

War Foretold:

Ukraine's Crisis, 30 Years in the Making¹

Dr. Christopher Zambakari, BS, MBA, MIS, LP.D.

Blame it not on forever friends or frenemies. Blame it, instead, on perpetual interests.

In recent months, there has been no shortage of news² reports, political opinions and military analyses³ dissecting the military and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, a country the combined size of Texas and Louisiana, with 43.7 million inhabitants.

We *think* we know what has happened in Ukraine. We have been told by the nation's press that the military operation is simply a matter of Russian aggression; in

other words, business as usual.⁴ As is often the case in confrontations between two great powers, when elephants fight, the grass suffers. Ukrainians are therefore, caught between a rock and a hard place.

The West, Ukrainian leaders and Russian brass all bear responsibility for the current crisis.

The crisis has a long history.⁵ Every Russian leader since the fall of the Soviet Union has staunchly opposed the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into Eastern Europe, and particularly into countries that border Russia.⁶ Dating to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Russian leaders Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev have maintained a longstanding position that Ukraine, an eastern border neighbor, not be allowed NATO membership.⁷ Additionally, Russia has habitually

¹ Zambakari, Christopher. 2022. "War Foretold: Ukraine's Crisis, 30 Years in the Making." *The Fletcher World Forum* (forthcoming in Spring 2022 Issue).

² 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.

³ David Leonhardt, "Ukraine, Explained: And why people are fearing war there," *New York Times*, December, 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/08/briefing/biden-putin-ukraine-border-tensions.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁴ Editorial Board, "Opinion | Why Ukraine — and Russia's aggression against it — matters to Americans," *Washington Post*, February 124, 2022,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/24/why-ukraine-matters-to-united-states/>.

⁵ 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/>.

⁶ Anatol Lieven, "Ukraine: What Russia wants, what the West can do," *Responsible Statecraft*, February 25, 2022,

<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/02/25/ukraine-what-russia-wants-what-the-west-can-do/>.

⁷ Lieven, Anatol. 1995. "Russian Opposition to NATO Expansion." *The World Today* 51 (10):196-199.

⁸ For carefully documented account of this period in East-West diplomacy see Marie Elise Sarotte, *Not one inch: America, Russia, and the making of post-Cold War stalemate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

demanded a reduction of NATO's injection of troops and military equipment into eastern European countries that share boundaries with Russia; albeit we must bear in mind the comparatively low numbers of troops involved. These requests have all been emphatically rejected by the United States and other NATO members.⁹

NATO membership is by invitation only. Prospective applicants, once¹⁰ invited, must earn Intensified Dialogue status. In NATO's own words, discussions involve a "full range of political, military, financial and security issues relating to (the interested country's) possible NATO membership." Next is an invitation to join the Membership Action Plan, a measure designed to help the prospective member state prepare for inclusion in the international organization. Any NATO expansion decision is made by unanimous agreement.

Meanwhile, European Union (EU) membership is based upon the so-called "Copenhagen Criteria," which require, primarily, that a prospective member state demonstrate the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the respect for and protection of minorities; the

existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU. EU membership is based on a unanimous decision by the EU Council.

The EU is an economic bloc, NATO a military alliance. Both have overlapping sets of requirements.

In December 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a list of security demands to the U.S. President Joe Biden that included removing NATO troops and bases from former Soviet Union territories and ceasing military assistance to Ukraine.¹¹ As has been the case with past U.S. presidents, Russia's demands were rebuffed, and the military match was lighted: Putin recognized the independence of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk;¹² Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky declared a state of emergency in his country;¹³ and Putin retaliated with a "special military operation" in Ukraine. The next day, February 24, all hell broke loose.

Western elites are once again beating the drum for the United States to "do more," demanding that the Biden administration and the Western alliance defend

⁹ Global Conflict Tracker, "Conflict in Ukraine," Council on Foreign Relations, April 29, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>

¹⁰ "NATO Enlargement & Open Door," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, July 2016, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160627_1607-factsheet-enlargement-eng.pdf.

¹¹ Dmitri Trenin, "What Putin Really Wants in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, December 28, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2021-12-28/what-putin-really-wants-ukraine>.

¹² Sammy Westfall and Claire Parker, "Why is Ukraine's Donbas region a target for Russian forces?" *Washington Post*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/21/what-is-donbas-donetsk-luhansk-conflict/>.

¹³ 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.cbsnews.com/news/russia-ukraine-news-military-reservists-emergency-declaration/>.

Ukraine from the multi-pronged Russian assault. In response, Biden approved the deployment of 7,000 additional U.S. troops to Germany, where the U.S. already maintains modern military bases, to reassure NATO allies of his commitment to the alliance.¹⁴ As Biden noted, these troops would not be deployed to Ukraine to “be engaged in the conflict.”¹⁵

Despite the posturing and troop deployments,¹⁶ neither the U.S. nor NATO is prepared to deploy combat troops.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the EU, UK and other allies have continued to supply military equipment and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. However, these European nations have resisted Ukraine’s calls for more direct military involvement – a stance based on the horrific possibilities of an all-out world war. European leaders and President Biden have been right to rule out such an expansion of direct military support.¹⁸

¹⁴ Paul Mcleary and Bryan Bender, “Pentagon sending 7,000 more troops to Germany as fighting rages in Ukraine,” *Politico*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/24/russian-invasion-decapitating-ukraine-government-00011404>.

¹⁵ Mcleary and Bender, Pentagon sending 7,000 more troops.

¹⁶ Barbara Plett Usher, “Ukraine conflict: Why Biden won't send troops to Ukraine,” *BBC News*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-60499385>.

¹⁷ “Transcript: NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg on Russian aggression, Ukraine’s capabilities, and expanding the Alliance,” *Atlantic Council*, January 28, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/transcripts/transcript-nato-head-jens-stoltenberg-on-russian-aggression-ukraines-capabilities-and-expanding-the-alliance/>.

¹⁸ Usher, Ukraine conflict.

¹⁹ How the West Can Still Protect Kyiv, “Alina Polyakova and Daniel Fried, Putin’s Long Game in Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-02-23/putins-long-game-ukraine>.

Most media accounts have synthesized the escalating situation into a simple narrative: Russia is waging a war of aggression and Putin’s actions constitute an “invasion,”¹⁹ rather than a defensive measure.²⁰ *The New York Times* called Putin’s actions a “blunt defiance of international law.”²¹ While leaders have scrambled to convene emergency meetings,²² President Biden and other Western powers have levied sanctions against dozens of Russian entities and officials.²³ Included in the sanctions, notably, are individuals not previously targeted — Putin’s inner circle and their family members.²⁴ By including people other than public officials and financiers on the list of those sanctioned, the U.S. and its Western allies are sending signals that no one is off limits that national media have reported is an effort to shut down

²⁰ Ann M. Simmons and Matthew Luxmoore, “Ukraine Invasion Is Putin’s Most Aggressive Move Yet to Restore Russia’s Place in the World,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-invasion-is-putins-boldest-move-yet-to-restore-russias-place-in-the-world-11645731030>.

²¹ Anton Troianovski, “Putin Orders Troops to Separatist Regions and Recognizes Their Independence,” *New York Times*, February 21, 2022, last modified March 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/21/world/ukraine-russia-putin-biden>.

²² Westfall and Parker, Target for Russian forces.

²³ Michael Collins, “Biden threatens devastating sanctions if Russia invades Ukraine. Here's what that might look like,” *USA Today*, February 14, 2022, last modified February 22, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2022/02/14/ukraine-us-sanctions-russia/6777935001/?gnt-cfr=1>.

²⁴ Phil Mattingly, Biden's latest Russia sanctions mark new target: The families of Putin's inner circle, *CNN*, February 23, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/23/politics/russian-sanctions-families-putin-inner-circle/index.html>.

pathways for top Putin associates to shield their wealth by giving it to family members.²⁵

Now, with the mounting death tolls and global market shocks, many wonder if this conflict could have been prevented. Russia's military buildup and subsequent actions are, in fact, the result of the West's complicity in Ukraine, dishonored security assurances, and, ultimately, a failure to learn from the past.²⁶

The strategic geopolitical concerns driving Russia's actions are not hard to understand. These concerns date to events that spurred the collapse of the Soviet Union; they can be traced to the assurances that were dishonored by Western powers in the years following the end of the Cold War.²⁷ The most important of these announced assurances included pledges limiting the further eastward expansion of NATO.²⁸ Yet, from its inception in 1949 – an organization of 12 founding members – to today, NATO has added 30 member states. Despite former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's famous commitment to expand NATO “not one inch eastward,”²⁹ the alliance has managed to expand well beyond its original boundaries.

These historic events ultimately set the stage for what we are now witnessing in eastern Europe. Clearly,

²⁵ Phil Mattingly, Mark new target.

²⁶ Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton “35+ Years Of Freedom Of Information Action,” National Security Archive, December, 12, 2017, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>.

²⁷ Savranskaya and Blanton, 35+ Years Of Freedom.

preliminary discussions focused on the process necessary for admitting Ukraine into NATO enraged Russia's leadership. Despite Russia's well-documented opposition to expansion and countless reassurances that it wouldn't occur, Western states continued to expand NATO – or at least not rule out expanding NATO – in a manner that exacerbated Russian fears and left its leaders feeling encircled, given an increasing military presence near its borders.

The BBC has noted that Ukraine is not in America's sphere of influence or geopolitical neighborhood.³⁰ Ukraine does not share a border with the United States, nor does it host an American base. Likewise, Ukraine is not a significant trade partner, nor does it possess strategic oil reserves; the conflict does not pose an imminent threat to the United States' security. In brief, Ukraine does not represent a significant American interest.

On the contrary, for Russia, Ukraine's status is a top national security issue.³¹ Thus, Russia has willingly deployed combat troops to prevent Ukraine's ascension into NATO. Russia perceives Ukraine the same way the U.S. views countries in the Western

²⁸ Tony Wood, “Why didn't they stop it?” *London Review of Books* 44, no. 4, February 23, 2022, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n04/tony-wood2/why-didn-t-they-stop-it>.

²⁹ Savranskaya and Blanton, Freedom Of Information Action.

³⁰ Usher, Ukraine conflict.

³¹ Anatol Lieven, “Russia Has Been Warning About Ukraine for Decades. The West Should Have Listened,” *Time*, January 25, 2022, <https://time.com/6141806/russia-ukraine-threats/>.

Hemisphere.³² For the same reasons the U.S. might object to Mexico or Canada entering into a military alliance with China or Russia, Putin & Co. are equally concerned about the consequences of Ukraine hosting NATO military bases.

America has exercised its own sphere of influence for more than 200 years in the Western Hemisphere, since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823.³³ Russian interests in maintaining influence over former Soviet states is tantamount to U.S. Monroe Doctrine and desire to dominate the Western hemisphere.³⁴ This country's heavy-handed involvement in Central America and the Caribbean helped to consolidate the Western Hemisphere into a U.S. dominated sphere of influence.³⁵

While former Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, signed a constitutional amendment in 2019 committing Ukraine to becoming a member of NATO and the European Union,³⁶ a survey showed that barely half the population was in favor of NATO membership.³⁷ Furthermore, the two heavily Russian-speaking

breakaway enclaves of Donetsk and Luhansk, which constitute a population of 3.8 million, were excluded from the survey.

It is essential to note that political violence seldom dies with peace agreements. Violence is not self-evident. In order to make sense of violence, one must rethink how and why it was precipitated in the past and then place it in its proper socio-historical context. In the case of the current Ukraine crisis, there has been an abject failure to understand the history that has led to today's conflict.

Whatever the outcome of the conflict, the cost will not be borne in Brussels, London or Washington. Devastation will be borne by and measured in Ukrainian lives. Ukraine's survival hinges on its ability to convince the East and the West that it can exist like Sweden, Austria, or Ireland — as an EU member without NATO membership.³⁸ Another viable option for Ukraine is buried in the Minsk Protocol of February 2015.³⁹ The Protocol would have granted the breakaway eastern Ukrainian provinces of Luhansk

³² Zeeshan Aleem, "The Russia-Ukraine war crisis, explained by an expert," MSNBC, January 26, 2022, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/russia-ukraine-war-crisis-explained-expert-n1288016>.

³³ 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>.

³⁴ Beinart, U.S. Stop Lying to Itself.

³⁵ Dietz, James L. "Destabilization and Intervention in Latin America and the Caribbean." *Latin American Perspectives* 11,

no. 3 (Summer 1984): 3–14.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633287>.

³⁶ "Ukraine President Signs Constitutional Amendment On NATO, EU Membership," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 19, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-president-signs-constitutional-amendment-on-nato-eu-membership/29779430.html>.

³⁷ Wood, Why didn't they stop it?

³⁸ Anatol Lieven, "The Meaning of Ukraine's Coming Neutrality," FP Insider, April 4, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/04/ukraine-neutrality-nato-west-europe-russia-peace-ceasefire/>.

³⁹ Anatol Lieven, "Ending the Threat of War in Ukraine: A Negotiated Solution to the Donbas Conflict and the Crimean

and Donetsk special recognition, a decentralized form of government and veto power over Ukraine's membership in NATO. The failure of this guarantee of autonomy lies partly with the West; it has failed to encourage or support Ukraine's political leadership to implement or work toward realization of the protocol. Equally, Ukrainian Presidents Poroshenko and Zelensky share in the washout of the protocol's promise, and also with Moscow, which has failed to encourage compliance in Luhansk and Donetsk.

The demise of the aforementioned peace deal laid the foundation for Russia's "special military operation" into Ukraine. It is time to acknowledge the cold truth about the politics of power – states don't have forever friends or frenemies, only perpetual interests.⁴⁰ Unless the West is prepared to go to war with Russia to defend Ukraine's sovereignty, we must acknowledge Russia's historically justified veto over Ukraine's military alliances. We must understand Russia's concern about NATO's continued eastward movement. If we can't do this, we risk escalation of the crisis in Ukraine, we risk spreading political and humanitarian chaos.

Dispute," Quincy Institute For Responsible Statecraft, January 4, 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/report/ending-the-threat-of-war-in-ukraine/>.

⁴⁰ Congress, "114 Cong. Rec. (Bound) - Senate: October 4, 1968," Government. U.S. Government Publishing Office, October 10, 1968, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-CRECB-1968-pt23/GPO-CRECB-1968-pt23-1-1>.

About the Author

Christopher Zambakari is a Doctor of Law and Policy, chief executive officer of [The Zambakari Advisory, L.L.C.](#), Hartley B. and Ruth B. Barker Endowed Rotary Peace Fellow, and assistant editor of The Bulletin of the Sudan Studies Association. His areas of research and expertise are international law and security, political reform and economic development, governance and democracy, conflict management and prevention, nation- and state-building processes in Africa and in the Middle East. His work has been published in law, economic, and public policy journals.