

Week after Biden-Putin meeting, crunch time is coming

by M. K. Bhadrakumar*



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(Picture ma)

Russia is reiterating its 'red lines' seeking long-term legal guarantees against NATO's further advancement to the east and the deployment of weapons on Russia's western borders.

The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on December 10¹ putting on record its expectation that long term legal guarantees must be given "within a specific timeframe and on the basis of the principle of comprehensive and indivisible security."

Moscow senses that Washington is turning the argument around and maintaining that the issue is about the so-called build-up on Russian territory that might presage an invasion of Ukraine.

This has been repeated by Biden himself² on December 12 who once again neatly sidestepped the issue of NATO deployments and preferred to dwell instead on what happens if Russia were to invade Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the US has rallied the G7 countries behind it. The G7 statement³ of December 12 basically echoes the US stance. The G7 also chose to sidestep Russia's "red lines" regarding NATO expansion spelt out in the December 10 foreign ministry statement.

The US state department has announced⁴ that Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Dr. Karen Donfried will travel to Kiev and Moscow on December 13-15 "to discuss Russia's military buildup and to reinforce the United States' commitment to

Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity."

Donfried will then travel to Brussels on December 15-16 to consult with NATO Allies and EU partners "on efforts to pursue a diplomatic solution."

The West is being hypocritical by turning this into an issue of territorial aggression by Russia, forgetting conveniently that there is a complicated background to all this dating all the way back to the western leaders (including then US secretary of state *James Baker* and German foreign minister *Hans-Dietrich Genscher*) promising to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that in the downstream of a Soviet approval for German unification, the West would guarantee that NATO would not move "an inch" eastward toward Russia's borders.

Indeed, by the mid-1990s, the *Bill Clinton* Administration West proceeded to ignore that assurance, which was fundamental to Russia's security, and the NATO embarked on the expansion path in a sequential way, expanding first to Central Europe and then to the Baltic region and the Balkan countries that previously formed Yugoslavia.

The numerous Russian protests against the NATO expansion were simply ignored. Moscow wasn't in a position at that time to assert its national interests.

A defining moment came when the NATO announced in 2008 that the door was open for membership of Ukraine (and Georgia). Russia once again protested, as NATO membership of these two countries would bring the alliance's deployments right to its western and southern borders. Once again, the US refused to pay heed.

However, there was a paradigm shift by 2013–2014, when the West successfully overthrew the established pro-Moscow government of President *Viktor Yanukovich* in Ukraine (who was, incidentally, an elected leader) and installed in his place a pro-western leadership in Kiev. Thereupon, a systematic project to transform Ukraine as an anti-Russian state commenced.

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Today, the challenge that Russia faces is that even without admitting Ukraine as full member, the NATO has begun deploying to that country, taking advantage of the standoff in Donbas and the poor relations between Kiev and Moscow.

The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson *disclosed on December 12⁵* that NATO is pumping massive quantities of arms into Ukraine and “militants are being sent there *under the guise of military instructors.*”⁶

On the face of it, a showdown cannot be ruled out anymore, much as Moscow disavows any intention to use force.

The “known unknown” is how far the US domestic politics is driving Biden’s future course of action. (Putin has sought a face-to-face meeting with Biden.) Post-Afghanistan, Biden’s rating has plummeted drastically and fewer than three in 10 Americans approve of Biden’s handling of the US inflation crisis, and most give him low marks on every major issue other than the Covid-19 pandemic.

An ABC News poll found after Biden’s video summit on December 7 with Putin that only 15% of respondents said they have a “great deal” of trust in the president to negotiate with Putin on America’s behalf. (That compares with 26% rating in an ABC June poll.)

Put differently, it may suit Biden to project that he is “tough” on Russia. Leaders with lacklustre record in office tend to use foreign policy issues to boost their image. 2022 is a crucial election year in the US with forecasters predicting that Democrats may lose control of the Congress, which would indeed seriously affect Biden’s presidency and affect his re-election bid in 2024.

Biden may stand to lose face if he were to sit down at the negotiating table to discuss Putin’s “red lines.” More importantly, this is one of those situations where having waded into the mid-stream, it becomes too late to turn back now.

The point is, Ukraine is “unfinished business” and the whole Western project to take on Russia may flounder if the NATO is stalled on its expansion track. Demonising Russia has gone far and deep already in the western rhetoric. Meanwhile, the West is watching with alacrity that Russia has regained strategic parity with the US and is striding ahead of the US in the conventional forces by developing advanced hypersonic

weaponry. Putin himself touched on this in a weekend *media interview.*⁷

The signs are that Russia still prefers a diplomatic / political solution but is highly unlikely to water down its demands and accept once again another NATO expansion, this time right up to its borders. The MFA’s December 10 statement touches on core issues of Russia’s national defence.

In an interview with Izvestia newspaper today, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister *Sergey Ryabkov* said, “It’s not as if the problems began yesterday. They are related, for the most part, with the US aspiration to negate Russia as an independent key factor of international life, and impose on us its own approaches to a whole range of issues, including how we should live in our own country.”

Ryabkov said Ukraine “is above all Washington’s geopolitical project, an attempt to widen the sphere of its own influence, expanding its tools to enhance its positions which, according to US aspirations, will help them dominate in this region of the world. This is, of course, a method to create difficulties for us, impinging on our security. We are saying openly: we have certain red lines that we won’t allow anyone to cross; we have a very clear requirement... Moscow needs maximally reliable legal guarantees of its safety.”

He concluded with the warning that Moscow will continue to highlight for NATO members that the alliance’s security won’t increase in the event of its expansion and the consequences of this step would be grave. (Read here *the full transcript of this important interview* by Ryabkov with Izvestia.)⁸

Separately, Ryabkov has also been quoted as saying to the state-run *RIA Novosti* news agency today that “Our response will be military” if the NATO does not guarantee to Moscow an end to its eastward expansion. “There will be confrontation. There’s basically no trust in NATO. Therefore, we’re no longer playing this kind of game and don’t believe NATO’s assurances.”

Plainly put, Russia rejects the US’ sophistry regarding a threat of Russian invasion of Ukraine in order to divert attention from what is truly at stake here – namely, Moscow’s refusal to accept any further NATO expansion eastward in the post-Soviet space.

The crunch time is coming now that Russia has learnt a bitter lesson the hard way that the Westerners verbal assurances have no sanctity. The supreme irony is that Gorbachev and Baker are still alive.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/week-after-biden-putin-meeting-crunch-time-is-coming/>, 13. December 2021

¹ https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4991520

² <https://tass.com/world/1374257>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/g7-foreign-ministers-statement-on-russia-and-ukraine>

⁴ <https://www.state.gov/assistant-secretary-donfrieds-trip-to-ukraine-russia-and-belgium/>

⁵ <https://tass.com/russia/1374401>

⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/08/politics/us-ukraine-security-assistance-military-training/index.html>

⁷ <https://tass.com/russia/1374381>

⁸ https://www.mid.ru/en_GB/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4992391