



## NATO Did Not Cause Putin's Imperial War

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# NATO Did Not Cause Putin's Imperial War

A number of Western scholars have been building an argument for quite some time that the United States and its allies are to blame for Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 (including the annexation of Crimea) and its subsequent full-scale assault in 2022. The case that NATO's actions caused the war is difficult to sustain in the face of overwhelming evidence that President Vladimir Putin's imperial beliefs are far more important to understanding why the Russian president wants control of Ukraine. NATO enlargement contributed to the deterioration in the West's relations with Russia over the past quarter century, but that was to an important extent because Russian imperialists never fully accepted Eastern Europe's sovereignty and rejected Ukraine's altogether.

These scholars believe that the issue is one of classic great power politics and preventive war, and that the root cause of the Russia-Ukraine war is essentially what Putin sometimes says it is: NATO encroached onto Russia's sphere of influence, and Putin had no choice but to respond as he did. Their solution is therefore straightforward: grant Russia its coveted sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union—Russia's neighbors will have to “learn to be both more fearful

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**The invasion of Ukraine is an imperial war designed to bring Ukraine under Russian control**

of and more deferential to the Kremlin,” as political scientist Graham Allison put it—and build a foundation for better relations between the West and Russia at the expense of Eastern Europe’s sovereignty and security.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than seeing Putin’s full-scale invasion as a preventive war launched to protect Russian security from an encroaching NATO, we need to understand his war as an imperial war designed to bring Ukraine under Russian control. Putin is looking to rebuild Russian greatness through empire, with profound implications for the future of European security and world politics. Analysts who emphasize realist logic may not believe that

world politics affords the possibility of protecting the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and agency of small states (particularly as Central and Eastern Europeans were seeking to join NATO; membership was not imposed on them), but a globally legitimate international order depends on it.

In this article, we first briefly lay out the argument that the reckless pursuit of NATO enlargement caused Putin’s war against Ukraine. Second, we revisit the history of NATO enlargement and US-Russia relations after the Cold War, showing that it was one irritant among many in the US-Russian relationship; that Ukraine was not close to joining NATO in 2021 when Putin made the decision for full-scale war; and that Russian fear of NATO was not a major factor in the march to war. Instead, we argue that Putin’s imperial beliefs about Ukraine were the most important cause of the war. Putin had long sought to bring Ukraine under Russian political control and made the decision for war at a time when everything else he had tried had failed to achieve this core objective. These deeply held beliefs were compounded by a flawed decision-making process that convinced Putin that it would be easy to overthrow the Ukrainian government and put in place a pro-Russian puppet regime. The 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, we conclude, was primarily about imperial beliefs, not great power politics.

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## **The Case Against NATO Enlargement**

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Prominent scholars using realist logic argue that Putin saw Ukraine’s NATO membership as increasingly likely, and thus he launched a preventive war to protect his borders before Ukraine joined the Western alliance. In their telling of the story, George F. Kennan, the realist architect of the West’s containment

strategy of the late 1940s, presciently warned of the dangers in a piece for the *New York Times* in 1997 called “A Fateful Error.” Kennan argued that bringing Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into the alliance “may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”<sup>2</sup>

The following year, Kennan’s eminent biographer, Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis, outlined his basic principles of grand strategy: “treat former enemies magnanimously; do not take on unnecessary new ones; keep the big picture in view; balance ends and means; avoid emotion and isolation in making decisions; be willing to acknowledge error.” He then went on to say that the NATO enlargement decision “manages to violate *every one*” of those principles. He added that during the course of his career, there was no policy that had less support among his fellow historians than NATO enlargement.<sup>3</sup>

NATO admitted the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland in 1999. Seven more countries joined the alliance in 2004, including the Baltic countries Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which had been forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. As we discuss further below, in 2008, NATO appeared to promise Ukraine that it would join someday. So, when Putin invaded Ukraine in 2014 and seized Crimea, the political scientists were ready to build on the earlier arguments about the dangers of enlargement to blame the United States for Russia’s actions. The leading US realist scholar, University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer, stated quite simply: “The United States is principally responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis.” It had promoted policies that the Russian government viewed as “an existential threat.” What else could Russia do but behave as any great power would?<sup>4</sup>

By 2022, so the story according to realism goes, Putin had to launch a full-scale invasion against Ukraine before it joined NATO. His was a preventive war designed to ensure the security of Russia’s borders.<sup>5</sup> As Mearsheimer put it, “Contrary to the conventional wisdom in the West, Moscow did not invade Ukraine to conquer it and make it part of a Greater Russia. It was principally concerned with preventing Ukraine from becoming a Western bulwark on the Russian border.”<sup>6</sup> Even realist scholars who are not interested in playing the blame game argue that the events of the 1990s and 2000s constituted a classic security dilemma: the expansion of Western power into Central and Eastern Europe reduced Russian security, leading Russia to respond, thereby in turn undermining Western security.<sup>7</sup>

## Why NATO Enlargement Did Not Cause the Russian Invasion

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A significant problem with these arguments is that they conveniently ignore much of post-Cold War history. At the end of the Cold War, the United States pursued a massive drawdown in forces, which was accompanied by significant cuts in European military spending and forces. The West concluded the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty with the former Soviet bloc, which dramatically reduced the heavy weaponry that had been positioned on both sides of the Iron Curtain for decades. By 2014, the United States had withdrawn 80 percent of its troops in Europe and removed every single one of the roughly 6,000 Abrams main battle tanks deployed there.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1990s, the United States was actually looking for ways to *include* Russia in European security. In 1995, Russia accepted the US invitations to join NATO's Partnership for Peace and to participate in the NATO implementation force in Bosnia after the signing of the Dayton Accords. In 1997, Russia agreed to the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which created a new NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (later reincarnated as the NATO-Russia Council). In the Founding Act, NATO agreed to a number of restrictions on the territories of new members, including no deployment of nuclear weapons or "additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" in the "current and foreseeable security environment."<sup>9</sup> After Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, annexing Crimea and sponsoring a war in the Donbas region of Ukraine, NATO began deploying small multinational battlegroups in the Baltics and Poland, but on a rotating basis given the Founding Act's language against "permanent stationing of substantial combat forces."<sup>10</sup>

The case that NATO caused the war typically rests on two core assumptions. First was Kennan's point that the West's policies strengthened "nationalist" sentiment within Russia. Second was the view promulgated by scholars opposed to

**The Ukrainian people did not support joining NATO until after Russia invaded in 2014**

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NATO enlargement from the beginning, such as Mearsheimer and MIT political scientist Barry Posen, who argued that no great power could have stood by as a country of Ukraine's size and strategic importance on its border moved closer and closer to NATO membership. Not only should the United States have understood this, but Ukraine should have recognized its place in the international order. As Mearsheimer told the *New Yorker*'s Isaac Chotiner, "When you're a

country like Ukraine and you live next door to a great power like Russia, you have to pay careful attention to what the Russians think, because if you take a

stick and poke them in the eye, they're going to retaliate.”<sup>11</sup> Ukraine, in fact, was paying careful attention, and tried to balance its foreign policy for a long time between the West and Russia. The Ukrainian people did not support joining NATO until after the Russians invaded in 2014, at a time when Ukraine was officially neutral.<sup>12</sup>

Most US policymakers were well aware of the dangers of Russian revanchism and imperialism, and that is one reason that Ukraine was not actually on a concrete path to membership. The actions NATO took vis-à-vis Ukraine between 2008-2022 were designed to avoid bringing Ukraine into NATO, not to pave the way for it. At the same time, no US president wanted to explicitly rule the prospect out. The NATO Treaty's Article 10 provides that the alliance can “invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty.” It would undermine the treaty to *a priori* decide that Ukraine, as a European country, could never join. Moscow is also a signatory to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which states countries have the “right to be or not be a party to treaties of alliance,” a provision that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and Russian president Boris Yeltsin both affirmed. Earlier in his presidency, so did Putin.<sup>13</sup>

The issue of Ukraine joining NATO was moot until George W. Bush, in the last year of his presidency, decided to push for a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Ukraine in 2008. The MAP was designed after the 1999 round of NATO enlargement to put some structure on a country's effort to pursue alliance membership. US Ambassador to Russia William Burns argued vociferously in cables home in 2007 and 2008 that a MAP for Ukraine was a terrible idea, since it would be seen as crossing a red line across the political spectrum in Russia.<sup>14</sup> The French and German leaders shared this view and blocked the US effort to offer Ukraine a MAP at the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit. Instead, the leaders agreed to a compromise in their summit declaration, simply saying that Ukraine “will become [a member] of NATO.”<sup>15</sup>

This statement was in many respects the worst of all worlds.<sup>16</sup> It angered Putin but did nothing for Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO. It also misled and muddled much of the subsequent writing on this issue. Mearsheimer refers to “the April 2008 decision to bring Ukraine and Georgia into NATO,” even though the alliance was, in fact, kicking the can down the road. Posen writes that “George W. Bush decided to extend NATO membership to Ukraine,” which no president could do on his own given the need for consensus at NATO. Posen further suggests that “Russia had plenty of evidence that NATO membership for Ukraine was not only probable but increasingly likely.” And yet, he also writes, “Because many of the same member states who were initially leery of membership for Ukraine remained leery, and because the

Russians unequivocally opposed NATO membership for Ukraine, the MAP process was perpetually postponed.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed it was.

Ukraine had little prospect of joining NATO after Bush left office. Obama made clear he was slow-walking the process as part of his efforts to “reset” the US-Russia relationship. Donald Trump wasn’t interested in Ukraine joining NATO in his first term, and he’s made clear that he opposes that prospect in his second. On that, he and Joe Biden agreed.<sup>18</sup> German chancellor Olaf Scholz told Putin shortly before the 2022 full-scale invasion that Ukraine wouldn’t join NATO “in the next thirty years.” It simply defies all evidence to argue, as Mearsheimer does, that “there is little doubt that starting in early 2021, Ukraine began moving rapidly toward joining NATO.”<sup>19</sup>

None of this means that NATO and the United States had nothing to do with Putin’s decision for war against Ukraine. However, it was not because he feared a military attack from NATO on Russia—NATO didn’t have the troops to launch such an invasion, and Russia has thousands of nuclear weapons—but because NATO enlargement was one of a long list of perceived slights to Russia that Putin resented. We know the basic list because Putin would routinely lecture foreign leaders and other foreign interlocutors about these perceived slights and humiliations of Russia.<sup>20</sup> Some of the actions and events he would mention in addition to NATO enlargement did occur: NATO’s attacks on Serbia during the 1999 Kosovo War and the subsequent 2008 recognition of Kosovo’s independence; US withdrawal from the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002; the 2003 US invasion of Iraq; the color revolutions in countries like Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004 (which reflected popular sentiment, not Western machinations); the Arab Spring in 2011; and NATO’s intervention (authorized by the UN Security Council) in Libya in 2011. Some did not occur, such as alleged US support for Chechen terrorists, US responsibility for the 2011-2012 protests in Moscow against the rigged 2011 parliamentary elections, or a so-called “coup” against Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 (also known as the “Euromaidan Revolution”).<sup>21</sup> In general, even the events that did actually happen either took place independent of US actions or were not part of an American plan to weaken or humiliate Russia. They happened indigenously or were decisions taken primarily for reasons having little to do with Russia.

In other words, Putin seemed to believe, and for quite a long time, that the West in general and the United States in particular was out to humiliate Russia, and him personally. Indeed, he even told the political scientist Ivan Krastev that he thought that Obama deliberately put many women in charge of Russia policy in order to humiliate him.<sup>22</sup> Putin returned to the issue of humiliation by the West when justifying the invasion of Ukraine in an October 2024 press conference. He complained that in his interactions with the West, Russia was “always put in its place.” Russia, Putin continued, faced the prospect of

“sliding into the category of second-class states” and existing solely as a “raw-material appendage,” eventually losing its sovereignty. The 2022 war, Putin implied, had made it possible for Russia to “strengthen its sovereignty, its economic independence.” The Russian journalist Andrey Kolesnikov, who has been the Kremlin correspondent for one of Russia’s leading newspapers since the beginning of Putin’s rule, was surprised that Putin answered so openly. Kolesnikov wrote, “Yes, that was exactly what Vladimir Putin thinks. Moreover, I believe it was the very essence of his thoughts that provoked his famous actions [the 2022 invasion of Ukraine].”<sup>23</sup> Johns Hopkins University historian Sergey Radchenko commented, “This is not a security argument. It’s an argument about status and hierarchy.”<sup>24</sup>

In short, Putin did not like NATO enlargement, but he did not like a lot of things the United States did. He was not alone in Russia in disliking the continuation of a US-led alliance that expanded to include former Soviet satellites. But no country bordering Russia joined NATO after 2004 until 2023 (Finland), after Russia invaded Ukraine, and the last time a US president pushed for such an enlargement (unsuccessfully) was in 2008 just before leaving office. NATO-Ukraine political and military cooperation began in the 1990s (as did NATO-Russia political and military cooperation). After 2014, Ukraine welcomed further joint training and exercises because it was already at war—Russia occupied 7 percent of Ukrainian territory—and it wanted to build a capable military. NATO cooperation was designed to make it possible for Ukraine to defend itself *without* joining the alliance. There is little evidence that in 2021-2022 Putin thought that NATO might or could attack Russia.

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After all, given what we know about Russia’s invasion plan, they assumed an easy victory and were unconcerned about a possible direct NATO military response.

Perhaps Putin did believe Ukraine was on the verge of membership, despite all evidence to the contrary. But the issue was not the threat to Russian security; it was the threat to Putin’s ability to control Ukraine. Great powers have choices in how they respond to a relative decline in status, like Russia went through after 1991. Attempting to recolonize Ukraine through military force was a choice.<sup>25</sup> The reason the imagined possibility of Ukraine quickly joining NATO was so neuralgic to Putin and other Russian elites is that they could not conceive that Ukrainians would freely choose to associate their fortunes with the West, given Russia and Ukraine’s centuries-old fraternal bonds (as they understood the relationship). Therefore, it must be because of something the West in



general, and the United States in particular, had done to trick, co-opt, or entice Ukrainian elites that explained these Ukrainian aspirations. This failure of Putin to accept Ukrainian agency and autonomy and acknowledge how his own policies (especially the 2014 annexation of Crimea) had soured many Ukrainians on their relationship with Russia, is ultimately rooted in imperial beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

International security scholar Kimberly Marten has done the most detailed work on the Russian military's reaction to NATO enlargement. She argues that while NATO expansion was a "major irritant" in the relationship, Russian elites understood that enlargement, by including small countries that would be difficult to defend and by making consensus at NATO harder to reach, weakened rather than strengthened the alliance. After exhaustively studying the evidence, she writes, "Could one reasonably make the argument that Russia felt its 2021 borders were threatened by the Ukrainian military and its relationship with NATO? The answer is unequivocally no."<sup>27</sup> We must look elsewhere for an explanation of Putin's invasion.

## **Russian Designs on Ukraine**

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Much of the literature attributing the Russian war against Ukraine to the alleged military threat posed by NATO fails to engage with the extensive literature on Vladimir Putin's beliefs and the decision-making process around the 2014 and 2022 Russian attacks. For example, Posen's preventive war argument briefly considers but dismisses alternative explanations, including the one embraced by most specialists on Russia and Ukraine: Putin's imperialist beliefs about Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> Posen asserts that we do not have the evidence to evaluate this explanation, even though he himself confidently makes assertions about other beliefs and fears of Putin and his advisers about the prospects for Ukrainian NATO membership and its impact on Russian security to bolster his own argument.<sup>29</sup> Yet, there is considerable information already available about Putin's beliefs about Ukraine and the role they played in his decision for war; Russia's conduct of the war also is consistent with the imperialism explanation.

Putin's imperial attitudes about Ukraine are long-standing. In 1994, while deputy mayor of Saint Petersburg, he told the German consul general that Crimea and Eastern Ukraine "have always been a part of Russian land." He told George W. Bush in 2008 that Ukraine is "not even a state" and that a significant part of its territory "was given by us."<sup>30</sup> During COVID, Putin went into isolation and oversaw the preparation of a 5,000-word article, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," in hindsight a manifesto for war. Putin clearly took the preparation of the article seriously, spending "an inordinate amount of time during the COVID-19 pandemic poring over historical texts,"

a strange thing to do if the thing at the forefront of his mind was the military threat from NATO. In the article, Putin asserted that Ukraine was created by the Bolsheviks “on the lands of historical Russia” and declared flatly that “Russia was robbed.” Substituting his own views for that of millions of Ukrainians and the Ukrainian government, he insisted that “true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia.”<sup>31</sup>

His February 21, 2022 speech justifying the full-scale invasion repeated the same arguments about Ukraine being created on “historically Russian land” and referred to it as “Vladimir Lenin’s Ukraine.” Tellingly, when asked by a sympathetic Tucker Carlson in February 2024 to explain his reasons for the invasion, Putin spent nearly thirty minutes on a tendentious history lesson that started in 862, leaving a puzzled Carlson to ask why this was relevant. Putin lectured visiting foreign leaders such as Scholz and French president Emmanuel Macron about this history in private, suggesting these statements were not simply for propaganda purposes.<sup>32</sup>

Putin’s objective since early in his presidency was to establish Russian political control over Ukraine. He reportedly told associates frequently that if Russia did not do something it might “lose” Ukraine, and he took Russia-Ukraine relations under his personal control.<sup>33</sup> The preference was always to achieve this objective using political, diplomatic, and economic means. Putin invested a lot of political and actual capital in trying to get Viktor Yanukovich elected president in 2004, and to keep him in the presidency while ensuring Ukraine was tied to Russia and not the European Union in 2013-2014.<sup>34</sup>

**Putin’s objective since early in his presidency was to establish political control over Ukraine**

The Minsk agreements, negotiated between Russia and Ukraine after the Russian-led Donbas insurgency of 2014, were a failed attempt to stop the fighting and, in Putin’s interpretation, a means of gaining political leverage over the central Ukrainian government. If fully implemented, the accords would have given a special decentralized status to Donetsk and Luhansk, regions inside Ukraine that Russia thought it could and should control. Full-scale war in 2022 was a last resort after Putin apparently concluded that time was running out and all other means had failed.<sup>35</sup> A major sign of Russia’s loss of influence came in early 2021, when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky went after the media holdings and political party of Viktor Medvedchuk—a key ally so close that Putin is godfather of Medvedchuk’s daughter—with Medvedchuk placed under house arrest. For years, Medvedchuk had told Putin that most Ukrainians were pro-Putin and pro-Russian.

Indeed, Putin's view of his odds in a full-scale war were likely structured, in some measure, by the sometimes-questionable counsel of his closest cadre.<sup>36</sup> During the pandemic, Putin's close friend Yuriy Kovalchuk ("Putin's banker") moved in with Putin. Kovalchuk, who holds anti-Western views, reportedly played a key role in convincing Putin that the West was divided, and the time was ripe for a quick operation. As Russian journalist Ilya Zhegulev put it, "Kovalchuk convinced him that the West is weak; Medvedchuk convinced him that Ukraine is weak & loyal."<sup>37</sup> Russia's security services, as often happens in personalist dictatorships, told the ruler what he wanted to hear, cherry-picking information that reinforced Putin's belief that Zelensky was unpopular and that most Ukrainians would not oppose Russia's invasion.<sup>38</sup>

This underestimation of Ukrainian national identity and resilience was also a product of condescending attitudes toward Ukraine. Putin's imperial beliefs about Ukraine meant that he could not fathom Ukrainians freely choosing to associate their future with the West. Since they were "one nation" with Russians, this striving to move Ukraine westward had to be due to Western scheming and a Ukrainian leadership imposed from outside. Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov allegedly told a stunned acquaintance in fall 2021 that "there's going to be a war" after he had been at the Kremlin for an interview with Putin, maintaining that, according to the acquaintance, "Putin felt personally offended by Zelensky."<sup>39</sup> Ironically, as opinion polls make clear, it was actually Putin's annexation of Crimea in 2014 that played a key role in shifting Ukrainian national identity in a more pro-European and less pro-Russian direction.<sup>40</sup> But Putin never appeared to see it that way.

Russia's conduct of the war is also inconsistent with the argument that it was fear of NATO that led to Putin's decision and fully consistent with imperial ideas about Ukraine. Russia has destroyed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Ukrainian cultural buildings such as libraries, theaters, museums, churches, and cultural centers. These symbols and repositories of Ukrainian cultural heritage are perceived by Russia as an affront to the notion that Ukrainians and Russians are

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## Russia's conduct of the war is fully consistent with imperial ideas about Ukraine

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"one nation." Russia has imposed the Russian language and Russian curriculum (including history textbooks with Putin's preferred historical narrative about Ukraine) on schools in occupied territory, and forced Russification in these territories more generally, including coercing residents to take Russian citizenship. Russia has illegally deported thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia, forcibly adopt-

ing at least hundreds of them to Russian families. All of these acts violate international humanitarian law.<sup>41</sup> A good case can be made that Russian actions meet

the legal definition of genocide.<sup>42</sup> These actions have nothing to do with securing Russia's borders but are fully consistent with imperial beliefs about Ukraine.

Moreover, Russia's formal conditions for peace include multiple restrictions on Ukrainian domestic politics. These include making Russian an official state language, banning "Nazi and neo-Nazi propaganda," disbanding "nationalist" political parties and organizations, and ensuring the influence of the branch of the Orthodox Church that is under the Moscow Patriarchy (as opposed to the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine in Kyiv). While presenting these demands, the chief Russian negotiator told his Ukrainian counterparts, "You do not exist as a nation, as a country. This is a situation where Russians kill Russians."<sup>43</sup> These conditions also express imperial intent and have nothing to do with security fears about NATO. Indeed, Russia rejected a peace deal proposed by the Trump administration in early 2025 that would have prevented Ukrainian NATO membership, granted either *de jure* or *de facto* recognition of Russian territorial conquests, and lifted sanctions. Putin said no, insisting on a deal that addressed the "root causes" of the conflict; that is, Ukraine's desire to maintain its sovereignty and political autonomy.<sup>44</sup> Putin reportedly also rejected a peace deal early in the war that would have kept Ukraine out of NATO.<sup>45</sup>

## Putin's Legacy

NATO enlargement was a policy that produced great benefits for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which sought inclusion into Western institutions after four decades of Soviet domination and control. It enabled the United States and its allies to work with those formerly communist countries to extend the Western zone of peace and prosperity in Europe across much of the continent.

It was difficult to pursue the NATO enlargement policy and manage the relationship with Russia given Moscow's unhappiness with its former satellites leaving the sphere of influence it claimed. But it's hard to single out NATO enlargement as *the* driver of the poor relations that developed between Russia and the West. (Between 1991 and 2001, there were even on-and-off discussions between the West and Moscow about potential Russian membership in the alliance.<sup>46</sup>) As noted above, Russia was unhappy with the United States and the West about many things. At the same time, the West grew wary about Russia's authoritarian turn under Putin, who also engaged in military coercion and war in places like Moldova as well as Georgia, and later pursued election interference in the United States and Europe.

Meanwhile, Putin's imperial beliefs continued unabated. He contended that Russia is not seizing territory but "returning it—it's ours."<sup>47</sup> His definition of

his own and Russian greatness included bringing territories he deemed historically Russian into the Russian Federation and subjugating Ukraine to Russia. Ukraine was determined to break free from Russian control and align its future with the West, and that determination was amplified and accelerated to a great extent by Putin's own actions, especially the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russian-directed Donbas War. While he still could, and when he thought the West was weak, Putin decided to try to re-establish Russian domination over Ukraine. Given his misguided views about Ukrainian identity, and Russia's personalist authoritarian political system that reinforced rather than challenged the leader's flawed vision, he thought the war would be easy.<sup>48</sup>

The dominant modern academic realist theories for understanding great power politics are focused on the structure of the international system, and not on leaders or domestic politics. For understanding the recurrence of war and general patterns of balance-of-power behavior in the international system, these theories can often be useful. But even some of the most prominent scholars

**Nothing was happening in 2021 and 2022 to indicate a threat to Russia from NATO**

who use structural realism have noted that these theories are less helpful at explaining particular foreign policy decisions.<sup>49</sup> And the evidence in the case of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is clear: NATO enlargement was one irritant among many in the West's relations with Russia, and nothing was happening in 2021 and 2022 to indicate a threat to Russia from NATO. There were conflicting preferences between the parties. Ukraine

wanted to be free and independent, and the West supported this aspiration. Putin did not want Ukraine to be free and independent. Given that all other means had failed, and he could not fathom that Ukraine's westward tilt was freely chosen, he was willing to use force to achieve his objectives.

If NATO had never put Ukrainian membership on the table in 2008, would Putin have abandoned his desire to bring Ukraine under Russian control? Given the evidence of his revisionist and imperialist beliefs, that seems unlikely. His grab for Crimea and the Donbas in 2014 helped push the rest of Ukraine toward the West. Eight years later, an aging, isolated, personalist dictator, who had long believed that Ukraine's separation from Russia in 1991 was unnatural, convinced himself that Russia was going to "lose" Ukraine if he did not act soon. Without his imperial beliefs that Ukraine belonged to Russia—beliefs that many Russians share—Putin would not have felt the need to launch a full-scale invasion in February 2022.

## Notes

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