

Ukraine Crises Trace Back to Ongoing NATO Enlargement

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Due to its location on the map between Russia and the EU-NATO states, the Ukraine or Ukraine has significant strategic importance as tensions there rise once more. The country is most commonly called “Ukraine” but, out of preference, the author will retain its less frequently used title of “the Ukraine”.

Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US National Security Advisor (1977-1981) for president Jimmy Carter, wrote that Russian power would be diminished without control over the Ukraine, its western neighbour.

Brzezinski outlined of the Ukraine being “a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard” and “a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire”. (1)

One of the Kremlin’s principal gateways into Europe would be cut off, if the Ukraine became hostile to Russia, coupled with a grave threat to Russian access of the nearby Black Sea. Brzezinski noted that, with the wresting of the Ukraine from Russia’s sphere of influence, Moscow would be forced to direct much of its focus instead to the south and east, such as towards the Central Asian states. Russia would lose not only a pivotal ally, but could be deprived of investing in the Ukraine’s rich industrial and agricultural base.

The background to ongoing crises in the Ukraine can be traced to the Soviet Union’s disintegration - from 1989 culminating in the complete collapse in late 1991. During the summer of 1990, there were crucial negotiations between US president George H. W. Bush, his Secretary of State James Baker and Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader.

Gorbachev consented to a most unwise move: Germany would be allowed to align with the West, on the basis that NATO thereafter should not advance “one inch eastward” (2). Bush and Baker verbally agreed to this generous concession with “iron-clad guarantees”. Gorbachev had been naive to think that such an arrangement would hold. In violation of their pledge, the Americans instantly expanded NATO to the eastern half of Germany, as the country was formally reunified in October 1990. Gorbachev was irate at this but, when he complained, he was informed by Washington that their previous understanding was merely a gentleman’s agreement. It was not “iron-clad” after all.

NATO had been founded in 1949 under the guise of defending western Europe from the Soviets. NATO was established in fact to bolster US hegemony, and to prevent Europe from pursuing an independent path. The US strategic analyst George Friedman said, "For all of the last 100 years Americans have pursued a very consistent foreign policy. Its main goal: to not allow any state to amass too much power in Europe". (3)

When the perceived Russian threat disappeared in the early 1990s, the pretext for NATO's existence vanished. Yet this organisation did anything but disappear; quite the opposite, it has enlarged on a continual basis.

In March 1999 president Bill Clinton absorbed into NATO the central European countries of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. Less than a decade before, Hungary and Poland had still belonged to the Russian-led Warsaw Pact alliance, along with the defunct Czechoslovakia. By undertaking these reckless moves Clinton ignored the warnings of US diplomats like George Kennan, who wrote two years before, "Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the post cold-war era". (4)

Kennan's opinion was shared by dozens of US political, military and academic leaders, including former president Dwight Eisenhower's granddaughter, Susan Eisenhower, an expert on international security. Together they signed an open letter to Clinton on 26 June 1997, in which they expressed that his plan to enlarge NATO was "a policy error of historic proportions". (5)

General Eisenhower had written in the early 1950s that NATO "will have failed" if by 1961 all American soldiers present in Europe "have not been returned to the United States" (6). He would be somewhat shocked to learn, two generations later, that US troops are still stationed on European soil.

Clinton's successor George W. Bush continued with NATO expansionism in March 2004, by advancing to various parts of Russia's borders. That year, acceding to NATO were the Baltic states in the Kremlin's backyard - Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Likewise joining NATO in 2004 were the former Warsaw Pact countries of Romania and Bulgaria, along with Slovenia and Slovakia.

The encirclement of Russia by US-led military forces has led to an enhanced risk of nuclear war. This scenario has been sadly predictable as one nuclear superpower (America) has encroached deep into the domains of another (Russia). For example, NATO and Russian aircraft have been involved in skirmishes and near collisions in recent times, which could eventually result in disaster. (7) (8)

Due to the Ukraine's strategic value, Clinton, on winning the presidency in January 1993, gave specific priority to that nation. Clinton feared that if the Ukraine was left to its own devices, it would again fall firmly under the sway of Russia (9). When Clinton met the Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk in Kiev during January 1994, the US president proposed the Ukraine's integration under NATO's umbrella, by joining the new Partnership for Peace (PfP) program.

Clinton described the PfP as a "track that will lead to NATO membership", and president Kravchuk signed up to it in February 1994. Clinton's proposition, to link the Ukraine to the US Armed Forces through NATO, was heavily favoured in Kiev by nationalist and far-right groups, and in other areas of western Ukraine such as Galicia.

Following the Soviet Union's demise, the American historian and linguist Noam Chomsky wrote,

"The general mission of NATO was officially changed to a mandate to protect 'crucial infrastructure' of the global energy system, sea lanes and pipelines, giving it a global area of operations. Furthermore, under a crucial Western revision of the now widely heralded doctrine of 'responsibility to protect', sharply different from the official UN version, NATO may now also serve as an intervention force under U.S. command". (10)

The Ukraine itself is a complex country, containing entrenched ethnic, political and cultural differences. Other segments of its population would not accept NATO or EU membership, particularly those living in eastern Ukraine.

The so-called colour revolutions (in Georgia, 2003 and the Ukraine, 2004) received encouragement from the CIA, NED and USAid, along with other US organisations like Freedom House and the American Enterprise Institute. (11)

The 2004 Orange Revolution in the Ukraine sought to invalidate the election of Viktor Yanukovich, the slightly pro-Russian ex-governor of Donetsk Oblast. In 2003 and 2004, the Bush administration funnelled over \$65 million into US-linked associations and NGOs in the Ukraine, with the ultimate aim of helping pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko to claim the presidency, which he did in January 2005. President Bush even paid for Yushchenko's trips to America, where the latter met with the US authorities.

Near the end of Bush's presidency in April 2008, it was stated explicitly at the NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania: "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO". This announcement was a serious aggravation to the Russians.

Chomsky, whose father William was born in what is today western Ukraine, said in early March 2015,

"No Russian leader, no matter who it is, could tolerate Ukraine, right at the geostrategic center of Russian concerns, joining a hostile military alliance". (12)

By interfering in Ukrainian affairs, Washington wanted to negate Russia's re-emergence as a major power. Since the Americans could not defeat Russia in war, short of a certain nuclear conflict, the US has sought to surround and contain Russia, as it had done with the Soviet Union.

The former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (1973-1977), hardly a dove, pointed out how "the West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country". Kissinger noted that separate parts of the Ukraine consisted of Russian territory for generations. Much of western Russia had first been called Kievan Rus', between the 9th and 13th centuries. The Ukraine was historically called "Little Russia".

Western efforts to institute a client outfit in the Ukraine was concerned, moreover, in dislodging Russia from the Crimea, a 10,000 square mile peninsula which juts out into the

Black Sea. The Crimea contains an old Russian naval base in the port of Sevastopol, a critical installation from Moscow's viewpoint.

The Crimea has strong ties to the Kremlin; it was part of the Russian Empire from 1783 to 1917, and subsequently consisted of Soviet territory until 1991. According to a 2014 Russian census, the Crimea's 2.2 million populace comprises of two-thirds who say they are Russians, compared to 15% who believe they belong to the Ukraine, and about 10% being Crimean Tatars (13). The latter are an indigenous group of Turkic origin.

A 2001 Ukrainian census on the Crimea stated that 60% of its people were ethnic Russians, and 24% were Ukrainian. Both censuses highlighted that over 75% of Crimeans identify Russian as their native language, whereas around one in ten of its inhabitants speak Ukrainian as a first language. (14)

The Crimea's largest city, Sevastopol, had long been considered a Russian metropolis. More than nine-tenths of its people spoke the mother tongue. The Crimea is a popular holidaying destination for tourists from Russia. Considerable numbers of Sevastopol's male residents were ex-Soviet sailors, with anchors tattooed on their hands and arms. They were favourable to Russia and strongly opposed NATO, which they regarded as a foe. In 1994, over 90% of Sevastopol locals expressed support for the Russian naval base remaining in the area, which hosts the Kremlin's Black Sea Fleet, as it has done since 1783.

The Ukraine's exit from Russian control would compromise Moscow's natural gas exports to various European countries. By 2013, around three trillion cubic feet of Russian gas passed through Ukrainian territory, to supply such EU states as Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia and Poland. The Ukraine was dependent on at least 40% of its gas imports from the Russian state-owned energy firm Gazprom, headquartered in St. Petersburg.

The American economist Paul Craig Roberts, a former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury under president Ronald Reagan, wrote in February 2014, "Ukraine, or the western part of the country, is full of NGOs maintained by Washington". Their goal as Roberts outlined was "to make Ukraine available for looting by US banks and corporations and to bring Ukraine into NATO, so that Washington can gain more military bases on Russia's frontier". (15)

In December 2013, the IMF approved a \$15.2 billion bailout to the Ukraine, over a two and a half year period. The IMF's conditions were harsh and included a substantial cut to energy subsidies, social projects and pensions, the sacking of state workers, strengthening of banks and privatisation of state-owned enterprises, along with their selling off at reduced prices to Western corporations. These were the same terms that the IMF had proposed to Kiev in 2010, which the new president Yanukovych was unable or unwilling to meet.

Yanukovych suspended negotiations on 21 November 2013 on potentially joining the EU, often a precursor to NATO accession (or the other way around). Out of the EU's 27 states, 21 are NATO members. Had the Ukraine moved towards the European bloc, they would have suffered a loss of around \$500 billion due to a severance of business ties with Russia (16). The previous month, October 2013, president Vladimir Putin had levied customs controls, duties and quotas on Ukrainian products entering Russia, as a warning to Yanukovych regarding his flirtations with the West.

Furthermore, the EU was hardly in a position to fix the Ukraine's economic woes. Brussels was reeling from its own self-inflicted financial turmoil plaguing member states like Spain,

Portugal and Greece, while threatening France and the very survival of the Eurozone.

On 17 December 2013, Yanukovich travelled to Moscow where Putin offered him a securities investment worth \$15 billion. It included a natural gas deal whereby Kiev would pay at a 33% lower cost. This would allow the Ukraine to save \$3.5 billion per year. The contract was less expensive and more advantageous to Kiev, in comparison to the terms proposed by the EU and IMF. (17)

The Ukraine's then prime minister, Mykola Azarov, said it was a "historic deal", enough to enable Kiev to balance its payments for two years and to allow the country to re-establish economic growth. It involved co-operation with Russia on industrial matters, including collaboration in such fields as aeronautics, satellite production, arms and ship building.

However, Yanukovich would not be allowed to follow through with these plans. His decision to snub Western overtures led Washington to conclude that he would have to go. From 21 November 2013, revolts sprang up in the western half of the Ukraine, perhaps some of a spontaneous nature but which was quickly exploited for geopolitical purposes.

Roberts observed,

"The protests in western Ukraine are organized by the CIA, the US State Department, and by Washington and EU-financed Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that work in conjunction with the CIA and State Department. The purpose of the protests is to overturn the decision by the independent government of Ukraine not to join the EU". (18)

Already in mid-December 2013, US senators John McCain and Christopher Murphy were ensconced in the protests in Kiev, stirring up the marchers. This was flagrant interference by foreign officials in the internal affairs of another country. Victoria Nuland, the US Assistant Secretary of State, was also in Kiev at this time encouraging the protesters, handing out sandwiches to them and to police officers. Nuland was involved to such an extent she later participated in choosing Yanukovich's possible successor, and she stated that since 1991 Washington had spent \$5 billion to support "the aspirations of the Ukrainian people to have a strong, democratic government that represents their interests".

In early February 2014, Nuland spoke of her preference for the economist and lawyer Arseniy Yatsenyuk. She said he has "got the economic experience, the governing experience" to replace Yanukovich as president. Yatsenyuk, who is pro-EU and pro-NATO, would instead become the Ukraine's prime minister on 27 February 2014. Billionaire businessman Petro Poroshenko took over from the ousted Yanukovich, in what Friedman called "the most blatant coup in history".

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Shane Quinn obtained an honors journalism degree. He is interested in writing primarily on foreign affairs, having been inspired by authors like Noam Chomsky. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Notes

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