



CONTACT GROUP ON RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS

What should the NATO summit do and what will it do in the context of the Russia/Ukraine crisis?¹

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One day shy of the four-month anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the ELN Contact Group on Russia-West Relations met to discuss the upcoming NATO summit in Madrid and what it would focus on with regard to the conflict in Ukraine. Conversation ranged from specific areas that the summit could address to broader patterns and trends in the war, both currently and in the future.

Likely occurrences at the NATO summit: emphasis on unity, little development in operational strategy

The Group discussed several areas that were likely to be addressed at the upcoming NATO summit, which promises to be NATO's most important summit since the 9/11 terror attacks. For logical reasons, the summit will be dominated by NATO's response to Russia's military action in Ukraine. Members were sure that NATO will declare that it is unified in its response to the war, even if this is not entirely true. There will be a bald repetition of the language from the 2008 Bucharest summit that Ukraine and Georgia will become members of NATO; given that it was said once, it is impossible to go back. The centrepieces of the summit, however, will be plans for a strong boost to NATO defence capabilities and a new NATO strategic concept, which will describe Russia as a threat and will include a toughening of language on China.

Members considered that there will not be much development from the summit as to what specifically NATO will do in Ukraine: apart from a general call for allies to fund a further package of non-lethal assistance to Ukraine, there is little agreement on how exactly to respond throughout the bloc, making further united action difficult. Nonetheless, this lack of unity will not prevent members from tough talk and national pledges of assistance to Ukraine. There is also little unity regarding the fate of

¹ This was the Contact Group's 17th meeting. The Group met virtually to discuss the upcoming NATO summit and the current situation regarding the Russia/Ukraine conflict. This summary note was prepared by the European Leadership Network and does not necessarily represent the views of any individual Contact Group member or any member of the European Leadership Network.

the NATO-Russia Founding Act; thus, it is possible that nothing will be said about the Act and its future will be left hanging.

On an Alliance level, it seems that there is agreement that the NATO Response Force will be massively increased – by at least six times. The number of NATO forward deployed battalions will be doubled from four to eight and a number of other related military initiatives will likely be implemented as well, including increased defence spending, modernisation, improvements in mobility of forces, and so on. These are all areas that can be expected to be discussed and implemented at the summit.

One member asked about Sweden and Finland's applications to join NATO. Most members agreed that it would eventually happen, despite Turkey's objections. One Russian speaker, however, noted that while Swedish and Finnish accession to NATO will likely occur, it may not matter all that much to Russia, apart from the fact that it will "kill off the idea of neutrality in Europe" in Russia. In Russia, even Switzerland is not considered neutral anymore; neither is Austria.

What should NATO be doing?

The second main area discussed at the Contact Group meeting was what NATO *should* do, both at the upcoming NATO summit and in general. Members and speakers had a variety of opinions on what course NATO should follow, and distinct cleavages were noted between Russians and Europeans.

Backchannels: difficult, but potentially necessary

One area discussed at some length was the idea of "backchannels". One member commented on the difficulty of creating and maintaining backchannels between NATO members and Russia at the current moment when "there's an immediate reaction to blame you as being pro-Russian". A Russian speaker agreed that backchannels are less present now than in the past, citing the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which there were certainly backchannels which were ultimately used not only to diffuse the immediate situation but also to set the United States and the Soviet Union on a path to a broadly more cooperative relationship. In the current moment, however, such backchannels do not exist, making us "vulnerable to potential escalation."

Another member disagreed, however. For this member, an appeal for western partners to "be more reasonable", to "look into the abyss", and carefully analyse Russian proposals is simply inappropriate at the given moment. Perhaps such an arrangement would be appropriate if the conflict was simply another round of shelling in the Donbas, as had occurred many times over the past eight years or so. But the conflict has reached a new level now, and the number of deaths – military and civilian – make the idea of truly opening diplomatic backchannels untenable at the moment. The Russian speaker agreed that while communication "should be maintained", formal diplomatic negotiations are "not going to happen", and dialogue is currently perceived as a "toxic word". Dialogue, in the speaker's mind, should only be used at this point to prevent a nuclear war.

"Carrots": Unfavourable opinion

A non-Russian speaker suggested that "if you are wielding a larger stick, you can also offer more carrot". NATO could, for example, expand its description of its approach to deterrence by including not just military aspects, but also other areas, including diplomacy and arms control. Additionally, in this

context, NATO could commit more firmly to better communication to minimise the risk of dangerous misperceptions.

Other meeting participants from Russia and Europe alike, however, disliked the term and idea of offering “carrots” to Russia. Russian participants largely agreed that even if NATO countries did offer incentives or openings to Russia, nobody in Russia would be likely to accept them. At this point, there is little interest in NATO from the Russian side. One member felt simply that “offering carrots to Russia is not something that should be happening right now”. This member did admit, however, that mil-to-mil contact should be encouraged, even despite the obstacles.

Future Approaches to Russia: Large Differences

Finally, Contact Group members discussed how NATO should approach Russia in the future. On this issue, opinions differed sharply between the Russian and European participants in this session. The idea of “accepted co-existence” was broached by one Russian speaker as a potential model for relations going forward. The fact that this was not “co-habitation” – which implies a certain level of closeness – was emphasised; rather, “co-existence” will “ensure that both sides continue to survive” in a world impacted by many other forces. In such a co-existent state, some rules should be worked out and observed by the two sides that go beyond simple arms control.

A Russian participant also contented that a Russian “defeat” in Ukraine would be catastrophic and destabilising for the Russian political system and the Russian body politic. In addition, they argued that any attempt to take away Russia’s ability to threaten its neighbours, as some NATO member state governments have said, would only be possible through external control of Russia. Furthermore, should Russia continue to lose on the battlefield due to massive supplies of Western weapons systems, Russia could begin bombing supply hubs, including those in Poland, which could lead Russia-NATO confrontation down the path to nuclear exchange. To help assuage some Russian concerns, one Russian member suggested that NATO could “de-sacralise” the conflict by removing the “good vs. evil” narrative: Russia wants at least some respect in the international arena and to “get rid of its inferiority complex”. Other Russian participants argued, on the contrary, that a new elite was emerging in Russia that felt no inferiority, were indifferent to Western views and therefore did not feel a need for respect from the West.

One Russian perspective that proved very controversial was the notion that the West is waging war on Russia – not the other way around. The viewpoint was advanced that sanctions are a means of warfare, and that Western countries have been engaged in economic warfare against Russia for years. Some non-Russian members of the Group pushed back strongly at this. Far from “waging war” the West was doing the bare minimum. Indeed, Western countries should go beyond the bare minimum and have a “response to aggression”, including disentangling the European Union from Russia. A new European security model “when Russians are killing Ukrainians” would be unacceptable.

Contacts: Daniel Shapiro, ELN Network Consultant, daniels@europeanleadershipnetwork.org; Anya Osetrova, ELN Network Consultant, anna@europeanleadershipnetwork.org (for media mentions).