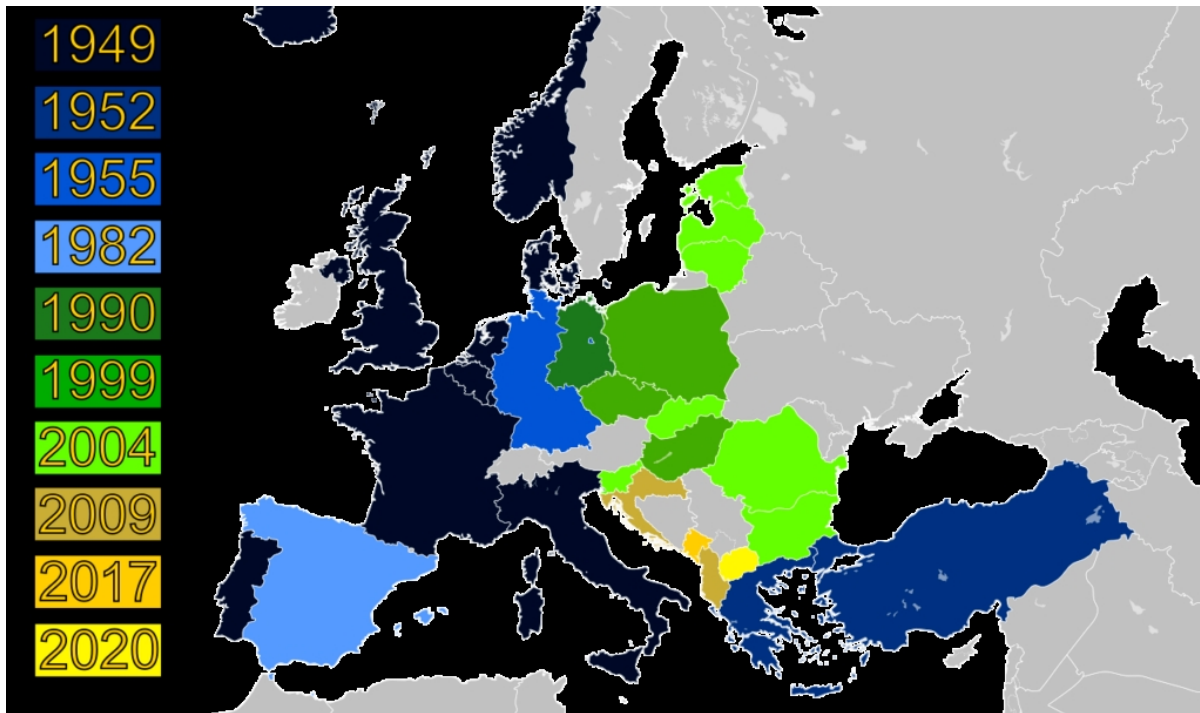


By Bryce Greene

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Many governments and media figures are rightly condemning Russian President Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine as an act of aggression and a violation of international law. But in his first speech about the invasion, on February 24, US President Joe Biden also called the invasion "unprovoked."

It's a word that has been echoed [repeatedly](#) across the media ecosystem. "Putin's forces entered Ukraine's second-largest city on the fourth day of the unprovoked invasion,"

Axios

(

[2/27/22](#)

) reported; "Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine entered its second week Friday," said

CNBC

(

[3/4/22](#)

).

Vox

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[3/1/22](#)
) wrote of “Putin’s decision to launch an unprovoked and unnecessary war with the second-largest country in Europe.”

The “unprovoked” descriptor obscures a long history of provocative behavior from the United States in regards to Ukraine. This history is important to understanding how we got here, and what degree of responsibility the US bears for the current attack on Ukraine.

Ignoring expert advice

The story starts at the end of the Cold War, when the US was the only global hegemon. As part of the deal that finalized the reunification of Germany, the US promised Russia that NATO would not expand [“one inch eastward.”](#) Despite this, it wasn’t long before talk of expansion began to circulate among policy makers.

In 1997, dozens of foreign policy veterans (including former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and former CIA Director Stansfield Turner) sent a [joint letter](#) to then-President Bill Clinton calling “the current US-led effort to expand NATO...a policy error of historic proportions.” They predicted:

In Russia, NATO expansion, which continues to be opposed across the entire political spectrum, will strengthen the nondemocratic opposition, undercut those who favor reform and cooperation with the West [and] bring the Russians to question the entire post-Cold War settlement.

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman ([5/2/98](#)) in 1998 asked famed diplomat George Kennan—[architect](#) of the US Cold War strategy of containment—about NATO expansion. Kennan’s response:

I think it is the beginning of a new cold war. I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else.

Of course there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are—but this is just wrong.

Despite these warnings, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were added to NATO in 1999, with Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia following in 2004.

US planners were warned again in 2008 by US Ambassador to Moscow William Burns (now director of the CIA under Joe Biden). **WikiLeaks** leaked a [cable](#) from Burns titled “Nyet Means Nyet: Russia's NATO Enlargement Redlines” that included another prophetic warning worth quoting in full (emphasis added):

Ukraine and Georgia's NATO aspirations not only touch a raw nerve in Russia, *they engender serious concerns about the consequences for stability in the region*

Not only does Russia perceive encirclement, and efforts to undermine Russia's influence in the region, but it also fears unpredictable and uncontrolled consequences which would seriously affect Russian security interests.

Experts tell us that Russia is particularly worried that the *strong divisions in Ukraine over NATO membership*, with much of the ethnic

Russian community against membership, could lead to *a major split, involving violence or at worst, civil war*

. In that eventuality,

Russia would have to decide whether to intervene; a decision Russia does not want to have to face

A de facto NATO ally

But the US has pushed Russia to make such a decision. Though European countries are divided about whether or not Ukraine should join, many in the NATO camp have been adamant about maintaining the alliance's "open door policy." Even as US planners were warning of a Russian invasion, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated NATO's 2008 plans to integrate Ukraine into the alliance (**New York Times**, [12/16/21](#)). The Biden administration has taken a more roundabout approach,

[supporting](#)

in the abstract "Kyiv's right to choose its own security arrangements and alliances." But the implication is obvious.

Even without officially being in NATO, Ukraine has become a de facto NATO ally—and Russia has paid close attention to these developments. In a December 2021 [speech](#) to his top military officials, Putin expressed his concerns:

Over the past few years, military contingents of NATO countries have been almost constantly present on Ukrainian territory under the pretext of exercises. The Ukrainian troop control system has already been integrated into NATO. This means that NATO headquarters can issue direct commands to the Ukrainian armed forces, even to their separate units and squads....

Kiev has long proclaimed a strategic course on joining NATO. Indeed, each country is entitled to pick its own security system and enter into military alliances. There would be no problem with that, if it were not for one "but." International documents expressly stipulate the principle of equal and indivisible security, which includes obligations not to strengthen one's own security at the expense of the security of other states....

In other words, the choice of pathways towards ensuring security should not pose a threat to other states, whereas Ukraine joining NATO is a direct threat to Russia's security.

In an explainer piece, the **New York Times** ([2/24/22](#)) centered NATO expansion as a root cause of the war. Unfortunately, the **Time**
s omitted the critical context of NATO's pledge not to expand, and the subsequent abandonment

of that promise. This is an important context to understand the Russian view of US policies, especially so given the ample warnings from US diplomats and foreign policy experts.

The Maidan Coup of 2014

A major turning point in the US/Ukraine/Russia relationship was the 2014 violent and unconstitutional ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich, elected in 2010 in a vote [heavily split](#) between eastern and western Ukraine. His ouster came after months of protests led in part by [far-right extremists](#)

(
FAIR.org

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[3/7/14](#)

). Weeks before his ouster, an unknown party leaked a [phone call](#)

between US officials discussing who should and shouldn't be part of the new government, and finding ways to "seal the deal." After the ouster, a politician the officials designated as "the guy" even became prime minister.

The US involvement was part of a campaign aimed at exploiting the divisions in Ukrainian society to push the country into the US sphere of influence, pulling it out of the Russian sphere (**FAIR.org**, [1/28/22](#)). In the aftermath of the overthrow, Russia illegally annexed Crimea from Ukraine, in part to secure a major [naval base](#) from the new Ukrainian government.

The **New York Times** ([2/24/22](#)) and **Washington Post** ([2/28/22](#)) both omitted the role the US played in these events. In US media, this critical moment in history is completely cleansed of US influence, erasing a critical step on the road to the current war.

Keeping civil war alive

In another response to the overthrow, an uprising in Ukraine's Donbas region grew into a rebel movement that declared independence from Ukraine and announced the formation of their own republics. The resulting civil war claimed thousands of lives, but was largely paused in 2015

with a ceasefire agreement known as the Minsk II accords.

The deal, agreed to by Ukraine, Russia and other European countries, was designed to grant some form of autonomy to the breakaway regions in exchange for reintegrating them into the Ukrainian state. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian government refused to implement the autonomy provision of the accords. Anatol Lieven, a researcher with the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, wrote in **The Nation** ([11/15/21](#)):

The main reason for this refusal, apart from a general commitment to retain centralized power in Kiev, has been the belief that permanent autonomy for the Donbas would prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and the European Union, as the region could use its constitutional position within Ukraine to block membership.

Ukraine opted instead to prolong the Donbas conflict, and there was never significant pressure from the West to alter course. Though there were [brief](#) reports of the accords' revival as recently as late January, Ukrainian security chief Oleksiy Danilov

[warned](#)

the West not to pressure Ukraine to implement the peace deal. "The fulfillment of the Minsk agreement means the country's destruction," he said (

AP

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[1/31/22](#)

). Danilov claimed that even when the agreement was signed eight years ago, "it was already clear for all rational people that it's impossible to implement."

Lieven notes that the depth of Russian commitment has yet to be fully tested, but Putin has [supported](#)

the Minsk accords, refraining from officially recognizing the Donbas republics until [last week](#)

The **New York Times** ([2/8/22](#)) explainer on the Minsk accords blamed their failure on a disagreement between Ukraine and Russia over their implementation. This is inadequate to explain the failure of the agreements, however, given that Russia cannot affect Ukrainian parliamentary procedure. The **Times** quietly acknowledged that

the law meant to define special status in the Donbas had been “shelved” by the Ukrainians, indicating that the country had stopped trying to solve the issue in favor of a stalemate.

There was no mention of the comments from a top Ukrainian official openly denouncing the peace accords. Nor was it acknowledged that the US could have used its influence to push Ukraine to solve the issue, but refrained from doing so.

Ukrainian missile crisis

One under-discussed aspect of this crisis is the role of US missiles stationed in NATO countries. Many media outlets have claimed that Putin is Hitler-like (**Washington Post**, [2/24/22](#)); **Bo**

ston Globe,

[2/24/22](#)

), hellbent on reconquering old Soviet states to “recreat[e] the Russian empire with himself as the Tsar,” as Clinton State Department official Strobe Talbot told

Politico

(

[2/25/22](#)

).

Pundits try to psychoanalyze Putin, asking “What is motivating him?” and [answering](#) by citing his televised speech on February 21 that recounted the history of Ukraine’s relationship with Russia.

This speech has been widely characterized as a call to reestablish the Soviet empire and a challenge to Ukraine’s right to exist as a sovereign nation. Corporate media ignore other public statements Putin has made in recent months. For example, at an expanded meeting of the Defense Ministry Board, Putin [elaborated](#) on what he considered to be the main military threat from US/NATO expansion to Ukraine:

It is extremely alarming that elements of the US global defense system are being deployed

near Russia. The Mk 41 launchers, which are located in Romania and are to be deployed in Poland, are adapted for launching the Tomahawk strike missiles. If this infrastructure continues to move forward, and if US and NATO missile systems are deployed in Ukraine, their flight time to Moscow will be only 7–10 minutes, or even five minutes for hypersonic systems. This is a huge challenge for us, for our security.

The United States does not possess hypersonic weapons yet, but we know when they will have it.... They will supply hypersonic weapons to Ukraine and then use them as cover...to arm extremists from a neighbouring state and incite them against certain regions of the Russian Federation, such as Crimea, when they think circumstances are favorable.

Do they really think we do not see these threats? Or do they think that we will just stand idly watching threats to Russia emerge? This is the problem: We simply have no room to retreat.

Having these missiles so close to Russia—weapons that Russia (and China) see as part of a plan to give the United States the capacity to [launch a nuclear first-strike](#) without retaliation—seriously challenges the cold war deterrent of Mutually Assured Destruction, and more closely resembles a gun pointed at the Russian head for the remainder of the nuclear age. Would this be acceptable to any country?

Media refuse to present this crucial question to their audiences, instead couching Putin's motives in purely aggressive terms.

Refusal to de-escalate

By December 2021, US intelligence agencies were sounding the alarm that Russia was amassing troops at the Ukrainian border and planning to attack. Yet Putin was very [clear](#) about a path to deescalation: He called on the West to halt NATO expansion, negotiate Ukrainian neutrality in the East/West rivalry, remove US nuclear weapons from non proliferating countries, and remove missiles, troops and bases near Russia. These are demands the US would surely have made were it in Russia's position.

Unfortunately, the US refused to negotiate on Russia's core concerns. The US offered some serious steps towards a larger arms control arrangement (**Antiwar.com**, [2/2/22](#))—something the Russians acknowledged and appreciated—but [ignored](#) issues of NATO's military activity in Ukraine, and the deployment of nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe (**Antiwar.com**, [2/17/22](#)).

On NATO expansion, the State Department continued to [insist](#) that they would not compromise NATO's open door policy—in other words, it asserted the right to expand NATO and to ignore Russia's red line.

While the US has [signaled](#) that it would approve of an informal agreement to keep Ukraine from joining the alliance for a period of time, this clearly was not going to be enough for Russia, which still remembers the last broken agreement.

Instead of addressing Russian concerns about Ukraine's NATO relationship, the US instead chose to pour [hundreds of millions of dollars](#) of weapons into Ukraine, exacerbating Putin's expressed concerns. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy didn't help matters by [suggesting](#) that Ukraine might begin a nuclear weapons program at the height of the tensions.

After Putin announced his recognition of the breakaway republics, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [canceled](#) talks with Putin, and began the process of implementing sanctions on Russia—all before Russian soldiers had set foot into Ukraine.

Had the US been genuinely interested in avoiding war, it would have taken every opportunity to de-escalate the situation. Instead, it did the opposite nearly every step of the way.

In its explainer piece, the **Washington Post** ([2/28/22](#)) downplayed the significance of the US's rejection of Russia's core concerns, writing: "Russia has said that it wants guarantees

Ukraine will be barred from joining NATO—a non-starter for the Western alliance, which maintains an open-door policy.” NATO’s open door policy is simply accepted as an immutable policy that Putin just needs to deal with. This very assumption, so key to the Ukraine crisis, goes unchallenged in the US media ecosystem.

‘The strategic case for risking war’

It’s impossible to say for sure why the Biden administration took an approach that increased the likelihood of war, but one **Wall Street Journal** piece from last month may offer some insight.

The **Journal** ([12/22/21](#)) published an op-ed from John Deni, a researcher at the [Atlantic Council](#), a think tank funded

by the US and allied governments that serves as NATO’s de facto brain trust. The piece was provocatively headlined “The Strategic Case for Risking War in Ukraine.” Deni’s argument was that the West should refuse to negotiate with Russia, because either potential outcome would be beneficial to US interests.

If Putin backed down without a deal, it would be a major embarrassment. He would lose face and stature, domestically and on the world stage.

But Putin going to war would also be good for the US, the **Journal** op-ed argued. Firstly, it would give NATO more legitimacy by “forg[ing] an even stronger anti-Russian consensus across Europe.” Secondly, a major attack would trigger “another round of more debilitating economic sanctions,” weakening the Russian economy and its ability to compete with the US for global influence. Thirdly, an invasion is “likely to spawn a guerrilla war” that would “sap the strength and morale of Russia’s military while undercutting Mr. Putin’s domestic popularity and reducing Russia’s soft power globally.”

In short, we have part of the NATO brain trust advocating risking Ukrainian civilians as pawns in the US’s quest to strengthen its position around the world.

'Something even worse than war'

A **New York Times** op-ed ([2/3/22](#)) by Ivan Krastev of Vienna's Institute of Human Sciences likewise suggested that a Russian invasion of Ukraine wouldn't be the worst outcome:

A Russian incursion into Ukraine could, in a perverse way, save the current European order. NATO would have no choice but to respond assertively, bringing in stiff sanctions and acting in decisive unity. By hardening the conflict, Mr. Putin could cohere his opponents.

The op-ed was headlined "Europe Thinks Putin Is Planning Something Even Worse Than War"—that something being "a new European security architecture that recognizes Russia's sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space."

It is impossible to know for sure whether the Biden administration shared this sense that there would be an upside to a Russian invasion, but the incentives are clear, and much of what these op-eds predicted is coming to pass.

None of this is to say that Putin's invasion is justified—FAIR resolutely condemns the invasion as illegal and ruinous—but calling it "unprovoked" distracts attention from the US's own contribution to this disastrous outcome. The US ignored warnings from both Russian and US officials that a major conflagration could erupt if the US continued its path, and it shouldn't be surprising that one eventually did.

Now, as the world once again inches toward the brink of nuclear omnicide, it is more important than ever for Western audiences to understand and challenge their own government's role in dragging us all to this point.

Featured image: Wikimedia [map](#) of NATO expansion since 1949 (creator:Patrickneil).

