

NATO Keeps Saying Things NATO Doesn't Let You Say

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There are two things that go off script and are not allowed to be said. Every official statement or mainstream media article that mentions the war in Ukraine must call it an unprovoked war. You are not allowed to say that NATO expansion east, potentially to Ukraine and right up to Russia's borders, was a provocation, even if you add that it does not justify the war. And you are not allowed to say that it is time for Ukraine to negotiate with Russia and that conceding territory must be on the table. In the past couple of weeks, top NATO officials have said them both.

In his opening remarks to the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs on September 7, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg made the stunning admission that Russian President Vladimir Putin made the decision to invade Ukraine, not entirely unprovoked, but – as Putin has always said – to push an encroaching NATO out of Ukraine.

Stoltenberg [said](#) that in 2021, prior to the war, Putin “sent a draft treaty that they wanted NATO to sign, to promise no more NATO enlargement. That was what he sent us. And was a pre-condition for not invade Ukraine. Of course we didn't sign that.” Stoltenberg then went on, “He wanted us to sign that promise, never to enlarge NATO. . . . We rejected that. So he went to war to prevent NATO, more NATO, close to his borders.” The Secretary General of NATO then closed his remarks with the conclusion that “when President Putin invaded a European country to prevent more NATO, he's getting the exact opposite.”

Stoltenberg was referring to the [proposal on mutual security guarantees](#) that Putin sent to both the US and NATO in December 2021 just months before the war. A [key demand](#) was that “The United States of America shall take measures to prevent further eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and deny accession to the Alliance to the former USSR republics.”

He clearly sets out both that Russia was willing to forgo invading Ukraine for a written guarantee that NATO would not expand to Ukraine and that Putin made the decision to go to war when that demand was rejected in order “to prevent NATO . . . close to his borders.” “Putin invaded a European country,” Stoltenberg says, “to prevent more NATO.”

That is what Putin has always said. He has always said, as have his predecessors, that Ukraine is the red line for NATO expansion. In 2008, Putin called NATO expansion to Ukraine “a direct threat” to Russian security. His foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, warned the political West that Russia would do “everything possible” to prevent Ukraine from becoming a member of NATO. In the months before the war, Putin [wrote](#) that Ukraine had become a “springboard against Russia.” He said that NATO infrastructure was being staged on the

territory of Ukraine, on the edge of Russia, that Ukraine was being transformed into an “anti-Russia” and that Russia “will never accept” that.

The US and NATO have always presented NATO as a defensive alliance that poses no threat to Russia. When asked about Stoltenberg’s statement that Russia went to war to prevent NATO expansion into Ukraine, US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller [said](#) that NATO is not “in any way a threat to Russia. NATO was a – is, was then and is now – a defensive Alliance.”

That line has long been hard for Russia to believe. How else can they interpret that, at the end of the Cold War, the line across Europe, instead of being erased, moved further and further east to engulf every country but Russia who was specifically excluded? How could the preservation and expansion of the military alliance to Russia’s borders with the accompanying exclusion of Russia be interpreted as anything other than a threat? How would the US interpret the expansion of a Russian led military alliance to its borders if it was the sole country denied membership? The line finally became impossible to believe in March of 1999. On March 12, 1999, NATO admitted its first former Warsaw Pact countries: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Less than two weeks later, without UN authorization, NATO began the bombing of Russia’s traditional ally, Serbia.

Stoltenberg was not the only NATO official to say something that NATO does not allow to be said. The official script says that you do not say when Ukraine has to negotiate – “nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine,” Biden likes to [say](#) – and you do not say that Ukraine has to allow Russia to keep Crimea, the Donbass or any Ukrainian territory.

Unless you’re a top NATO official. On August 15, Stian Jenssen, the chief of staff for Jens Stoltenberg, surprisingly [said](#), “I think that a solution could be for Ukraine to give up territory, and get NATO membership in return.”

Ukraine responded angrily. “Statements that Ukraine can become a member of NATO in exchange for giving up some of Ukraine’s territories are totally unacceptable,” [said](#) the foreign ministry spokesman. Jenssen [apologized](#): “My statement about this was part of a larger discussion about possible future scenarios in Ukraine, and I shouldn’t have said it that way. It was a mistake.”

Speaking on September 10 to *The Economist*, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky [worried](#) that “I have this intuition, reading, hearing and seeing their eyes [when they say] ‘we’ll be always with you. But I see that he or she is not here, not with us.’”

Jenssen’s statement was surprising; Stoltenberg’s was stunning. One suggested Ukraine negotiate its territory; the other suggested the war was not unprovoked and could, perhaps, have been avoided with a NATO promise not to expand to Ukraine. Both were statements made by officials at the highest level of NATO that NATO says should not be said.

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