

China Gives Oomph to Russia's 'Nyet' on NATO

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*Fourteen years ago today, when then-ambassador to Russia **William Burns**, in an IMMEDIATE cable titled "**Nyet Means Nyet: Russia's NATO Enlargement Redlines**," reported Moscow's warning that NATO membership for Ukraine would cross a red line, the Russians could do little more than grouse. Enter from left stage Chinese **President Xi Jinping** last year with the shot of adrenalin Putin needed to make "Nyet" stick.*

Today's acrimony at the UN Security Council provides the latest sign of Russia's no-holds-barred chutzpah regarding the U.S. on Ukraine, with the words of Russian UN **Ambassador Vasily Nebenzia**. U.S. UN **Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield** had accused Russia of "**actions [that] strike at the very heart of the UN Charter.**"

Nebenzia retorted that the U.S. is "whipping up tensions and provoking escalation." As for invading Ukraine, Nebenzia addressed the US ambassador with these words: "**You are almost pulling for this ... You want it to happen. You're waiting for it to happen, as if you want to make your words become a reality.**"

Burns and Lavrov

No one is better placed to discern the significance of this change of tone than ex-ambassador Burns, who is now-CIA Director. In his Feb. 1, 2008 cable citing Lavrov's admonitions, Burns reported that the NATO membership issue "could potentially split Ukraine in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene." Burns added: "NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains an emotional and neuralgic issue for Russia, but strategic policy considerations also underlie strong opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine."

In those dark days of Cheney/Bush and Secretary of State **Condoleezza Rice**, Burns needed to summon up some moxie of his own to tell his masters, however diplomatically, that Russia is entitled to have its own "strategic policy considerations," and that it might even intervene in Ukraine. In present circumstances, this earlier tell-it-like-it-is behavior offers some hope that CIA Director Burns may be one of the "adults in the room". It seems a safe guess that has been among those advising President Joe Biden to respond with respect

and speed to **President Vladimir Putin's** proposals to conduct serious security negotiations without delay, and even to [put on the table what Moscow calls issues of "secondary importance"](#) (secondary only to the more rhetorical issue of NATO enlargement) - like putting limits on where offensive strike missiles can be placed in Eastern Europe.

Two Against One

That President Biden was poorly briefed last June on what the Soviets used to call the "world correlation of forces" became embarrassingly clear after the June 16, 2021 summit when, before he could be whisked onto his departing plane from Geneva, [Biden let it be known](#) that the "Russians are in a difficult spot being squeezed by China." And here is the bizarre way Biden described, at his post-summit presser, his bizarre approach to Putin on China:

"Without quoting him [Putin] - which I don't think is appropriate - let me ask a rhetorical question: You got a multi-thousand-mile border with China. China is seeking to be the most powerful economy in the world and the largest and the most powerful military in the world."

Xi and Putin: Our Relationship 'Exceeds an Alliance'

Putin and Xi set out to do Biden's homework for him, emphasizing the closeness of the strategic relationship between China and Russia. This effort culminated in the Xi-Putin virtual summit on Dec. 15, the same day that Moscow delivered its draft bilateral treaty on security matters to the US (no coincidence).

Whether Russia and China have a formal defense alliance or something short of that became largely moot that day when [Chinese President Xi Jinping stated](#) that "this relationship even exceeds an alliance in its closeness and effectiveness."

The *New York Times* insisted (and is technically correct as far as we know) that "the two countries do not have a formal alliance." But as tension grows along Russia's western border and along China's Pacific frontier, prudent statesmen would conclude that the exact definition or description of the China-Russia strategic partnership has become a distinction without much difference.

Adding Drama

The sum and substance of what Russia and China decided to demonstrate at the Putin-Xi virtual summit on Dec. 15 shines through the video of the highly scripted first minute of their conversation. This segment apparently is the only video portion released so far; [it was picked up by the NY Times](#), as well as other outlets. Still, most commentators seemed to miss its significance, even though the video included subtitles (and lots of body language) for anyone truly interested.

Please click on the segment, or read the transcript (from the subtitles):

Putin: "Dear friend, dear President Xi Jinping.

Next February I expect we can finally meet in person in Beijing as we have agreed.

We will hold talks and then participate in the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic

Games. I am grateful for your invitation to attend this landmark event.”

Xi: “Dear President Putin, my old friend. It’s my pleasure to meet you at the end of this year by video the second time this year.

This is our 37th meeting since 2013. You have hailed on many occasions China-Russia relations as a model in international collaboration in the 21st Century, strongly supporting China’s position on safeguarding its core interests, and firmly opposed attempts to drive a wedge between our two countries. I highly appreciate it.”

Gratuitous declarations from Washington that the US will officially boycott the Winter Olympics February in Beijing may not strike most of us as a grave matter of state; the Chinese, of course, take this much more seriously. Clearly, Putin wanted to align his initial remarks closely with China, and at variance with the US and those of its docile allies who have fallen in line to snub the Winter Games. In any event, for Putin and Xi, it was a felicitous way into the conversation.

It is Xi’s comments that merit particular attention. Thirty-seven meetings since 2013! Do the math: 4-plus summits a year, even taking into account Covid restrictions on travel. What better way to put flesh on “Dear President Putin, my old friend”?

Core Interests

The past several weeks have given the words “core interests” unusual prominence and importance. Russia has core interests regarding Ukraine, further NATO expansion, and emplacement of missiles within range of sensitive sites in Russia. For China, the “core interest” is, of course, Taiwan, and Beijing is determined to deter any action that violates the One-China agreements that have kept the peace for a half-century. Xi expresses appreciation not only for Putin’s help in safeguarding [China’s] core interests, but also for the fact that Putin has “firmly opposed attempts to drive a wedge between the two countries – ending the clip as it began, with an obvious dig at the US.

President Putin’s visit to Beijing later this week for the opening of the Olympics will provide occasion for additional displays of solidarity – as well as visuals. Meanwhile, back in Washington, Under-Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and her protégé Antony Blinken seem to be still in the dark. They have been asking the Chinese to “use their influence” with Moscow to get it to de-escalate the situation regarding Ukraine. Parallel universe? Perhaps Director Burns can ensure that Biden has a chance to watch that one-minute video of the Dec. 15 summit between Putin and Xi.

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