



# NATO and the Road Not Taken<sup>1</sup>

Image credit: VanderWolf Images / [iStock.com](https://www.iStock.com)

## **Rajan Menon, Ph.D.**

*Anne and Bernard Spitzer Professor of International Relations,  
Colin Powell School, City College of New York/City University of New York;  
Senior Research Scholar, Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, Columbia University*

After a prolonged buildup of forces, the total reaching 120,000 soldiers and National Guard troops, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided on February 24, 2022, to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The decision has revived a sharp-elbowed debate in the United States. One side consists mainly, though not exclusively, of those belonging to the realist school of thought. This side insists that Putin's move can only be understood by taking into account the friction that NATO's eastward expansion created between Russia and the United States. The other side, primarily comprised of neoconservatives and liberal internationalists, retorts that Putin's protests against NATO's enlargement are bogus. They contend

<sup>1</sup> This article was first published by *The Boston Review* on March 16, 2022, and is republished with permission from *The Boston Review* and Rajan Menon.

that Putin’s animosity toward democracy — particularly the fear that its success in Ukraine would rub off on Russia and bring down the state that he has built since 2000 — was the sole reason for the war.

Both sides have succumbed to the single-factor fallacy. Given the complexities of history and politics, why should we assume that Putin has only one aim, only one apprehension? In consequence, their exchanges have been inconclusive, producing more heat than light. On occasion, there have been simpleminded portrayals of realism in newspaper columns<sup>2</sup> and magazines,<sup>3</sup> and worse, ugly *ad hominem* attacks.<sup>4</sup> There has been little meaningful debate. Social media has enabled much sound and fury, proving about as productive as a dog’s attempt to chase its tail, albeit much less amusing.

Opposition to Putin’s war against Ukraine must not prevent efforts to understand the circumstances that led to it. This distinction bears emphasizing because emotions about the war have run high, and analyses of Russia’s actions have sometimes been conflated with endorsement — and in ways that have exposed realists, in particular, to attack. We must examine the larger context and a deeper view of the role of NATO, and think about the European security order we might hope for in the future.

## ***The context***

The outrage in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine reflects the widespread belief that it cannot reasonably be seen as a necessary war of self-defense against an aggressor. Indeed, like the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Russia’s assault on Ukraine is a preventive war: Its justification was that a designated enemy might, at some point in the future, pose a serious threat. Preventive wars do more than just violate international humanitarian law; when powerful countries claim the

<sup>2</sup> Ross Douthat, “They Predicted the Ukraine War. But Did They Still Get It Wrong?” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/opinion/ukraine-russia-invasion-west.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Tooze, “John Mearsheimer and the Dark Origins of Realism,” *New Statesman*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2022/03/john-mearsheimer-dark-origins-realism-russia>.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Schwarz, “No, Russia Didn’t Get Its Propaganda From John Mearsheimer.” *The Intercept*, March 7, 2022. <https://theintercept.com/2022/03/06/russia-john-mearsheimer-propaganda/>.

right to invade other countries and topple their governments based on imagined scenarios that they declare unacceptable, they make the world an even more dangerous place. Whatever Putin's apprehensions about NATO, they do not justify his unprovoked assault on Ukraine, to say nothing of the Russian army's wanton attacks on civilians.

Yet, even though Putin bears primary responsibility for the unjust war in Ukraine, NATO cannot accurately present itself as blameless. As the temperature rose in the run up to the war, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and U.S. President Joe Biden repeated that the alliance's statement from its 2008 Bucharest summit — that its doors were open to Ukraine (and Georgia) — stood, and that Putin's demand that the country pledge to be a neutral state was not up for negotiation.<sup>5</sup> In truth, there was no chance that Ukraine would be admitted to NATO anytime soon: NATO's April 1949 founding treaty requires a unanimous vote before new members can join, and everyone knew that Ukraine wouldn't clear that bar. <sup>6</sup>Ukraine was thus left to knock on the alliance's door for nearly fourteen years. Still, the possibility that it might be allowed in was enough to stoke Russian fears, and that increasingly exposed Ukraine to danger. Meanwhile, NATO had no serious intention of guaranteeing Ukraine security through membership. In short, Kyiv was left in limbo. That (non)decision was a mixture of cowardice and strategic irresponsibility, one for which Ukraine has paid a terrible price, while NATO has paid none at all. Seen this way, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's anger at the alliance, reflected in his speech at the February 2022 Munich Security Conference, becomes understandable.<sup>7</sup>

**Even though Putin bears primary responsibility for the unjust war in Ukraine, NATO cannot accurately present itself as blameless.**

<sup>5</sup> Bucharest Summit, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," NATO, July 5, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm).

<sup>6</sup> "The North Atlantic Treaty," NATO, last modified April 10, 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm).

<sup>7</sup> "Zelensky's full speech at Munich Security Conference," *The Kyiv Independent*, February 19, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/national/zelenskys-full-speech-at-munich-security-conference>.

Realists are right to say that Putin’s complaints about NATO expansion have been blithely dismissed by the defenders of that policy as a red herring. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and Polish–American journalist Anne Applebaum, for instance, waves away Putin’s complaints as nothing more than camouflage for his real fear, namely that a successful democracy in Ukraine could inspire Russians and threaten the Russian state.<sup>8</sup> Stephen Kotkin, a preeminent historian of Russia, reaches a similar conclusion through a different route.<sup>9</sup> Expansionism and authoritarianism have always marked Russian history and are ineradicable, he says. So, NATO expansion cannot account for anything Russia says or does; indeed, it’s an essential counterweight to an innately aggressive country. Russia, in short, is portrayed as irredeemable. Its past explains its present and future actions. Ergo, Western policy toward it deserves no scrutiny.

Putin certainly does preside over an authoritarian political system and abhors U.S. campaigns to spread democracy and promote “color revolutions” in countries near Russia. But Ukraine has been a democracy — i.e., a country with regular elections, numerous civic organizations and a free press — since the end of 1991, when it became independent. (Some have likened it to a “failed state,”<sup>10</sup> but that label brings to mind Somalia- or Libya-like anarchy, fragmentation and pervasive violence, conditions that don’t accurately describe Ukraine, no matter the flaws of its democracy.) Putin made no effort to annex parts of Ukraine before 2014, not even during the overtly pro-Western 2004–2005 Orange Revolution. Therefore, his aversion to democracy does not, by itself, explain his objections to NATO’s enlargement. What’s more, Russian opposition to NATO enlargement long preceded Putin’s presidency. In fact, it dates back to the 1990s, when, under

<sup>8</sup> Anne Applebaum, “The U.S. Is Naive About Russia. Ukraine Can’t Afford to Be,” *The Atlantic*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/ukraine-russia-kyiv-putin-bluff/621145/>.

<sup>9</sup> David Remnick, “The Weakness of the Despot,” *The New Yorker*, March 11, 2022, [https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/stephen-kotkin-putin-russia-ukraine-stalin?utm\\_source=nl&utm\\_brand=tny&utm\\_mail=ing=TNY\\_Daily\\_031222&utm\\_campaign=aud-dev&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=tny\\_daily\\_recirc&bx-id=5bd674fd24c17c10480128f6&cndid=32608657&hasha=d9d734773e6797f04e411482f0baf9b3&hashb=7a4e-58a8b74cd64ce795db27dc86649559bc8615&hashc=95b115ad14ea7080ada28b9560c3f69aofd2996ee18d-6266e78dofc2b22532ac&esrc=AUTO\\_NYA](https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/stephen-kotkin-putin-russia-ukraine-stalin?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mail=ing=TNY_Daily_031222&utm_campaign=aud-dev&utm_medium=email&utm_term=tny_daily_recirc&bx-id=5bd674fd24c17c10480128f6&cndid=32608657&hasha=d9d734773e6797f04e411482f0baf9b3&hashb=7a4e-58a8b74cd64ce795db27dc86649559bc8615&hashc=95b115ad14ea7080ada28b9560c3f69aofd2996ee18d-6266e78dofc2b22532ac&esrc=AUTO_NYA).

<sup>10</sup> Katrina vanden Heuvel, “Opinion | A Path out of the Ukraine Crisis,” *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/15/path-out-of-ukraine-crisis/>.

President Boris Yeltsin, Russia was cheered in the West as both a democracy and a partner.

Besides, it is not just democracies that are entitled to worry about their security. Democratic states are obliged, if only in sheer self-interest, to take the security interests of non-democratic states into account. Were this not true, the protracted negotiations that have been held with North Korea, for example, would be inexplicable.

The argument of Applebaum, and others of like mind — including Ivo Daalder,<sup>11</sup> the former U.S. ambassador to NATO, and Michael McFaul,<sup>12</sup> President Obama's ambassador to Russia — is self-serving. It absolves dogged proponents of NATO expansion like them from having to engage in any introspection: Putin bears all the blame for the deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations, and NATO expansion has had nothing to do with it. Case closed. If only things were that simple and easily reducible to moral certitudes.

Declassified documents<sup>13</sup> demonstrate that President Boris Yeltsin expressed his opposition to NATO to the Clinton administration on several occasions,<sup>14</sup> and that senior U.S. diplomats relayed to Washington the pervasive antipathy toward the policy within Russia's foreign policy and national security apparatus. For example, in 1993, as Secretary of State Warren Christopher was about to depart for a meeting with Yeltsin, the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. embassy, James Collins, sent a cable warning that NATO expansion was "neuralgic to the Russians,"<sup>15</sup> who

<sup>11</sup> Ivo Daalder, "Vladimir Putin's Deepest Fear Is the Freedom of Russia's Neighbours." *Financial Times*, January 18, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/6c0c9e21-0cf7-4732-a445-bc117fb5d6f8>.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Person and Michael McFaul, "What Putin Fears Most," *Journal of Democracy*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/what-putin-fears-most/>.

<sup>13</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, "NATO Expansion – The Budapest Blow Up 1994," National Security Archive, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>14</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, "NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard," National Security Archive, March 16, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard>.

<sup>15</sup> "Your October 21-23 Visit to Moscow – Key Foreign Policy Issues," National Security Archive, October 20, 1993, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16378-document-06-your-october-21-23-visit-moscow>.

feared that they would “end up on the wrong side of a new division of Europe ... if NATO adopts a policy which envisions expansion into Central and Eastern Europe without holding the door open to Russia.”<sup>16</sup> That outcome, warned Collins, “would be universally interpreted in Moscow as directed at Russia and Russia alone — or ‘neo-containment,’ as Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev recently suggested.”<sup>17</sup> NATO never had any serious intention of guaranteeing Ukraine security through membership. It left Kyiv in limbo.

Collins was right. Consider what Yeltsin told President Bill Clinton during their May 10, 1995, meeting in Moscow. Russia’s first president questioned the sanity of NATO’s expansion:

*I want to get a clear understanding of your idea of NATO expansion, because now I see nothing but humiliation for Russia if you proceed. How do you think it looks to us if one bloc continues to exist while the Warsaw Pact has been abolished? It’s a new form of encirclement if the one surviving Cold War bloc expands right up to the borders of Russia. Many Russians have a sense of fear. ‘What do you want to achieve with this, if Russia is your partner?’ [T]hey ask. I ask it too: ‘Why do you want to do this?’ We need a new structure for Pan-European security, not old ones! Perhaps the solution is to postpone NATO expansion until the year 2000 so that later we can come up with some new ideas. Let’s have no blocs, only one European space that provides for its own security.*<sup>18</sup>

Putin’s animosity toward NATO’s enlargement represented continuity, not a personal quirk, and was well understood in Washington. For example, in a February 2008 cable written shortly before the fateful Bucharest summit and addressed to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff

<sup>16</sup> William Noah Glucroft, “NATO: Why Russia Has a Problem with Its Eastward Expansion,” *Deutsch Welle (DW)*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-why-russia-has-a-problem-with-its-eastward-expansion/a-60891681>.

<sup>17</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, “NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard,” National Security Archive, March 16, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard>.

<sup>18</sup> “Summary Report on One-on-One Meeting between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, May 10, 1995, Kremlin,” National Security Archive, May 10, 1995. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16391-document-19-summary-report-one-one-meeting>.

(among others), the U.S. ambassador to Russia, William Burns, now the head of the CIA, noted:

*Foreign Minister [Sergei] Lavrov and other senior Russian officials have reiterated strong opposition, stressing that Russia would view further eastward expansion as a potential military threat. NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains an 'emotional and neuralgic' issue for Russia, but strategic policy concerns also underlie strong opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. In Ukraine, these include fears that the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene.<sup>19</sup>*

In his 2019 memoir, *The Back Channel*,<sup>20</sup> Burns notes that he made the same point, although more vividly, in a memo to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, also written in February 2008. “Ukraine’s entry into NATO,” he wrote, “is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin’s liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.”

It’s wrong, therefore, to reduce Russian aversion to NATO expansion to Putin’s paranoia and fear of democracy, or Russia’s historical baggage. No leader in Moscow liked the policy, and they minced no words about it. However, out of weakness and economic dependence on the West, and the United States in particular, they had to come to

**‘Ukraine’s entry into NATO is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite.’**  
– Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia William Burns

<sup>19</sup> Rajan Menon, “NATO and the Road Not Taken,” *Boston Review*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/nato-and-the-road-not-taken/>.

<sup>20</sup> Rajan Menon, “NATO and the Road Not Taken,” *Boston Review*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/nato-and-the-road-not-taken/>.



terms with it — including by signing the May 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act,<sup>21</sup> and settling for sops such as the NATO–Russia Council,<sup>22</sup> formed in May 2002.

In the 1990s, Russia, led by an ailing and often inebriated Yeltsin, was near economic collapse and its armed forces were debilitated. After Putin became president in 2000, Russia gained the economic and military power to go beyond verbal objections to NATO. The catalyst was NATO’s decision related to Ukraine’s and Georgia’s membership at its Bucharest conclave. Thereafter, Russia turned from protests to pushback. The first sign of this change was the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, which occurred soon after the Bucharest meeting. Then, in 2014, fearing that Ukraine’s Maidan Revolution would lead to alignment with NATO and the European Union, Russia annexed Crimea and created two breakaway statelets in Ukraine’s Donbas region.<sup>23</sup>

The crisis that Putin’s war has created between Russia and the West can only be understood by bringing NATO expansion into the picture. However, this is not to say that the remote prospect of Ukraine entering the alliance at all justifies Putin’s decision to invade it. It does not. Still, it is worth thinking about the road not taken as it offers lessons for the future.

The rupture that Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has created between Russia and the West will likely persist as long as he remains president, perhaps longer. But it ought to be an occasion to reflect on whether the United States missed an opportunity, as early as 1989, to forge a European order that included Russia rather than one that kept it on the outside, increasing its sense of alienation and exclusion, and ensuring that it would have no stake in safeguarding it and would, instead, seek to destroy it.

The history of NATO expansion raises the question of whether there was an

<sup>21</sup> “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France,” NATO, last modified October 12, 2009, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm).

<sup>22</sup> “NATO–Russia Council (NRC),” NATO, last modified September 1, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50091.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm).

<sup>23</sup> Rajan Menon and Eugene B. Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The unwinding of the post-cold war order* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).



alternative way of organizing Europe after the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989. As it happens, expanding the alliance toward the Russian border was not the only feasible choice. Once the Soviet-aligned communist governments in Eastern Europe (or East-Central Europe, as the region is now called) began to crumble, and Germany's reunification became imminent, President Mikhail Gorbachev

**Leaders are often inclined, by default, to favor the status quo, especially when it favors them.**

proposed disbanding both NATO and the Warsaw Pact in favor of a new, inclusive, trans-European security order stretching from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains. President George H. W. Bush dismissed this idea and Gorbachev's follow-up proposal for a unified but neutral Germany.<sup>24</sup> Knowing that Gorbachev held a weak hand — he was battling political opponents at home and dependent on Germany to provide money for the

500,000 troops stationed there (who would eventually have to be sent home and housed and fed) — Bush insisted that NATO was in Europe to stay and that its writ would encompass all of a unified Germany. He understood that the United States needed NATO to remain a European power but was also, understandably, skittish about dismantling a structure that had worked for half a century. Leaders are often inclined, by default, to favor the status quo, especially when it favors them. Bush's stance also suggests that, even at the tail end of the Cold War, the United States envisioned an enlarged NATO and understood that it would be impractical if the alliance's troops and weapons were formally barred from eastern Germany, the corridor to East-Central Europe.

Conceiving and creating a wholly new security system amid fast moving, unexpected events — the collapse of the communist states in the old Eastern Europe, the unraveling of the Soviet Union, the Soviet nuclear weapons remaining in what would become the independent states of Belarus and Ukraine — would have required an uncommon boldness of vision. The pity is that the United States didn't give it any serious thought.

<sup>24</sup> M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch* (London: Yale University Press, 2022).

Now, those with the most influence on U.S. foreign policy — those belonging to the executive branch and Congress, or who work for the major newspapers and prominent think tanks — are in no mood to reflect on lost opportunities. To the contrary, along with the shock created by Putin’s attack on Ukraine, there is a mood of triumphalism. Russia’s aggression has been interpreted as a vindication of the decision to expand NATO. The prevailing view is that, if anything, the United States should double down and increase its military presence in Europe, including in NATO’s eastern flank.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, this camp wants to make it permanent, even though Section IV of the NATO–Russia Founding Act stipulates that there will be no “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” there.

This call to station even more American troops and armaments in Europe is curious considering that European countries’ combined GDP (\$15.3 trillion)<sup>26</sup> is more than ten times Russia’s (\$1.5 trillion).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Europe boasts world-class tech companies<sup>28</sup> and many top-grade defense industries — in short, ample wherewithal for self-defense.<sup>29</sup> What Europe lacks is political will, and that owes to the iron-clad U.S. defense guarantee that endures even thirty years after the Cold War. The watchword in Washington remains that the United States must maintain its status, as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it, as “the indispensable nation.” Part of that role involves serving as the protector par excellence for European countries that recovered from the ravages of World War II decades ago to become competitors of the United States in the global marketplace.

<sup>25</sup> John R. Deni, “America Needs a Permanent Military Presence in the Baltics, and Here’s Why,” *Defense News*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/09/24/america-needs-a-permanent-military-presence-in-the-baltics-and-heres-why/>.

<sup>26</sup> “GDP/ Europe,” *Trading Economics*, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/gdp?continent=europe>.

<sup>27</sup> “GDP/Europe,” *Trading Economics*.

<sup>28</sup> Niels Martin Brochner, “Council Post: Why We Are About To Enter The Golden Age Of European Tech,” *Forbes*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/02/25/why-we-are-about-to-enter-the-golden-age-of-european-tech/>.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Roth, “The Size and Location of Europe’s Defence Industry,” *Bruegel*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/size-and-location-europes-defence-industry>.

The proper lesson to draw from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is that Europe must, at a measured but deliberate and demonstrable pace, move toward much greater self-reliance in defense, even if it eschews the more ambitious goal of “strategic autonomy.”<sup>30</sup> Those, including me, who favor greater European autonomy in defense are not tipping their hats to Donald Trump.<sup>31</sup> Unlike him, they are not calling for junking NATO overnight, seeking to extort money from European governments in exchange for continued U.S. protection, or damning them as deadbeats. Their basic point is that Europe can manage its own defense and should seek to do so gradually while preserving trans-Atlantic cooperation on a variety of fronts. In principle, this can be done within a reconfigured NATO or, eventually, without it.

The crisis that Putin’s war has created between Russia and the West can only be understood by bringing NATO expansion into the picture. But this may prove a distant dream, even a chimera. NATO’s own latest figures show that Canada and Europe have a long way to go, even if a less demanding standard is used — for example, the “guideline,”<sup>32</sup> adopted at the alliance’s 2014 Wales summit, that each NATO member state should allocate 2 percent of its GDP to defense spending. By 2021, only ten out of thirty NATO members had done so. Their record in meeting the second guideline — devoting 20 percent of national defense spending to acquiring arms and equipment and investing in military-related research and development — is better: only five countries have failed to hit that benchmark.

Remarkably, Germany, which has the largest GDP in Europe, has yet to meet either goal. As documented in the 2019 report on the Bundeswehr by Germany’s former Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces Hans-Peter Bartels, chronic shortfalls include staffing, enlistment and application rates, basic equipment (such as armored vests, radio jamming transmitters and night vision goggles),

<sup>30</sup> Lucia Retter, Stephanie Pezard, Stephen J. Flanagan, Gene Germanovich, Sarah Grand-Clement and Pauline Paillé, “European Strategic Autonomy in Defence,” RAND Corporation, November 9, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1319-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1319-1.html).

<sup>31</sup> Rajan Menon, “A New and Better Security Order for Europe,” Defense Priorities, February 15, 2022, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/a-new-and-better-security-order-for-europe>.

<sup>32</sup> “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2021),” NATO, June 11, 2021, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/210611-pr-2021-094-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/210611-pr-2021-094-en.pdf).

spare parts, maintenance and training.<sup>33</sup> Following the invasion of Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz pledged a one-time, additional \$113 billion for the military budget, which he said would increase its share of GDP to 2 percent.<sup>34</sup>

Whether the Russia shock will spur Germany and other members of NATO to meet the Wales benchmarks remains to be seen. What we have seen is President Biden scrambling to muster some 8,000 troops to dispatch to NATO's eastern flank as Russia massed troops along Ukraine's border. A glance at the map suggests that meeting that challenge should have principally been the responsibility of Europeans, not of a protector located over 4,000 miles away.

**Europe must, at a measured but deliberate and demonstrable pace, move toward greater self-reliance in defense.**

A new security European order should also involve greater engagement between Russia and the United States to advance nuclear arms control and to create “confidence-building measures” that reduce the likelihood of war in Europe. Now is not, to put it mildly, the most opportune time to make headway on these fronts. Putin will eventually be gone, but Russia will remain. It will also be a major power in Europe, and the United States will need to revive

mutually beneficial cooperation with it on matters of security.

Europe must, at a measured but deliberate and demonstrable pace, move toward greater self-reliance in defense. On arms control, Russia and the United States should negotiate an improved version of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.<sup>35</sup> Signed by presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, that agreement eliminated all nuclear-armed missiles with a range between 500

<sup>33</sup> Dr Hans-Peter Bartels, “Culture of responsibility in times of excessive organisation,” January 29, 2019, [https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/594460/8085ed11cf7ce79ddd40bod435fabfb7/statement\\_annual\\_report\\_2018-data.pdf](https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/594460/8085ed11cf7ce79ddd40bod435fabfb7/statement_annual_report_2018-data.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Maria Sheahan and Sarah Marsh, “Germany to Increase Defence Spending in Response to ‘Putin’s War’ – Scholz,” *Reuters*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/germany-hike-defense-spending-scholz-says-further-policy-shift-2022-02-27/>.

<sup>35</sup> Daryl Kimball, “The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance,” Arms Control Association, last modified August 2, 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/INFtreaty>.

and 5,500 kilometers. The United States charged, in 2014, that Russia was violating the accord, and the Russians leveled their own accusations. Rather than seeking to resolve these differences through negotiations, however, President Donald Trump summarily exited the treaty in 2019, surprising Washington's NATO allies. President Putin soon followed suit. A revamped INF Treaty would make Europe a much safer place.

The New START treaty, which covered strategic nuclear weapons, was signed by the United States and Russia in 2010.<sup>36</sup> In February 2021 both countries extended it until 2026. That provides time for the current crisis to abate and for both countries to negotiate a follow-on deal that further reduces the number of deployed warheads and bombs from the limit of 1,550 set by the treaty. While the United States has been keen on China's participation in talks to reduce strategic nuclear weapons, Beijing has insisted that it will not take part so long as the United States and Russian nuclear arsenals far exceed its own, which is estimated to contain 350 bombs and warheads.<sup>37</sup> So, either China can build up to reach Russia's numbers (which it is already doing) or the two nuclear superpowers can build down, starting from the limits set by New START, to Chinese levels. Then they can jointly engage China in efforts to make further cuts to create a minimum nuclear deterrent for each country. There has been much debate about the desirability of, and problems involved in, moving toward that goal, but none are, in principle, insuperable.<sup>38</sup>

On the confidence-building front, one important step would be rejoining the 1992 Open-Skies Treaty,<sup>39</sup> which Trump withdrew from in 2020, as did Russia the following year.<sup>40</sup> That agreement allotted the thirty-four signatories, twenty-six

<sup>36</sup> Shannon Bugos, "New START at a Glance," Arms Control Association, April 1, 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/NewSTART>.

<sup>37</sup> Shannon Bugos, "Pentagon Sees Faster Chinese Nuclear Expansion," Arms Control Association, December 1, 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-12/news/pentagon-sees-faster-chinese-nuclear-expansion>.

<sup>38</sup> Li Bin, "Major Problems with Minimum Deterrence," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 21, 2014, [https://thebulletin.org/roundtable\\_entry/major-problems-with-minimum-deterrence/](https://thebulletin.org/roundtable_entry/major-problems-with-minimum-deterrence/).

<sup>39</sup> Daryl Kimball, "The Open Skies Treaty at a Glance," Arms Control Association, December 1, 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/openskies>.

<sup>40</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Follows US in Withdrawal from Open Skies Treaty," *AP News*, January 15, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-leaves-open-skies-treaty-e58019b80ae95e12007265aedfac229b>.

of whom have ratified it, varying quotas of flights they could conduct and were obligated to permit. (More than 1,500 have been conducted since the treaty took effect in 2002.) The flights, which can cover the entire territory of participating countries, enable them to observe the deployment and movement of each other's troops and armaments. The purpose is to increase transparency and build trust.

Russia and the United States should also negotiate protocols to prevent close encounters between one another's military aircrafts and warships — which have occurred repeatedly in recent years in the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, and Baltic Sea regions — to reduce the likelihood that an accident could spiral into an armed confrontation.<sup>41</sup> In addition, routinized meetings between American and Russian military officers (so-called mil-to-mil exchanges) could reduce mistrust and provide an opportunity to learn about the other side's security concerns. Moreover, they could also lay the groundwork for negotiations at higher levels to place limits on troops and weapons, and perhaps even to demarcate weapons-free zones along the NATO-Russia front.

Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a pacific European security order stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals may prove beyond reach, but that should not prevent efforts to move toward a more stable and secure future. The diplomats who try to steer things in that direction should keep in mind the advice President John F. Kennedy offered in his 1961 Inaugural Address: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate."<sup>42</sup>

**'Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.'**

— John F. Kennedy, 1961 Inaugural Address

Meanwhile, the war Putin unleashed has injured thousands and killed hundreds of civilians in Ukraine, reduced parts of many Ukrainian cities to rubble, and forced more than 2.5 million people to flee their homeland for refuge in neighboring

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth McLaughlin and Luis Martinez, "A Look at the US Military's Close Calls with Russia in the Air and at Sea," ABC News, January 5, 2001, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-militarys-close-calls-russia-air-sea/story?id=63558131>.

<sup>42</sup> "Milestone Documents," National Archives, April 9, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/list>.

countries<sup>43</sup> — mainly Poland, whose two largest cities have become overwhelmed by the influx and have had to plead for international assistance.<sup>44</sup>

Even if Russian firepower overcomes Ukraine’s army, Putin’s military victory will prove to be a strategic defeat. Any pro-Russian government he installs won’t last long without Russian troops. Will Putin occupy a country that, in land area, is the largest in Europe (aside from Russia) and has 44 million people, most of whom will reject Russian overlordship, with many resorting to rebellion? If so, for how long and at what cost? A weakened Russia, cut adrift from the West, will become even more dependent on China, and, according to some senior Chinese foreign policy experts, even a liability.<sup>45</sup> The U.S. military presence in Europe will increase and may even become permanent in NATO’s east. In Finland and Sweden, Russia’s attack on Ukraine has prompted a debate about joining NATO. (*Editor’s note:* On April 4, Finland officially became the 31st member of NATO, marking a major shift in the security landscape in northeastern Europe that adds some 1,300 kilometers (830 miles) to the alliance’s frontier with Russia.) Germany and France, the foremost proponents within the alliance of engagement with Russia, now see it in a different light.

**Starting war is the easy part; what’s difficult, perhaps even impossible, is using it to achieve anything that resembles strategic success.**

Putin’s gambit in Ukraine provides another reminder, as if we needed it, of the destructiveness and cruelties of war. It also pours cold water on theories that offer economic interdependence as a solution to war. But it also reveals what has been clear for over a generation: Starting war is the easy part; what’s difficult, perhaps even impossible, is using it to achieve anything that resembles strategic success.

<sup>43</sup> “Ukraine Refugee Situation .” Ukraine Refugee Situation. UNHCR. Accessed March 23, 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

<sup>44</sup> Agnieszka Wądołowska, “‘We Can’t Take Any More Refugees’: Polish Cities Call on Government to Seek EU and UN Help,” Notes From Poland, March 11, 2022, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/03/11/we-cant-take-any-more-refugees-polish-cities-call-on-government-to-seek-eu-and-un-help/>.

<sup>45</sup> Hu Wei, “Possible Outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian War and China’s Choice,” *U.S.-China Perception Monitor*, March 12, 2022, <https://uscnpm.org/2022/03/12/hu-wei-russia-ukraine-war-china-choice/>.



***About the author***

Rajan Menon is a recipient of the Ellen Gregg Ingalls Award for Excellence in Classroom Teaching at Vanderbilt University; the Joseph F. Libsch Award for Distinguished Research at Lehigh University; and the Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching presented by the Lindback Foundation. He was selected as a Carnegie Scholar (2002–2003) and has received fellowships and grants from the Woodrow Wilson Center, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, and the United States Institute of Peace.

Menon has written more than 50 opinion pieces and essays for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsday*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, and *washingtonpost.com*. He has appeared as a commentator on National Public Radio, ABC, CNN, BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and World Focus (PBS).