

# What! No Russian Invasion of Ukraine?

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*I hope you know this by now, but on Christmas morning the Russian military announced a sizable troop withdrawal from Russian territory near Ukraine. The [New York Post’s Eileen AJ Connelly jumped on the story](#). At noon Saturday her piece, “Over 10,000 Russian troops leaving Ukraine border region after month of drills”, was posted.*

While the drawdown was announced without fanfare, it might represent the first *quid* for the *quo*’s that **President Vladimir Putin** expects from U.S. negotiators next month in talks originally proposed by **President Joe Biden**.

How to explain the silence of the corporate media on the troop pullout? One can imagine the reaction of the egg-nog-ed elite running our foreign-policy/media strategy upon hearing the news. “Another Russian dirty trick, announcing this on Christmas day! Who is in good shape enough to prepare our customary press guidance? You know, our Daily Memo for the Media? We also need to focus on what subtle treachery lies behind this ostensibly conciliatory move by Russia.”

Apparently, no one was up to the challenge. Without the customary Memo for the Media, the stenographers posing as journalists for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were at sea. You can almost hear them making excuses for those from whom they receive dictation: “Hey, it’s Christmas; surely this hard-to-explain news can wait a day or two. We, all of us, need to put the right spin on this gambit from the outset.” And so, as of this writing, not a word yet in the *NYT* or *Washington Post*.

## **Informal Memo for the Media**

Since it may be a day or two more before the media gets the guidance memo, let me help with some background.

When Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin talked via video on Dec. 7, *the White House readout* was unusually sparse. It indicated that Biden voiced deep concern about “Russia’s escalation of forces surrounding Ukraine” and called for “de-escalation and a return to diplomacy”, adding that “the two presidents tasked their teams to follow up”.

Two weeks later, in a key address to the leadership of the Russian armed forces. [Putin provided additional detail](#):

“Incidentally, during our conversation he [Biden] actually proposed appointing senior officials to oversee this sphere” (“sphere” being Russian concerns over US missile deployments in Romania, Poland and possibly Ukraine). “It was in response to his proposal that we drafted our proposals on precluding the further eastward expansion of NATO and the deployment of offensive strike systems in the countries bordering on Russia.”

### **Not Worth the Paper It’s Written On**

As Putin addressed the Russian senior military on Dec. 21, a hint of defensiveness crept in as he emphasized the need for long-term, legally binding guarantees. Perhaps he saw a smirk on the face of one of the generals. (It is a safe bet that Putin has faced considerable pressure from his military to take advantage of Russia’s preponderance of power near Ukraine and use it for more than “just” leverage to get talks going.) In any case, Putin felt it necessary to demonstrate that he is quite aware of Washington’s dismissive attitude toward its obligations under arms control treaties:

“Well, we know very well that even legal guarantees cannot be completely fail-safe, because the United States easily pulls out of any international treaty that has ceased to be interesting to it for some reason, sometimes offering explanations and sometimes not, as was the case with the ABM and the Open Skies treaties - nothing at all.”

“There are certain signals that our partners are willing to work on that [a “clear and comprehensive response to Russia’s proposals”]. However, there is also the danger that they will attempt to drown the proposals in words, or in a swamp, in order to take advantage of this pause and do whatever they want to do.

“To make clear to everyone: we are aware of this, and this turn of events, these developments will not work for us. We look forward to constructive and meaningful talks with a visible outcome - and within a definite timeframe - that would ensure equal security for all.”

### **The Ball in US Court**

The positive news, so far, lies in the unusually rapid response by the White House in agreeing to discuss Moscow’s proposals next month. One might well have expected them to be dismissed out of hand or put on the back burner, far-reaching as they are. So what else was discussed between Biden and Putin on Dec. 7 - besides the scary enough warnings about highly dangerous 5-minute warning time for hypersonic missiles. What prompted Biden to react positively to the surprising initiative the Kremlin publicized so quickly?

My guess is that it was the Chinese elephant (dragon?) in the room. At the June summit in Geneva, President Biden flummoxed those of us who knew how close Russia and China had already become, by stating publicly with supreme confidence after the summit:“

“Let me choose my words. Russia is in a very, very difficult spot right now. ... They are being squeezed by China.” [Russia] has 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.”

It seems likely that on Dec. 7 Putin made a point of explaining to Biden that, on this issue, he had been woefully misinformed. It was rather the case that Russia and China have never been closer – that, indeed, they have what amounts to a virtual military alliance.

Biden may have been alerted to tune into the virtual summit that Putin was scheduled to have with Chinese President Xi Jinping on Dec. 15, [during which Xi stated](#) that China’s relationship with Russia “even exceeds an alliance in its closeness and effectiveness. (See also: “[Putin Has a Big Brother in Xi](#)”

As soon as the June summit in Geneva was announced, [we worried](#):

“Whether or not Official Washington fully appreciates the gradual – but profound – change in America’s triangular relationship with Russia and China over recent decades, what is clear is that the US has made itself into the big loser. The triangle may still be equilateral, but it is now, in effect, two sides against one.

There was little sign just a half-year ago that Biden was aware of this profound shift in the “world correlation of forces.” His acceptance of Putin’s proposal to hold early discussions may reflect that Biden is no longer tone-deaf to where the US now stands in the triangular relationship.

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