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by John Barrett
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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President Vladimir Putin's manufactured crisis over Ukraine continues. The stakes are serious enough, with 100,000 Russian troops on the border with Ukraine, and with parts of Ukrainian territory – Crimea and Transnistria – under de facto Russian control since 2014.

Putin's demands over Ukraine have been slapped on the table for U.S. and NATO response. Senior U.S. administration officials have rejected his demands publicly, but they agreed to meet with Russian representatives in Geneva earlier this week. After inconclusive bilateral talks, the discussion has moved to NATO HQ in Brussels and the NATO-Russia Council (NRC).¹

Putin's Demands – No Ukraine in NATO, Plus Security Guarantees

Putin's demands are essentially threefold.

First, no to the possibility that Ukraine might join NATO. Second, no to NATO missile systems deployed in territories close enough to hit Russia. Third, no to foreign (NATO) troops and weapons stationed on the territories of the Alliance's easternmost members. These demands are in fact security guarantees, a long-sought Russian policy objective following the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

So, what should be NATO's – and Canada's – response to Putin's renewed quest for security guarantees? To answer this requires a look at how NATO-Russian relations were negotiated from 1992 to 1997, when security guarantees and Russian red lines were first raised.

The issues – resolved with the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act – were fundamentally the same as Putin's demands today. From the early days of the Russian Federation, the old Soviet mindset was very close to the surface but was gaining a strident nationalist character. Security was seen as zero sum, a competition in which the gain of one side meant a loss for the other. Any change in NATO's military capabilities resulting from expanded membership was automatically regarded as a threat to Russia.

Former foreign minister Andrey Kozyrev sought to warn the West about such nationalist forces in Russia and how they would change the emerging non-adversarial nature of post-Cold War Europe. At a ministerial meeting of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Stockholm in 1992, attended by all European countries and the former USSR, he delivered his remarks as if such forces had taken over and had completely reversed Russia's foreign policy, taking it away from the West and back to the old Soviet hostility.²

¹ Created in May 2002, the NRC has met periodically as a forum for dialogue and information exchange. In April 2014, following Russia's "illegal military intervention in Ukraine and its violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," NATO suspended all practical co-operation with Russia and it has since remained suspended. See: [NATO - Topic: NATO-Russia Council \(NRC\)](#).

² Kozyrev later reassured delegations that his remarks did not reflect Russia's policy – but they easily could if nationalist forces gained political power. See: *TASS* report, Stockholm, December 14, 1992.



Unfortunately, the mindset Kozyrev described is still prevalent in Russia, including in people like Putin, who called the collapse of the Soviet Union a “catastrophe.” It propels his demands today over Ukraine and the need for security guarantees from NATO.

Russia's Hostility to NATO's Acceptance of New Members

The specific catalyst for Putin's hostility was NATO's decision in the mid-1990s to expand its membership. Russian officials and many parliamentarians at the time treated NATO enlargement purely in zero-sum terms, i.e., designed to expand NATO's (and the U.S.'s) sphere of influence in Europe, thereby threatening Russia's vital interests in the region.³ It was unacceptable to them.

Outright opposition such as this did not, however, stop enlargement from happening. Russia therefore demanded legally binding security guarantees from NATO to mitigate the negative impact it believed would come from enlargement. In practice, that meant seeking to block deployment of NATO infrastructure, equipment and personnel on the territories of new NATO members.⁴

In the lead-up to the NATO-Russia Founding Act in May 1997, the Alliance took pains to assuage Russia's implacable opposition to enlargement. This was done, not through security guarantees, but through confidence-building mechanisms (CBMs) in the form of self-imposed restrictions, buttressed by political commitments at the highest level.

To this end, the Alliance made clear its position through a unilateral political commitment: “In the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.”

Regarding Russia's anxiety over NATO's nuclear weapons, the Alliance also declared it had “no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members,” a political commitment that was restated in the body of the NATO-Russia Founding Act.

The NATO Council recognized that acquiescing to Russian demands for limitations on new members would fundamentally create a second-class membership. This was completely rejected. NATO was not going to yield its pre-eminence in decision-making to any consultative mechanism with Russia.⁵

³ Boris Yeltsin berated then-NATO secretary general Javier Solana during his first trip to Moscow in 1996: “Why do you want to enlarge NATO against Russia? ... The U.S. and you (NATO) want to subordinate Central and Eastern European countries and move closer to Russia's border. We cannot accept this. However, if you insist, we will consider NATO a military bloc directed against Russia. We will then build a Russian-Eastern bloc to defend Russia.”

⁴ As the Canadian ambassador summarized the Russian approach at a North Atlantic Council meeting: “No nukes, no Ukraine, no Balts, fix the CFE Treaty.”

⁵ According to the internal agreement: “Whatever the scope of NATO-Russia relations, they will have to find their limits where they would intrude into the Alliance's decision-making process or impede NATO's ability to meet its objectives and fulfil its collective responsibilities under the Washington Treaty, as well as its new missions.”



Addressing Russia's Security Concerns through CBMs, Not Security Guarantees

The NATO-Russia negotiations through 1996 and 1997 revealed a basic difference in concepts of security in post-Cold War Europe. Believing its national interests or sphere of influence somehow threatened, Russia has sought reassurance from NATO through legally binding security guarantees. By contrast, the West (NATO and non-NATO European countries) went the route of legally binding arms control and disarmament restrictions on military capabilities, buttressed by political commitments and CBMs.

When Russia demanded NATO impose restrictions on its equipment, troops and infrastructure, NATO set such issues into the wider context of arms control and disarmament. In late 1996, a high-level task force was instructed to develop Alliance negotiation positions on reducing military equipment and infrastructure, setting limits on levels of forces in peacetime, instituting measures to increase transparency through information exchanges and supporting verification of compliance through inspection protocols and short-notice overflights via the Open Skies Treaty.⁶

This resulted in the successful negotiation of an adapted Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty to accommodate the anticipated changes resulting from new members joining NATO.⁷ Though not a quid pro quo, it was nonetheless an explicit response to Russian security concerns voiced over NATO enlargement. The goal was to mitigate apprehension on either side that a military incursion or surprise attack could be mounted successfully. Special attention was paid to zones close to or abutting Russia.

Suspicious about NATO's ultimate intentions arose again only two years after the NATO-Russia Founding Act. On March 24, 1999, NATO aircraft bombed Serbian military targets responsible for attacking Kosovar communities. Russia's ambassador to NATO delivered a statement by then-president Boris Yeltsin, which described NATO's military action as "the attempt by NATO to enter the 21st century in the uniform of the world policeman. Russia will never agree with this."

NATO-Russia relations fell thereafter into the doldrums. A few months later, in 2000, Putin became president, a position he would effectively control until this day. The Soviet view of security and spheres of influence had a new champion.

In 2004, the former Soviet Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) joined NATO –previously a Russian red line. That has only entrenched the view of Putin and those who think like him that Ukraine, as the ultimate red line for Russia, must never join NATO.⁸

⁶ Included in the confidence-building approach was further development of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) 1994 Vienna Document, which contained an array of politically binding measures to address and alleviate concerns through information exchanges, limits on military exercises, provisions for greater transparency in military force postures and inspections. VD 94 involved all members of the OSCE, not just NATO countries and Russia.

⁷ The Agreement on the Adaptation of the CFE Treaty, signed in Istanbul on November 19, 1999.

⁸ It was no accident that Putin's recent diatribe about Ukraine and NATO took place in front of Russian military leaders on December 20, 2021, the 30th anniversary of the meeting at NATO HQ in which the Soviet ambassador represented the USSR at the beginning, and then ended the meeting representing the Russian Federation.



Next Steps and Where Canada Can Help

Efforts are currently underway to resolve the Putin-manufactured crisis over Ukraine through diplomacy. As a NATO member, what can Canada do to contribute?

Based on this review of where the Russian quest for security guarantees came from and how NATO successfully responded, with Russia's agreement, some steps Canada could take include:

- Reaffirm NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's statement on January 7 that every nation has "the right to decide its own path, including what kind of security arrangements it wants to be part of"⁹ and that Russia does not hold a veto over Ukraine in this regard;
- Continue and enhance military capability development, training and capacity-building in Ukraine, in line with NATO's response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict and its comprehensive assistance package for Ukraine;
- Oppose Putin's grievances and accusations against NATO as coming from a Soviet-style mindset that treats any move towards the West by sovereign former Soviet countries, such as Ukraine, as ultimately directed against Russia;
- Stand firm against Russian misinformation that NATO has somehow reneged on its pledges to Russia about military infrastructure in new member states. None of this is supported by the negotiating record of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, the adapted CFE Treaty or political commitments made by NATO at the time;
- Point to OSCE and CFE treaty forums as the appropriate venues for Russia to raise any concerns on NATO's treaty-limited military equipment and agreed troop levels in Europe, including in areas bordering Russia;
- In rebuffing Russian demands, keep open the possibility that CBMs (not security guarantees) could be discussed in relation to Russia's proclaimed security concerns, provided such discussion is reciprocal and enhances security and stability for all of Europe;
- Given our long history of constructive arms control and verification initiatives, identify possible ways of strengthening CBM effectiveness to improve transparency about military capabilities and intentions (NATO's as well as Russia's);
- Examine a revitalization of the 2002 Open Skies Treaty, an important aerial inspection measure covering all of Europe and Russia, which, unfortunately, the Trump administration abandoned in 2018.

In this way, Canada can help put an end to Putin's diversionary and unfounded argument that Russia needs new security guarantees from NATO if the Ukraine crisis is to end peacefully – and to restore the diplomatic focus back on Russia's illegal and illegitimate actions in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine and the Black Sea region. There is no quid pro quo.

⁹ Stoltenberg's statements reported in the *Globe and Mail*, January 8, 2021.

▶ **About the Author**

***John Barrett** is a former Canadian ambassador. He served as head of policy planning on the NATO International Staff during the 1990s.*

► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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