

# If Kennedy Hadn't Listened to Khrushchev

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*This horrible war that could have been avoided, shouldn't have been launched and could have been ended early through a negotiated settlement has reached an unimagined brink. The major parties to the war, Russia, Ukraine and the US, can continue on the path of escalation and go over the brink, or they can start to talk and to listen to each other.*

Russia has been brought to the realization that there will be no negotiations with the West. Putin's December 2021 requests for negotiations before the war and Russia's accompanying [proposal on mutual security guarantees](#) were spurned by the US. At the start of the war, the State Department [discouraged](#) Ukraine from pursuing its interests and negotiating an end to the war in favor of continuing the war to fight for broader US interests. When a negotiated settlement was within [reach](#), and it appeared that the war would not last much longer, the foreign minister of Turkey, the nation that hosted the promising Istanbul talks, [charged](#) that the promise of peace had been killed by "countries within NATO who want the war to continue."

On September 21, Putin [said](#) that he "would like to make public for the first time" that "After the start of the special military operation, in particular after the Istanbul talks, Kiev representatives voiced quite a positive response to our proposals. These proposals concerned above all ensuring Russia's security and interests. But a peaceful settlement obviously did not suit the West, which is why, after certain compromises were coordinated, Kiev was actually ordered to wreck all these agreements." Russia had realized that there would likely not be a negotiated end to the war.

Russia also realized that they were no longer fighting the regional war against Ukraine they had launched. Ukraine's response had been hijacked by the US, turning the war into a wider war between Russia and the US and NATO. The scale of the West's provision of weapons, combined with training and targeting intelligence had already led Russia to see the US as risking crossing that line. Already by the end of April, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov had [said](#) that "NATO, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy and is arming that proxy."

But from Russia's perspective, the crossing of the line could no longer be denied after the September Ukraine counteroffensive that exposed direct US involvement that included intelligence sharing that, according to *New York Times* [reporting](#), "allowed the United States to provide better and more relevant information about Russian weaknesses" [and](#) to increase "feeds of intelligence about the position of Russian forces, highlighting weaknesses in the Russian lines." The US then [war-gamed](#) the counteroffensive with the Ukrainian military and [advised](#) them on "avenues for a counteroffensive [that] were likely to be more successful than others." The US was providing everything but the soldiers who would die: they were providing the weapons, the training, the intelligence and the plan.

Russia had [realized](#) "that it is now in a direct war with the US, that this is now an American war." On September 21, Putin [said](#) that Russia is fighting "the entire Western military machine." And for Russia that meant that, even if Ukraine wasn't in NATO, the existential threat that had long before Putin been Russia's red line, NATO was in Ukraine. That conclusion was only reinforced by Zelensky's September 30 [statement](#) that "De facto, we have already made our way to NATO."

NATO is in Ukraine, and Ukraine is "de facto" in NATO. In 2008, when NATO promised at its Bucharest summit that Ukraine would become a NATO member, Russia declared it an existential threat that it would stop. According to Russian reporting at the time, Putin "flew into a rage" and promised that "if Ukraine joins NATO, it will do so without Crimea and the eastern regions."

On September 30, an official signing ceremony was held in Moscow, following the referendums in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, that began the process of absorbing those four eastern regions into Russia.

Russia has promised to use any weapons necessary to defend its territory. The eastern regions of Ukraine are now seen by Russia as its territory. To ensure the manpower to keep the promise to defend its expanded territory, Russia simultaneously ordered a [partial mobilization](#) of up to 300,000 reserves.

The war has now escalated to the brink. The two sides have pushed as far as they can without risking going over. Though Ukraine is not officially in NATO, NATO is in Ukraine, completing the push east to Russia's borders that Moscow has long feared. Russia has now annexed the eastern regions as they promised they would in 2008 if NATO came to Ukraine and consistently with their stated goal to protect Russian nationals in the Donbas whether through autonomy, independence or ascension to Russia. Having reached this pivotal point, Russia now called for the resumption of talks. On September 30, in a line in his speech at the signing ceremony that has gone unreported in the West, [Putin called on Kiev to return to talks](#): "We call on the Kiev regime to immediately cease fire, all hostilities, to stop the war that Kiev started back in 2014, and to return back to the negotiating table."

There is a brief window for Russia, Ukraine and the US to act on that moral responsibility and turn back from the brink and return to talks.

This is not the first time that it has come to Russia's perceived need for nuclear threats. In 1962, Russia famously placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. Less famously, in April 1999, in a furious phone call as the NATO bombing of Kosovo came to a head, Boris Yeltsin warned President Clinton, "Don't push Russia into this war? You know what Russia is, you know what Russia has at its disposal!"

The US and Russia that time talked and listened. It took time, and the relationship was, perhaps, irreparably damaged, but a compromise agreement was reached. NATO stopped its bombing of Kosovo, Serbian forces withdrew and a NATO and Russian peacekeeping forces were deployed to Kosovo under the banner of the UN.

In 1962, Kennedy and Khrushchev also listened and talked—if secretly. In 1962, Khrushchev feared American aggression in Cuba. Kennedy’s Operation Mongoose had the explicit goal of overthrowing Castro. When Edward Lansdale, who was running the operation, drew up the timeline for the coup, he said that “final success will require decisive US military intervention”. Equally importantly, Khrushchev feared American aggression in Russia: the US had Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy complete with nuclear warheads. Kennedy and Khrushchev stepped back from the brink. Exchanged secret messages led to negotiations. Russia would remove its nuclear missiles if the US would remove its nuclear missiles. To feel safe removing the missiles from Cuba, Khrushchev further demanded guarantees that the US would not invade Cuba. Kennedy agreed to provide an informal promise not to invade.

The US and NATO broke their promise not to expand NATO east of Germany and mocked Russia’s security concerns and red lines as they moved closer to Russia’s borders. Russia escalated by launching a war on Ukraine. The US continued the escalation by deeper and more direct involvement in the war. Russia further escalated by annexing the eastern regions. Now is the moment to end the escalation and urgently begin to listen and to return to talks.

What would have happened if Kennedy had not listened to Khrushchev and if the two had not secretly talked?

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*Featured image: 03 June 1961 President Kennedy meets with Chairman Khrushchev at the U. S. Embassy residence, Vienna. U. S. Dept. of State photograph in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, Boston.*

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