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## ***In Paris, Ukraine's Zelensky proposes EU-Russia-Ukraine talks***

Amid explosive tensions between the NATO-backed government in Kiev and Russia, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky travelled yesterday to meet French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris. German Chancellor Angela Merkel also attended part of the meeting via a conference call.



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky [Credit: en.kremlin.ru]

As Zelensky arrived in Paris, diplomatic relations between Washington and Moscow were teetering on the brink of collapse. Russia expelled ten US diplomats including US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan, in retaliation for sweeping sanctions Biden imposed on Russia, and after Washington abandoned threats to deploy two warships along Russia's

Black Sea coast. Last month, Russia recalled its ambassador to the United States, normally the last diplomatic step before the outbreak of war, over Biden's extraordinary remark calling Putin a "killer."

Recent weeks had seen a flare-up of the conflict provoked by the February 2014 NATO-backed coup in Ukraine, in which Washington and Berlin backed far-right forces to topple a pro-Russian government in Kiev. The coup rapidly split the country along linguistic lines, as Russian-speaking areas of the country opposed the new far-right government. Crimea voted to secede from Ukraine and to re-join Russia, while pro-Moscow separatists took over the Donbass in eastern Ukraine.

Tensions have soared since Biden's inauguration, after which the Kiev regime cut off water supplies to Crimea and adopted a "Crimean Platform" calling to militarily reconquer the Donbass and Crimea, which hosts a key Russian naval base at Sevastopol. This policy, if enacted, clearly entails going to war with Russia. Moscow retaliated by massing troops along the Russian-Ukrainian border and threatening to seal off parts of the Black Sea.

Yesterday morning, before the talks with Zelensky, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov asked Berlin and Paris to restrain Kiev. He said, "It would be very important for us if Mr. Macron and Ms. Merkel used their influence during this video-conference with Mr. Zelensky to explain to him the possibility of a definitive cessation of all provocations" on the front lines in eastern Ukraine.

After Zelensky's meeting with Macron, in a "working lunch," Zelensky issued a statement calling for resumption of talks between the Moscow and Kiev, mediated by Berlin and Paris. He said, "I would like all four of us to participate [to discuss] the security situation in the east of Ukraine and to end the occupation of our territory."

Berlin and Paris both issued statements generally supporting Zelensky and hypocritically blaming Russia for the conflict. In a communiqué, the German Chancellery stressed its "concern at the increase in Russian troops along the border with Ukraine" and called for a withdrawal "of these reinforcements so that we can achieve de-escalation."

In Paris, the Elysée presidential palace declared its "support" for Ukrainian sovereignty and stressed that "Volodymyr Zelensky expressed on his part a very clear wish for de-

escalation.” It added that the talks between Merkel, Macron and Zelensky had centred on “the search for a political solution to the crisis and the means to bring Russia back on board in negotiations.” It added that officials from Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine would meet in order to prepare a new round of talks on the “Normandy format.”

So-called “Normandy format” talks began in 2015, amid the international crisis provoked by the Obama administration’s threat to arm Ukraine against Russia; Merkel and then-French President François Hollande held talks with Russian and Ukrainian officials in an attempt to avert war.

Yesterday, Peskov responded to the summit by denying that Russian troop deployments were a threat and insisting that Moscow seeks a diplomatic resolution: “Russia is not a party to conflict. Russia is doing its best to help resolve this conflict. We will always work to make that clear.”

Despite the generally favourable tone of the German and French communiqués backing Zelensky, it was more or less apparent that the Ukrainian president’s appeals for greater European support against Russia had fallen on deaf ears.

On Thursday, the day before arriving in Paris, Zelensky had granted a full-page interview to the right-wing French daily *Le Figaro*, laying out his agenda for the talks. He pointed to dangerous military tensions internationally: “Since Joe Biden took office, everyone has been flexing their muscles around the planet. Personally, I don’t want that to be at Ukraine’s expense.”

On this basis, Zelensky asked France to support Ukrainian membership in NATO and the EU, given its close support for NATO ever since the 2014 coup: “Our country has made great sacrifices in terms of human lives. We cannot stay indefinitely in the waiting room of the EU and of NATO. ... It is time to shift into higher gear, for us to be invited into the EU and NATO, as we do not want to have to beg.”

Zelensky also dismissed the “Normandy format” talks between Berlin, Paris, Moscow and Kiev, declaring that they were dead: “I think Emmanuel Macron is capable of maintaining them on life support. But honestly, they are in cardiac arrest.”

*Le Figaro* 's interviewer pointed to questions about the extent of support for Zelensky in Washington. Asked whether he had waited a long time after Biden's inauguration—two months, in fact—before receiving a phone call from the US president, Zelensky was forced to evasively reply: “Too long, you mean? But the United States is a great country. They have a lot of problems to resolve, and Ukraine is not their first priority, I am sorry to say.”

Yesterday, by all accounts, neither Paris nor Berlin supported Zelensky's calls for Ukraine's admission into the EU or NATO. Macron reportedly refused to discuss Ukrainian membership in NATO until the next NATO summit meeting, set for June, while French Junior Minister for European Affairs Clément Beaune declared that Ukrainian membership in the EU was unrealistic: “We can support Ukraine ... But that does not mean membership, that is not a serious perspective.”

*Le Figaro* concluded that Macron had “eluded Zelensky's appeal for help,” pointing to panic in European ruling circles at the extraordinarily sharp military and diplomatic tensions with Russia. It wrote, “This was a meeting whose importance was magnified by events and that visibly provoked embarrassment in Paris.”

A German government spokesperson said: “Ukraine can freely choose its political needs. However, further steps towards membership are not currently expected.” The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote that Berlin is “walking a tightrope” after Kiev asked it for arms and NATO membership, adding: “These two requests are rejected by the federal government. The idea that Ukraine would be accepted into the NATO alliance given unresolved territorial conflicts and would benefit from its guarantee of assistance is considered absurd in Berlin.”

In the final analysis, responsibility lies not only with the reactionary Kiev regime but with NATO's reckless, long-standing policy of military escalation in Eastern Europe. Over the three decades since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, it gradually integrated most of Eastern Europe into the NATO military alliance. Its 2014 putsch placed hostile far-right militias like the Right Sector and the Azov Battalion on Russia's borders, and gave them enormous political weight in Kiev.

The Normandy format talks have, over the last six years, failed to resolve the conflict stirred up by NATO. The support of European and American imperialism for a far-right regime in Kiev threatening Russia with military action perpetually leaves open the danger of a war between Ukraine and Russia, escalating into all-out war between all the NATO powers and Russia.

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