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# Secretary Antony J. Blinken at a Press Availability

## REMARKS

ANTONY J. BLINKEN, SECRETARY OF STATE

INTERCONTINENTAL HOTEL

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

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**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Good afternoon. Foreign Minister Lavrov and I finished our meeting a short while ago, and I first want to begin by thanking Switzerland for hosting us, for its traditional

hospitality, which is very much appreciated.

I came to Geneva following up on last week's discussions at the U.S.-Russia Strategic Stability Dialogue, the NATO-Russia Council, and the OSCE on the crisis in Ukraine and broader European security issues. Our objective was to determine whether Russia is prepared to take the diplomatic path and other necessary steps to de-escalate the situation in Ukraine and, ultimately, to resolve our differences through diplomacy and through dialogue.

The discussion today with Minister Lavrov was frank and substantive. I conveyed the position of the United States and our European allies and partners that we stand firmly with Ukraine in support of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. We've been clear: If any Russian military forces move across Ukraine's border, that's a renewed invasion. It will be met with swift, severe, and a united response from the United States and our partners and allies.

We also know from experience that Russia has an extensive playbook of aggression short of military action, including cyber attacks, paramilitary tactics, and other means of advancing their interests aggressively without overtly using military action. Those types of Russian aggression will also be met with a decisive, calibrated, and again, united response.

That's the clear message coming out of my meetings on Wednesday in Ukraine with President Zelenskyy, Foreign Minister Kuleba; yesterday in Germany with my counterparts from Germany, the UK, France, and the European Union; and with German Chancellor Scholz. We're united in our commitment to finding a way forward through diplomacy and dialogue, but equally in our resolve to impose massive consequences should Russia choose the path of confrontation and conflict.

I expressed again to Minister Lavrov that on the security concerns that Russia has raised in recent weeks, the United States and our European allies and partners are prepared to pursue possible means of addressing them in a spirit of reciprocity, which means, simply put, that Russia must also address our concerns. There are several steps that we can take – all of us, Russia included – to increase transparency, to reduce risks, to advance arms control, to build trust.

I conveyed directly to Minister Lavrov our specific concerns for Russia's actions that challenge or undermine peace and security not only in Ukraine but throughout Europe and, indeed, in the world. I also laid out several ideas to reduce tensions and increase security which we've developed in consultation with our partners and allies and where we believe we can find

common ground, again, based on the principle of reciprocity.

This was not a negotiation but a candid exchange of concerns and ideas. I made clear to Minister Lavrov that there are certain issues and fundamental principles that the United States and our partners and allies are committed to defend. That includes those that would impede the sovereign right of the Ukrainian people to write their own future. There is no trade space there – none.

Foreign Minister Lavrov and I also talked about the way forward. Let me say as well that he heard from us and from me that what is for us an inviolable rule: nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine, nothing about NATO without NATO, nothing about Europe without Europe. Based on our discussion, I believe we can carry forward this work of developing understanding agreements together that ensure our mutual security, but that's contingent on Russia stopping its aggression toward Ukraine.

So that's the choice that Russia faces now. It can choose the path of diplomacy that can lead to peace and security or the path that will lead only to conflict, severe consequences, and international condemnation. The United States and our allies and partners in Europe stand ready to meet Russia on either path, and we will continue to stand with Ukraine.

I believe that Foreign Minister Lavrov now has a better understanding of our position and vice versa. Today's discussion was useful in that sense, and that's precisely why we met.

So I'll return to Washington this afternoon to consult with President Biden and our entire national security team, as well as members of Congress, and critically, allies and partners in the days ahead. Based on the discussions today, Foreign Minister Lavrov and I agreed that it's important for the diplomatic process to continue. I told him that following the consultations that we'll have in the coming days with allies and partners, we anticipate that we will be able to share with Russia our concerns and ideas in more detail and in writing next week. And we agreed to further discussions after that. We agreed as well that further diplomatic discussions would be the preferable way forward, but again, it is really up to Russia to decide which path it will pursue.

I should mention as well that the foreign minister and I had an opportunity to discuss Iran, an example of how the United States and Russia can work together on security issues of shared concern. The talks with Iran about a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA have reached a decisive moment. If a deal is not reached in the next few weeks, Iran's ongoing nuclear advances

will make it impossible to return to the JCPOA.

But right now, there's still a window, a brief one, to bring those talks to a successful conclusion and address the remaining concerns of all sides. We didn't expect any major breakthroughs to happen today, but I believe we are now on a clearer path in terms of understanding each other's concerns, each other's positions. Let's see what the next the next days bring.

And with that, I'm happy to take your questions.

**MR PRICE:** Andrea Mitchell.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Mr. Lavrov has spoken today about hysterical rhetoric, what he calls hysterical rhetoric from the West about an invasion, he claims, to provoke Ukraine. And President Biden said that with what has happened so far, that he believes that Putin will move in because he's got to do something.

So do you think, as of today, that you have a better understanding from Mr. Lavrov, first of all, of what Putin's intentions are? Do you have any commitment at all that they will stop the aggression that you say is standing in the way of any positive agreement?

He says that you are going to present written responses, which you've just confirmed, but he wants them to be to his original proposals, which you and everyone in the administration has said from the beginning are non-starters, proposals to limit NATO expansion. So will your written answers have any different response to him about NATO expansion, which you just said is nothing, is not negotiable? So where do you see a space for any kind of engagement to defuse this crisis?

And as you – since you brought up Iran, do you think there is the possibility, after talking to Mr. Lavrov, that you and Russia – the U.S. and Russia – and the other allies can get Iran – agree to come into compliance? And will the U.S. then agree to lift sanctions perhaps simultaneously? Thank you very much.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thanks very much, Andrea. First, we're not proceeding on the basis of emotion. We're proceeding on the basis of fact and history. The facts are that Russia has amassed very significant forces on Ukraine's border and continues to do so – 100,000 troops most recently, including forces deployed to Belarus that would give Russia the capacity, if President Putin so chooses, to attack Ukraine from the south. from the east. from the north. And

we've seen plans to undertake a variety of destabilizing actions, some of them short of the overuse of force, to destabilize Ukraine, to topple the government, a variety of things.

So, as I said, this is not on the basis of emotion. It's on the basis of fact and also history. Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, seizing Crimea, provoking an ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, the Donbas, changing Ukraine's borders by force. That's what we're looking at. We've heard Russian officials say that they have no intention of invading Ukraine. In fact, Minister Lavrov repeated that to me today. But again, we're looking at what is visible to all, and it is deeds and actions, not words that make the difference. I suggested to Minister Lavrov, as we have repeatedly, that if Russia wants to begin to convince the world that it has no aggressive intent toward Ukraine, a very good place to start would be by de-escalating, by bringing back, removing its forces from Ukraine's borders, as well as engaging in diplomacy and dialogue, which is what we did today and what we plan to continue doing in the days and weeks ahead.

We've said all along that we intended not only to respond to the concerns that Russia has raised, but to share our own concerns, which are many, about the actions that Russia takes that we see as a threat to security in Europe, and indeed, beyond. And so it was important in the course of the conversations that we've had today, Andrea, both last week at the Strategic Stability Dialogue between the United States and Russia, at the NATO-Russia Council, at the OSCE, to make sure that we fully understood each other's positions, each other's concerns.

After that and after consulting very intensely with allies and partners, President Biden wanted me to have this opportunity, having digested what we've heard over the last week and maybe – and presumably the Russians having had an opportunity to discuss what they had heard initially from us with President Putin – to really see where we are directly with Foreign Minister Lavrov, to determine whether there is a path forward for dialogue and for diplomacy, and then to look at how we would pursue that. And again, what was agreed today, which was that we will share with Russia a response to the concerns it's raised, our own concerns, and put some ideas on the table for consideration. And then we plan to meet again after Russia's had an opportunity to look at that paper and we'll see where we go from there.

But let me also be clear about this: To the extent that Russia's engaged for now in diplomacy, but at the same time continues to take escalatory actions, continues to build its forces on Ukraine's borders, continues to plan for aggressive action against Ukraine, we and all of our allies and

partners are equally committed to make sure we are doing everything possible to make clear to Russia that there will be, as I said, a swift, severe, and united response to any form of aggression by Russia directed toward Ukraine.

Finally, let me say this: Based on the conversation today, Andrea, look, I believe that there are areas where, on a reciprocal basis, we can address some of each other's concerns. And they go to things like greater transparency in our military activities, various risk-reduction measures, pursuing arms control, and other ways to build trust that I think would address some of the concerns that Russia has expressed as well as the many concerns that we have.

But it's very important to be equally clear about things that we will not do, and one of those is we will not go back on the fundamental principles that we have and that we are committed to defend. And one of those is NATO's open door and others include, as I've talked about in recent days and recent weeks, our commitment to the principle that one nation can't simply violate and change the border of another country by force, that it can't propose to dictate to another country its choices, its policies, with whom it will associate, and that it can't exert a sphere of influence that would subjugate its neighbors to its will. We're not going to put any of those principles in question, and I think Russia understands that very well.

So again, based on the conversations we've had over – the extensive conversations over the past week and today here in Geneva, I think there are grounds for and a means to address some of the mutual concerns that we have about security. We'll see if that bears out. And meanwhile, we will continue to prepare resolutely to both paths that we've laid out for Russia: the path of diplomacy and dialogue or the path of renewed aggression, confrontation, and consequences.

**MR PRICE:** Michael Crowley.

**QUESTION:** And your —

**MR PRICE:** I'm sorry, Andrea. We have very limited time. Michael Crowley.

**QUESTION:** And your – the question about Iran, Mr. —

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Oh, I'm sorry, I – (inaudible) to address that. So on Iran, I have to say that Russia shares our sense of urgency, the need to see if we can come back into mutual compliance in the weeks ahead. And we hope that Russia will use the influence that it has and relationship

that it has with Iran to impress upon Iran that sense of urgency, and equally, that if we're unable to do that because Iran refuses to undertake the obligations that are necessary, that we will pursue a different path in dealing with the danger posed by Iran's renewed nuclear program, a program that had been put in a box by the agreement that we had reached in the past, the JCPOA, and that unfortunately has now escaped from that box as a result of us pulling out of the agreement and Iran restarting its dangerous program.

**MR PRICE:** Michael.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Secretary Blinken. After four fairly inconclusive meetings between U.S. diplomats and Russian ones, does this process need to move to the presidential level for a breakthrough? Does President Biden need to be speaking to President Putin for progress really to be made here?

And a second question if I may: In Berlin, you outlined the stakes of this crisis, including the security – the sanctity of borders and the governing principles of international peace and security. Yet President Biden several weeks ago said that the use of American military force is off the table in this situation. While I'm sure that makes intuitive sense to many Americans for all kinds of reasons, I wonder if you could just explicitly lay out the reasoning why that has been taken off the table. And do you believe the President's statement would still apply even if Russia were to invade Ukraine? Thank you.

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** First, on the second part of the question, we have made clear and done a number of things in support and defense of Ukraine that will continue. First and foremost, we have worked in very close coordination with allies and partners to develop and make clear to Russia the consequences from renewed aggression against Ukraine. And that is an important component of deterring and dissuading Russia from engaging in that course.

At the same time, we have proceeded with providing Ukraine with significant defensive military assistance – in fact, in this year alone, more than at any time since 2014. That continues. Allies and partners are doing the same. And finally, we've worked very closely with allies and partners to begin to plan for the reinforcement of NATO itself on its eastern flank in the event of further Russian aggression against Ukraine. All of these things to make clear to Russia the costs and consequences of its potential actions.

We think that's the best and most effective way to convince Russia not to engage in further aggression against Ukraine. Ukraine is a very valued partner of the United States and other countries in Europe as well, but our Article 5 commitment extends to NATO Allies, something that we are deeply committed to. Ukraine is not a member of NATO and it's not covered by the Article 5 commitment, but a determination to do everything we can to defend it and to prevent or deter aggression directed toward it. And as I said, we will continue all of those efforts in the coming days and coming weeks even as we test whether the path to a diplomatic resolution is possible.

And I'm sorry, the first part of the question?

**QUESTION:** Dialogue between the presidents to move the process more quickly than it has been (inaudible).

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Oh, yes, thank you. What we've agreed today is that we will share in writing next week our ideas, our response to concerns that Russia has raised, concerns that we have that we will share, again, in writing with Russia. We intend based on the conversation today, based on that paper, as well as the paper we received from Russia, to have follow-on conversations after that – initially, at least, at least at the level of foreign ministers. And if it proves useful and productive for the two presidents to meet, to talk, to engage to try to carry things forward, I think we're fully prepared to do that. President Biden has met here in Geneva with President Putin. He's spoken to him on the phone or via videoconference on a number of occasions. And if we conclude and the Russians conclude that the best way to resolve things is through a further conversation between them, we're certainly prepared to do that.

**MR PRICE:** Ben Hall.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, thank you. I was wondering if – as you keep coming back for more dialogue, more talks with the Russians, they continue to act. They continue to mass troops; they continue to destabilize Ukraine. Economically, it's facing a number of hardships. Would you acknowledge the harm they have already done just through their aggressive actions, and in turn, why would you not consider sanctions at this point? There's bipartisan support for them in the U.S.; Ukraine have called for them. Why not?



And then a second question: You said time and time again that the pretexts Russia gives for their aggression are false, there's no basis in fact. I'm curious if Secretary – Foreign Minister Lavrov sits opposite you, looks you in the eye, and tell you effectively – tells you lies to your face. And if so, why humor with them with a response? Why humor them with written responses next week, if that's the case?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Thanks, Ben. First, again, we're not waiting to take action to counter Russia. As I said a moment ago, we've committed more security assistance to Ukraine in the past year – I think something like \$650 million – than at any previous time, going back to 2014 when Russia invaded Ukraine. We're continuing to provide that assistance. We have additional deliveries that are scheduled in the coming weeks.

As I noted as well, we've been engaged in extensive diplomacy around the world, rallying allies and partners together in the face of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Yesterday, we announced actions against agents of Russian influence who are operating in Ukraine and who are seeking to destabilize the country. And again, as I've said, we've made it clear to Russia that they would face swift, severe costs to their economy if they move forward with further invasion of Ukraine, as well as the reinforcement of NATO along its eastern flank.

We engage in diplomacy and dialogue; that's my job. But at the same time, we are embarked on a path of defense and deterrence. These things are not mutually inconsistent – in fact, they reinforce each other. So even as we're talking, if the Russians are continuing to escalate and to build up, we are continuing to strengthen everything we're doing in terms of the assistance we're providing to Ukraine for its defense, in terms of the work we're doing at NATO to prepare as necessary to further reinforce the Alliance, and continuing to define and refine massive consequences for Russia with our allies and partners when it comes to financial, economic and other sanctions.

So we're doing both at the same time. Now, when it comes to the conversations we have, I think the charitable interpretation would be that sometimes we and Russia have different interpretations of history. And I have to say today we certainly heard things that we strongly disagree with in terms of in terms of that history, but by and large, the conversation was not polemical. It was direct, businesslike, and I think in that sense, useful. And it's important to test whether we can, again, resolve these differences through diplomacy and dialogue. That's clearly

the preferable way to do it, it's clearly the responsible way to do it, but it's also up to Russia.

**MR PRICE:** We'll take a final question from Laurent Burkhalter.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Laurent Burkhalter, Swiss Television RTS. I wanted to talk about the measures that can be taken to de-escalate the situation – you've mentioned them – from both sides. If you could specify them again and tell us an idea of the timeline, how soon it must happen, which comes first. And bigger picture, what do you think the Kremlin wants through this current situation?

**SECRETARY BLINKEN:** Well, that last question is probably best addressed to President Putin because, in a sense, only he really knows. And I'll come back to that in a minute. But again, as I was saying earlier, I think that as we've looked at what Russia has put forward, as we've listened to what they've said, as we've consulted intensely among allies and partners, as we've looked at our own deep security concerns about actions that Russia takes – not only with regard to Ukraine, but in other places and by other means in Europe and beyond – I think it is fair to say that there are areas where we believe we can pursue dialogue and diplomacy to see if we can find ways to address mutual security concerns on a reciprocal basis that would enhance security for everyone – for us, for our European allies and partners, and for Russia.

And again, as I suggested earlier, transparency, confidence-building measures, military exercises, arms control agreements – these are all things that we've actually done in the past and that, if addressed seriously, can I believe reduce tensions and address some of the some of the concerns. But again, that remains to be seen whether we can do that in a meaningful way. And there again it depends, I think, on what Russia actually wants. That is the right question.

And here's what is striking to me, and I shared this with Foreign Minister Lavrov today. I asked him, from Russia's perspective, to really try to explain to me, to us how it is they see the actions they've taken as advancing their stated security interests and their broader strategic interests. Because as I said to Minister Lavrov, so many of the things that you've done in recent years have precipitated virtually everything you say you want to prevent.

Before Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, seizing Crimea, going into the Donbas, Russia's favorability ratings in Ukraine were 70 percent. Now they're 25 or 30 percent. Before 2014, before they went and seized Crimea and went into the Donbas, support in Ukraine for joining NATO was 25 or 30 percent. Now it's 60 percent. Before 2014, we had been continuing on the

path of continuing to reduce while at the same time strengthening our forces in Europe since the

end of the Cold War. Well, what happened after 2014 is NATO felt the obligation, because of Russian aggression, to reinforce its eastern flank. And since 2014, our efforts over many years to convince allies and partners to increase defense spending, well, that succeeded, but I have to say, as much because of Russia and the actions it's taken as because of anything we've done.

So based on Russia's stated strategic interests and concerns, how has that – how have their actions advanced those concerns? On the contrary, it's gone in the opposite direction from what Russia purports to want. And now, if Russia renews its aggression against Ukraine, the outcome will be to simply reinforce the very things, the very trends that Russia expresses concern about. So I hope that that's something that Mr. Lavrov reflects on and that President Putin might reflect on as they think about the days and weeks ahead. Thank you.

**MR PRICE:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

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