

Long in the Making:

The West's Complicity in the Crisis in Ukraine

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In recent weeks, there has been no shortage of news reports¹, political opinions and military analyses in an effort to dissect² the growing crisis in Ukraine, a country the size of Texas with 43.7 million inhabitants. Embedded in the coverage has been the media's portrayal of the military operation as simply a matter of Russian aggression; business, in other words, as usual. As in any war and conflict, truth is the first casualty.

The war has now created³ over one million refugees. As the Russian military entered the city of Kherson,

and advancing toward southern Ukraine, new round of talks has failed⁴ to deliver any cease-fire.

The war has caused division among countries in Africa, Middle East, and Africa over how to juggle the converted effort to exert pressure on Russia while maintaining good relations with the west. South Africa was one of 26 African countries that were unwilling to condemn⁵ Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Whereas half the countries joined a UN resolution to condemn the war, 17 abstained, eight declined to participate in the vote, and one (Eritrea) voted with Russia. For these countries, in order to maintain working relationship with a growing and assertive Russia and China, they have to balance between the West and the growing ties⁶ between these countries with China which abstained from the vote and Russia. Other key countries in South Asia and East Asia—including India and China—refused⁷ to vote in favor of the resolution.

In what few would ever believe is merely a saber-rattling show of strength by President Vladimir Putin, Russia's military has amassed⁸—depending on

¹ Sammy Westfall, "What you need to know about tensions between Ukraine and Russia", *Washington Post*, November 26, 2021,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/11/26/ukraine-russia-military/?nid=top_pb_signin&arcId=6MAKXIQTPNBGVEEMUFB7BFFL64&account_location=ONSITE_HEADER_ARTICLE.

² David Leonhardt, "Ukraine, Explained", *New York Times*, December 8, 2021,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/08/briefing/biden-putin-ukraine-border-tensions.html?searchResultPosition=1>

³ Drew Hinshaw, "Russia's War on Ukraine Has Created Over 1 Million Refugees in Just a Week", *Wall Street Journal*, last modified March 3, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/at-ukrainian-border-overwhelmed-guards-volunteers-confront-exodus-of-refugees-fleeing-war-11646320646?mod=djemwhatsnews>.

⁴ Yaroslav Trofimov, "Ukraine, Russia Fail to Agree on Cease-Fire, as Moscow Shelling Kills Civilians" *Wall Street Journal*, last modified February 28, 2022,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/kyiv-and-moscow-hold-talks-as-ukrainian-troops-repel-russian-attacks-11646046458>.

⁵ Geoffrey York, "In sign of Russian influence, many African leaders decline to criticize Putin," *Globe and Mail*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-in-sign-of-russian-influence-many-african-leaders-decline-to-criticize/>

⁶ "Alliances come under heavy fire," *Africa Confidential* 63, no. 5 (March 2022). https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/13831/Alliances_come_under_heavy_fire.

⁷ Ted Galen Carpenter, "UN Vote Signals Trouble for Washington's Global Coalition Against Russia," *National Interest*, March 3, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/un-vote-signals-trouble-washington%E2%80%99s-global-coalition-against-russia-200954>.

⁸ Gordon Lubold, Yaroslav Trofimov and Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Warns of Imminent Russian Invasion of Ukraine With Tanks, Jet Fighters, Cyberattacks," *Wall Street Journal*, last modified February 18, 2022,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-troops-told-to-exercise-restraint-to-avoid-provoking-russian-invasion-11645185631>.

who's reporting — between 169,000 and 190,000 troops near Ukraine's border; many have already moved into the nearly surrounded unitary republic. As events unfolded, U.S. President Joe Biden has repeatedly maintained⁹ that a Russian invasion of Ukraine was imminent.

Milestones leading to the invasion of Ukraine came fast and furious in February. On the twenty-first of the month, Putin formally recognized¹⁰ the independence of two Moscow-supported breakaway enclaves in Ukraine, the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. At the same time, he announced a “special military operation,” vowing to “end the nightmare” of war in the contested region. Next, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky declared¹¹ a 30-day state of emergency and ordered all eligible men to enter military service. On the twenty-fourth of the month, all hell broke loose: The Russian attack began with a barrage of more than 100 ballistic, cruise and surface-to-air missiles, as well as some 75 medium and heavy bombers, in what one U.S. defense official described as the initial phase of an invasion that was the largest in Europe since World War II.

Can Ukraine withstand, somehow, the onslaught? Most media accounts have consolidated the rapidly escalating situation into a simple narrative: Russia is waging a war of aggression. The general consensus is that Russia is at fault and that Putin's

actions are an “invasion” rather than a defensive measure.

The New York Times reported¹² in its February 22 edition that Russia's recognition of the two separatist regions in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, was a “blunt defiance of international law.” Western leaders from Washington to Paris, from London to Berlin and from NATO to the European Union have scrambled¹³ to hold emergency meetings, which continue now, even as missile strikes on Ukraine continue. President Biden has led the call for the activation of sanctions¹⁴ against Moscow for its perceived breach of international law, and Western allies are responding. A day after Russia's initial incursions, sanctions were announced¹⁵ against targets not previously put in the crosshairs of such restrictions and penalties — President Putin's inner circle and their family members.

But here's the kicker. Through all the reports and all the commentary, and through the endless analysis and the brightly colored maps with arrows and borders and flags, the real tragedy is that the crisis over Ukraine could have been prevented, could have been avoided. The months-long military buildup that led to the missiles and bombs are the result of the West's actual complicity¹⁶ in Ukraine, dishonored security

⁹ Chloe Taylor, Amanda Macias and Christina Wilkie, “Biden warns of imminent attack, says diplomacy is still possible,” CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/18/ukraine-russia-crisis-live-updates.html>.

¹⁰ Sammy Westfall, “Why are Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine's Donbas region a flash point for Putin?” *Washington Post*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/21/what-is-donbas-donetsk-luhansk-conflict/>.

¹¹ Charlie D'Agata, Justine Redman and Haley Ott, “Ukraine calls up reservists, declares national emergency as U.S. and allies hit Russia with new sanctions,” CBC News, February 23, 2022, <https://www.cbcnews.com/news/russia-ukraine-news-military-reservists-emergency-declaration/>.

¹² Michael D. Shear, Richard Pérez-Peña, Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Anton Troianovski, “Biden Joins Europe in Punishing Russia With Sanctions,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2022,

last modified March 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/22/world/russia-ukraine-biden-putin>.

¹³ Westfall, Flash point for Putin.

¹⁴ Michael Collins, “Biden threatens devastating sanctions if Russia invades Ukraine. Here's what that might look like,” *USA Today*, February 14, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2022/02/14/ukraine-us-sanctions-russia/6777935001/?gnt-cfr=1>.

¹⁵ Phil Mattingly, “Biden's latest Russia sanctions mark new target: The families of Putin's inner circle,” CNN Politics, February 23, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/23/politics/russian-sanctions-families-putin-inner-circle/index.html>.

¹⁶ Isaac Chotiner, “Why John Mearsheimer Blames the U.S. for the Crisis in Ukraine,” *New Yorker*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-john-mearsheimer-blames-the-us-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine>.

assurances, and our own failure¹⁷ to learn from the past.

For some¹⁸, Putin is attempting to renegotiate the end of the Cold War by extending influence and restoring Russia's sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Others question¹⁹ the mental sanity of the Russian president; Putin's demand that NATO cease its eastward expansion and never allow Ukraine membership is perceived²⁰ as an outrageous demand, the demand of a lunatic. Yet, for others, the motive behind Putin's mobilization along critical points on the Ukrainian border is a diversion from domestic woes and an attempt to consolidate support²¹ for the regime in Russia. Such a tactic has worked before: In 2014, Russia invaded and annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine, and Putin's approval rating²² rose to 80 percent from 60 percent.

But, such surface views of international affairs fail to historicize approval ratings in times of crises, especially in the U.S. After all, President George W. Bush's rating²³ rose from 60 percent to 92 percent on the strength of his response after the tragic September 11 al-Qaeda-inspired attacks²⁴. His popularity with the American public rose again with the invasion²⁵ of Iraq

in 2003. During the presidential terms of Lyndon Johnson, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, different crises in financial, terrorism, military and even healthcare arenas resulted²⁶ in improved approval ratings.

As with any major crises, the devil is in the details. Here in the U.S., whether it was the decision to send military advisors to Vietnam that led to the prolonged war in that country, or the military actions directed against Iraq, Afghanistan and even Syria, to truly understand the Russia-Ukraine crisis, we must put²⁷ the conflict in its social-historical context — this is what is missing from popular media accounts and the preoccupation to first designate good guys and bad guys, context be damned. When presented in a vacuum convenient to the presenter, the outcome is a dangerous, one-sided game of — pardon the pun — Russian roulette.

Dating to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 — through its leaders Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Putin, Medvedev and Putin (again) — Russia has had a longstanding position²⁸ that Ukraine not be allowed NATO membership. Under its succession of modern-day presidents, it has demanded a reduction of North

¹⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault" *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

¹⁸ Stephen Fidler, "Putin's Endgame: Unravel the Post-Cold War Agreements That Humiliated Russia," *Wall Street Journal*, last modified February 22, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/putins-endgame-unravel-the-post-cold-war-agreements-that-humiliated-russia-11645482412>.

¹⁹ David E. Sanger and Anton Troianovski, "U.S. intelligence weighs Putin's two years of extreme pandemic isolation as a factor in his wartime mind-set," *New York Times*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/putin-pandemic-mindset.html>.

²⁰ Bryce Greene, "What You Should Really Know About Ukraine," *Fair*, January 28, 2022, <https://fair.org/home/what-you-should-really-know-about-ukraine/>.

²¹ David Satter, "Weakness at Home Drives Putin to Invade Ukraine," *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/weak-approval-putin-force-ukraine-russia-invasion-crimea-greatness-corruption-kremlin-oligarch-civil-unrest-apartment-bombing-dissent-11645541932>.

²² Satter, Weakness at Home.

²³ "Presidential Approval Ratings -- George W. Bush," Gallup, Accessed June 20, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx>.

²⁴ Gary Langer, "Poll: Bush Approval Rating 92 Percent," ABC News, January 6, 2006, abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=120971&page=1.

²⁵ Daniel Stevens, "War and Elections." *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2015): 477–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43868288>.

²⁶ Mona Chalabi, "Rally round the flag: do wars boost presidential popularity?" *The Guardian*, January 4, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2020/jan/04/trump-iran-suleimani-president-approval-ratings>.

²⁷ Henry Farrell, "Putin's fight with Ukraine reflects his deep distrust of the West. There's a long history behind that," *Washington Post*, December 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/01/putin-ukraine-nato-expansion/>.

²⁸ M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (United States: Yale University Press, 2021).

Atlantic Treaty Organization's expansion of troops and military equipment in eastern European countries that share Russia's borders. These requests have been rejected²⁹ by the U.S. and other NATO members.

Recently, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, perhaps blindly, "(O)ne country does not have the right to exert a sphere of influence. That notion should be relegated to the dustbin of history." But, this is a philosophy this country has historically spurned³⁰; we have over and over again exerted our own sphere of influence. It, therefore, smacks of hypocrisy³¹ to leverage the charge against Russia, while not taking the time so important to avoiding a larger-scale conflict. Two examples of perchance-forgotten U.S. "exertion" — in addition to our *known* involvements in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, etc. — come to mind: the U.S. occupation and military actions against various Latin American countries during the so-called Banana Wars from 1898 to 1934, and President Ronald Reagan's covert operations against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua in the 1980s. These were carried out in order to prevent³² foreign powers from establishing spheres of influence in the Western hemisphere. And to protect our own sphere.

Simon Waxman, recently noted³³ this hypocrisy that makes a mockery of international law and the rule-based global order. He noted that rule of law is evoked both by Russia's critics and Russian that call for greater US involvement in the crisis "does not exist." It is a double standard that continues to play out in conflicts where the United States is involved including in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia. Waxman asks correctly "Where was it in

2003? Where was it when NATO bombed Yugoslavia in 1999? When the United States bombed Libya in 1986? When the United States supported a coup in Honduras in 2009, or the coup in Iran in 1953? Where, for that matter, was it when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, to muffled grumbling abroad? Russia has repeatedly targeted civilians in Syria while the rest of humanity yawns. None of these actions was authorized under the UN Charter or other conventions governing the laws of war, the backbones of the alleged global order"

Conversely, it is impossible to think that any American leader would allow, say, Russia or China, to set up³⁴ military camp in, say, Mexico or Canada. Writes political analyst and former vice president of the National Intelligence Council Graham Fuller³⁵, "A Chinese military presence in Canada or Mexico would evoke extreme reaction in Washington. Indeed, there are hints now that China or Russia might seek to brush back America's drive to push NATO up to Russia's very borders. Responses could include exercising greater diplomatic or even armed military presence closer to U.S. borders."

For a country that enjoys one of the largest spheres³⁶ of influence and control in the western hemisphere, Blinken's observation is symptomatic of how the U.S. views and interacts with the rest of the world. Russia's behavior is explained in terms of the psychological³⁷ makeup of its leaders, its failed exercise in democracy and the changing post-

²⁹ "Global Conflict Tracker," Council on Foreign relations, last modified April 8, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>.

³⁰ Peter Beinart, "When Will the U.S. Stop Lying to Itself About Global Politics?" *New York Times*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/us-russia-putin-ukraine.html>.

³¹ Simon Waxman, "What Rule-Based International Order?" *Boston review*, March 2, 2022, https://bostonreview.net/articles/what-rule-based-international-order/?utm_source=Boston+Review+Email+Subscribers&utm_campaign=d340e1d605-newsletter_2_16_22_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_ter

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³² Beinart, U.S. Stop Lying.

³³ Waxman, Rule-Based International Order.

³⁴ Beinart, U.S. Stop Lying.

³⁵ Graham E. Fuller, "Washington Denies Reality of "Spheres of Influence"—a New Pinnacle of Hypocrisy," February 6, 2022, <https://grahamefuller.com/washington-denies-reality-of-spheres-of-influence-a-new-pinnacle-of-hypocrisy/>

³⁶ Beinart, U.S. Stop Lying.

³⁷ Ryu Spaeth, "Is Putin Sane?" *Intelligencer*, February 19, 2022, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/02/is-vladimir-putin-sane.html>.

cold war order³⁸. Very little thought is given to the level of the Russian reality, a real-life, first-hand experience with facing invasion from others over the past two centuries. The threat Russia feels is not merely a theoretical³⁹ geopolitical shudder. Western armies brutally invaded Russia's borders in 1812 when Napoleon's charge resulted in nearly half a million Russian casualties. In 1943, Germany stormed across Russia's western border seeking "lebensraum" — living space — a prolonged WW II action that resulted in as many as 27 million losses for the Soviet Union. Is such history forgotten in the West?

According to recently declassified documents, Western leaders did offer⁴⁰ security assurances against NATO expansion into eastern Europe to Russian leaders in 1990 and 1991. In fact, a roll call of those pledging such support represents an all-star team of trusted world doyens, leaders including NATO's own Secretary-General Manfred Woerner, U.S. Presidents George Herbert Walker Bush and George W. Bush, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III, CIA Director Robert Gates, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, French President François Mitterand, British Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major, and British Foreign Minister Douglas Hurd. Based on such a "cascade" of assurances, a panel convened⁴¹ by the National Security Archive notes, "(S)ubsequent Soviet and Russian complaints about being misled about NATO expansion were founded in written contemporaneous memcons and telcons at the highest levels." Also, the panel writes of the findings, "The documents reinforce former CIA Director Robert Gates's criticism of 'pressing ahead

with expansion of NATO eastward [in the 1990s], when Gorbachev and others were led to believe that wouldn't happen.'"

The guarantees from NATO that there would be no such eastern expansion, including Secretary Baker's "not one inch eastward" proclamation⁴², was the security assurance General Secretary of the Communist Party and President of Russia Mikhail Gorbachev sought. NATO's expansion was years in the future, when these disputes would erupt again, and more assurances would come to Russian leader Boris Yeltsin.

The position that the United States should not seek to fight Russia over Ukraine or other matters that are not vital to its national interest is not new. Both Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump rejected⁴³ bipartisan pressure to militarily confront Putin because Ukraine is⁴⁴ of vital interest only to Russia and not the U.S.

This view persisted even after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. The argument that Ukraine is a matter of national interest to Russia was similarly repeated⁴⁵ by Obama in 2016. In *The Atlantic*, Jeffrey Goldberg, summarized⁴⁶ Obama's point by noting "Ukraine is a core Russian interest but not an American one, so Russia will always be able to maintain escalatory dominance there." Obama noted that "we have to be very clear about what our core interests are and what we are willing to go to war for." The crisis in Ukraine and Russia's invasion today does not warrant America's military deployment to Ukraine. That has become President Biden's position as well who has rejected⁴⁷ countless calls to intervene militarily in

³⁸ Christian Caryl, "Why Democracy Didn't Work in Russia," *New Republic*, October 27, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/145446/democracy-didnt-work-russia-masha-gessen-book-traces-rise-repressive-nationalism>.

³⁹ Gerard Baker, "How the U.S. and Europe Lost the Post-Cold War," *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-and-europe-lost-post-cold-war-civilizational-values-china-russia-america-virtues-western-xi-putin-11645471928?mod=e2fb&fbclid=IwAR17qB43EseC89W13tQpFITPIoGhzQe0CHa_Lwj0H67Mb7xOO6itif_93UY

⁴⁰ Fuller, Spheres of Influence.

⁴¹ Savranskaya and Blanton, NATO Expansion.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

⁴⁴ Goldberg, *The Obama Doctrine*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Remarks by President Biden in State of the Union Address," White House, March 1, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/02/remarks-by-president-biden-in-state-of-the-union-address/>.

Ukraine; something that would activate NATO's article 5 and get all members to get involve in a war with Russia.

The reality is that U.S. policymakers — and other Western countries' ruling bodies — seldom reflect⁴⁸ on their own history. These policymakers, here and abroad, don't admit⁴⁹ their own geographic sensitivities, their own territorial realities. The tragedy of what is unfolding in Ukraine is that those in power rarely examine⁵⁰ their own motives or interrogate the history and context that animate the conflict today. They often assign⁵¹ benign humanitarian concerns to their actions while denying others' claims to the same. In the current crisis in Ukraine, calling the Russia's attack 'unprovoked' obscures⁵² the long history behind the conflict and stalls our ability to find durable solutions to the conflict. For the sake of the people of Ukraine, there is an urgent need to demilitarize the border zone by freezing NATO's eastward expansion. It is necessary to reassure Putin that Ukraine will not become a member of NATO.

It is said⁵³ that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce. For the victims of war, farce is a tragedy compounded. In the countless media accounts of the situation in Ukraine, it is *assumed* this is a conflict in which the U.S. will play a lead role. Our government has done nothing to counter the assumption, but rather has warned of reprisals and mayhem should the war escalate. It comes down to this: Is the Russia-Ukraine conflict one in which the U.S. must participate? While this country has, in fact, been a part of the assurances given Russia in the past — assurances that haven't been honored when

push comes to shove — is it in our best interests to turn our attention away from our own economic, political, social and cultural issues? Is it up to the U.S. to muscle its provision of military and financial resources into a European conflict? Our further or expanded involvement in Ukraine will come at a cost, a cost measured in dollars and lives. If there is a sphere of influence being exerted, our involvement, at this time, must be relegated to the dust bin.

⁴⁸ Michael Brenner, "Another Casualty of the Ukraine Conflict: The Truth," Scheerpost, March 5, 2022, <https://scheerpost.com/2022/03/05/another-casualty-of-the-ukraine-conflict-the-truth/>.

⁴⁹ Galen Carpenter, "How Barack Obama's Good 'Intentions' Destroyed Libya," *National Interest*, February 23, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/how-barack-obamas-good-intentions-destroyed-libya-126441>.

⁵⁰ Bryce Greene, "Calling Russia's Attack 'Unprovoked' Lets US Off the Hook," Fair, March 4, 2022, <https://fair.org/home/calling-russias-attack-unprovoked-lets-us-off-the-hook/>.

⁵¹ Noam Chomsky, "Humanitarian Intervention' and Imperialism," *Telesur*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Noam-Chomsky-Humanitarian-Intervention-US-Imperialism-20180214-0028.html>.

⁵² Greene, "Calling Russia's Attack

⁵³ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Daniel de Leon (New York: Project Gutenberg, 2021).

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