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The Russian diplomatic offensive

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Russia simply has nowhere else to retreat, declared Russian President Vladimir Putin at the year-end press conference. Therefore, Moscow went on the offensive. The first stage is happening on the diplomatic front. The active phase has begun with the first round of talks with the West on security guarantees in January. It depends on them whether geopolitical tension will build up or whether the temperature can be brought down.

In 2021, hopes that negotiations to resolve the conflict in Donbass could end up with strong agreements finally collapsed. These hopes really did exist. They appeared after the power changed in Kiev and Vladimir Zelensky became the country's president, who declared his main goal was to achieve peace.

Later the team of President Zelensky realized that any compromise on Donbass, and especially the implementation of the Minsk Agreements in their current form, could cost not only in terms of polls rating, but also in general the stability of the government. They were obliged to take into account the internal situation.

Kiev, under Petro Poroshenko, for example, did not raise the issue of the return of Crimea. Volodymyr Zelensky instead, made it one of the central points of its foreign policy. The "Crimean Platform" was created, with the declared purpose to force Russia to return the peninsula. A new foreign policy strategy was adopted in Ukraine called "counteraction to the aggressive policy of Russia" complemented by the steps towards membership in the EU and NATO. On the problem of Donbass, the following position was adopted: this conflict is a war with the Russian Federation; and the issue must be resolved in negotiations with the Russian side, and not with Donetsk and Lugansk.

Volodymyr Zelensky announced that he was ready for such negotiations with Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin responded by saying that it is not against such contacts. But not the Donbass issue, which Russia considers to be an internal Ukrainian conflict, should be discussed at them, but the issues of bilateral relations. On this, the topic of organizing a Russian-Ukrainian summit faded.



The Minsk Agreements military buffer zone in the Donbass region

Moscow began to actively respond to Kiev in Autumn. In September, the unrecognized republics of Donbass (Donetsk Popular Republic and Lugansk Popular Republic) announced the beginning of economic integration and the mutual abolition of customs. In November, Vladimir Putin, by decree, opened access to the Russian market for goods produced in the DPR and LPR as a response to Ukraine's failure to comply with the Minsk agreements. He argued that since it is not possible to return the self-proclaimed republics to Ukraine, it was necessary at least to improve their economic situation.

The geopolitical response was not long in coming either. Russia, despite repeated requests from Kiev, Berlin and Paris, flatly refused to hold a new summit in the "Normandy format" until the Ukrainian side fulfils the agreements of the last Paris meeting. Moscow also did not agree to a meeting of the foreign ministers of the countries participating in the Normandy Four. Instead, the Russian Foreign Ministry shocked Western diplomats by publishing correspondence between Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his German and French counterparts. It followed from it that the Russian Federation would not conduct any negotiations in the "Normandy format" as long as it is called a party to the conflict in eastern Ukraine or attempts are made to involve it in the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

As a consequence, a new approach was formulated with regard to Ukraine. If Kiev is not ready to talk with the separatist republics in Donbass and wants to negotiate with Russia, Russia then doesn't see any advantage to talk to Kiev and intends to speak with the United States and NATO. Clarity was made by Vladimir Putin, who announced that Russia needs legal guarantees from the West for its security. They concern not only Ukraine, but directly affects Moscow that insists on the request that the neighbouring country must remain non-aligned forever. At the same time, no one is going to ask Kiev's opinion.

On the background of the deadlock with the settlement of the conflict in Donbass, the Russian authorities began to pay attention increasingly to the intensification of military and military-technical cooperation between Western countries and Ukraine.

From the statements of Russian officials, it follows that Moscow has become seriously afraid of Ukraine becoming a "quasi-member of NATO" - a springboard for an attack on Russia, albeit without formal integration into the alliance so far.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, in particular, spoke about what exactly caused the concern of the Russian side: "The desire of the North Atlantic Alliance to involve the Ukrainian armed forces in its military activities poses a threat to security, taking into account Kiev's attempts to resolve the Donbass problem by force. The military development of the territory of Ukraine by NATO countries continues. The situation is aggravated by the supply of helicopters, attack unmanned aerial vehicles, anti-tank guided missiles by the United States of America and its allies".

According to him, the United States and NATO as a whole "are purposefully increasing the scale and intensity of military training measures near Russia." "Increasingly, strategic aviation is involved in them, carrying out simulated launches of nuclear missiles at Russian facilities. The number of their flights near the Russian borders has more than doubled. NATO pays special attention to the issues of the transfer of troops to the eastern flank of the alliance, including from the continental part of the United States" Sergei Shoigu said. Russia also drew attention to the increasingly frequent military manoeuvres of the United States and its allies in the Black and Baltic Seas.

“They do what they want,” – so Vladimir Putin described the actions of the Western countries. And he warned: “What they are now doing on the territory of Ukraine and planning to do, this is not thousands of kilometres from our national border - this is at the doorstep of our house. They must understand that we simply have nowhere to retreat further”.

In response, Russia decided, as Vladimir Putin put it, to create “tension”. Significant forces were deployed to the border with Ukraine, which, naturally, did not go unnoticed by the United States and its allies. A diplomatic offensive followed at the same time. On November 18, Vladimir Putin instructed the Foreign Ministry to seek from Western countries to provide Russia with “serious long-term security guarantees.”

On the 1st of December, the President of the Russian Federation clarified which guarantees are in question: “In the dialogue with the United States and its allies, we will insist on the development of specific agreements that would exclude any further NATO moves to the east and the deployment of weapons systems that threaten us in close proximity to Russian territory”. On December 7, he discussed this topic with his American counterpart Joe Biden. On December 15, Assistant Secretary of State Karen Donfried, who flew to Moscow, was handed over to the Russian Foreign Ministry drafts of two documents prepared by the Russian side: an agreement with the United States on security guarantees, and an agreement on security measures for the Russian Federation and NATO member states.

These documents contain two key demands of Russia, promulgated by Vladimir Putin: on the non-expansion of NATO, primarily at the expense of Ukraine, and on the refusal to deploy weapons and forces near the borders of the Russian Federation. However, Moscow demands a lot more: that the NATO countries stop military cooperation with the post-Soviet countries and withdraw their forces to the 1997 positions, and the United States withdraw its nuclear weapons from Europe and stop interfering in the internal affairs of Russia. Contrary to usual diplomatic practice, the drafts of both treaties were actually made publicly available immediately after being handed over to the addressees. With a warning: Moscow needs an answer “immediately”, otherwise it will have to resolve the issue in a different way. Exactly what was not stated, but the wording presented by the officials was clearly aimed at emphasizing Moscow’s decisive attitude: “a military-technical alternative”, “restoration of the military balance”, “creation of NATO counter-threats in places where they do not expect” ...

“The answer can be very different. It depends on the proposals that our military experts will make to me,” Vladimir Putin himself said on this occasion.

The combination of diplomacy plus intimidation was deployed and the message received. Joe Biden was the first to publicly declare his readiness to discuss Russian concerns. At the same time, he announced a format that would be quite suitable for Moscow: the five leading NATO countries (in fact, the United States, and also, presumably, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, France) and Russia. However, other members of the North Atlantic Alliance, primarily Eastern European ones, as well as Ukraine, insisting that their fate should not be decided without its participation, reacted angrily to this.

As a result, Washington offered to discuss this topic in three formats at once:

- Bilateral Russian-American (the first consultations are scheduled for January 9-10, 2022 in Geneva);
- In the Russia-NATO Council (the meeting is scheduled for the 12th of January);
- And within the framework of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (the meeting will be held one day later).

The agenda of the upcoming consultations was discussed by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden during a telephone conversation late in the evening on the 30th of December.

For Moscow, the most important thing is the two-way track with Washington. The Russian authorities are convinced that if they agree on something with the United States, American allies and partners will adjust. Moscow regards consultations within the framework of the Russia-NATO Council and the OSCE as a tribute to the United States of its transatlantic commitments, but does not expect any results from them, but on the contrary, sees in them the danger of “chattering” the issue.

American officials have already called some of the Russian proposals “useful,” but immediately described some as “unacceptable.” There are no guarantees that the parties will be able to find a generally acceptable solution to the non-expansion of NATO (at least at the expense of Ukraine) and the non-deployment of weapons and forces near the Russian border. Meanwhile, the United

States and its allies are preparing to present their own list of claims to Russia at the January talks, and it is unlikely to be short.

This means that the option of escalating the conflict cannot be ruled out in principle. Russian officials keep repeating that Russia is not going to invade anywhere. At the same time, they make it clear that they will not leave unanswered a possible offensive by the Ukrainian armed forces in Donbass or a provocation against the Russian ethnic civilian population of the unrecognized republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. That could lead, for example, to the recognition of the independence of these entities with the official deployment of the Russian armed forces there.

At the end a new Normandy format with USA/NATO and Russia at the table, considering that both are involved in supporting military, financially and politically the two conflicting sides, seems to be more promising for the stability and security of the region.

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