

NATO must warn Putin against any European misadventure, and also calm his nerves.

The Geneva talks between the United States and Russia were, not surprisingly, inconclusive. It was practically impossible for the former Cold War rivals to iron out their differences in the first round at a time when tensions are running high in Europe, especially over Ukraine.

But the fact that hurried talks were held between the two powers and they agreed to continue the negotiations to discuss both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's expansion and Russia's troop mobilisation is itself a welcome step. The U.S. was actually forced to come to the table by President Vladimir Putin, who has amassed about 100,000 troops along Russia's border with Ukraine. The Kremlin has also issued a host of demands to the West that sought to stop NATO's further expansion into Eastern Europe and roll back the alliance's military presence to 1990 levels.

Now, the deadlock is that the U.S. has publicly said that it will not shut NATO's door on potential future members. And nobody knows what Mr. Putin would do if the talks collapse. By forcing the U.S. to come to the table to discuss NATO's expansion — an issue which Moscow has been complaining about for years — Mr. Putin has scored the first victory. But it would be naive of him to believe that the Russian demands would be accepted by the West without any resistance. So, the challenge for both sides is to find common ground.

The source of Russia's staunch opposition to NATO is its deep insecurity. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a substantially weakened Russian Federation saw NATO's continued expansion into Eastern Europe as a violation of the post-Cold War consensus.

Russia responded militarily in 2008 when Georgia was considering joining NATO, and in 2014, it took Crimea from Ukraine after the pro-Russian regime in Kiev was toppled by protests. On the other side, the West sees Russia as an aggressive, abrasive and destabilising giant that breathes down the neck of Europe. In hindsight, both NATO's expansions and Russia's military responses are driving instability in Eastern Europe.

Finding a solution to the crisis will not be easy. It depends on whether both sides are able to get out of their Cold War mentality and build mutual confidence in bilateral relations. For all practical purposes, Ukraine and Georgia, both faced with separatist conflicts, cannot join NATO in the foreseeable future. NATO could use this reality as a policy promise to calm Russian nerves. Mr. Putin, on the other hand, is also in a tough spot.

Russia is still battling with the economic costs of his Crimea annexation, which has left a wide chasm in Russia's ties with Europe. Further aggression against Ukraine might serve his tactical interests but could deal a deadly blow to any plan to bring the Russia-Europe ties back on track.

A war is in nobody's interests. Russia and the West should keep that in mind when they sit down for the next round of talks.

Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. Which of the following countries is not included in NATO?

- (a) Ukraine
- (b) Belarus
- (c) Georgia
- (d) All of the above

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q. Russia's attitude towards the expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe is worrying for the West. According to you, what can be the solution to this whole dispute? Discuss. (250 Words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.