

WHAT PUTIN FEARS MOST

Michael McFaul & Robert Person

RUSSIA'S brutal invasion of Ukraine has ignited the largest war in Europe since World War II, indiscriminately spilling the blood of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers and innocent civilians. Russian President Vladimir Putin wants you to believe that NATO is to blame. He has frequently claimed that NATO expansion—not the 200,000 Russian soldiers and sailors attacking Ukraine's ports, airfields, roads, railways, and cities—is the central driver of this crisis. Following John Mearsheimer's provocative 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article arguing that "the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault," the narrative of Russian backlash against NATO expansion has become a dominant framework for explaining—if not justifying—Moscow's ongoing war against Ukraine. This notion has been repeated not only in Moscow but in the

United States, Europe, and elsewhere by politicians, analysts, and writers. Multiple rounds of enlargement, they argue, exacerbated Russia's sense of insecurity as NATO forces crept closer to Russia's borders, finally provoking Putin to lash out violently, first by invading Georgia in 2008, then Ukraine in 2014, and now a second, likely far larger, invasion of Ukraine today. By this telling, the specter of Ukraine's NATO membership points both to the cause of the conflict and its solution: take membership off the table for Ukraine, so the argument goes, and future wars will be prevented.

This argument has two flaws, one about history and one about Putin's thinking. First, NATO expansion has not been a *constant* source of tension between Russia and the West, but a *variable*. Over the last 30 years, the salience

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Photo: Gulliver Image

A wave of "democratic expansion": the 2013 EuroMaidan protests in Kyiv

of the issue has risen and fallen not primarily due to waves of NATO expansion, but instead as a result of waves of democratic expansion in Eurasia. In a very clear pattern, Moscow's complaints about the alliance spike after democratic breakthroughs. While the tragic invasions and occupations of Georgia and Ukraine have secured Putin a de facto veto over their NATO aspirations, since the alliance would never admit a country under partial occupation by Russian forces, this fact undermines Putin's claim that the current invasion is aimed at NATO membership. He has already blocked NATO expansion for all intents and purposes, thereby revealing that he

wants something far more significant in Ukraine today: the end of democracy and the return of subjugation. On February 24th, 2022, in an hour-long, meandering rant explaining his decision to invade, he said so directly.

This reality highlights the second flaw: because the primary threat to Putin and his autocratic regime is democracy, not NATO, that perceived threat would not magically disappear with a moratorium on NATO expansion. Putin would not stop seeking to undermine democracy and sovereignty in Ukraine, Georgia, or the region as a whole if NATO stopped expanding. As long as citizens in free

countries exercise their democratic rights to elect their own leaders and set their own course in domestic and foreign politics, Putin will continue to try to undermine them. Putin's declared goal of "denazification" in Ukraine is a code word for regime change—antidemocratic regime change.

HOW WE GOT HERE

To be sure, NATO and its expansion have always been sources of tension in U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Russian relations. Two decades ago, one of us coauthored (with James Goldgeier) a book on U.S.-Russia relations entitled *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia After the Cold War* (2003), which includes a chapter called "NATO Is a Four-Letter Word." To varying degrees, Kremlin leaders Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, and Dmitri Medvedev have expressed concerns about the expansion of the alliance.

Since its founding in 1949, NATO has kept its door open to new members who meet the criteria for admission. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, no one should be surprised that countries formerly annexed, subjugated, and invaded by the Soviet Union might seek closer security ties to the West. The United States and other

NATO allies have worked hard not to deny the aspirations of those newly free societies while also partnering with Russia on European and other security issues. They have sometimes had success and sometimes not.

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Many of those who blame the current Ukraine conflict on NATO overlook the fact that in the 30 years since the end of the Cold War, Moscow's rejection of NATO expansion has veered in different directions at different times.

When President Boris Yeltsin agreed to sign the Russia-NATO Founding Act in 1997, Russia and the alliance codified into this agreement a comprehensive agenda of cooperation. At the signing ceremony Yeltsin declared, "What is also very important is that we are creating the mechanisms for consultations and cooperation between Russia and the Alliance. And this will enable us—on a fair, egalitarian basis—to discuss, and when need be, pass joint decisions on major issues relating to security and stabilities, those issues and those areas which touch upon our interests."

In 2000 while visiting London, Putin, then serving as acting Russian president, even suggested that Russia could join NATO someday:

Why not? Why not [...] I do not rule out such a possibility [...] in the case that Russia's interests will be reckoned with, if it will be an equal partner. Russia is a part of European culture, and I do not consider my own country in isolation from Europe [...] Therefore, it is with difficulty that I imagine NATO as an enemy.

Why would Putin want to join an alliance allegedly threatening Russia?

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, American President George W. Bush and Putin forged a close, cooperative relationship to fight a common enemy: terrorism. At the time, Putin was focused on cooperation with NATO, not confrontation. The only time the alliance has ever invoked Article 5 on collective defense was to support a NATO intervention in Afghanistan, an action that Putin supported at the UN Security Council. He then followed up this diplomatic support with concrete military assistance for the alliance, including helping the United States to establish military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. If NATO was *always* a threat to Russia and its "sphere of influence," why did Putin facilitate the opening of these bases in the former Soviet Union?

During his November 2001 visit to the United States, Putin struck a realistic but cooperative tone:

We differ in the ways and means we perceive that are suitable for reaching the same objective ... [But] one can rest assured that whatever final solution is found, it will not threaten ... the interests of both our countries and of the world.

In an interview that month, Putin declared,

Russia acknowledges the role of NATO in the world of today, Russia is prepared to expand its cooperation with this organization. And if we change the quality of the relationship, if we change the format of the relationship between Russia and NATO, then I think NATO enlargement will cease to be an issue—will no longer be a relevant issue.

When NATO announced in 2002 its plan for a major (and last big) wave of expansion that would include three former Soviet republics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—Putin barely reacted. He certainly did not threaten to invade any of the countries to keep them out of NATO. When American journalist Robert Siegel asked Putin specifically in late 2001 whether he opposed the Baltic states' membership in NATO, he stated, "We of course are not in a position to tell people what to do. We cannot forbid people to make certain choices if they want to increase the security of their nations in a particular way."

Putin even maintained the same attitude when it was a question of Ukraine someday entering the Atlantic Alliance. In May 2002, when asked for his views on the future of Ukraine's relations with NATO, Putin dispassionately replied,

I am absolutely convinced that Ukraine will not shy away from the processes of expanding interaction with NATO and the Western allies as a whole. Ukraine has its own relations with NATO; there is the Ukraine-NATO Council. At the end of the day, the decision is to be taken by NATO and Ukraine. It is a matter for those two partners.

A decade later, under President Medvedev, Russia and NATO were cooperating once again. At the 2010 NATO summit in Lisbon, Medvedev declared,

The period of distance in our relations and claims against each other is over now. We view the future with optimism and will work on developing relations between Russia and NATO in all areas ... [as they progress toward] a full-fledged partnership.

At that summit, he even floated the possibility of Russia-NATO cooperation on missile defense. Complaints about NATO expansion never arose.

From the end of the Cold War until Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, NATO in Europe was drawing down resources and forces, not building them up. Even while expanding membership,

NATO's military capacity in Europe was much greater in the 1990s than in the 2000s. During this same period, Putin was spending significant resources to modernize and expand Russia's conventional forces deployed in Europe. The balance of power between NATO and Russia was shifting in favor of Moscow.

These episodes of substantive Russia-NATO cooperation undermine the argument that NATO expansion has always and continuously been *the* driver of Russia's confrontation with the West during the last three decades. The historical record simply does not support the thesis that an expanding NATO bears sole blame for Russian antagonism with the West and Moscow's aggression against Ukraine since 2014. Rather, we must look elsewhere to understand the genuine source of Putin's hostility to Ukraine and its Western partners.

The more serious cause of tensions has been a series of democratic breakthroughs and popular protests for freedom in post-communist countries throughout the 2000s, which many, including Putin, refer to as the "color revolutions." Putin believes that Russian national interests have been threatened by what he portrays as U.S.-supported coups. After each of them—Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, the Arab Spring in 2011, Russia in 2011–12, and Ukraine in 2013–14—Putin has pivoted to more hostile policies

toward the United States, and then invoked the NATO threat as justification for doing so.

Boris Yeltsin never supported NATO expansion but acquiesced to the plans on the first round of expansion in 1997—by signing an agreement with NATO that included references to new membership—because he believed that his close ties to President Bill Clinton and the United States were not worth sacrificing over this comparatively smaller matter. Through NATO's Partnership for Peace program and especially the NATO-Russia Founding Act, Clinton and his team made a considerable effort to keep U.S.-Russian relations positive while at the same time managing NATO expansion. The 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo severely tested that strategy but survived in part because Clinton gave Yeltsin and Russia a role in the negotiated solution. When the first post-communist color revolution overthrew Slobodan Milošević a year later, Russia's new president, Putin, deplored the act but did not overreact. At that time, he still entertained the possibility of cooperation with the West, including NATO.

Yet the next round of democratic expansion in the post-Soviet world, the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, esca-

lated U.S.-Russian tensions significantly. Putin blamed the United States directly for assisting this democratic breakthrough and helping to install someone whom he saw as a pro-American puppet, President Mikheil Saakashvili. Immediately after the Rose Revolution, Putin sought to undermine Georgian democracy, ultimately invading in August 2008 and recognizing two Georgian regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—as independent states. U.S.-Russian relations reached a new post-Soviet low in 2008.

A year after the Rose Revolution, the most consequential democratic expansion in the post-Soviet world, the Orange Revolution, erupted in Ukraine in 2004. In the years prior to that democratic breakthrough, Ukraine's foreign-policy orientation under President Leonid Kuchma was relatively balanced between east and west, but with gradually improving ties between Kyiv and Moscow. That changed when a falsified presidential election in late 2004 brought hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians into the streets, eventually sweeping away Kuchma's—and Putin's—handpicked successor, Viktor Yanukovich. Instead, the prodemocratic and pro-Western Orange Coalition led by President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yuliya Tymoshenko took power.

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Compared to Serbia in 2000 or Georgia in 2003, Ukraine's Orange Revolution was a much larger threat to Putin. First, the Orange Revolution occurred suddenly and in a much bigger and more strategic country on Russia's border. The abrupt pivot to the West by Yushchenko and his allies left Putin facing the prospect that he had "lost" a country on which he placed tremendous symbolic and strategic importance.

To Putin, the Orange Revolution undermined a core objective of his grand strategy: to establish a privileged and exclusive sphere of influence across the territory that once comprised the Soviet Union. Putin believes in spheres of influence—that as a great power, Russia has a right to veto the sovereign political decisions of its neighbors. Putin also demands exclusivity in his neighborhood: Russia can be the only great power to exercise such privilege (or even to develop close ties) with these countries. This position has hardened significantly since Putin's conciliatory stance of 2002 as Russia's influence in Ukraine has waned and Ukraine's citizens have repeatedly signaled their desire to escape Moscow's grip. Subservience is now required. As Putin explained in a recent article,

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in his view Ukrainians and Russians are "one people" whom he is seeking to reunite, even if through coercion. For Putin, therefore, the 2004 "loss" of Ukraine to the West marked a major negative turning point in U.S.-Russian relations that was far more salient than the second wave of NATO expansion that was completed the same year.

Second, those Ukrainians who rose up in defense of their freedom were, in Putin's own assessment, Slavic brethren with close historical, religious, and cultural ties to Russia. If it could happen in Kyiv, why not in Moscow? Several years later, it almost did occur in Russia when a series of mass protests erupted in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities in the wake of fraudulent parliamentary elections in December 2011. They were the largest protests in Russia since 1991, the year the Soviet Union collapsed. For the first time in Putin's decade-plus in power, ordinary Russians showed themselves to have both the will and the capability to threaten his grip on power. That popular uprising in Russia occurred the same year as the Arab Spring and was followed by Putin's return to the Kremlin as president for a third term in 2012. The combination of these mass protests and Putin's reelection

as president caused another major negative turn in U.S.-Russian relations and ended the "reset" launched by Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitri Medvedev in 2009. Democratic mobilization, first in the Middle East and then across Russia—not NATO expansion—ended this last chapter of U.S.-Russian cooperation. There have been no new chapters of cooperation since.

U.S.-Russian relations deteriorated even further in 2014, again because of new democratic expansion, not NATO expansion. The next democratic mobilization to threaten Putin happened again in Ukraine in 2013–14. After the Orange Revolution in 2004, Putin did not invade Ukraine, but wielded other instruments of influence to help his protégé, Viktor Yanukovich, narrowly win the Ukrainian presidency six years later. Yanukovich, however, turned out not to be a loyal Kremlin servant, but tried to cultivate ties with both Russia and the West. Putin finally compelled Yanukovich to make a choice, and the Ukrainian President chose Russia in November 2013 when he reneged on signing an EU association agreement in favor of pursuing membership in Russia's Eurasian Economic Union.

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To the surprise of everyone in Moscow, Kyiv, Brussels, and Washington, Yanukovich's decision to scuttle this agreement with the EU triggered mass demonstrations in Ukraine again, with hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians pouring into the streets in what would become known as the EuroMaidan or "Revolution of Dignity" to protest Yanukovich's turn away from the democratic West. The street protests lasted several weeks, punctuated tragically by the killing of dozens of peaceful protestors by Yanukovich's government, the eventual collapse of that government and Yanukovich's flight to Russia in February 2014, and a new pro-Western government taking power in Kyiv. Putin had "lost" Ukraine for the second time in a decade, again because of democratic regime change.

But this time, Putin struck back with military force to punish the alleged U.S.-backed, neo-Nazi usurpers in Kyiv. Russian armed forces seized Crimea; Moscow later annexed the Ukrainian peninsula. Putin also provided money, equipment, and soldiers to back separatists in eastern Ukraine, fueling a simmering eight-year war in Donbas that claimed the lives of approximately

14,000 people. After invading—not before—Putin amped up his criticisms of NATO expansion to justify his belligerent actions.

In response to the second Ukrainian democratic revolution, Putin concluded that cooptation through elections and other nonmilitary means had to be augmented with greater coercive pressure, including military intervention. Since the Revolution of Dignity, Putin has waged an unprecedented assault against Ukraine’s democracy using a full spectrum of military, political, informational, social, and economic weapons in an attempt to destabilize and eventually topple Ukraine’s democratically elected government. Ukraine’s relationship with NATO and the United States was just a symptom of what Putin believes is the underlying disease: a sovereign, democratic Ukraine.

PUTIN’S REAL CASUS BELLI

Amazingly, eight years of unrelenting Russian pressure did not break Ukraine’s democracy. Just the opposite. After Putin’s annexation and ongoing support for the war in Donbas, Ukrainians are now more united across ethnic, linguistic, and regional divides

than at any other point in Ukrainian history. In 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky won the Ukrainian presidency in a landslide election, winning popular support in every region of the country. Not surprisingly, Putin’s war in eastern Ukraine also has fueled greater enthusiasm for joining NATO among Ukrainians.

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In February 2022, Putin embarked on a new strategy for ending Ukrainian democracy: massive military intervention. Putin claims that his purpose is to stop NATO expansion. But that is a fiction. Nothing in Ukraine-NATO relations has changed in the past year. It is true that Ukraine

aspires to join NATO someday. (The goal is even embedded in the Ukrainian constitution.) But while NATO leaders have remained committed to the principle of an open-door policy, they also clearly stated prior to the war that Ukraine was not yet qualified to join. Putin’s *casus belli* is his own invention.

On the eve of his invasion, Putin’s strategy to undermine Ukrainian democracy looked as if it might succeed without military force. The very threat of war did significant damage to the Ukrainian economy and fueled new divisions among Ukraine’s political

parties over how Zelensky handled the leadup to the crisis. Some argued that Zelensky should have created a new grand coalition or unity government; others lamented his alleged inadequate preparations for war. And some claimed that Zelensky showed his diplomatic inexperience by arguing with U.S. President Joe Biden about the probability of a Russian invasion at a time when unity with the West was most needed.

But an impatient and angry Putin could not wait anymore. He attacked with the full might of the Russian armed forces. As we all know, the war is still raging.

Putin’s strategy has backfired thus far. Contrary to his expectations, Putin’s use of force has strengthened Ukrainian democracy, not weakened it. His decision to invade Ukraine has united Ukrainians and strengthened Zelensky’s popularity and image as a leader of the nation. While Putin has remained isolated from his subjects and even his own courtiers while his bombs wreak devastation in a far-off land, the charismatic Zelensky has vowed to stay in Kyiv with his soldiers and fight for Ukraine’s democratic future, rallying

public opinion in Ukraine and around the world. Putin may still believe that there is no such thing as a Ukrainian nation, as he has claimed on multiple occasions. But just as warfare has forged national identities for centuries, Russia’s aggression has galvanized a Ukrainian

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But despite early Ukrainian successes on the battlefield, the long-term survival of Ukraine’s democracy hangs in the balance.

Putin’s continued bellicose rhetoric and rejection of any serious attempts to negotiate a ceasefire suggest that Moscow’s assault will continue unabated. Russia’s initial military operations suggest that Putin envisioned a blitzkrieg invasion from multiple fronts that would face little resistance and rapidly encircle Kyiv, resulting in Zelensky’s forcible removal from power. New elections held at gunpoint would then deliver Putin his desired puppet government, just as they did in post-World War II Eastern Europe in the shadow of Soviet tanks.

In one Ukrainian city, Melitopol, in a facsimile of Stalin's methods in Eastern Europe after 1945, Russia's occupying forces have already removed the mayor and installed a Moscow puppet. At the time of this writing, however, Russia's military has been bogged down by

fierce Ukrainian resistance and is now settling in for the unpleasant prospect of a long, bloody slog across miles of inhospitable Ukrainian territory. Russia's armies will be treated by Ukrainians as the occupiers of 1941, not the liberators of 1945. It is too early to predict the outcome of this gruesome war. But despite the Russian army's

relatively poor performance so far, there is no evidence to suggest that Putin has abandoned his objective to remove Zelensky from power and subjugate Ukraine to Moscow's control.

Putin may dislike NATO expansion, but he is not genuinely frightened by it. Russia has the largest army in Europe, engorged by two decades of lavish spending. NATO is a defensive alliance. It has never attacked the Soviet Union or Russia, and it never will. Putin knows that. But Putin is threatened by a flourishing democracy in Ukraine. He cannot tolerate a successful and democratic

Ukraine on Russia's border, especially if the Ukrainian people also begin to prosper economically. That would undermine the Kremlin's own regime stability and proposed rationale for autocratic state leadership. Just as Putin cannot allow the will of the Russian people to

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guide Russia's future, he cannot allow the people of Ukraine, who have a shared culture and history, to realize the prosperous, independent, and free future that they have voted and fought for.

Although the chance of a stable ceasefire seems remote today, unprecedented sanctions and growing public dissent within Russia could,

in theory, force Putin to the negotiating table. The fog of war is dense. But regardless of where the Russian invaders are stopped—be it Luhansk and Donetsk or Kharkiv, Mariupol, Kher-son, Odesa, Kyiv, or Lviv—the Kremlin will remain committed to undermining Ukrainian (and Georgian, Moldovan, Armenian, and the list goes on) democracy and sovereignty for as long as Putin remains in power and maybe longer if Russian autocracy continues. And the Ukrainian people have already proved their mettle: they will fight for their democracy until the day Russian forces leave Ukraine. ●

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