

WHO IS TO BLAME?

Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg and James Stavridis

IN Cold War times “who is to blame” was a favorite expression in the Soviet Union. For any crisis or unpopular act, there was always someone at whom an accusing finger could be pointed.

With the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine, we certainly have a severe crisis on our hands. Not quite knowing how the much-desired de-escalation should be achieved, analysts in both Russia and the West have once again turned to the question of “who is to blame?”

Whenever Russia’s imperial ambitions re-surge, many are eager to reproach NATO. They find an excuse for Russia’s belligerent behavior in NATO’s ‘conquest of Europe.’ Some commentators go beyond singling out the Alliance, and find the crux of our current problems in the assertion that ‘the U.S. has treated Russia like a loser.’

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Is the Ukraine-Russia crisis really about NATO or the way the West relates to Russia? Did we cause the crisis in Ukraine and could we have averted it simply by altering our own actions? Our answer is “no” to both of these questions.

HAS THE WEST HUMILIATED RUSSIA?

In 2014, we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the beginning of the end of the Cold War, most emblematically symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall. The terms we use to describe those events almost suggest that the East-West conflict simply somehow evaporated after 45 years.

Let’s be honest about the fact that the Cold War did not just suddenly end; rather, it was spectacularly lost by one side. As soon as Moscow became too weak to keep countries down by force (remember Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland in 1956, 1968, and 1981,

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Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama in Washington, DC at the height of the reset period

respectively), Soviet republics and satellites ran away from Moscow’s failed economic policies and authoritarian impulses without much hesitation.

Nevertheless, the end of the Cold War was indeed very different from the conclusion of a classic war. After all, the “victorious” side did not impose territorial losses or reparations on the loser. Quite the contrary.

Germany, for one, even had to pay compensation to Russia for pulling its troops out of the country. Russia automatically inherited the Soviet Union’s permanent seat on the UN Security Council and, in the 1990s, it became the

International Monetary Fund’s largest borrower. In 1997, the European Union established a partnership with Russia that has so far resulted in no less than 32 EU-Russia summits.

In 1998, the world’s leading industrialized democracies included Russia in the G8. Russia’s addition was the result of its insistence and a sign of G7 goodwill, as Moscow clearly never met the economic or political criteria to join.

Since 2001, Germany has held separate and quite elaborate twice-yearly governmental and business summits with Russia. In 2009, the United States and Russia together embarked on a policy

that was termed a “reset”—an attempt to improve, or even “upgrade,” relations between the two countries. Although the long-term chances of succeeding in this were doubted by many, it was certainly a promising sign when Russia and the United States negotiated a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty after only a few months of negotiations in 2010.

However, the United States had broader ambitions with the reset program, for it also tried to advance relations with Moscow by stopping NATO membership talks with Ukraine and Georgia and backtracking on the missile defense program in Poland and the Czech Republic. The reset was a central element of the Obama Administration’s foreign policy, and a reflection of the underlying hope that signs of goodwill shall be duly reciprocated by Moscow.

Three years into the reset program, President Medvedev called it “an extremely useful exercise.” He also concluded that as a result of it “we probably enjoyed the best level of relations between the United States and Russia during those three years than ever during the previous decades.” During their joint press conference, the then-Russian

president referred to President Obama as “my friend and colleague.” The American president, in turn, explained that “cooperation between the United States and Russia is absolutely critical to world peace and stability,” adding that he “could not have asked for a better partner in forging that strong relationship than Dmitry.”

That same year, 2012, the United States relaxed visa requirements for Russians. In 2013, Russia was admitted to the World Trade Organization, and it also made progress in its OECD accession talks.

But what was happening with regards to NATO in the meantime? In 1997, the so-called “Founding Act”

between NATO and Russia was signed. The document contained the famous pledge reiterating that NATO had “no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members.”

In 2002, the NATO-Russia Council was founded (ironically, the same year that NATO was supposedly threatening Russia with its largest enlargement round). Following that, NATO and Russia coordinated on counter-terrorism pro-

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grams and on freight transportation, the training of local personnel, and a helicopter maintenance program in Afghanistan. In 2010, the key goals in NATO’s Strategic Concept included the words to “build a true strategic partnership with the Russian Federation” as a key goal.

2013 was the first year that NATO even held a military exercise on the Alliance’s eastern border. Russian officials were invited as observers. At the same time, NATO members were supplying Russia with military equipment. Germany’s Rheinmetall won a €100 million contract to build a training center for the Russian army. Moscow negotiated with the pan-European EADS about the sale of helicopters. France was building the infamous amphibious assault ships, and Italy’s Iveco manufactured armored vehicles for Russia.

To say the least, Russia was not “excluded” by the West and the steps described above hardly constitute grounds for the claim of humiliation. However, Russian leaders went back and forth between cooperating with the rest of the world and spurning the West, and all too often decided against the best interest of their own country.

DID NATO CONQUER EUROPE?

The false narrative of the conquest of Europe by NATO was born when the Alliance opened its doors to Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in the mid-1990s. George Kennan called this “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era.” Unfortunately, very highly regarded observers have adopted at least parts of this view. When Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, Thomas L. Friedman commented ironically that we sacrificed a democratic Russia for the Czech Navy in NATO. In 2014 he added that NATO enlargement was “one of the dumbest things we’ve ever done.” Later that same year, John Mearsheimer identified Ukraine as the “taproot of the trouble of NATO enlargement.”

These prominent public intellectuals are obviously not suspected of being vassals of Russian propaganda—far from it. Both Friedman and Mearsheimer are capable and sensible thinkers. So are they right in this case?

Russia’s leaders often assert that the successive rounds of NATO enlargement happened against Western countries’ explicit pledge not to expand the Alliance eastwards in exchange for Germany’s reunification. Since the

myth of this promise has resurfaced in the face of the Ukraine crisis, it is worth reviewing the facts again.

West Germany's Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, and U.S. Secretary of State, James A. Baker III, indeed talked to the last Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, and their diplomatic counterpart, Eduard Shevardnadze, about such an agreement in 1990. However, no head of state consented to such a trade-off—nor was it ever put into writing. Gorbachev, who is otherwise critical of NATO expansion and calls it a violation of the “spirit of 1990,” himself affirmed that this topic was simply “not discussed at all” in his times.

In 1991, four CEE countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) launched the “Višegrad Group” to more effectively pursue EU and NATO membership. Despite mounting pressure, discussions between these countries and NATO did not start until 1993.

Enlargement was a widely contested idea in the West then as well. Critics feared the costs, were worried about the Alliance's cohesion and sense of direction, and were concerned about Moscow's reactions.

In 1994, the allied leaders eventually endorsed NATO's “open door” policy, drawing up a long list of political and military requirements for candidate countries. In 1999, while there were other nations pursuing membership, only the Hungarians, Czechs, and Poles were admitted to NATO. It was not until 2002 that additional countries were invited to step on the path of membership. This was again preceded by their organization into another pro-enlargement lobbying body, this time the Vilnius Group.

None of these nations were coerced or threatened in any way; and each round of expansion was agreed through consensus by the heads of state of all Alliance members—not exactly what one would call a “conquest.” We know what pressuring a nation to join an alliance looks like: tanks rolling into Prague in 1968, for example. No NATO coercion ever occurred—in fact, it was the opposite, with the CEE countries pursuing a relatively reluctant alliance.

Had it been NATO's objective to “conquer Europe,” it should have pressed for the inclusion of Finland and Sweden—Nordic states with sizeable and well-organized armies. However, it was the

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We tend to forget, for example, that the more recent Russian-Ukraine gas crises were not the first attempts by Moscow to use the energy card for political purposes. In 1990, Russia used an

often dismissed as unfounded or paranoid, and shadowed by past traumata.

Yet there was enough evidence to underpin worries, as Russia compensated for its lack of military dominance by other means of control in its self-proclaimed sphere of influence. Like a card player with a bad hand, Moscow has been playing through a mixture of creativity, bravado, and bluster.

energy blockade to attempt to prevent the Baltic states from breaking away from the USSR. In 1992, Moscow cut off gas supplies as part of its attempt to keep its military bases in the Baltic countries. When in 1997 Lithuania decided to privatize its oil refinery and not sell it to Russian investors, its oil shipments were repeatedly halted for “technical reasons” or unspecified repair works. The list goes on, for Russia has a long history of price manipulation and attempts at playing small countries off against each other.

CEE countries that rushed under NATO's protective umbrella. This was not a “war of ideas” but a “marketplace of ideas;” and the ideas of NATO—democracy, freedom, and liberty—were the winners.

WHO, WHOM?

Politicians and intelligentsia in Central and Eastern Europe were keenly aware that Moscow—despite losing its Soviet Empire—had not abandoned its imperial ambitions.

In 2009, for example, 22 leading politicians and public intellectuals from CEE countries published a joint open letter in which they expressed their deep concerns about the Obama Administration's overly optimistic approach to Russia.

While on the face of it they welcomed the “reset of relations,” they also warned that Russia was increasingly revisionist, was using “overt and covert means of economic warfare,” and basically called it a ‘power pursuing a nineteenth-century agenda with twenty-first-century tactics and methods.’ The 22 authors were also concerned about a flagging NATO, and especially about weakening ties between the United States and its European allies.

Although this letter was written after Russia's August 2008 war with Georgia, such worries were still too

WHERE DID IT GO WRONG?

As in any situation of disagreement, there is plenty of blame to go around. Although we firmly state that

NATO's behavior or membership at no point threatened Russia in a military sense, certain U.S. and NATO strategies certainly lacked diplomatic wisdom and failed to build a constructive, cooperative approach.

The discussion of a potential NATO "Membership Action Plan" (MAP) for Georgia and Ukraine up to 2008 was an unnecessary provocation of Russia, given that neither of the two countries were ready for this step, nor were many members of NATO open to the idea of accepting them into the Alliance.

Similarly, the planned missile defense and radar system in Poland and the Czech Republic was another needling of strained Russian nerves. Despite the system's relatively small size, its aim towards third countries, its overall questionable effectiveness, and its clear inability to defend against potential Russian nuclear strikes, the idea of any kind of American military presence in Poland was unacceptable for Russia. As a sign of goodwill towards President Medvedev and his more cooperative approach, the plan was eventually canceled as part of the Obama Administration's reset in 2009.

The Central and Eastern Europeans wanted to join the Alliance because of their dark experiences as part of the Warsaw Pact and a sense that, in the long term, Russia would always seek a sphere of privileged influence that would include them.

While all of these undoubtedly contributed to the embitterment of relations, the real change happened in Russia—first and foremost on the domestic front.

In September 2011, Vladimir Putin announced that he would run for president for a third term. This instantly, though not unexpectedly, dashed all hopes that the Medvedev era had finally put Russia on a sustainable path of true democratization. Amid election fraud accusations and popular protests, the United Russia party won the 2011 parliamentary elections, and Putin was re-elected for a third presidential term in March 2012.

On the day of Putin's inauguration, the police responded to demonstrations with an overwhelming use of force and detained about 250 people. After Putin was sworn in for another six-year term, pressure on journalists, NGOs, opposition forces, and gay people increased significantly. At the same time, Moscow became increasingly hostile to the West. In just a year's time, the Kremlin's moves included limitations on the freedom of assembly, attempts to curtail the



NATO Supreme Allied Commander Admiral James Stavridis and German Foreign Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg confer at the October 2010 meeting of NATO Foreign and Defense Ministers in Brussels

Photo: NATO.int

freedom of the internet, trumped-up accusations against opposition leaders, the Pussy Riot trial, the ban prohibiting American families from adopting Russian orphans, the legal re-definition of treason, a law requiring foreign NGOs to register as 'foreign agents,' the expulsion of USAID, and the raid of the offices of several international NGOs. An impressive agenda to counter democratic values, to say the least.

The United States quickly had to confront the fact that the reset was over. Its ensuing symbolic response was the passage of the Magnitsky Act at the end of 2012, which imposed sanc-

tions on those responsible for gross violations of human rights in Russia. It was arguably one of the most important human rights bills adopted by the U.S. Congress over the past several decades.

The European Union was frequently "concerned," as stated in its obligatory press statements, and as it usually is when it comes to unfavorable geopolitical developments, but it had failed to apply any tangible measures at that point in time. Individual EU Member States showed a varying level of activity, with the UK being the most vocal in its criticism.

The first real sign of a deterioration in Russia-Western relations was apparent when even Germany started to diverge from its previous policy of silent restraint. The Chancellor's envoy for German-Russian cooperation came forward with his criticism, Federal President Joachim Gauck called off a visit to Russia, and the Bundestag adopted a resolution talking about the danger of Russia facing a "backward development on its way to an open and modern state" in October 2012.

The corrosion of the domestic political climate in Russia coincided with the emergence of a trend that, unlike NATO enlargement, did in fact pose a genuine threat to Russia. The shale revolution in the U.S., and the possibility of it reaching Europe as well (either in the form of American exports or through local production), grew to become a real risk to the very foundation of Russia's petro-economy.

It was against the backdrop of all those developments that Russia started building the Eurasian Union, an organization mimicking the EU in many ways, but only superficially. That being said, it quickly became obvious that, aside from questions about its future success,

the Eurasian Union was also different from the EU in a profound way: joining wasn't exactly voluntary and membership was also not compatible with maintaining strong relations with other political and economic organizations.

In September 2013, Armenia's government was bullied into walking away from the Association Agreement with the European Union, while at the same time confirming its plans to join the Eurasian Union. A country that is completely dependent on Russia's security assistance in a conflict with Azerbaijan—whose defense spending exceeds Armenia's entire budget—had no chance to stand up to the Kremlin's will.

... AND THEN CAME UKRAINE

Putin's calculus was that he could turn Ukraine around with similar ease. A combination of corrupt cronies in Ukraine's leadership, the necessary amount of pressure, and stepped-up fabrications about the consequences of moving closer to the West, was supposed to dissuade Ukraine from entering an association with the European Union. This plan worked, in the sense that it only required Viktor Yanukovich to call off signing the agreement with the EU—which he dutifully did. However, the Ukrainian

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people courageously decided to not let their president take away their chance of having what they saw as a path leading to future prosperity.

A day after Yanukovich's announcement, 2,000 people were demonstrating against his sudden U-turn. Ten days later, 300,000 people were on the streets. Three months later, the president fled the country. Practically speaking, ever since that moment Russia has been at war with its western neighbor, including, of course, annexing Crimea and fully supporting an insurgency in eastern Ukraine with direct military intervention—an invasion by any sensible definition of the term.

WHY DIDN'T WE JUST ALL FINLANDIZE?

When claiming that NATO enlargement to Central Europe, or the attempt to offer Ukraine a partnership agreement with the EU, was a mistake, it is easy to make a compelling case for how it perturbed Russia, but much harder to show what alternative would have been available.

At the beginning of the current crisis, the idea of the "Finlandization" of Ukraine was floated again. However, the superficially appealing idea of a non-

aligned country conceals the immense price that Finland has paid for achieving the status of not being constantly threatened by Russia.

Some present "Finlandization" as a relatively straightforward path to peaceful coexistence with Moscow. In reality, however, Finland's experience was far more tragic than that.

The idea that Finland's experience of neutrality would be somehow applicable to a country that Russia's current leader does not even consider a separate nation has its clear intellectual limits.

Between 1939 and 1945 Finland fought the Winter War and the ensuing Continuation War with the Soviets. As a result, Finland lost 87,000 lives or 2.3 percent of its population, was forced to cede vast territory to the Soviet Union, and had to evacuate more than 430,000 people—about 12 percent of its population—from those territories. It also had to pay war reparations to the USSR, and forewent the Marshall Plan—thereby falling behind the rest of Europe for at least a decade.

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those promoting "Finlandization" as a panacea are rarely confronted with the question of whether it would be enough for countries like Ukraine or Georgia to "only" refrain from pursuing their security and economic interests to the fullest, or if further significant sacri-

fices would be a necessary pre-condition for taming Russia.

But we don't even have to go that far to realize the flaws of this proposal. The idea that Finland's experience of neutrality would be somehow applicable to a country that Russia's current leader does not even consider a separate nation has its clear intellectual limits.

Insisting on "Finlandization" in the face of what has happened in Ukraine over the past year implies the acceptance of the Russian narrative. Finland is not a member of NATO, but is a thoroughly Western country and has been a member of the European Union since 1995. Ukraine was not about to become a member of NATO or even the EU; rather, Kiev just tried to sign a free trade pact with the EU. This step was enough to unnerve Putin so much as to pressure his protégé-President at the helm of the country to walk away from the Association Agreement.

The fact is that there is broad tacit agreement within the Alliance that

Ukraine and Georgia will not become NATO members, no matter how much they want to or try to fulfill the necessary criteria. In that sense, there has already been an essential Finlandization of those two countries. Vladimir Putin's decision to nevertheless annex Crimea and invade parts of Ukraine was the complete rejection of the idea that countries belonging to Russia's perceived sphere of influence had any right to sustained sovereignty or a basic sense of security.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

The question of whether Russia's threatening demeanor made the former Warsaw Pact countries run to the Alliance, or if NATO expansion made Russia aggressive, is an interesting discussion for academics. On balance, it appears to us that the

Central and Eastern Europeans wanted to join the Alliance because of their dark experiences as part of the Warsaw Pact and a sense that, in the long term, Russia would always seek a sphere of privileged influence that would include them. They were right. The question for these countries was a vital question about sovereignty and necessary security.

Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a "Common European Home" failed because Russia broke down on the road to a true democratic transformation, and its leader decided to disguise the country's weakness by spurring paranoia about an imaginary external threat embodied by NATO, and by turning on its neighbors.

From the NATO perspective, the decision to allow the expansion to include former Warsaw Pact nations was, again, a good one on balance. It has made much more of Europe secure, whole, and free. It has provided a larger pool of partners to undertake NATO missions in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Libya, and in counter-piracy. And it was done with a hand-out to Russia to come and participate via the Partnership for Peace process and many other mechanisms. In our view, expanding NATO, and subsequently the EU, were sensible decisions, although not without costs or controversy. Central and Eastern European nations finally achieved alignment with Western institutions, which gave them the opportunity to enjoy democracy, the rule of law, and economic growth—things they did not even have a chance of having during Soviet times.

Based on everything that history teaches us about declining great powers grappling with their diminishing influence in general—and what we have seen in the past 25 years specifically—we are convinced that the current crisis did not happen because of a larger NATO.

Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a "Common European Home" did not fail because the West denied Russia the right

to proclaim a special sphere of influence encompassing a significant portion of Europe. It failed because Russia broke down on the road to a true democratic transformation, and its leader decided to disguise the country's weakness by spurring paranoia about an imaginary external threat embodied by NATO, and by turning on its neighbors.

It is in no one's interest to stumble backwards into the twilight of another Cold War.

When Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea, it disregarded Ukraine's right for self-determination, violated a legally binding document, and put at risk the lives of those it

claims to be protecting. It did so, simply put, because it could. What it could not do, however, is to reverse the fall of the Soviet Union—absurdly called "the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century" by Vladimir Putin. The reason is evident: it's because of the security guarantees others in the region enjoy thanks to NATO expansion.

Having said all that, it is in no one's interest to stumble backwards into the twilight of another Cold War. It would be a terrible mistake for the West to counter aggression with aggression. Putin's narrative of the encircled Russian bear would then actually come true.

But there are ways to show what the limits are of further Russian belliger-

ence—most notably, at the moment, through sanctions. Any potential victim of aggressive Russian expansion and breach of international law should have the right and means to defend itself properly. Today, Ukraine can only rely on its own weak defenses—it is time to strengthen them.

While it would be the wrong signal to offer Ukraine NATO membership, we should not shy away from providing further support for responsibly-led Ukrainian armed forces. A hopefully level-headed Ukrainian leadership not only needs more engagement from experts in the region, but also outside help to improve the capabilities of its armed forces. Additional investments in its military must be supported by the West through carefully organized assistance. Furthermore, there are numerous options, aside from full NATO membership, to create joint armed

structures and military partnerships. An example is the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian brigade, for which a letter of intent was signed in 2009, but was only revived this September.

In terms of Russia, we need a new *modus vivendi*. Our agenda with the Russian Federation is far larger than Ukraine alone. It encompasses work we can do together *vis-à-vis* Afghanistan, the High North/Arctic region, piracy, narcotics, violent extremism, arms control, energy, climate, Iran, Syria, and a host of other key issues. While we will clearly have disagreements with Moscow on the so-called frozen conflicts—Georgia, Moldova, and now Crimea—these should not stop us from finding other ways to work together constructively. But blaming NATO for Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine is certainly not the right way to move forward. ●

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