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Russia-West Talks Fail to Yield A Breakthrough

A series of recent Russia-West engagements involving Russia's talks with the US, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), failed to yield any breakthrough. Amidst this stalemate, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphasised that "Russia has run out of patience" and now seeks a "written response" from the West to its proposals for jointly building European security architecture.



The trigger for these discussions was Russia's massive troop build-up along its border with eastern Ukraine. This had led to fears of an imminent Russian invasion, similar to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. While an uneasy calm prevails on the Russia-Ukraine border, the sharpening of rhetoric between Russia on one hand and Ukraine and the West on the other highlights the potential of

a flare-up in their long-running standoff.

In this light, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov's suggestion about putting Russian boots in Venezuela and Cuba has raised the stakes. Meanwhile, the US has highlighted possible sanctions against President Putin. Meanwhile, Western insinuations of the recent cyber-attacks on Ukraine being orchestrated from Russia and the Kremlin deploying saboteurs in Kiev to fake an attack on Russian positions to give Moscow a pretext to launch an invasion against Ukraine have further upped the ante.

Notably, Russia's draft treaty proposals to the US and NATO on legally binding security guarantees appear non-negotiable for the West. These propositions, which would upend the European security architecture, involve halting NATO expansion eastwards in the post-Soviet space, including in Ukraine, and a large-scale US military withdrawal from the European continent. Russia is also seeking a dilution of NATO's military commitment to its eastern European members who had joined the alliance in May 1997. Implied in these proposals is Russia's message of Moscow and Europe alone determining the course of European security. From a Western perspective, these proposals would entail giving Russia a veto on NATO's future course of action.

In this context, finding common ground appears a herculean task given the core differences between Russia and the West. These stem from Russia's perception of the West rejecting its claims of being an equal partner. The West, meanwhile, has often looked at Russia as a spent power.

Arguably, a new model of security interaction in Europe can only emerge if Russia and the West start looking at each other through a new prism amidst their existing trust deficit.

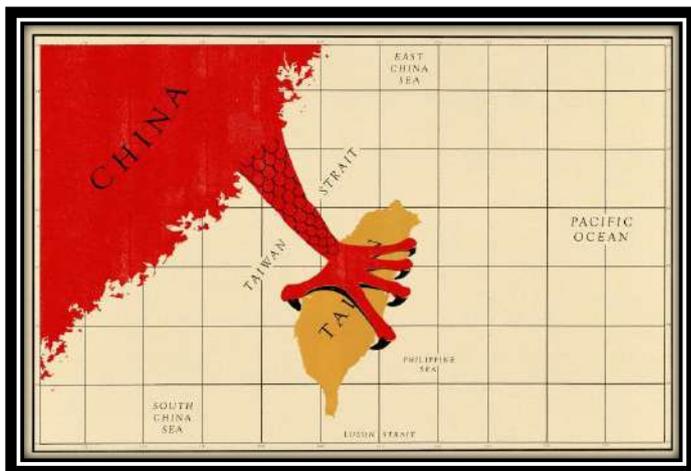
For Russia, having put the onus of a détente on the West, its credibility of coercive diplomacy in Ukraine would be at stake if its concerns are not accommodated. The starting point for Russia is likely to be a neutral Ukraine.

Needless to say, a Russian invasion of Ukraine would scupper chances of a détente between Russia and the West. Russia would face crippling sanctions including abrogation of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Ukraine's membership in NATO could also be fast-tracked.

The silver lining, however, is that at present both sides appear amenable for further discussions.

As China threat grows, Taiwan passes extra \$8.6bn defence budget

On 11 Jan 2022, Taiwan's parliament passed an extra spending bill of \$8.6bn to boost defence capabilities against growing military threats from China. This additional defence budget will be in addition to the planned annual expenditure on the military. The budget proposal received support from all four party caucuses at the 113-seat Legislative Yuan, Lawmakers said they would closely monitor the spending of the new funds, which should serve to strengthen Taiwan's maritime and air defences amid increasingly assertive behaviour by Chinese military aircraft and naval vessels.



While tensions between Taipei and Beijing remain high, Beijing's sabre-rattling towards the island has increased considerably since President Tsai Ing-wen came to power in 2016. China claims self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory and accuses its democratically elected government of being separatists. Taiwan's government says it is a sovereign nation with no need to declare independence. In 2021,

China has significantly ratcheted up military and political pressure, publicising multiple recent military drills simulating an invasion. Its warplanes also breached Taiwan's air defence zone at unprecedented levels last year. In the largest ever incursion, at least 38 Chinese aircraft flying in two waves crossed the island's air defence zone in October, prompting the deployment of fighter jets.

Taiwan's defence ministry, in September last year, had proposed this five-year special defence budget of around T\$237.3 Billion (approx. \$ 8.6 Billion) from 2022 as Chinese warplanes breached its air defence zone at unprecedented levels. Taiwan's defence minister Chiu Kuo-cheng had argued that "The military threats and provocation are even more than before," adding that any crisis was likely to escalate fast. In a white paper released in November 2021, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence said the PLA had developed the ability to blockade Taiwan's major airports and harbours.

As per reports, the additional funds allocated through this extra spending bill will be used to purchase anti-ship and anti-aircraft armaments for navy and coast guard vessels, as well as unmanned aerial vehicles. A detailed list of estimated expenditures on a variety of military equipment from this additional defence budget has been published by the Taiwanese Directorate General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics (DGBAS). About 64% of the money will be spent on anti-ship weapons such as land-based missile systems, including a T\$148.9 billion plan to mass-produce home-grown missiles and "high-performance" ships. The bulk of the funds would go to domestic weapons projects, although some of the money would go to parts and technological support from the U.S. Taiwan's Defence Ministry said those locally developed systems include cruise missiles and warships. T\$29.6 billion has been earmarked for Wan Chien air-to-ground missiles and the upgraded version of its Hsiung Feng IIE missile, the longer-range Hsiung Sheng land-attack missile. The additional budget would also go toward Taiwan's indigenous shipbuilding program, which is building missile corvettes, landing ships and diesel-electric submarines for Taiwan's Navy.

Taiwan's defence strategy has long focused on "asymmetric defence" or that it would "resist the enemy on the opposite shore, attack it at sea, destroy it in the littoral area, and annihilate it on the beachhead," according to the defence ministry. In practice, this means that while outnumbered by the PLA, Taiwan aims to make itself an unattractive enough target for attack by being able to carry out a prolonged resistance.

Wang Yi visit East Africa and South Asia

In the New Year, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi travelled to Africa and South Asia, from 4 to 7 January 2022, to reiterate and reaffirm Chinese commitment to these regions. Incidentally, Chinese diplomacy has developed a tradition in the last 32 years which makes Africa the first destination of the Chinese Foreign Minister's overseas visit at the beginning of the year.



Historically, Africa has had an important place in Chinese foreign policy vision. In the past, Africa's anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles received Chinese support. Africa was important for China to mobilise support for its One China policy. These ideological legacies are progressively intertwined with material imperatives of trade and investment. Under President Xi Jinping, China's outreach to Africa has received even a sharper focus.

In Eritrea, Wang Yi and his Eritrean counterpart Osman Saleh signed a joint statement that opposed “hegemonic interferences in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of democracy and human rights.” In the joint statement, China opposed “any unilateral sanctions on Eritrea.” Eritrea reaffirmed “adherence to the one-China principle.” COVID-19 prevention cooperation has, understandably, been the salient feature in China’s cooperation with Africa in the last two years.

In Comoros, which was Wang Yi’s second stop, he expressed China’s willingness to “help Comoros realize universal immunization within this year... help Comoros to eliminate malaria by 2025... [and] support Comoros in the Emerging Comoros Plan 2030 development strategy.” The Chinese foreign ministry underlined Comorian Foreign Minister Dhoahir Dhoulkamal’s praise for China’s “sense of responsibility as a major country” in its strong support for the global fight against the pandemic.

In Kenya, Wang took part in the completion ceremony of the Chinese-built oil terminal at the port city of Mombasa. Wang highlighted Xi’s pledge to “provide another 1 billion doses of vaccines to Africa” and promised “an additional 10 million doses of vaccines for Kenya.”

Dismissing concerns about China’s ‘debt trap’ in Africa, he counter-charged that it is “a malicious hype-up by some people”. He wrapped up his visit to the East African countries on 7 January, reminding that although Africa “should be a big stage for international cooperation” only not “for competition among major countries”.

He emphasised the idea of China’s Initiative of Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa and announced China’s intention to appoint a special envoy to foster peace in the turbulent Horn of Africa. While Wang gave no further details of the envoy's role, this announcement is being interpreted as China’s aspiration to play the role of mediator in the region’s conflicts.

From the East African shore, Wang Yi travelled to further East — to the Maldives and Sri Lanka. The visits yet again underscored China’s approach towards deepening its engagement in the South Asian part of the Indian Ocean region. In the Maldives, Wang Yi recounted China’s developmental assistance for the island country and informed about various specific projects completed and underway. Wang Yi visit to Sri Lanka marked “the 65th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries and the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Rubber-Rice Pact” between them. However, the visit was important for its strategic messaging. His remark during the visit that any third party should not be allowed to influence China-Sri Lanka relations was seen as targeting India. His suggestion for creating a forum for the Indian Ocean region with Chinese involvement was seen as carving out space for itself in the region.