

International Briefs

Opinion in CFR's *Foreign Affairs*: 'Time for NATO To Close Its Door'

The Council on Foreign Relations' publication *Foreign Affairs* published an opinion column on Jan. 17 by Michael Kimmage, calling the NATO alliance "ill-suited to 21st-century Europe" and stating that it should at least forswear accepting any more nations as members, including Ukraine. Kimmage, a Catholic University professor and a senior fellow at both the German Marshall Fund and the Wilson Center, wrote that "NATO suffers from a severe design flaw: extending deep into the cauldron of Eastern European geopolitics, it is too large, too poorly defined, and too provocative for its own good.... Today, the alliance is a loose and baggy monster of 30 countries, encompassing North America, Western Europe, the Baltic states, and Turkey. This expanded NATO wavers between offense and defense, having been involved militarily in Serbia, Afghanistan, and Libya. The sheer enormity of the alliance and the murkiness of its mission risk embroiling NATO in a major European war."

Kimmage wrote that in order to improve its defensive capacities, NATO should publicly and explicitly forswear adding any more members. Moreover, he says, "rethinking the security architecture of Central and Eastern Europe would not be a concession to Putin. To the contrary, it is necessary in order for the most successful alliance of the 20th century to endure and prosper in the 21st."

Germany's Merz: Cutting Russia Off SWIFT Would Destroy World Economy

The new CDU leader in Germany,

Friedrich Merz, strongly disagrees with the sanctions the United States is threatening against Russia, with the Greens' backing. As reported by Germany's DPA news agency, Merz said cutting Russia off from the SWIFT interbank messaging system "would basically break the back of international payment traffic.... Calling SWIFT into question could be an atomic bomb for the capital markets and also for goods and services. We should leave SWIFT untouched. I would see massive economic setbacks for our own economies if something like that happens. It would hit Russia, but we would be damaging ourselves considerably."

U.S. Accuses Russia of Planning Ukraine False Flag Operation for Invasion

According to RT, the accusation first originated with the Ukrainian Defense Ministry. Ukraine's military intelligence embellished the story, saying it had intercepted information about a plot by Russian spies to start a sabotage operation from disputed territory in Moldova, south of Ukraine, where Russian troops are stationed. When a major cyberattack hit key Ukrainian government websites today, the Kiev government pointed to Russia as the culprit. On Jan. 14, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, and Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, echoing each other, both asserted they had information that the Russians had pre-positioned "operatives" in eastern Ukraine to stage the false flag operation to then justify an invasion. Psaki said this was the same *modus operandi* the Russians used in 2014 prior to reincorporating Crimea into Russia and that Russia's plan is now to launch these operations

in Ukraine several weeks prior to an actual invasion.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded Jan. 14 to a question about the report saying that "so far all these statements have been unsubstantiated and not backed up by anything." It should be recalled that last Dec. 20, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu warned that American private military companies (PMCs) were working with Ukrainian special forces and had delivered chemical components to two cities in the Donbas region in order to stage false flag operations that could be blamed on Russia.

UN's Guterres: Release Afghanistan's Funds, People 'on the Verge of Death'

Speaking to reporters at the United Nations on Jan. 13, Secretary General António Guterres called on the United States to release the Afghan central bank assets it has had frozen since last August, stressing the urgency of injecting liquidity into the Afghan economy, to avoid a complete breakdown that will worsen hunger, poverty, destitution, and death. Guterres was scheduled to speak with Secretary of State Tony Blinken Jan. 14, in the company of Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths and Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), precisely to address the issue of releasing the frozen funds. He is also calling on the international community to support the UN's appeal to raise \$5 billion for Afghanistan.

Guterres emphasized that "we are in a race against time to help the Afghan people.... Freezing temperatures and

frozen assets are a lethal combination for the people of Afghanistan. Rules and conditions that prevent money from being used to save lives and the economy must be suspended in this emergency situation,” he warned.

Syria Joins the Belt and Road Initiative

At a Jan. 12 event in Damascus, Syria announced that it has joined the Belt and Road Initiative, through a memorandum of understanding signed by Fadi al-Khalil, Chairman of the Syrian Planning and International Cooperation Commission, and China’s Ambassador to Syria, Feng Biao. “Syria was one of the foundational nations of the ancient Silk Road, especially the cities of Aleppo and Palmyra,” said Khalil, who further declared that the agreement would bring about “the strengthening of the joint cooperation within the relations of our two friendly countries.”

Even as U.S. sanctions and military operations devastated the nation, Syria continued to enjoy good relations with China, which has provided investment and humanitarian assistance. As centralized state sovereignty over Syrian territory strengthens, China will see more opportunities for collaboration.

This week’s agreement follows Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s trip to Damascus last summer, and Xi Jinping’s phone call with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in November.

On Jan. 12, State Department spokesman Ned Price denounced the trend toward countries’ recognition and collaboration with Syria: “We have been very clear that we are not encouraging, and in fact, we believe that the conduct that the Assad regime has demonstrated, including the atrocities it has inflicted on its own people—this is not the time for rehabilitation of the Assad regime.”

Chatham House Ultimatum: Russia Must Be Defeated

The City of London war-hawks expressed their panic that Biden may “appease” Russia in the upcoming meetings, in a Jan. 7 article “U.S. Must Seize the Initiative at Talks with Russia.” Written by Keir Giles, a senior fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program for Chatham House, he cautions that “there is every sign Russia may end up getting something for nothing—which will only confirm for Moscow that military threats are the best way to achieve its goals.” He cites Biden’s mention of “finding an accommodation” for Russia’s concerns, and the “promise of negotiations” which endorses Moscow’s demands as acceptable for discussion as signs that Moscow believes it can “extract substantial concessions.”

Giles calls this a “Chamberlain moment”—the ugliest possible insult to a nation that lost 27 million people fighting the Nazi occupation—warning of the danger of appeasing Russia for the sake of “temporary peace.”

He concludes his diatribe against Russia, but implicitly targeting Biden, by writing, “It is no longer time to discuss how to deter Russia when it has become clear that deterrence has failed. At that point there is no option but to plan not for deterring Russia, but for defeating it.”

IMF Not-So-Veiled Warning of Coming Global Economic Crash

In a not-so-veiled warning of a coming financial crash, the International Monetary Fund warned on Jan. 10 that emerging markets could be seriously affected once the U.S. Federal Reserve starts to tighten monetary policy—especially countries with high

inflation. They warn capital could be rapidly withdrawn from these countries.

Posting on its blog, the IMF said: “Broad-based U.S. wage inflation or sustained supply bottlenecks could boost prices more than anticipated and fuel expectations for more rapid inflation. Faster Fed rate increases in response could rattle financial markets and tighten financial conditions globally. These developments could come with a slowing of U.S. demand and trade and may lead to capital outflows and currency depreciation in emerging markets.”

First Russian Units Arrive for Russian-Belarusian Joint Exercise

The Russian Defense Ministry reported Jan. 19 that units from the Eastern Military District have begun arriving in Belarus for the joint exercises that kick off on Feb. 9. “The units of the Eastern Military District involved in the check of the reaction forces of the Union State, with standard equipment and weapons, marched in a combined way (on their own and by rail) to unfamiliar training grounds to places of training tasks on the territory of the Republic of Belarus.”

The Southern Military District, meanwhile, announced Jan. 20 that combat teams from missile regiments equipped with Iskander missiles have begun live-fire training exercises at the Kapustin Yar training range in the Astrakhan region. TASS reports that the missile formation has advanced there from the Krasnodar region and will practice at least ten combat training tasks to overcome notionally contaminated terrain, deploy missile launchers, and deliver strikes against mock enemy targets in drills that will last about a month. Kapustin Yar is about 425-450 km east of the border with Ukraine.