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European leaders meet with Putin. Should Biden?

Katherine Doyle

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After weeks of dialogue, little has shifted in the standoff with Russian President Vladimir Putin over Ukraine. European leaders have met with Putin in Moscow.

U.S. and NATO allies have met with their Ukrainian and Russian counterparts. The Kremlin has continued to mass troops on Ukraine's borders. Washington has moved forces east.

Meanwhile, warnings from U.S. officials have grown dire, with Biden's top national security adviser over the weekend stating that an invasion could come "any day."

How to break the escalating tensions isn't clear.

Biden has in the past argued in favor of direct dialogue between leaders, telling reporters after sitting down with Putin in June that there's "no substitute" for meeting face to face. "All foreign policy is the logical extension of personal relationships," the president said at the time.

But a meeting between Biden and Putin, which the Russian leader said in December that he would "really like," has proven elusive.

The White House hasn't ruled it out: Biden is "certainly open" to speaking directly with Putin if doing so would provide "the most constructive step moving forward," the president's press secretary said last week. But, Jen Psaki added, a de-escalation of Russian forces along Ukraine's border would "make that diplomatic path easier."

A presidential sit-down with Putin "could well make sense ... to convey that the United States is willing to discuss reasonable Russian security concerns, to observe that the Russian proposals have thus far been complete nonstarters, and to emphasize the downsides for Russia of an invasion," said Richard Fontaine, CEO of the Center for a New American Security. "But before any such meeting, the administration will need to determine how to define that first category."

While Russia has denied any intention of attacking Ukraine, it has demanded security concessions from NATO, including a promise that the alliance will not add Ukraine as a member. In remarks last week, Putin said the United States had ignored his security demands.

American voters appear to back NATO and Washington's insistence that any country can join the alliance if it meets the criteria, even as this frustrates a possible resolution with Russia.

In a new *Politico*/Morning Consult [poll](#), 49% of voters said NATO should not give in to Russia's demand that Ukraine be prevented from joining the alliance, compared to 17% who said NATO should accept it if it forestalls an invasion.

But Americans also oppose war with Putin. A December YouGov [poll](#) with the Charles Koch Institute found that a majority of people opposed going to war with Russia over Ukraine, 58%, compared to 27% who backed the idea.

If Biden holds back from a leader-to-leader meeting, he could assign a senior diplomat to engage in his place. Biden dispatched CIA Director Bill Burns, his most senior Russia expert, to Moscow in November and Germany in January to de-escalate the tensions, with other aides engaged in similar entreaties.

"There is also a case for Biden sending a special emissary to engage with Putin directly rather than doing so at the presidential level," Fontaine said. "But the point is that the diplomacy is critical right now — to avoid a war or to position ourselves best if one comes anyway."

Macron has reiterated that Ukrainian sovereignty must be protected but also has broached the need to take Russia's demands into account.

"We have to be very realistic. We will not obtain unilateral gestures, but it is essential to avoid a deterioration of the situation before building mechanisms and reciprocal gestures of trust," he [told](#) the *Journal du Dimanche*. "Then, we will discuss the terms of a de-escalation."

For Biden, the nuances may prove more difficult to thread. The president came under fire last month after suggesting that Western allies might [moderate their response](#) to a Russian attack on Ukraine, depending on its scale, with his officials since then adopting a stricter rhetorical line.

"I don't see much point in Biden meeting with Putin unless Biden's or Putin's position has changed significantly," said Justin Logan, a Cato Institute senior fellow. But he said Macron taking the lead in the negotiations could prove fruitful.

"Macron is dancing around the edge of formally committing to the reality that Ukraine will not join NATO in the policy-relevant future," Logan explained. "By contrast, the Biden administration inexplicably elevates this narrow question to the abstract principle that countries should be able to choose their own alliances, which is false, as NATO requires unanimity among members for admitting a new member."

While Ukraine has pressed for membership, senior U.S. officials, including a top adviser to Biden, have recognized Russia's deep-seated objections to that prospect.

In a memo to former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Burns, a former ambassador to Moscow, wrote that it was "hard to overstate the strategic consequences" of offering NATO

membership to Ukraine and that "there could be no doubt that Putin would fight back hard" by doing so.

Publicly, the Biden administration appears unwilling to give Putin's concerns any credence.

"It's a mistake, I would say, to define things by the terms that President Putin is defining things. ... They are the aggressor," Psaki said last week, arguing that "NATO is a defensive alliance."

Responding to Russia's pushback, she argued, "It is not the same thing."

But Logan said there would be little downside to acknowledging the reality of Ukraine's prospects for NATO admission were Macron to do so.

"Should France somehow commit to oppose Ukrainian membership for some period of time, it would acknowledge a basic reality that Putin has requested as a concession," Logan said. "This might not satisfy Putin, of course, but little would be lost."