

# Russia's True Strategy Shows Itself

by George Friedman - February 1, 2022

If you look at the whole of Russia's behavior around Ukraine, its strategy becomes clear – or as clear as clear gets in geopolitics. The buildup of troops started months ago. In time, it dawned on the U.S. and its NATO allies that something might be happening. The Russians issued their demands a few weeks ago, asking that NATO not grant Ukraine membership into the alliance and that it withdraw weapons from Eastern Europe. Put differently, Moscow wanted to return to a status quo that it had held before the Soviet Union fell.

One explanation for Russian behavior thus emerged. Moscow's demands made it seem as though Ukraine and Eastern Europe posed a unique threat to Russia that would abate if NATO abandoned ship. That is simply untrue; missiles no longer need to be close to be a target in order to be a threat. That demand therefore made little sense except in the case I have been pressing: Russia needs strategic depth against a ground assault. However unlikely this threat may be, it is primal and visceral. That threat would be abated some if NATO retreated westward, but it would be all but removed if Russian troops eventually were deployed westward.

The problem with this line of thinking is that Russia knew full well that the U.S. and its allies would reject its demands.

Another theory was that Russia always intended to invade Ukraine. It wanted the United States to reject its offer to justify a war. The Europeans generally don't want a war, nor do many in the United States. The Russians may have believed the rejection of their demands would have created serious concern in Europe but no more than interested awareness in the United States. So if we shift the focus away from Ukraine, Russia's intention might have been to simply divide NATO so deeply that it could never be repaired. Considering the Europeans are unwilling to financially sustain the alliance, the U.S. doesn't trust its members to share all the risks, and with the general economic forces driving Europe apart, Russia doesn't have to try all that hard to divide the alliance.

On this point, Germany, the de facto leader of Europe, is essential. Its economy is currently weakened by limits on its export market and internal imbalances from the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the stabilizing factors of its economy has been the reliability of Russian natural gas exports, a reliability that was to be enhanced by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Russia needs the revenue from selling to Europe in general and Germany in particular. Russia's actions near Ukraine have thus

created a conundrum. Germany – and really, all NATO members – needs Russia's energy but does not trust Russia. A war might force Russia to stop exports to Europe, giving Germany and others the choice between internal mayhem and long-term security from Russia. Russia has made no overt move because the idea of an attack is more powerful than an actual attack.

This would explain why Russian demands were meant to be rejected, holding off an invasion while the fear of war grows. It would trigger German gestures of solidarity with NATO while urgently searching for a solution that would compel Russia to desist. It would explain Moscow's extraordinary patience with the U.S. response, and it would explain the promise that in spite of massed forces, there will be no war. If NATO essentially breaks up, Russia will be in a position to create a neutral military zone and an economic zone that it is an integral part of and chief energy supplier to.

The one counter to all this is something we don't usually pay attention to in geopolitics: public opinion. The outright rejection of the Russian offer should have divided the U.S. and created general anti-American feeling in Europe. So far, this has not happened, despite the fact that Russia is generally pretty good at using social and political divisions to shape the behavior of countries to its benefit.

Moscow's actions and offers were meant to cast the U.S. as unreasonable. Yet no powerful anti-war movement has arisen in Europe as yet, and the division in Washington remains in place. Driving Europe in the direction the Russians want would seem to require public support. That would deny governments room for maneuver, which is precisely what Russia needs to do.

This is a complex explanation for a very complex set of maneuvers. If NATO shatters, the Russians think they will take control of Ukraine without risk. From the viewpoint of Germany at least, the benefits of NATO do not compare with the benefits of access to natural gas. Germany, for one, cannot value NATO over gas. Russia has adopted a strategy of indirect attack, first weakening NATO, perhaps mortally, then expecting Ukraine to fall in its lap. That is its expectation but Russia, as other nations, has been frequently wrong. The Russians were utterly honest when they said that they were not intending to attack Ukraine. They have bigger fish to fry before that.

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