

Opinion **Ukraine conflict**

There is a diplomatic route out of the Ukraine crisis

The Nato-Russia Council has been revived and confidence-building measures are under discussion

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The current crisis in Ukraine is the next step in Vladimir Putin's bid for Russia to play in the big leagues again © Efreem Lukatsky/AP

Robert Hunter YESTERDAY

The writer was US ambassador to Nato, 1993-98

Ukraine will never join Nato, and there will be no war between Russia and the west. The first has long been assured. The second will depend on whether Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden follow the tried and trusted methods of international diplomacy.

As early as May 1989, President George H W Bush laid out aspirations for the post-cold war era: to create a “Europe whole and free” and at peace. The challenge was to engage Russia in broader European security and politics without it playing a spoiler’s role. Nato would remain and Russia would not be stigmatised as having lost the cold war. In 1997, Nato decided to take in three new members, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary — the first two to reassure everyone about Germany’s future.

The Nato-Russia Founding Act established a joint council in which Moscow would be an equal partner. The allies would not let Ukraine become part of a Russian sphere of influence, but also knew it could not be included in Nato. The result was the [Nato-Ukraine Charter](#) which gives Ukraine the right to consultations at Nato and a long list of areas of co-operation, together with a promise that in time it might be considered for Nato membership.

The flaw in this arrangement lies in the so-called open-door policy, which the US and its allies continue to assert. But “open door” only means the right to apply to join

at Nato's 2008 summit in Bucharest, it pushed for "membership action plans" for the two countries. Other allies rebelled; but to keep Bush from going home empty-handed, they agreed that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of Nato". In diplo-speak, that meant "never" and was understood as such.

Putin, who had always been bitter about the collapse of the Soviet Union and its consequences, bided his time until 2014, when Russia seized Crimea and sent troops into Ukraine's mostly Russian-speaking Donbas region.

The current crisis in Ukraine is the next step in Putin's bid for Russia to play in the big leagues again and to be recognised as such by the US. It is doubtful that he has ever intended to invade, which would make Russia a pariah state for years to come. For his part, Biden signalled a desire to talk by ruling out a role for US military forces. Russia then signalled its readiness to resume diplomacy by tabling two draft treaties.

Diplomacy is thus now front-and-centre, with only the terms of agreement to be hammered out. The US has the tougher job: Putin has an audience of one, whereas Biden has to deal with 29 allies, Ukraine, Georgia, other members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and critics at home.

The outcome will recognise that Ukraine will not join Nato and that countries will still be allowed to apply (although there are no serious countries left on the list of potential new members). Additionally, the two sides will agree to confidence-building measures. These are already on the table, and the Nato-Russia Council has been resuscitated. The US also needs Russia to end cyber attacks and interference in US and European democracies. Moscow has already moved to close down REvil, a major hacking network based in Russia.

The message from the Geneva meeting last week between US secretary of state Antony Blinken and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov was clear: the crisis has moved into the dealmaking stage. It's just the terms that have to be worked out.

The US and Nato, along with Russia if Putin understands where his country's real interests lie, will have a chance again to pursue a Europe whole and free and at peace.

