

# NATO and Russia Reaffirm Mutual Loathing

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While little real progress was made at NATO-Russia meeting, Russia claimed a PR victory.

After two years of military posturing and harsh rhetoric, Russia and the Western NATO military alliance met in Brussels on April 20 to try to re-open lines of communication severed in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea. The meeting ran longer than expected, and the two sides failed to bridge any meaningful gaps.

The core issue continues to be Ukraine. Moscow claims it intervened to defend Russian-speakers in Crimea and eastern Ukraine in what was effectively a civil war. NATO rejects these assertions, insisting that Moscow is waging a proxy war against Kiev by stoking rebel forces to fight in eastern Ukraine.

"During the meeting, it was reconfirmed that we disagree when it comes to the facts and narratives [of the Ukraine crisis], and when it comes to the responsibilities for the crisis" said NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg at a post-meeting press conference. Though it

is small consolation, he said that the two sides agree only on the importance of implementing the so-called Minsk cease-fire agreement in eastern Ukraine.

The meeting took place behind closed doors, but Stoltenberg hinted of further disagreement over key issues relating to Minsk. Specifically, he said the Russian side rejects any special responsibility for overseeing its implementation. But NATO remains firm that Russia is not only arming and funding separatists in eastern Ukraine, but commanding them as well. "There are profound disagreements," was Stoltenberg's message.

Speaking after the meeting, Russia's ambassador to NATO Alexander Grushko, said there was "no positive agenda" under discussion with NATO. Both sides said there could be future meetings under the council format, but neither side could say when such a meeting would take place. Grushko said Russia would only arrange a new meeting when there was a "real agenda."

Despite the barely concealed frustration on both sides, the NATO leader tried to put a positive spin on the day's events. "We have proven today that we can sit down and talk," he said. But tensions are high, and as Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov noted in the lead-up to the meeting, a "total lack of trust" remains between the two sides. Channels for dialogue have existed throughout the crisis, but achieved nothing.

Over the past two years, NATO's eastern members have become increasingly vocal about orienting the alliance's defensive posture toward Russia. Poland's Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski, called Moscow a more potent risk than the Islamic State, a terror group banned in Russia.

From the opposite side, Russian officials have ranted at the perceived arrogance and "zealous Russophobia" of NATO leaders.

The most vivid display of tension occurred over the Baltic Sea, where simulated attack runs on April 11 brought a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 attack aircraft to within 10 meters of a U.S. destroyer, the Donald Cook, which was sailing in international waters. Soon afterward, a Russian fighter intercepted and performed a daring barrel-roll over a U.S. reconnaissance plane in the region.

"Moscow views its provocative and unpredictable actions and its willingness to risk much more serious incidents than the West as a "force equalizer" — a non-linear response to the West's military superiority," said Vladimir Frolov, a Russian international affairs expert. The maneuvers are also a way for the Kremlin to guarantee that its voice is heard in Brussels. In reviving the NATO-Russia Council, the alliance is partly ceding to these demands, but the two sides remain separated by an insurmountable bridge of perception.

The real goal for Russia seems to be a public relations victory. On the one hand, NATO officials are firm that Russia will not be brought in from the cold. On another, says Frolov, the meeting — which Moscow says is only happening because NATO asked for it — allows Russia to demonstrate that the Western countries which have tried to isolate it are "seeing the error of their ways" and have come knocking at the Kremlin's door for re-engagement.

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