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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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14.01.2022

Failure of NATO-Russia Council underscores the risk of war

Like the bilateral negotiations between the US and Russia on Monday, the meeting of the NATO-Russia Council on Wednesday also ended with no tangible result.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called it a “positive sign” that the 30 NATO countries and Russia were “sitting at the same table again for the first time in two and a half years and dedicated themselves to substantial issues.” There is a fundamental willingness on both sides to continue the dialogue, he added. However, there are still “considerable differences of opinion”—and not only over Ukraine.

Both Stoltenberg and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman reiterated their unwillingness to comply with Russian demands for security guarantees.



U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman speaks during a media conference after a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council at NATO headquarters, in Brussels, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. (AP Photo/Olivier Matthys)

“We will not compromise on our basic principles,” emphasized Stoltenberg. He categorically ruled out Russia’s demand for no further expansion of NATO. Russia has “no right of veto on the question of whether Ukraine can become a NATO member,” he declared.

Sherman also stated on the question of Ukraine’s NATO membership, “Every country has the sovereign right to choose its own path.” She said that she made this basic principle of international order and European security clear again in talks with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Gruschko.

In fact, the talks in Geneva and Brussels were less of a “dialogue” than an ultimatum. NATO members and the Western media have been accusing Russia for weeks of planning a military attack on Ukraine, which Moscow firmly denies. They justify the accusation with the fact that Russia has relocated 100,000 soldiers near the Ukrainian border—which Moscow has neither denied nor confirmed. However, Moscow emphasizes that Russia is free to move troops and carry out military maneuvers on its own territory.

The US has threatened major consequences for Russia. Last Saturday, two days before the talks in Geneva, the *New York Times* reported, “The Biden administration and its allies are assembling a punishing set of financial, technology and military sanctions against Russia that they say would go into effect within hours of an invasion of Ukraine, hoping to make clear to President Vladimir V. Putin the high cost he would pay if he sends troops across the border.”

The *Times* cited officials who “described details of those plans for the first time.” “Such moves are rarely telegraphed in advance. But with the negotiations looming President Biden’s advisers say they are trying to signal to Mr. Putin exactly what he would face,” wrote the newspaper.

The plans that the United States have discussed with allies in recent days “include cutting off Russia’s largest financial institutions from global transactions, imposing an embargo

on American-made or American-designed technology needed for defense-related and consumer industries, and arming insurgents in Ukraine who would conduct what would amount to a guerrilla war against a Russian military occupation, if it comes to that.” The exclusion of Russia “from the SWIFT system, which executes global financial transactions between more than 1,100 banks in 200 countries,” is also being discussed.

Moscow has every reason to be concerned. Since the last Stalinist rulers of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, expressed their unrestrained loyalty to imperialism and dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991, the largest Western military alliance has moved ever closer to the borders of Russia and has broken all promises it previously made. NATO has incorporated former Warsaw Pact members and three former Baltic Soviet republics and armed them to the teeth. It has attacked and destroyed several international allies of Russia in violation of international law in order to bring about regime change—including Iraq, Libya and Syria.

The NATO-Russia Council was established in 2002 to ease tensions between the Western military alliance and Moscow. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democrats, SPD) raved about a “historic event” with which bloc thinking had finally been overcome, and about a “new quality” in relations with Moscow.

The council met monthly at ambassadorial level. Twice a year, the foreign and defense ministers and the chiefs of the general staff met to discuss arms control and the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking and to exchange information on planned exercises.

When the US and Germany supported the pro-Western coup in Ukraine in 2014 and Russia responded by annexing the Russian-populated Crimea after a referendum, the body fell into a crisis. After the assassination attempt on the double agent Sergei Skripal in London, for which the British government blamed the Russian secret service without substantiated evidence, NATO expelled several Russian diplomats. The NATO-Russia Council had not met since then.

In the meantime, the US and other NATO members have systematically armed the Ukrainian army and the fascist militias that are fighting against pro-Russian separatists in the east of the country. Among other things, they have received cutting-edge Javelin anti-

tank missiles. It is these ultra-nationalist militias that the *New York Times* says Washington wants to use in the “guerrilla war” against Russia.

Official US military aid to Ukraine in 2021 was \$250 million, with this year’s planned military spending amounting to \$300 million. On Monday, CNN and *Politico* reported that President Joe Biden approved additional shipments of firearms, ammunition, radios, and other military equipment. The military aid will thus be significantly increased again.

The unstable Ukrainian regime, undermined by oligarchic struggles and corruption, and the ultra-nationalist militias on which it relies can at any time be used for a provocation that will force Moscow to react. The east of Ukraine, in which a civil war has been smoldering since 2014, is mostly populated by residents of Russian descent. It would not be the first military conflict that the US and its allies have provoked in this way.

If NATO is now back at the negotiating table with Russia after a two-and-a-half-year ice age, there are two reasons.

First, public opinion in the US and Europe, which is largely opposed to a war against Russia, needs to be attuned to a military confrontation. The western media is constantly spreading the mendacious narrative: “We are peaceful and want to negotiate, but Putin wants to invade Ukraine and is making demands that cannot be met.”

Secondly, the US is developing the conflict with Russia as part of its geopolitical strategy, which is aimed at halting the economic and military rise of China and keeping the Europeans under control. A close alliance between Russia and China therefore needs to be prevented. The Biden administration knows that the Putin regime is under massive social pressure because of its murderous COVID-19 policy and glaring social inequality, and is therefore susceptible to political maneuvers and deals.

The European NATO members support the aggressive course against Russia but are pursuing their own interests. German imperialism in particular regards eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as traditional areas of expansion that it tried to conquer during the First and Second World Wars. Berlin fears that the United States will disadvantage Germany if it submits to its line.

This is particularly evident in the conflict over Nord Stream 2. Washington wants to use the completed but not yet approved gas pipeline as leverage against Russia, while Berlin wants to put the pipeline, on which Germany's energy supply depends, into operation. The conflict runs straight through the German government. While the Greens and the Free Democrats advocate stopping the pipeline, the SPD supports it.

The rivalries between the NATO powers are another factor that increases the risk of war. The explosive mixture of rivalries between imperialist allies, preparations for war against their opponents and social tensions are reminiscent of the eve of the First World War. This is also recognized by right-wing bourgeois commentators.

The 83-year-old journalist Michael Stürmer published in *Die Welt* a comment entitled "The new sleepwalkers." The title refers to the historian Christopher Clark's bestseller about the causes of the First World War. The former SPD chairman and German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel described the current situation in the Ukraine conflict as "dramatic" and "threatening."

This madness can only be stopped by a socialist offensive by the international working class against war and capitalism. It is the only social force that is motivated neither by profit nor national interests.

World Socialist 13.01.2022