



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

DPG POLICY BRIEF

US-Russia Imbroglia over Ukraine: The Mother of All Global Hotspots?

Author

Nalin Surie

Volume VII, Issue 7

January 24, 2022



Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

www.delhipolicygroup.org



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

DPG Policy Brief Vol. VII, Issue 7

January 24, 2022

ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

At a time of disruptive change in the global order, DPG aims to deliver research based, relevant, reliable and realist policy perspectives to an actively engaged public, both at home and abroad. DPG is deeply committed to the growth of India's national power and purpose, the security and prosperity of the people of India and India's contributions to the global public good. We remain firmly anchored within these foundational principles which have defined DPG since its inception.

Author

Ambassador Nalin Surie, I.F.S. (Retd.), Distinguished Fellow for Diplomacy, Delhi Policy Group

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.

Cover Photographs:

US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet for the US-Russia summit at Villa La Grange in Geneva, Switzerland, June 16, 2021. Source: Reuters

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov meet at Hotel Wilson in Geneva, Switzerland, January 21, 2022. Source: Russian Foreign Ministry / TASS

© 2022 by the Delhi Policy Group

Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor,
India Habitat Centre,
Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003
www.delhipolicygroup.org

US-Russia Imbroglio over Ukraine: The Mother of All Global Hotspots?

by
Nalin Surie

Developing countries have got used to their conflicts being referred to as critical hotspots threatening international peace and security. The focus has varied depending on the configuration of the international political situation at any particular point in time. At times it is the DPRK nuclear programme, at others Iran's nuclear ambitions, or even the situation in Yemen. This has frequently led to interventions of various kinds by the great powers.

The end of 2021 and early 2022 has, however, presented the international community with a much more fundamental challenge that not only threatens peace and security in Europe but can and will, if not resolved at an early date, have serious implications right across the globe and especially in Eurasia, the Western Pacific and in North America.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic already has the world reeling over the last two years and now the discourse over imminent military action over Ukraine threatens, among other things, at the very least the revival of a Cold War-type situation. The fundamental difference in the current situation, though, is that any such revival will be based on a very uncertain set of factors: efforts by the United States (US) to restore its status as the sole superpower; a Russia which is trying to regain its status as a major global power; a European Union post Brexit that is seeking to establish a relatively independent security structure and greater post-national integration; an aggressive China that seeks to fulfil the China Dream of national rejuvenation; and questions over the continued relevance of NATO. To add to this complex situation is the question mark over the processes associated with globalisation, the trend towards greater self-reliance in global value addition chains, and technological self-reliance. There are other geo-economic implications as well.

The hope that the end of the Cold War in 1990/1991 would usher in an era of positive global cooperation to bring about equitable and well distributed development, peace and prosperity has largely been belied.

To understand the latest episode of the imbroglio in Ukraine, it is necessary to recall how the Western world reacted to the dissolution of the former Soviet Union in late December, 1991. Russia stood humbled and notionally bankrupt. Containment had worked, but the Russian armed forces remained a potent

force, even though the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. Russia's technological strength and natural resource base also remained potent. Yet, NATO not only continued in existence but was expanded with the membership of the now free East European nations. Its policy of First Use of nuclear weapons remained in place. As time went by, these countries of Eastern Europe also became members of the European Union. The latter process continues to ultimately be able to cover Ukraine and the Balkan states. Georgia and the Ukraine were promised NATO membership at some future date. Russia's national aspirations and core interests were essentially ignored, except when they were compatible with the interests of the US and Europe. Russia too, though, was partly to blame for this state of affairs.

The latest massing of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine is reminiscent of what happened in 2014, and the assessment of the United States and NATO is that a Russian attack on Ukraine is imminent. Russian military moves were accompanied by a re-enunciation by President Putin in his annual press conference on December 23, 2021 that Russia opposes any further eastward expansion of NATO, i.e., it would not accept Ukraine's membership of NATO.¹ He also made it clear that Russia opposes the deployment of NATO weapon systems in former East European countries which are now NATO members.

Russia presented to NATO/US in writing a proposal, dated December 17, 2021, of an agreement on measures to ensure the security of Russia and NATO members.² A second proposal, of the same date, was also shared for a bilateral agreement between Russia and the US on security guarantees.³ Apart from addressing Russian concerns vis-a-vis the US or US led actions, the second draft is also in the nature of the US acting as a guarantor to implement the undertakings in the proposed agreement with NATO. Russia demanded written responses and negotiations on these texts. The Russian position is that their principal interlocutor in this process is the US. Other NATO and EU members are in effect considered mute partners of the US.

The main Russian demands are that mutual relations must be based on cooperation, equal, undiminished and indivisible security; neither side shall strengthen their security individually at the expense of the other; neither shall

¹ President of Russia. (2021). Vladimir Putin's annual news conference. Retrieved from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438>

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2021). Agreement on measures to ensure the security of The Russian Federation and member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Retrieved from <https://mid.ru/print/?id=1790803&lang=en>

³ President of Russia. (2021). Treaty between The United States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees. Retrieved from https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en

create conditions or situations that pose or could be perceived as a threat to the national security of the other; neither side considers the other as an adversary; NATO shall not deploy military forces and weaponry on the territory of any other state in Europe in addition to the forces stationed on that territory as of May 27, 1997 (date of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and Russia); neither side shall deploy land based intermediate and short range missiles in areas allowing them to reach the territory of the other; a NATO commitment to refrain from any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine as well as other states; and NATO shall not conduct any military activity on the territory of Ukraine as well as other states in East Europe, in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia.

The American response was swift and clear and followed extensive consultations with NATO and EU partners to try and ensure that they were all on the same page. In short, the US has made it clear to Russia, including at the level of Secretary of State Blinken during talks with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in Geneva on January 21, 2022 that while the US, and its European allies and partners, were willing to discuss security guarantees with Russia, any move by Russian military forces across Ukraine's border would be seen as a renewed invasion that would be met with a "swift, severe and united response".⁴ In addition, if Russia utilises its extensive playbook of aggression (against Ukraine) short of military action, that too will be met with a "decisive, calibrated and united response".⁵ Further, the US and its European allies and partners are prepared to discuss security concerns raised by Russia and prepared to pursue possible means of addressing them in a "spirit of reciprocity".⁶ The US has also made it abundantly clear to Russia that NATO's open door policy will not change; its commitment to the principle that one nation cannot simply violate and change the border of another country by force will not change; the principle that any country cannot propose to dictate to another country its choices, its policies, and with whom it will associate will not change; and neither will its adherence to the principle that any country cannot exert a sphere of influence that would subjugate its neighbours to its will.

In an interview on January 13, 2022 Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that Russia's main demand is the eastward non-expansion of NATO.⁷ The other two

⁴ US Department of State. (2022). Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-12/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview on Channel One's "The Great Game" political talk show, Moscow, 13 January 2022. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation. (2022). Retrieved 24 January 2022, from https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1794264/.

principal demands are legal guarantees against deploying offensive weapons in territories neighbouring Russia and a plan for returning to the European security architecture as configured in 1997 which was the basis to create the Russia-NATO Council. [The 1997 Agreement is considered particularly important by Russia.]

Secretary Blinken on his part has also made it clear to the Russian side that the crisis in Ukraine is not primarily about weapons or military bases, but is about sovereignty and self-determination of Ukraine and all states. In his Berlin speech on January 20, 2022 Secretary Blinken asserted that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is bigger than issues between Russia and NATO and that it is a crisis with global consequences that requires global attention and action.⁸



US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet for the US-Russia summit at Villa La Grange in Geneva, Switzerland, June 16, 2021. Source: Reuters

Following their Geneva meeting on January 21, 2022, Secretary Blinken informed Foreign Minister Lavrov that the US and NATO will respond to the Russian proposals in a week in writing (as demanded by Russia). Presumably this response will cover measures to reduce tensions and address some security concerns by promoting transparency, confidence building measures, limiting military exercises and pursuing arms control agreements. And building trust. This is what has been done in the past. Blinken reiterated that

⁸ US Secretary of State. (2022). The Stakes of Russian Aggression for Ukraine and Beyond. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/the-stakes-of-russian-aggression-for-ukraine-and-beyond/>

this was a critical moment and expressed the hope that the path of diplomacy and dialogue remains open. There will be further discussions after the written proposals have been handed over. Blinken also clarified that if both sides conclude that the best way to resolve things is through a further conversation between Presidents Biden and Putin, the US side would be prepared to do that.

As of the time of writing, time has been bought by both sides, but all bets would be presumably off if Russia invades Ukraine or undertakes other aggressive actions short of military moves.

While the above is in brief the current state of play, there are other pertinent factors that need to be borne in mind. Russia has stated that if its security concerns are not addressed, it will undertake necessary “military-technical reciprocal measures”.⁹ What these may be has not been spelt out.

Andrey Baklitskiy, in an article published in The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists on January 14, 2022 observes that the Russian proposals seeking security guarantees do not contain anything really new.¹⁰ He also recalls that Putin’s demand is for long term, legally binding security guarantees from Washington and NATO, who collectively wield a military force four times that of Russia’s and have a military budget comparable to the entire Russian GDP.

The question, therefore, arises why has President Putin raised matters to this crisis point? Is it because Russia is simply tired of waiting any longer for responses to its proposals for security guarantees and believes its security situation is getting seriously compromised? Is US antagonism and sanctions on Russia the cause? Or is it the Russian assessment that the NATO alliance has weakened? Is it because the US economy is no longer the powerhouse that it was? Is it because the European Union has not yet succeeded in substantively taking forward the processes of European integration? Does the rise of China, as the second largest economy, a powerful military force, and Russia’s strategic partner that is formally identified by the US as its principal challenger, enable Russia to punch beyond its weight? Is it the Russian assessment that China will

⁹ Podvig, P. (2022). Russia threatened a “military-technical” response for unmet demands. What could that mean? - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Retrieved 24 January 2022, from <https://thebulletin.org/2022/01/russia-threatened-a-military-technical-response-for-unmet-demands-what-could-that-mean/>.

¹⁰ Baklitsky, A. (2022). Putin’s demand for security guarantees: Not new and not to be taken literally, but not to be ignored - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Retrieved 24 January 2022, from <https://thebulletin.org/2022/01/putins-demand-for-security-guarantees-not-new-and-not-to-be-taken-literally-but-not-to-be-ignored/>.

help it withstand fresh, harsher economic sanctions in case hostilities break out between Russia and Ukraine? There are other relevant questions too.

The current situation on the ground can perhaps be summarised as follows:

1. The United States and most of its European allies are convinced that Russia is on the verge of militarily invading Ukraine and have threatened a range of measures including devastating economic sanctions.
2. Russia has publicly and at a high political level made it clear that it has no intention of invading Ukraine but seeks resolution of its security concerns based on the principle of indivisible security in a formal and legally binding manner. Its efforts in the past for this purpose have evidently fallen on deaf ears.
3. The US and its NATO partners have clearly stated that they will not deploy troops in Ukraine in response to a Russian invasion. (President Biden added to the Ukrainian distress when in response to a question at his press conference on January 19, 2022 he suggested that the actual response to a Russian invasion could depend on the type and extent of the Russian military action)¹¹.
4. It has been reported that Germany has decided to not provide even defensive military equipment to Ukraine. It has also been reported that there is lack of consensus in the new German cabinet on the Nordstream 2 project and its approval being linked to a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine.
5. Russia believes that the current imbroglio has essentially to be settled between it and the US, and somewhat between Russia and NATO.
6. Russia is not willing to withdraw its troops along the border with Ukraine. Its point simply is that it cannot be told where to deploy its troops on its own territory as a pre-condition for dialogue.
7. Russia believes, as FM Lavrov stated on January 13, 2022 that NATO is now showing a total inability to negotiate.¹² Lavrov argues that this is not the first time this has happened, and cites the example of the Minsk

¹¹ The White House. (2022). Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/01/19/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-6/>

¹² Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview on Channel One's "The Great Game" political talk show, Moscow, 13 January 2022.

agreements of 2014/2015 which are not being implemented. Incidentally, this is a major Russian complaint, and implementation of these agreements could arguably have prevented matters reaching the stage they have at present. Indeed, at his annual press conference on December 23, 2021 President Putin had asserted that implementation of the Minsk agreements is the only way out (to settle the Russia-Ukraine issue), but that there is no desire on the part of the Ukrainians to do that.¹³

8. Both President Putin and FM Lavrov have recalled that Russia was made promises regarding the non-expansion of NATO etc. following the unification of Germany and dissolution of the Former Soviet Union. This is contested by the United States.
9. There is a belief in several sections of the US media and think tank community that President Putin's principal objective is to undermine or destroy NATO.

Secretary Blinken has made it clear that there will be no discussions on Ukraine without Ukraine being in the room. The Russian position is that the issue of security in Europe is much greater than the Ukraine issue.

There is no doubt that there are serious issues to be resolved between Russia and Ukraine and these include the issue of Russian diaspora in that country. However, unlike the situation in Georgia, the size, location and importance of Ukraine is such that it has willy-nilly become the pawn on the European security chess-board. The situation has worsened because of the lack of trust not only between Russia and Ukraine but more importantly between Russia and the US and consequently NATO. Russia is convinced that the US exercises a de facto veto on all security matters and can, in many cases, force through punitive economic measures against Russia. It believes that the US is pushing for Ukraine's membership of the EU.

When the cold war ended and the former Soviet Union was dissolved in late December 1991, there were many important segments in the Russian hierarchy, including former President Yeltsin, who wished to be accepted not only in the European scheme of things but also in NATO. The Warsaw Pact stood dissolved. This, however, was not to be. The focus was on defanging Russia and reducing it to the status of an indeterminate power that would never be a threat again. Simultaneously, the relationship of the West with China began to grow and the belief was that China could eventually be persuaded and enabled in the

¹³ President of Russia. (2021). Vladimir Putin's annual news conference.

direction of democratic pluralism. Perhaps, the West owed China for the role it had played in the containment of the former Soviet Union.

It is interesting to take note of the Chinese position on the current standoff over Ukraine. The spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Office said on January 17, 2022 that the Chinese position on the Ukraine issue “is crystal clear and remains unchanged. We embrace a vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable global security, advocate balanced and just treatment of security concerns and security initiative of relevant countries and resolve differences through dialogue and consultation.”¹⁴

After the wasted Yeltsin years, Russia under Putin was determined to restore the status of Russia, to begin with, as a major power. While this process was underway, Russia's relations with the US and the EU went through several stages, some seen as positive but many others negative. On balance, it can be argued that the negatives outweighed the positives although many European countries saw the advantages of a trustworthy Russia as a neighbour and an economic partner. But, the negatives on the security relationship continued to weigh heavily and, in the balance, establishment of trust suffered. Russian actions in Georgia compounded the problem and subsequent Western activism in the politics of Ukraine was construed as a direct threat by Russia to its interests.

Sanctions on Russia by several Western countries, including the US, confirmed the belief in ruling circles in Moscow that it was the West's intention to keep a tight leash on Russia and limit its freedom of manoeuvre in what it considered was its legitimate sphere of interest. This was undoubtedly one of several reasons that encouraged Russia to look to its immediate neighbour in the East, namely China. It is also no surprise that the Sino-Russian relationship has grown in content and substance over the last fifteen years in particular. For much of these fifteen years, China has benefitted from both growing relations with Russia and also its very substantial partnerships with the West. The latter, of course, has run into turbulent waters, in particular during the last five to six years.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2022). Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on January 17, 2022. Retrieved from https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202201/t20220117_10598778.html



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov meet at Hotel Wilson in Geneva, Switzerland, January 21, 2022.

Source: Russian Foreign Ministry / TASS

The US and its allies and partners in the West need to seriously introspect on why their relations with Russia have deteriorated to the extent that the world finds itself facing an imminent and serious crisis that, if not properly handled, could have disastrous consequences not only for Europe but for the entire world. So far, both sides have agreed to keep talking to find appropriate ways to address each other's security concerns through dialogue, although the use of threatening language has not really waned. They must also introspect on how and why their assessment of where China was headed went so awry that China is now considered the principal threat. The US also needs to reconcile its position that while both China and Russia are seen as the main threats, the threat from the former is more consequential, and yet it is the Russia threat which has become more salient. Many in Asia and the Indo-Pacific would be wondering whether the US's pivot to the Indo-Pacific would be seriously impacted by these latest developments. Questions will also be raised regarding the consistency of the US in conforming to the set of critical principles outlined by their spokespersons during the ongoing Ukraine standoff that all countries must be able to choose their own foreign policy orientation; that sovereignty and territorial integrity are sacrosanct, they must be respected; that all nations are and must be free to choose their own partnerships and alliances.[Notably, the central principle of "sovereignty" also includes the freedom to choose one's own system of governance.]

There is also need to assess how much genuine support there is among NATO members regarding the desirability of including Ukraine as a NATO member. Public statements by leaders suggest that such membership, if it is at all offered, is a long way off. There are also American scholars who, while sharply critical of Russian actions in Ukraine, also recognise the need to develop new concepts for future European security. For example, Michael E. O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at Brookings has, in a blog posted on January 11, 2022 written that "Ukraine and Georgia should not be in NATO- even if Moscow should not be able to make that decision for them."¹⁵ He adds, "The core concept for future European security in Eastern Europe would be one of permanent neutrality for former Soviet republics that are not now in NATO or the Russia led CSTO. They should retain their sovereign rights to join any other international organisation."¹⁶ Finally, he clarifies that "The new security architecture must require that Russia withdraw its troops from Ukraine and Georgia (and Moldova, most likely) in a verifiable manner. The Crimea issue would have to be finessed...".¹⁷ Thereafter, sanctions imposed on Russia could be lifted, though 'snapback' provisions would remain in case of Russian violations.

Will such an approach receive any traction when present indications are that both sides are sticking to their own versions of history and interpretations? Does it offer an equal balance of concessions? Can it save face for both sides?

The question is justifiably being asked about what would China do if push comes to shove and sitting on the fence is no longer an option. Beijing would undoubtedly be caught in a cleft stick. The current non-committal stance would not be good enough. The choice between fulfilling the obligations of a genuinely strategic partner of Russia and implications for its security as well as critical dependence on the West for its future economic growth and stability will have to be weighed in the balance and choices exercised. Would China be able to please both sides?

It has always been India's position that all disputes should be resolved peacefully through dialogue. India enjoys very good relations and no serious outstanding issues or conflicts with the US, Russia, Ukraine, NATO and EU member states. India was not a votary of the Cold War, nor is it in favour of any new War, Cold or Hot. Delhi's long-held belief in multipolarity is gaining traction around the world. Notions of balance of power or spheres of influence

¹⁵ O'Hanlon, M. (2022). Defusing the crisis in Europe: A better idea Ukraine than NATO membership. TheHill. Retrieved 24 January 2022, from <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/588950-defusing-the-crisis-in-europe-a-better-idea-ukraine-than-nato>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

are not conducive to solving the critical challenges facing mankind, including those of development and poverty alleviation. Nor are they facilitators of putting rapid technological development and innovation to the beneficial and equitable use of all. A peaceful and united Europe serves India well and we look forward to that happening and the clouds of war, threats and counter threats dissipating and disappearing very early from Ukraine through dialogue and peaceful negotiations without the shadow of the dark clouds of coercive action by any party involved.

The forthcoming weeks, and the outcomes following resumption of the US-Russia dialogue on security assurances, would demonstrate whether this mother of all global hotspots is headed towards a peaceful denouement or whether the world would have to brace itself for the inevitable outcome of obstinate posturing. Acceptable compromises are available and should be seized. In any event, the old order will have to change.



Delhi Policy Group
Core 5A, 1st Floor,
India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi - 110003
India

www.delhipolicygroup.org