

U.S., RUSSIA LOOKING FOR A BREAKTHROUGH

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Tug of war: Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden have laid out their demands. [File Photo](#)

After tough talk between Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin over the Russian troop build-up on the Ukraine border, U.S. and Russia insist they are hopeful that a pathway to easing tensions could open during diplomatic talks set for January.

But with less than two weeks to go before senior U.S. and Russian officials are to meet in Geneva, the chasm is deep and the prospect of finding an exit to the crisis faces no shortage of complications.

Mr. Biden on Friday told reporters that he advised Mr. Putin when they spoke by phone a day earlier that the upcoming talks could only work if the Russian leader “deescalated, not escalated, the situation” in the days ahead.

“I made it clear to President Putin that if he makes any more moves into Ukraine we will have severe sanctions,” Mr. Biden said. “We will increase our presence in Europe with NATO allies.”

Meanwhile, Mr. Biden’s national security team on Friday turned their attention to preparation for the Geneva talks, set for January 9 and 10, to discuss the Russian massing of some 1,00,000 troops on its border with Ukraine.

Mr. Biden is scheduled to speak by phone on Sunday with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Friday debriefed Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly, Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the Biden-Putin call and discussed preparations for the upcoming summit.

A top Putin aide on Friday reinforced that Russia stands by its demands for written security guarantees. Moscow wants it codified that any future expansion of NATO must exclude Ukraine and other former Soviet bloc countries and demands that the bloc remove offensive weaponry from countries in the Russian neighborhood.

“We will not allow our initiatives to be drowned in endless discussions,” Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the state RIA-Novosti news agency Friday.

“If no constructive answer comes in a reasonable time and the West continues its aggressive course, Russia will have to take all necessary measures to maintain a strategic balance and remove unacceptable threats to our security,” he added.

The Biden administration and NATO allies have made clear that the Russian demands are non-starters.

Former envoys’ letter

Following the Biden-Putin call, a group of 24 former U.S. national security officials and Russia experts — a group that includes several officials who served in the Obama, George W. Bush

and Clinton's administrations — released a statement calling on Mr. Biden to immediately, and publicly, lay out the penalties Russia would face if Mr. Putin were to move forward with military action.

The Russians for their part continue to make the case that they are facing an existential threat with Ukraine.

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