

Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault

The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin

By [John J. Mearsheimer](#)

According to the prevailing wisdom in the West, the Ukraine crisis can be blamed almost entirely on Russian aggression. Russian President Vladimir Putin, the argument goes, annexed Crimea out of a long-standing desire to resuscitate the Soviet empire, and he may eventually go after the rest of Ukraine, as well as other countries in eastern Europe. In this view, the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 merely provided a pretext for Putin's decision to order Russian forces to seize part of Ukraine.

But this account is wrong: **the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis. The taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West.** At the same time, the EU's expansion eastward and the West's backing of the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine -- beginning with the Orange Revolution in 2004 -- were critical elements, too. Since the mid-1990s, Russian leaders have adamantly opposed NATO enlargement, and in recent years, they have made it clear that they would not stand by while their strategically important neighbor turned into a Western bastion. For Putin, the illegal overthrow of Ukraine's democratically elected and pro-Russian president -- which he rightly labeled a "coup" - - was the final straw. He responded by taking Crimea, a peninsula he feared would host a NATO naval base, and working to destabilize Ukraine until it abandoned its efforts to join the West.

Putin's pushback should have come as no surprise. After all, the West had been moving into Russia's backyard and threatening its core strategic interests, a point Putin made emphatically and repeatedly. Elites in the United States and Europe have been blindsided by events only because they subscribe to a flawed view of international politics. They tend to believe that the logic of realism holds little relevance in the twenty-first century and that Europe can be kept whole and free on the basis of such liberal principles as the rule of law, economic interdependence, and democracy.

But this grand scheme went awry in Ukraine. The crisis there shows that realpolitik remains relevant -- and states that ignore it do so at their own peril. U.S. and European leaders blundered in attempting to turn Ukraine into a Western stronghold on Russia's border. Now that the consequences have been laid bare, it would be an even greater mistake to continue this misbegotten policy.

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THE WESTERN AFFRONT

As the Cold War came to a close, Soviet leaders preferred that U.S. forces remain in Europe and NATO stay intact, an arrangement they thought would keep a reunified Germany pacified. But they and their Russian successors did not want NATO to grow any larger and assumed that Western diplomats understood their concerns. The Clinton administration evidently thought otherwise, and in the mid-1990s, it began pushing for NATO to expand.

The first round of enlargement took place in 1999 and brought in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. The second occurred in 2004; it included Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Moscow complained bitterly from the start. During NATO's 1995 bombing campaign against the Bosnian Serbs, for example, Russian President Boris Yeltsin said, "This is the first sign of what could happen when NATO comes right up to the Russian Federation's borders. ... The flame of war could burst out across the whole of Europe." But the Russians were too weak at the time to derail NATO's eastward movement -- which, at any rate, did not look so threatening, since none of the new members shared a border with Russia, save for the tiny Baltic countries.

Then NATO began looking further east. At its April 2008 summit in Bucharest, the alliance considered admitting Georgia and Ukraine. The George W. Bush administration supported doing so, but France and Germany opposed the move for fear that it would unduly antagonize Russia. In the end, NATO's members reached a compromise: the alliance did not begin the formal process leading to membership, but it issued a statement endorsing the aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine and boldly declaring, "These countries will become members of NATO."

Moscow, however, did not see the outcome as much of a compromise. Alexander Grushko, then Russia's deputy foreign minister, said, "Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in the alliance is a huge strategic mistake which would have most serious consequences for pan-European security." Putin maintained that admitting those two countries to NATO would represent a "direct threat" to Russia. One Russian newspaper reported that Putin, while speaking with Bush, "very transparently hinted that if Ukraine was accepted into NATO, it would cease to exist."

Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 should have dispelled any remaining doubts about Putin's determination to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who was deeply committed to bringing his country into NATO, had decided in the summer of 2008 to reincorporate two separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But Putin sought to keep Georgia weak and

divided -- and out of NATO. After fighting broke out between the Georgian government and South Ossetian separatists, Russian forces took control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow had made its point. Yet despite this clear warning, NATO never publicly abandoned its goal of bringing Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance. And NATO expansion continued marching forward, with Albania and Croatia becoming members in 2009.

The EU, too, has been marching eastward. In May 2008, it unveiled its Eastern Partnership initiative, a program to foster prosperity in such countries as Ukraine and integrate them into the EU economy. Not surprisingly, Russian leaders view the plan as hostile to their country's interests. This past February, before Yanukovich was forced from office, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused the EU of trying to create a "sphere of influence" in eastern Europe. In the eyes of Russian leaders, EU expansion is a stalking horse for NATO expansion.

The West's final tool for peeling Kiev away from Moscow has been its efforts to spread Western values and promote democracy in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states, a plan that often entails funding pro-Western individuals and organizations. Victoria Nuland, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, estimated in December 2013 that the United States had invested more than \$5 billion since 1991 to help Ukraine achieve "the future it deserves." As part of that effort, the U.S. government has bankrolled the National Endowment for Democracy. The nonprofit foundation has funded more than 60 projects aimed at promoting civil society in Ukraine, and the NED's president, Carl Gershman, has called that country "the biggest prize." After Yanukovich won Ukraine's presidential election in February 2010, the NED decided he was undermining its goals, and so it stepped up its efforts to support the opposition and strengthen the country's democratic institutions.

When Russian leaders look at Western social engineering in Ukraine, they worry that their country might be next. And such fears are hardly groundless. In September 2013, Gershman wrote in *The Washington Post*, "Ukraine's choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents." He added: "Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

CREATING A CRISIS

Imagine the American outrage if China built an impressive military alliance and tried to include Canada and Mexico.

The West's triple package of policies -- NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion -- added fuel to a fire waiting to ignite. The spark came in November 2013, when Yanukovich rejected a major economic deal he had been negotiating with the EU and decided to accept a \$15 billion Russian counteroffer

instead. That decision gave rise to antigovernment demonstrations that escalated over the following three months and that by mid-February had led to the deaths of some one hundred protesters. Western emissaries hurriedly flew to Kiev to resolve the crisis. On February 21, the government and the opposition struck a deal that allowed Yanukovich to stay in power until new elections were held. But it immediately fell apart, and Yanukovich fled to Russia the next day. The new government in Kiev was pro-Western and anti-Russian to the core, and it contained four high-ranking members who could legitimately be labeled neofascists.

Although the full extent of U.S. involvement has not yet come to light, it is clear that Washington backed the coup. Nuland and Republican Senator John McCain participated in antigovernment demonstrations, and Geoffrey Pyatt, the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, proclaimed after Yanukovich's toppling that it was "a day for the history books." As a leaked telephone recording revealed, Nuland had advocated regime change and wanted the Ukrainian politician Arseniy Yatsenyuk to become prime minister in the new government, which he did. No wonder Russians of all persuasions think the West played a role in Yanukovich's ouster.

For Putin, the time to act against Ukraine and the West had arrived. Shortly after February 22, he ordered Russian forces to take Crimea from Ukraine, and soon after that, he incorporated it into Russia. The task proved relatively easy, thanks to the thousands of Russian troops already stationed at a naval base in the Crimean port of Sevastopol. Crimea also made for an easy target since ethnic Russians compose roughly 60 percent of its population. Most of them wanted out of Ukraine.

Next, Putin put massive pressure on the new government in Kiev to discourage it from siding with the West against Moscow, making it clear that he would wreck Ukraine as a functioning state before he would allow it to become a Western stronghold on Russia's doorstep. Toward that end, he has provided advisers, arms, and diplomatic support to the Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, who are pushing the country toward civil war. He has massed a large army on the Ukrainian border, threatening to invade if the government cracks down on the rebels. And he has sharply raised the price of the natural gas Russia sells to Ukraine and demanded payment for past exports. Putin is playing hardball.

THE DIAGNOSIS

Putin's actions should be easy to comprehend. A huge expanse of flat land that Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany all crossed to strike at Russia itself, Ukraine serves as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia. No Russian leader would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow's mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine. Nor would any Russian leader stand idly by while the

West helped install a government there that was determined to integrate Ukraine into the West.

Washington may not like Moscow's position, but it should understand the logic behind it. This is Geopolitics 101: great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory. After all, the United States does not tolerate distant great powers deploying military forces anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, much less on its borders. Imagine the outrage in Washington if China built an impressive military alliance and tried to include Canada and Mexico in it. Logic aside, Russian leaders have told their Western counterparts on many occasions that they consider NATO expansion into Georgia and Ukraine unacceptable, along with any effort to turn those countries against Russia -- a message that the 2008 Russian-Georgian war also made crystal clear.

Officials from the United States and its European allies contend that they tried hard to assuage Russian fears and that Moscow should understand that NATO has no designs on Russia. In addition to continually denying that its expansion was aimed at containing Russia, the alliance has never permanently deployed military forces in its new member states. In 2002, it even created a body called the NATO-Russia Council in an effort to foster cooperation. To further mollify Russia, the United States announced in 2009 that it would deploy its new missile defense system on warships in European waters, at least initially, rather than on Czech or Polish territory. But none of these measures worked; the Russians remained steadfastly opposed to NATO enlargement, especially into Georgia and Ukraine. And it is the Russians, not the West, who ultimately get to decide what counts as a threat to them.

To understand why the West, especially the United States, failed to understand that its Ukraine policy was laying the groundwork for a major clash with Russia, one must go back to the mid-1990s, when the Clinton administration began advocating NATO expansion. Pundits advanced a variety of arguments for and against enlargement, but there was no consensus on what to do. Most eastern European émigrés in the United States and their relatives, for example, strongly supported expansion, because they wanted NATO to protect such countries as Hungary and Poland. A few realists also favored the policy because they thought Russia still needed to be contained.

But most realists opposed expansion, in the belief that a declining great power with an aging population and a one-dimensional economy did not in fact need to be contained. And they feared that enlargement would only give Moscow an incentive to cause trouble in eastern Europe. The U.S. diplomat George Kennan articulated this perspective in a 1998 interview, shortly after the U.S. Senate approved the first round of NATO expansion. "I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies," he said. "I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anyone else."

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Most liberals, on the other hand, favored enlargement, including many key members of the Clinton administration. They believed that the end of the Cold War had fundamentally transformed international politics and that a new, postnational order had replaced the realist logic that used to govern Europe. The United States was not only the “indispensable nation,” as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it; it was also a benign hegemon and thus unlikely to be viewed as a threat in Moscow. The aim, in essence, was to make the entire continent look like western Europe.

And so the United States and its allies sought to promote democracy in the countries of eastern Europe, increase economic interdependence among them, and embed them in international institutions. Having won the debate in the United States, liberals had little difficulty convincing their European allies to support NATO enlargement. After all, given the EU’s past achievements, Europeans were even more wedded than Americans to the idea that geopolitics no longer mattered and that an all-inclusive liberal order could maintain peace in Europe.

So thoroughly did liberals come to dominate the discourse about European security during the first decade of this century that even as the alliance adopted an open-door policy of growth, NATO expansion faced little realist opposition. The liberal worldview is now accepted dogma among U.S. officials. In March, for example, President Barack Obama delivered a speech about Ukraine in which he talked repeatedly about “the ideals” that motivate Western policy and how those ideals “have often been threatened by an older, more traditional view of power.” Secretary of State John Kerry’s response to the Crimea crisis reflected this same perspective: “You just don’t in the twenty-first century behave in nineteenth-century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped-up pretext.”

In essence, the two sides have been operating with different playbooks: Putin and his compatriots have been thinking and acting according to realist dictates, whereas their Western counterparts have been adhering to liberal ideas about international politics. The result is that the United States and its allies unknowingly provoked a major crisis over Ukraine.

BLAME GAME

In that same 1998 interview, Kennan predicted that NATO expansion would provoke a crisis, after which the proponents of expansion would “say that we always told you that is how the Russians are.” As if on cue, most Western officials have portrayed Putin as the real culprit in the Ukraine predicament. In March, according to *The New York Times*, German Chancellor Angela Merkel implied that Putin was irrational, telling Obama that he was “in another world.” Although Putin no doubt has autocratic tendencies, no

evidence supports the charge that he is mentally unbalanced. On the contrary: he is a first-class strategist who should be feared and respected by anyone challenging him on foreign policy.

Other analysts allege, more plausibly, that Putin regrets the demise of the Soviet Union and is determined to reverse it by expanding Russia's borders. According to this interpretation, Putin, having taken Crimea, is now testing the waters to see if the time is right to conquer Ukraine, or at least its eastern part, and he will eventually behave aggressively toward other countries in Russia's neighborhood. For some in this camp, Putin represents a modern-day Adolf Hitler, and striking any kind of deal with him would repeat the mistake of Munich. Thus, NATO must admit Georgia and Ukraine to contain Russia before it dominates its neighbors and threatens western Europe.

This argument falls apart on close inspection. If Putin were committed to creating a greater Russia, signs of his intentions would almost certainly have arisen before February 22. But there is virtually no evidence that he was bent on taking Crimea, much less any other territory in Ukraine, before that date. Even Western leaders who supported NATO expansion were not doing so out of a fear that Russia was about to use military force. Putin's actions in Crimea took them by complete surprise and appear to have been a spontaneous reaction to Yanukovich's ouster. Right afterward, even Putin said he opposed Crimean secession, before quickly changing his mind.

Besides, even if it wanted to, Russia lacks the capability to easily conquer and annex eastern Ukraine, much less the entire country. Roughly 15 million people -- one-third of Ukraine's population -- live between the Dnieper River, which bisects the country, and the Russian border. An overwhelming majority of those people want to remain part of Ukraine and would surely resist a Russian occupation. Furthermore, Russia's mediocre army, which shows few signs of turning into a modern Wehrmacht, would have little chance of pacifying all of Ukraine. Moscow is also poorly positioned to pay for a costly occupation; its weak economy would suffer even more in the face of the resulting sanctions.

But even if Russia did boast a powerful military machine and an impressive economy, it would still probably prove unable to successfully occupy Ukraine. One need only consider the Soviet and U.S. experiences in Afghanistan, the U.S. experiences in Vietnam and Iraq, and the Russian experience in Chechnya to be reminded that military occupations usually end badly. Putin surely understands that trying to subdue Ukraine would be like swallowing a porcupine. His response to events there has been defensive, not offensive.

A WAY OUT

Given that most Western leaders continue to deny that Putin's behavior might be motivated by legitimate security concerns, it is unsurprising that they have tried to modify it by doubling down on their existing policies and have punished Russia to deter further aggression. Although Kerry has maintained that "all options are on the table," neither the United States nor its NATO allies are prepared to use force to defend Ukraine. The West is relying instead on economic sanctions to coerce Russia into ending its support for the insurrection in eastern Ukraine. In July, the United States and the EU put in place their third round of limited sanctions, targeting mainly high-level individuals closely tied to the Russian government and some high-profile banks, energy companies, and defense firms. They also threatened to unleash another, tougher round of sanctions, aimed at whole sectors of the Russian economy.

Such measures will have little effect. Harsh sanctions are likely off the table anyway; western European countries, especially Germany, have resisted imposing them for fear that Russia might retaliate and cause serious economic damage within the EU. But even if the United States could convince its allies to enact tough measures, Putin would probably not alter his decision-making. History shows that countries will absorb enormous amounts of punishment in order to protect their core strategic interests. There is no reason to think Russia represents an exception to this rule.

Western leaders have also clung to the provocative policies that precipitated the crisis in the first place. In April, U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden met with Ukrainian legislators and told them, "This is a second opportunity to make good on the original promise made by the Orange Revolution." John Brennan, the director of the CIA, did not help things when, that same month, he visited Kiev on a trip the White House said was aimed at improving security cooperation with the Ukrainian government.

The EU, meanwhile, has continued to push its Eastern Partnership. In March, José Manuel Barroso, the president of the European Commission, summarized EU thinking on Ukraine, saying, "We have a debt, a duty of solidarity with that country, and we will work to have them as close as possible to us." And sure enough, on June 27, the EU and Ukraine signed the economic agreement that Yanukovich had fatefully rejected seven months earlier. Also in June, at a meeting of NATO members' foreign ministers, it was agreed that the alliance would remain open to new members, although the foreign ministers refrained from mentioning Ukraine by name. "No third country has a veto over NATO enlargement," announced Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO's secretary-general. The foreign ministers also agreed to support various measures to improve Ukraine's military capabilities in such areas as command and control, logistics, and cyberdefense. Russian leaders have naturally recoiled at these actions; the West's response to the crisis will only make a bad situation worse.

There is a solution to the crisis in Ukraine, however -- although it would require the West to think about the country in a fundamentally new way. The United States and its allies should abandon their plan to westernize Ukraine and instead aim to make it a

neutral buffer between NATO and Russia, akin to Austria's position during the Cold War. Western leaders should acknowledge that Ukraine matters so much to Putin that they cannot support an anti-Russian regime there. This would not mean that a future Ukrainian government would have to be pro-Russian or anti-NATO. On the contrary, the goal should be a sovereign Ukraine that falls in neither the Russian nor the Western camp.

To achieve this end, the United States and its allies should publicly rule out NATO's expansion into both Georgia and Ukraine. The West should also help fashion an economic rescue plan for Ukraine funded jointly by the EU, the International Monetary Fund, Russia, and the United States -- a proposal that Moscow should welcome, given its interest in having a prosperous and stable Ukraine on its western flank. And the West should considerably limit its social-engineering efforts inside Ukraine. It is time to put an end to Western support for another Orange Revolution. Nevertheless, U.S. and European leaders should encourage Ukraine to respect minority rights, especially the language rights of its Russian speakers.

Some may argue that changing policy toward Ukraine at this late date would seriously damage U.S. credibility around the world. There would undoubtedly be certain costs, but the costs of continuing a misguided strategy would be much greater. Furthermore, other countries are likely to respect a state that learns from its mistakes and ultimately devises a policy that deals effectively with the problem at hand. That option is clearly open to the United States.

One also hears the claim that Ukraine has the right to determine whom it wants to ally with and the Russians have no right to prevent Kiev from joining the West. This is a dangerous way for Ukraine to think about its foreign policy choices. The sad truth is that might often makes right when great-power politics are at play. Abstract rights such as self-determination are largely meaningless when powerful states get into brawls with weaker states. Did Cuba have the right to form a military alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War? The United States certainly did not think so, and the Russians think the same way about Ukraine joining the West. It is in Ukraine's interest to understand these facts of life and tread carefully when dealing with its more powerful neighbor.

Even if one rejects this analysis, however, and believes that Ukraine has the right to petition to join the EU and NATO, the fact remains that the United States and its European allies have the right to reject these requests. There is no reason that the West has to accommodate Ukraine if it is bent on pursuing a wrong-headed foreign policy, especially if its defense is not a vital interest. Indulging the dreams of some Ukrainians is not worth the animosity and strife it will cause, especially for the Ukrainian people.

Of course, some analysts might concede that NATO handled relations with Ukraine poorly and yet still maintain that Russia constitutes an enemy that will only grow more formidable over time -- and that the West therefore has no choice but to continue its present policy. But this viewpoint is badly mistaken. Russia is a declining power, and it will only get weaker with time. Even if Russia were a rising power, moreover, it would still make no sense to incorporate Ukraine into NATO. The reason is simple: the United States and its European allies do not consider Ukraine to be a core strategic interest, as their unwillingness to use military force to come to its aid has proved. It would therefore be the height of folly to create a new NATO member that the other members have no intention of defending. NATO has expanded in the past because liberals assumed the alliance would never have to honor its new security guarantees, but Russia's recent power play shows that granting Ukraine NATO membership could put Russia and the West on a collision course.

Sticking with the current policy would also complicate Western relations with Moscow on other issues. The United States needs Russia's assistance to withdraw U.S. equipment from Afghanistan through Russian territory, reach a nuclear agreement with Iran, and stabilize the situation in Syria. In fact, Moscow has helped Washington on all three of these issues in the past; in the summer of 2013, it was Putin who pulled Obama's chestnuts out of the fire by forging the deal under which Syria agreed to relinquish its chemical weapons, thereby avoiding the U.S. military strike that Obama had threatened. The United States will also someday need Russia's help containing a rising China. Current U.S. policy, however, is only driving Moscow and Beijing closer together.

The United States and its European allies now face a choice on Ukraine. They can continue their current policy, which will exacerbate hostilities with Russia and devastate Ukraine in the process -- a scenario in which everyone would come out a loser. Or they can switch gears and work to create a prosperous but neutral Ukraine, one that does not threaten Russia and allows the West to repair its relations with Moscow. With that approach, all sides would win.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141769/john-j-mearsheimer/why-the-ukraine-crisis-is-the-wests-fault>

Conference Call with John Mearsheimer on the Ukraine Crisis

As the NATO summit began in Wales, John Mearsheimer, R. Wendell Harrison distinguished service professor of political science at the University of Chicago, joined Gideon Rose, editor of *Foreign Affairs*, to discuss the unintended effects of NATO expansion. Mearsheimer **argues** in the September/October 2014 issue of *Foreign Affairs* that the West is to blame for the Ukraine crisis.

A transcript is available below:

ROSE: Hi, everybody. Gideon Rose here, editor of Foreign Affairs. Delighted to have this call. We are lucky to be joined today by John Mearsheimer, the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and one of the country's most distinguished political scientists. **John, of course, is not just a leading IR theorist, but also a noted controversialist who always follows his extremely agile mind wherever it goes and says whatever he is thinking, which makes him a notorious bull in a china shop.**

One of the things that's fun about John, of course, is that he always is a little bit puzzled by the controversies he creates, because he just thinks that what he's doing is following logic where it goes and rarely is -- you know, annoyed or aware at the fact that it's dramatically different from what everybody else is thinking.

So with that, let's get to his latest argument, which has caused I think is fair to say quite a stir. It's an article in Foreign Affairs called "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault." And it links the current Ukraine crisis to Western policy towards NATO and Russia since the end of the Cold War.

Now, John, NATO is meeting right now to discuss what its future is, what -- how it should respond to Russia and deal with the Ukraine situation. You have a distinct take on this. Why do you think NATO is responsible at least in part for this crisis? Conventional wisdom has it that Putin is just an aggressive tyrant and that he has decided to sort of seize Ukraine. Why do you think that's not the whole or the full story?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, I think that the (inaudible) of the problem here is NATO expansion. And, of course, **NATO expansion is part of a broader strategy** on the part of the West, which is designed to peel Ukraine away from Russia's orbit. It's designed **to make Ukraine a Western bastion right on Russia's doorstep.** And NATO expansion is really one of three elements in the West's strategy. The other is E.U. expansion. And then **the third is the promotion of democracy.** In promoting democracy, basically what we're trying to do is put in place leaders in countries like Ukraine who are pro-Western, and that, of course, will make possible to turn Ukraine into a part of the West.

The Russians, on the other hand, have said from the very beginning **that NATO expansion was unacceptable.** And although they couldn't stop the first two tranches after 2008, when it became clear that **NATO had its eyes on Ukraine and Georgia,** the Russians made it unequivocally clear that this was unacceptable and that they would not tolerate it.

The West, of course, refused to hear what the Russians had to say and insisted, instead, that NATO expansion was a benign move on the part of the West and was not directed at Russia. But, again, the Russians refused to accept this.

And then you had the February 22nd coup earlier this year, and that was the straw that broke the camel's back. And Putin then went into action and, first of all, took Crimea and then, secondly, mobilized forces opposite the border with eastern Ukraine, and has made it clear that **he will wreck or destroy Ukraine before he will let it become part of NATO.**

ROSE: Now, you act as if that this is the West's driving this situation. Don't the Ukrainians have agency? I can imagine a lot of people responding to your comments there by saying, if only we had a policy of aggressive attempts to take Ukraine in. Certainly the Ukrainian liberals would have wanted that. But hasn't this crisis been driven by the fact that the Ukrainians want what the Poles have gotten and essentially want to move forward up and out of the Russian orbit and their stagnant corruption and vassal status? And if that is the case that they are driving some of this, are you saying essentially that we should turn our backs on Ukrainian aspirations?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, there's no question that the Ukrainians are interested in becoming part of NATO and being protected by the United States and the West more generally. And who can blame them? But the fact of the matter is that this is a prescription for disaster and that what the West should have told the Ukrainians is that incorporating Poland or the Baltic states into NATO was possible, but trying to incorporate Ukraine and Georgia into NATO would be a bridge too far. And what would happen is we would end up precipitating the crisis, and that **crisis would lead to the destruction of Ukraine.** And that is obviously not in Ukraine's interest.

This is what we should have told the Ukrainians. We should have just stopped with NATO expansion and given up on the idea of incorporating Ukraine into the West and instead said that what we're interested in doing is maintaining a **neutral Ukraine that effectively serves as a buffer state** between NATO on one side and Russia on the other.

ROSE: So we should have been cruel to be kind in the right measure and basically sort of let them realize that their aspirations were not going to be fulfilled and that they had to make the best of the fact that they are a small state on the border of a big, large, nasty, powerful state?

MEARSHEIMER: Yeah, I think the truth is, Gideon, that went people talk about states having rights and acting as if a country like Ukraine can just do anything that it wants, they're living in a fool's paradise. If you're a state that happens to be in **the neighborhood of a great power, it is imperative that you pay very careful attention**

to what that great power's interests are and how your behavior affects that great power's actions towards you.

Just take the United States in the Western Hemisphere. We have this policy called the Monroe Doctrine, and the **Monroe Doctrine basically says that no distant great power -- either European great power or an Asian great power -- can move military forces into the Western Hemisphere, that no country in our hemisphere can form a close military alliance with a distant country.** We just won't tolerate that.

Basically, **the same logic is at play with regard to Russia.** Russia is basically saying that Ukraine and Georgia are on our border and there's no way we're going to allow an alliance that was once a formidable foe of ours to move up into those countries and threaten us. This should be understandable to people in the West. I don't understand why most Americans don't understand this.

If China became really powerful and threaten to form an alliance with Canada and Mexico, and maybe even station military forces in those countries, it would drive the United States crazy. We would not tolerate that. It would be a violation of the Monroe Doctrine.

Well, again, the same basic logic is at play here. **This is geopolitics 101.** And why Western leaders don't understand this befuddles me.

ROSE: Would that same logic suggest -- well, we can get into this later, if you want -- but wouldn't that same logic suggest that the whole -- the conflict should be handled in a sort of somewhat quasi-appeasing way, including **giving Taiwan back to the Chinese** or things like that?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, our policy on Taiwan reflects this basic logic. We make it very clear that Taiwan is not an independent country and in no way shape or form are we going to promote Taiwan -- Taiwanese independence, because we know full well what the consequences would be with regard to China. **China has made it very clear that if Taiwan is to declare its own independence, China will go to war against Taiwan immediately, even though this will have severe economic consequences for China.** The United States fully understands that, and therefore, the United States walks on eggshells when it deals with this very issue.

Again, the same basic logic applies to Ukraine, as it does to Canada and Mexico with regard to a potential Chinese alliance down the road.

ROSE: Twenty years ago, you argued in Foreign Affairs that Ukraine should be allowed to keep its nuclear weapons precisely in order to ensure peace and stability, because some kind of Russo-Ukrainian rivalry was kind of inevitable and would be dangerous if

they didn't have a nuclear deterrent. How did that kind of view play into what's happened recently?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, I think there's no question if Ukraine had nuclear weapons the Russians would not be sending ground forces into eastern Ukraine. I think the nuclear weapons would have not prevented Russia from taking Crimea, in large part because the Russians were already there.

Many people say that the Russians invaded Crimea and conquered it. They didn't invade Crimea. They were already there. They had an agreement with Ukraine that they could station up to 25,000 troops in Crimea. So they were there. **And nuclear weapons would not have prevented Ukraine from losing Crimea.**

But with regard to the Russians invading eastern Ukraine, I think it's extremely unlikely they would have done that if Ukraine had nuclear weapons, because as you know, when a state's survival is at stake, that's the one circumstance under which it might use its nuclear weapons. One might say the likelihood of Ukraine using nuclear weapons if Russia invaded eastern Ukraine is not very great, but it doesn't have to be very great. The likelihood can be actually quite small, but given the consequences, the Russians I think would have stayed out.

So I think it would have been in Ukraine's interest today, and certainly over the long term, to have nuclear weapons.

ROSE: Is -- is it possible to -- does the manner in which Russia has pursued its interests in this case, sending troops in, subverting another country, being conniving with its propaganda and other kinds of things, in terms of the shoot down of the plane, is there something here that Russia has done that needs to be punished? Or do you just have to basically suck up what Russia has done because they're powerful enough to force us to do so?

MEARSHEIMER: I understand why people would like to punish Russia, given what's happened. It's completely understandable. But the question you have to ask yourself is, **what are the consequences of punishing Russia? What are the consequences of putting more and more sanctions on the Russians? What are the consequences of having military exercises in countries like Ukraine and moving forces into countries like Poland and the Baltics?**

And the answer is that it's just **going to make a bad situation worse**. It's going to further cause -- it's going **to cause further trouble in Ukraine itself**. It's going to give the Russians added incentives to wreck that country. **It's going to poison relations between the United States and Russia**. And, in fact, we need Russian help with regard to the

Iranian nuclear issue with regard to Syria and with regard to the movement of troops out of Afghanistan.

So it's in our interest to have good relations with Russia, not to have bad relations. And, of course, it's in the Russians' interests to have good relations with us and with Ukraine. So if we continue to pursue the present policy, things are just going to get worse and worse, and it's going to be a lose-lose-lose situation.

So even though it's understandable that people want to punish the Russians for what happened, it makes no sense.

ROSE: Is there anything that the Russians could do at this point that would change that calculus for you and make them somebody you need to punish or wouldn't want to deal with?

MEARSHEIMER: Not that I can think of, to be honest.

ROSE: If you were advising Obama now, what would you tell him to do, how to get out of -- and aside from, you know, not -- given that the past is the past, what would you be telling him to do right now on Ukraine?

MEARSHEIMER: I think at this point that we have to drastically change course and stop thinking about punishing the Russians and, instead, working out some sort of diplomatic deal, the centerpiece of which is a neutral Ukraine.

Our principal goal here should be to create a Ukraine that is neutral, that is a buffer state that sits between NATO on one side and Russia on the other side and is not aligned in any meaningful way with either Russia or the West. And to facilitate that, I think the first thing we have to do is take NATO expansion off the table in a very public way. I think it's also important to take E.U. expansion off the table.

And I think in addition to that, we should work with the Russians, with the IMF, and with the West Europeans to do everything we can to facilitate the rescue of Ukraine's economy and do what we can to turn it into a prosperous state, and then even promote democracy there. Of course, we don't want to promote democracy so that it leads to a state that views itself as part of the West and anti-Russian.

But there's no reason, once it's clear that this is going to be a neutral state, it's going to be a buffer state, that that state can't prosper. The Russians have a vested interest in having a prosperous Ukraine on their border, and, of course, the Ukrainians themselves do. I don't understand why the Ukrainians are so insistent on continuing to pursue a policy that leads to them becoming part of the West when the end result is they're going to be destroyed as a functioning society.

The Russians have made that very clear. Many people say that Putin is a bully, he's evil, he's willing to do terrible things. Well, if that's all true, the last thing you want to do is provoke him, because he has the levers to wreck Ukraine. What you have to do is work out some sort of accommodation. That may be distasteful, but the alternative is even worse.

ROSE: So is the general negative connotation of appeasement in Western foreign policy something we just need to get over? Or should we just basically follow appeasement policies under a different term, because that term is no longer politically acceptable, even if the substance of policy is what we should be doing?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, I've not heard anybody use the word appeasement up to this juncture. And it is a loaded term, because it's associated with Munich and what we did with Hitler. Obviously, the West made a huge mistake in the fall of 1938 in appeasing Hitler. And if you use the word appeasement in this context, it implies that Putin is the second coming of Adolf Hitler and Russia is the second coming of Nazi Germany and you're appeasing someone who should not be appeased.

But I don't think that's what's going on here. Putin is not a serious threat to conquer more territory in Eastern Europe. In fact, if you really wanted to wreck Russia, what you would do is invite it into Ukraine and let it try and conquer the whole country and swallow it. As I said in the article, it would be like swallowing a porcupine. The Russians surely know from their experience in Afghanistan, from watching us in Afghanistan, from watching us in Iraq that the last thing they want to do is try and conquer and absorb Ukraine. It just wouldn't make any sense. And the same goes for almost all the other countries on their border. It's just not in the cards.

Furthermore, this is a country that's going to decline in terms of relative power over time, largely for demographic reasons. So this is not the Soviet Union. This is not Nazi or Imperial Germany. And what we ought to do is just back off and try to create a neutral Ukraine, which, again, will be good for Ukraine, good for the Russians, and good for us.

ROSE: So the argument is that we can afford to accommodate and it's wise to accommodate on this particular issue, precisely because it's not a step down a slippery slope towards a lot of other aggression and precisely because Russian relative power is declining, and it's a question of sort of getting past the point at which their aspirations are so aggressive and ambitious?

MEARSHEIMER: I think that summed it up very nicely. I wouldn't disagree with anything you said there.

ROSE: OK. So how do you then, if you're NATO, reassure, let's say, the Estonians and the Latvians and the Lithuanians that you are, indeed, going to protect them without, you know, overly -- without creating a moral hazard for the Ukrainians in which you signal to them that you're going to more than you might actually be prepared to do?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, I think you have to make it very clear to the Russians and to the Eastern European countries that are now members of NATO that the United States is fully committed to defending them if they're attacked. And you may want to increase the number of exercises you have there and do a number of other -- take a number of other small steps to reassure them.

But I don't think you have to do much more than that, because I don't think that Putin is seriously interested in threatening any of those countries. Again, I think the principal cause of this crisis was NATO expansion. The idea that Putin was planning to go on a rampage for a long period of time and that NATO expansion was designed to contain him is belied by the facts.

Before the February 22nd coup, there was no evidence that anyone thought that Putin was going to take Crimea. There's no evidence that anyone thought that he had imperial ambitions in terms of conquering territory on his borders. It was not until after the February 22nd coup earlier this year that that all happened.

Moreover, if you look at the rationale for NATO expansion, up until very recently, it was never phrased in terms of containing the Russians. This is why someone like Mike McFaul will tell you that he reassured Putin and other high-level Russian policymakers on countless occasions that NATO is not directed at Russia, it was not designed to contain NATO. He was speaking the truth in terms of how he and his colleagues thought about NATO expansion.

They thought that they were expanding this European security community eastward. They didn't think that they were containing Russia, because nobody thought that Putin was going to go on a rampage, up until February 22nd. It was only after that that we changed our rhetoric and began to portray him as the second coming of Adolf Hitler.

ROSE: The -- in Western Europe, it seems like we've been able to get past the sort of zero-sum traditional offensive realist logic and create, as you say, a security community and so forth. Do you ever envision a time when we'll be able to approach questions in Eastern Europe like that, without the sort of traditional old-fashioned logic of sphere of interest and war and so forth coloring policy there?

MEARSHEIMER: That's a great question. My view on Western Europe is that the reason you have what in effect looks like a security community there, the reason that France and Germany don't worry about each other, is not because of the E.U. It's because

of NATO. And that's another way of saying it's because of the American military presence in Western Europe and now in Central Europe.

The United States serves as the pacifier. As long as we are there, there's no way that any of the European countries can end up fighting wars against each other. And what we were trying to do in expanding NATO eastward was to put the American security umbrella over more and more countries so that in the end that security community would grow.

The problem that we ran into was that from a Russian point of view, this was unacceptable, because the Russians did not think that they would ultimately be in that security community, and because that security community was run by NATO and really run by the United States, they viewed it as a threat.

So what happened here is in 1999, we took the first big step eastward and included countries like Poland and Hungary and the Czech Republic in NATO, and then in -- I think it was 2007, we took the second big step forward and included a handful of other states, including the Baltic states, and we got away with that, in part because Russia was very weak, but also because we were not talking about Ukraine and Georgia.

But in 2008, when we began to talk about expanding NATO further east and, in effect, expanding that security community further east, the Russians put their foot down. And by the way, we first announced that Georgia and Ukraine would become part of NATO in April 2008 at the Bucharest summit. That was a big NATO summit, April 2008.

And it's not surprising that in August 2008, you had a war between Georgia and Russia over this very issue. The Russians were deeply concerned about the prospect of Georgia becoming part of NATO, and Georgia did want to become part of NATO. And I believe that was the main cause of that war.

So the Russians early on sent a signal, a very clear signal to us with this conflict that the incorporation of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, or into the West more generally, was unacceptable.

ROSE: I've got lots more questions that I could ask, but we have a large and passionate audience that would love to get in on this discussion, as well. So I'm going to turn it over at this point to Q&A with our participants. Have at John Mearsheimer, and you can have back at them.

MEARSHEIMER: OK.

OPERATOR: Thank you. At this time, we will open the floor for questions. Our first question comes from Joseph Marks with Politico.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks very much for taking my question. One thing NATO leaders are going to be doing this week in Wales is articulating that a cyber attack could invoke Article 5 under certain circumstances. And cyber attacks are happening at a comparably low level right now in the Ukraine conflict. So I was hoping, Professor Mearsheimer, you could talk about how cyber war and cyber attacks -- which are happening every day on a nation-state level -- differ from conventional and nuclear attacks, because the bar is so low and attribution so difficult, and how should NATO and the U.S. be thinking about that?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, I'm not an expert on cyber warfare. I've thought a little bit about it. My view is that, if there are cyber attacks on NATO members and they come from the Russians, the key is to make sure that when we retaliate, it doesn't escalate. The key point you want to keep in mind is that Russia has nuclear weapons, and the United States has nuclear weapons, and it's very important that any form of cyber war remain a cyber war and not turn into a conventional war that might ultimately lead to nuclear escalation.

So I think that we have to be smart about cyber warfare, and there will be circumstances where we want to retaliate, but we want that retaliation to be measured because of the dangers of escalation.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MEARSHEIMER: You're welcome.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from Andrei Sitov with TASS Russian News Agency.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for doing the call. Thanks to the Foreign Affairs and thank you to Professor Mearsheimer. Obviously, to the Russian eyes and ears, the arguments that you are making are eminently reasonable. And the Russians themselves have been making those similar arguments over a long time and never got any real response.

The question here is, in your opinion, sir, the American government, the American authorities do not understand the arguments or do not want to understand the arguments, what is more likely? And then, secondly, I also wanted to ask you about the new plan or the schedule peace plan that President Putin offered yesterday for Ukraine? How, again, realistic it looks to you?

MEARSHEIMER: OK. With regarding to your first question, I think the key to understanding why Western policymakers did not listen to the Russians is that the two sides were operating according to very different logics. NATO and the policymakers in Washington thought about expansion. They thought about NATO enlargement in terms

of what I would call a liberal worldview. They did not view NATO expansion as threatening to Russia.

If you were to talk to Mike McFaul, Mike McFaul, who was the ambassador to Russia, believes fervently that NATO expansion was a benign form of behavior. He believes that the United States is a benign hegemon and that moving the alliance eastward is not directed at Russia and it is not at all linked to sort of geopolitical thinking.

The Russians, on the other hand, approach this issue in a completely different way. They were operating with a different playbook. The Russians thought about NATO expansion in terms of geopolitics 101. They viewed NATO expansion as a serious threat.

But the Americans and the Europeans operating according to this liberal playbook simply didn't hear what the Russians were saying. They thought geopolitics was something that had been killed and buried with the end of the Cold War. So they, therefore, ignored what Putin and other Russians said, which I find quite remarkable.

But in the end, you had this crisis. And when the crisis came, starting after February 22nd, people in the West, people in the White House were shocked by what happened. And the reason that they were shocked was because they were playing by this liberal playbook, and according to the liberal playbook, this should have never happened. But if you were playing according to the geopolitical 101 rulebook, which I play by, this is hardly surprising at all. And this is why people like George Kennan, who was a realist par excellence, said in 1999 that this is what would happen.

With regard to your second question about Putin's peace plan, I think it's a promising start, but it really doesn't address in detail all of the big issues that have to be ironed out here. So I think there are going to have to be many more meetings and many more discussions before we work out a viable solution.

ROSE: Let me follow up -- sorry.

QUESTION: Yeah, if I could follow up on this, after the people at the White House and the State Department, they were shocked, as you say, by what's happened, did this shock them into considering the arguments that they ignored previously? Have you heard from any official source in response to your argument -- to your argument?

MEARSHEIMER: I think all of the evidence is that they did not change their thinking at all. And, in fact, if you look at the policy that the West has been pursuing since the February 2014 coup, what we are, in effect, doing is just doubling down. So there's no evidence, at least out in the public domain, that leaders in the United States or in Western Europe have changed their thinking.

ROSE: So, John, let me do a follow-up on -- this is Gideon -- let me do a follow-up on that for a second, which is, even if everything you're saying was correct, is there some cost aspect to this that now that we're in the state we're in, there's a reason to maintain the policy and make him back down a little bit? Presumably, if you were advising him, you might be advising him to be a little bit less aggressive, as well, Putin, I'm saying? And is there -- is accepting -- even if you didn't do something -- even if you did something you shouldn't have done, is accepting a complete retreat something that is politically and geopolitically sensible for the U.S. and the West at this point?

MEARSHEIMER: I think that it's going to be extremely difficult for us to reverse gears at this point in time, for the reasons that you just stated. I think that any Western leader, especially Obama, who begins to try and go in the direction that I'm prescribing, is going to pay a significant cost, political cost. There's no doubt about that. Because as you point out, the sunk costs are great at this point in time.

I often say that when you change foreign policy on a big issue, it's like turning an oil tanker around in the water. You just don't do it on a dime. It takes time. And it's going to take us time to dig ourselves out of this hole.

And my great hope is that the Germans see the light on this one, because I think if there's any one country that holds out the prospect of understanding the basic logic I laid out, it's the Germans. You want to remember, at the Bucharest conference, the Bucharest NATO conference in April 2008, the reason that NATO did not move forward on NATO expansion into Georgia and into Ukraine at that point in time, in a really concrete way, was because of German and French resistance.

So I think the Germans kind of understand the basic logic that I'm laying out. And hopefully they'll fully grasp it and begin to lead the way in getting us to turn the oil tanker around.

ROSE: So you think the Germans are sensible, not just venal? Or do you think they're sensible because they're venal?

MEARSHEIMER: I'm not sure what the word "venal" means.

ROSE: Well, in this case, having economic-based interests in their foreign policy and wanting not to disrupt relations with Russia for purely self-interested economic reasons.

MEARSHEIMER: Well, I think you make an important point when you use the word "interests," because I think what we have to do here is we have to figure out, what is the policy that is in the interests of all the players? And my argument is that **creating a neutral Ukraine is in the interests of Russia, it's in the interests of Ukraine, and it's in the interests of the West, including Germany.** Germany has no interest in getting

involved in a game of sanctions versus counter-sanctions and then escalating up the ladder. This is going to have dire consequences for the E.U. economies. This is just not good.

And **what's happening is not good for the Ukrainian economy**. It's not good for the Russian economy. So everybody has an interest in trying to figure out how to get out of this mess. And the point that I'm trying to make is that if you double-down on the policy that got us into this situation, you're only going to make a bad situation worse.

And, of course, I fully understand your point, Gideon, that there are sunk costs here. And therefore, reversing direction at this point in time is going to be extremely difficult, especially for President Obama. And, of course, that's why I was saying I hope the Germans can take the lead, because I think it's easier for Merkel to do this than it is for Obama.

And I also think that the Germans have been smarter on this issue than the Americans have been since 2008, which is not to say the Germans have been especially smart, but they've been smarter than the Americans.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from James Kitfield with National Journal.

QUESTION: Thanks for doing the call, Professor. I'm curious, what do you say to the argument that, you know, given everything that you've said, isn't it a good thing that we expanded NATO, because you have millions of Eastern Europeans in the Baltics and Poland and the Czech Republic who are not likely to be threatened by Putin, and that this was an inevitable sort of Russian blowback, so the more people you get under the Western security tent, the more people you sort of allow to live, you know, by their own designs, rather than in Moscow's?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, I think you can definitely make the argument that it is good that we expanded NATO to include countries like Poland and the Baltic states, because their security is virtually guaranteed, as long as NATO is in existence or as long as the United States is in Europe with its military forces.

The problem is that when we thought about incorporating Ukraine and Georgia, we went too far. It was a bridge too far. And the Russians have kicked back and we now have this present crisis.

We, in effect, had an open door policy. And we saw really no limits to NATO expansion. And that was foolish. We should have stopped after the 2007 expansion into Eastern Europe and just left Ukraine and Georgia alone. And this would not have been a case of selling the Georgians and the Ukrainians out, because trying to incorporate those two

countries into NATO is just going to end up doing egregious damage to each of them. It would have been in their interest and the interest of Ukraine and in the interest of Georgia not to flirt with NATO and E.U. admission and not to flirt with the idea of becoming part of the West.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from Igna Scherzni (ph) with PAP.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. I am the correspondent for the Polish Press Agency. Professor, the NATO is expected to announce during this summit the increase of NATO presence in Eastern countries. They're not talking about permanent presence, but they are talking about persistent rotating presence, rotating exercises, and also creating of new rapid force, yes? So what -- how do you -- what do you think about this decision, how Russia could respond? And do you think NATO actually do -- does NATO anticipate the Russian response to this?

And I have the second question, also, about Ukraine, but maybe first about this. Thank you.

MEARSHEIMER: OK. I think that the key is for NATO not to permanently station troops in Eastern Europe, to include Poland and the Baltic states. I think that we've not done that up to this point in time, in large part because we understood full well that it would antagonize the Russians and it would damage relations between Russia and the West.

And fortunately, nobody's talking at this point in time about permanently stationing NATO troops in the East. And I hope that remains the case. There's going to be an increased presence for a temporary period of time. I think that makes perfect sense, because it reassures the countries in NATO that are in the eastern part of Europe. That's all for the good.

But I don't think the Russians will -- and I don't think the Russians will be bothered by that. I think the Russians understand that we have to do that. And as long as our presence isn't permanent, they'll have no problem with it.

So I think so far we've been quite measured in -- with regard to moving troops and conducting exercises in the east, but we have to be very careful that we don't step over the line and do anything to provoke the Russians.

QUESTION: You mean this declaration, this founding act from 1997, founding act of NATO, NATO-Russia Council, is still relevant?

MEARSHEIMER: Well...

QUESTION: You know, where NATO made promise that there won't be any permanent bases in the eastern countries.

MEARSHEIMER: Yes, I think it is still relevant. It could change, and I think that would be disastrous. Again, I don't think it's in NATO's interest -- and this includes a country like Poland -- to provoke the Russians and to poison relations over the long term between Russia and the West. No good will come from that, and I think it's going to be difficult to walk the dog back, so to speak, at this point in time, for reasons that Gideon pointed out. But nevertheless, I think we should go to enormous lengths to defuse this crisis, because it's good to no one.

QUESTION: And, also, about -- you said that the main reason for this crisis is NATO expansion, but, I mean, what do you make of the argument that there is actually no appetite for the NATO enlargement? You said yourself in 2009 they didn't (inaudible) the map, the road map, and (inaudible) Ukraine (inaudible) if you talk to diplomats in the West, they are not ready for enlargement, and this summit is not about enlargement anymore. So, I mean, I don't -- how would you make of this argument? I mean...

ROSE: Yeah, is it a falsifiable thing, John? Because if you had actually been pushing for NATO expansion, wouldn't you have pushed a lot harder, a lot earlier, and more consistently?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, the key point here is to remember that it's really what the Russians think. It's not so much what we did or what we think. I mean, again, to go back to Mike McFaul, Mike McFaul's point is that the Russians should have understood that NATO expansion was not directed at them. And my response to that is that what Mike McFaul thinks is largely irrelevant. It's what the Russians think.

The Russians thought that NATO expansion into Ukraine and into Georgia was going to happen, maybe not right away, but over the long term, and they were deeply concerned about that.

Now, there's no question that in 2008, at April 2008, as I said, the Germans and the French were a break on NATO expansion into Ukraine and Georgia at the Bucharest summit. That's clearly the case. But the Americans were pushing very hard, and that's why, in the final communique from the Bucharest conference, it was said that NATO and -- that Georgia and Ukraine will eventually become part of NATO. That's what the final declaration said.

And the Russians reacted immediately to that. That declaration was never taken off the table. Nobody ever said that NATO expansion was not going to happen. So the Russians had good reason to believe that it would eventually happen. And, by the way, Ukraine has just said -- this happened on August 29th -- that it was going to move to change its

non-aligned status and request membership in NATO. And then the NATO secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, said that if NATO did that, and it met the requirements -- I mean, if Ukraine did that and it met the requirements for NATO admission, then Ukraine could become part of NATO. This was just last month.

This is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. So the idea that NATO -- that Ukraine and Georgia becoming part of NATO is not a serious issue is not the way the Russians see it. And if I were a Russian, I would see it the same way. The mere fact that the United States of America remains committed to NATO expansion would scare me greatly.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from Martin Berchov (ph) with Information Danish Newspaper (ph).

QUESTION: Yes, hi, thanks. I think a lot of Western Europeans would agree with Professor Mearsheimer's view that a political settlement is needed and that there needs to be a clear line drawn in the sand about NATO membership and expansion. That's my feeling, although I'm in the United States at the moment.

But I also think that the way you have approached your analysis of what happened in Ukraine would not be shared by quite a lot of Western Europeans. Perhaps the radical left would share your view on that. So calling it a coup, when actually Yanukovich left on his own volition the country, and the parliament that had remained there actually voted in favor of the new government, is a little beyond what I think realistically happened.

Another thing is that you mentioned -- and I wonder whether it's realistic to imagine that Putin would ever accept a democratic Ukraine, if it were to become prosperous and successful, because it would reflect badly on his rule, which is turning out to be more and more authoritarian. In other words, it is not just about renouncing the idea of NATO membership for Ukraine. It is really about this relationship between the two countries, and what Putin feels, perhaps, is a threat to his own rule.

MEARSHEIMER: Well, let me take your questions in reverse order. I think that there's no question that Putin feels a threat to his own rule. And that's because we have, in effect, made it clear to him with our promotion of democracy in Ukraine that we may ultimately topple him from power, as well. The leader of the National Endowment for Democracy said as much last November in an op-ed in the Washington Post.

So I think Putin has good reason to think that, if we can do social engineering in Ukraine, we will ultimately do social engineering in Russia. This is why I'm saying that the United States should get out of the business of doing social engineering and promoting democracy in countries like Ukraine and in countries like Russia. It just doesn't make

good strategic sense, as long as that's all part of making a country like Ukraine part of the West.

But I think if the possibility of Ukraine becoming part of the West, becoming enmeshed in NATO and becoming enmeshed in the E.U. is taken off the table, then it's possible to think about promoting democracy in Ukraine. And -- because you're no longer making it part of the West.

And I think if you had a democracy and a prosperous democracy in Ukraine, it would not be a major problem for Putin, because I think Putin is fully capable of maintaining power in Russia and wouldn't view that as a great threat. So I think that that problem can be dealt with.

What was your other question?

QUESTION: Well, I think, you know, about -- you call it constantly a coup...

MEARSHEIMER: Oh, yes.

QUESTION: ... I think a lot of people disagree with that.

MEARSHEIMER: I think it was a coup. I mean, there was violence in the streets. People were dying. European leaders came in. They worked out an agreement to have an election that would replace Yanukovych, and I believe that the reason he left the country was he feared for his life. And I think that there was good reason for him to fear for his life. He was a democratically elected leader.

QUESTION: Yeah, but he left on his own volition, and the parliament voted -- approved the new government.

MEARSHEIMER: I'm not sure what it means to say he left on his own volition. He left because he was scared for his life.

QUESTION: Well, so what does it mean to be scared for your life? You can easily stay and fight for your country and what you believe is a democracy and your right -- your legitimate position as the president. He just left. I don't think that makes sense.

But in any case, another thing I wanted to ask you is this, though. The E.U. -- you argue that E.U. membership should be taken off the table, but the E.U. has never offered membership and not interested in that at all. I mean, we don't want more expansion. We've had more than enough. We're over our head. An association agreement would be fine.

MEARSHEIMER: Yeah, in the short term. But there is talk on numerous occasions of Ukraine eventually becoming a member of the E.U. and also becoming a member of NATO. I mean, it wasn't going to happen right away, but over the long term, this was held out as a promise for Ukraine.

QUESTION: I don't think there's any evidence to that.

ROSE: Let's keep going. We've got a few more.

QUESTION: OK, next -- I'm done. Thank you.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from Derek Mitchell with Mitchell Report.

QUESTION: Thanks very much, Professor, for doing this. You have on multiple occasions today, when referring to NATO expansion, said -- talked about the distinction between the U.S. and Western point of view and the Russian perspective. And I want to try to get you to expand a little bit on -- on whether it is -- whether what we're talking about is the Russian perspective, per se, or whether it is the Putin perspective. And let me just put it in this context.

It seemed to me that if someone with the ego and the intelligence of a Putin would look at Russia in its current circumstances and say, here is where I'm going to invest my time and energy, to build a 21st century economy, I'm going to try to find ways to, you know, make us a center for technology in the way that the Israelis have done it, I'm going to do everything I can to recreate a great Russia, but to recreate it in the 21st century terms.

Instead, it seems to me, after having made the huge investment in the Olympics, which was a splash on the global stage, he turns around and does something that is guaranteed to be costly to him politically, economically, and in all other ways.

ROSE: And the question is?

QUESTION: And the question is, how -- how does that -- is that a -- is that a Putin way of thinking or is that the Russian way of thinking?

MEARSHEIMER: Well, I would argue that there's hardly any daylight between Putin's thinking and the thinking of most members of the Russian foreign policy elite on this whole issue of Ukraine. And I think what your analysis misses is the fact that geopolitics still matters. You were saying that we're now in the 21st century, and you were implying that in the 21st century that all that matters is economic considerations and technical considerations and making sure that you fit into the world economy and that you

continue to prosper. There's no question that that's an important dimension of any state's foreign policy.

But the fact of the matter is that **geopolitics still matters**. And as I said to one of the questioners before, I think that the reason that the United States and the **Western Europeans** got themselves into so much trouble on this issue is that **they forgot that geopolitics still matters**. They forgot the fact that the Russians think very much in geopolitical terms and view NATO expansion and E.U. expansion in exactly those terms. They see what's happening through a geopolitical lens.

So I would say that the argument that politics -- **international politics has changed in the 21st century and economics completely dominate security issues is wrong**. And, by the way, you brought up the case of the Israelis. Your description of their economic miracle over the past decade or so is correct. But the Israelis don't forget the importance of geopolitics, either. Security and economics matter to them, as they do to most powers in the system, and that's certainly true of the Russians.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from Marianne LeVine with L.A. Times.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you so much for speaking with us today. I just wanted to get your take on whether or not you think the allies will move forward with lethal aid.

MEARSHEIMER: The allies will move forward with what?

QUESTION: With lethal aid. How likely do you think it is that the Obama administration, as well as the allies, will support lethal aid?

MEARSHEIMER: I'm not sure what that means.

QUESTION: I guess, do -- right now, we have non-lethal aid, or I guess aid...

(CROSSTALK)

MEARSHEIMER: Oh, lethal. L-e-t-h-a-l?

QUESTION: Yes.

MEARSHEIMER: Oh, I'm sorry. Lethal aid.

QUESTION: Yes, exactly. I'm sorry about that.

MEARSHEIMER: Sorry, I thought you meant "legal" aid. Lethal aid. It's not clear at this point in time exactly what we're going to do. I think it would be a **major mistake to provide the Ukrainians with lethal aid**. What we should be doing at this point in time is working with the Ukrainians to end the fighting and then doing everything we can to negotiate some sort of agreement, not only with the Russians, but with the insurgents in eastern Ukraine so that we can maintain the sovereignty of Ukraine and turn it into a buffer state.

If we give lethal aid to the Ukrainians, that's just going to cause the Russians to increase their military involvement in eastern Ukraine. It's going to make the civil war bloodier. And it's going to do more to poison relations between Russia and the West. And this is to nobody's advantage.

So I hope there's no movement to move -- there's no movement to give Ukraine lethal aid.

QUESTION: OK, thank you.

MEARSHEIMER: You're welcome.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from Teresa Abono (ph) with People's World.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for taking this question and for also expanding your views on the coup, the February 22nd coup. Kind of following up from that, the Russian media has really been emphasizing the role of fascist and extreme right-wing groups in the Ukrainian government. How accurate is this, in your opinion? And how does that play out in terms of the -- you know, Putin's plans, et cetera?

And also, could you expand a little more about how NATO expansion and building democracy, how these two interact with each other?

MEARSHEIMER: OK. I'll take them in reverse order. Building democracy and promoting the Orange Revolution in Ukraine were all designed not simply to make Ukraine democratic, but to bring into power leaders who were pro-Western. And those pro-Western leaders would therefore be well-positioned to help drive Ukraine into the West. In other words, what we wanted were people in charge in Ukraine who were deeply committed to becoming part of the West, and that meant **becoming embedded in NATO and becoming embedded in the European Union**.

So as we move NATO and the E.U. eastward, and we help facilitate the rise of **politicians who are pro-West**, you would, in effect, create a situation where Ukraine

someday would end up looking like Poland or end up looking like Germany. It would be...

ROSE: Still might. Still might.

MEARSHEIMER: I would not bet a lot of money on that. My argument, of course, is that what the Russians will do is they **will continue to wreck the country**. I think we got away with it with regard to Poland. And I don't think we're going to get away with it with regard to Ukraine. And I think that continuing to pursue that policy would be a big mistake.

ROSE: OK, we're going to have one last question.

QUESTION: He didn't answer mine.

ROSE: OK, John, you -- you can -- and we'll finish this off and then you can have one more, John.

MEARSHEIMER: OK, I'm sorry. Yes, I think it's quite clear that fascist groups played a key role in the uprising between November 2013 and February 22, 2014. This is well documented. And furthermore, it's clear, when the new government took over after Yanukovich left, that that new government included four individuals who I think could legitimately be called fascists.

And it's very clear that this concerns the Russians greatly. And there's no question this is what scared Yanukovich and played a key role in his leaving the country, in what I call a coup.

ROSE: OK, we'll take one last question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our next question comes from Tony Papper (ph) with EIR (ph).

QUESTION: It's great to hear you, Professor Mearsheimer, stick to your guns on this. Look, I want to briefly try to present a broader context and ask you to respond...

ROSE: Unfortunately, at this point, we don't have the time for the broader context. We're at the end of our time. So a quick question is all we have time for.

QUESTION: Well, I'll just begin what I was going to say. We're at the fag-end of the World War I, World War II, Cold War, perpetual war system that began with the dumping of Bismarck. This system is coming to an end. That's what we're looking at.

And what we have is a new system rising where you can see most -- in one view, most clearly, when the Brits met with Brazil with all the heads of state of South America toward a new system which resembles what Franklin Roosevelt was planning for the post-World War II system, rather than the perpetual war, Wall Street system, which is what we wound up with.

ROSE: OK. John, so final comment. Are we at the verge of a sort of global police -- you know, a new multipolar...

QUESTION: A new era.

ROSE: A new multipolar era with sort of local policing and regional policing?

QUESTION: The end of war, actually.

MEARSHEIMER: The point I would make is, there's no question that you have new actors on the scene and that the balance of power among various actors has shifted. Russia is declining. Germany is declining. China's rising. So there's been changes of that sort.

But the idea that this is sort of a new era of international politics and the world works in different ways is simply wrong. And I believe that that kind of thinking is what caused this crisis. The fact of the matter is that we still live in a world where realpolitik really matters, and it really matters when you're dealing with great powers.

And if people forget this when we deal with China, we're going to get ourselves into a whole heck of a lot of trouble, just like we've gotten ourselves into a whole lot of trouble with Russia over Ukraine. Power matters. Geopolitics matters. This is not to say that economics doesn't matter, but you want to understand that the world has not changed in fundamental ways as a result of the end of the Cold War.

ROSE: Well, with that, we're going to wrap this one up, but I want to thank John, I want to thank all of you. And, you know, now you know what it's like to be in a seminar at the University of Chicago with Professor Mearsheimer as your professor. Foreign Affairs, the cheapest and (inaudible) around, and we look forward to continuing to discuss this and other topics down the road. Thank all of you.

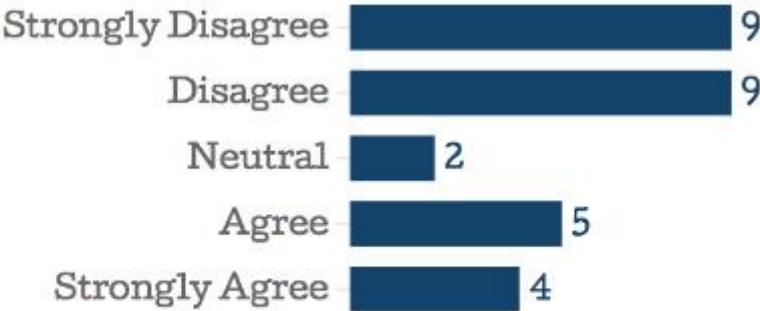
Who Is at Fault in Ukraine?

Foreign Affairs' Brain Trust Weighs In

We at *Foreign Affairs* have recently published a number of articles examining the extent to which the **ongoing crisis in Ukraine is the West's fault**. Those articles **sparked a heated** debate, so we decided to ask a broader pool of experts to state whether they agree or disagree with the following statement and to rate their confidence level about that answer.

The West provoked Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression in Russia's near abroad by expanding NATO and the EU after the Cold War.

Responses



Made with Chartbuilder

Full Results



[Leon Aron](#)

Strongly Disagree, Confidence Level 10

War is a continuation of politics by other means, and Russia's war on Ukraine is no exception. It is hard for anyone closely watching Russia's domestic political and economic dynamics in the past few years—especially since the 2008–9 crisis, the 2011–12 anti-regime demonstrations in over 80 of Russia's largest cities, the tenor of Putin's 2012 reelection campaign, and the authoritarian consolidation that followed—not to see the Ukrainian escapade as an epiphenomenon of the regime's domestic strategic direction. With foreign policy and Russia's great power status increasingly key to Putin's popularity (and thus to the regime's legitimacy), it is difficult to see how the Kremlin could have tolerated a Europe-bound Ukraine. I was on record as opposing the NATO expansion at the time as unnecessary

and divisive given what seemed to be Russia's trajectory in the early 1990s. But this is a straw man.



[Valerie Bunce](#)

Strongly Disagree, Confidence Level 8 Russia, no doubt, was threatened by the possible “defection” of a major state in what Russia defines as its zone of influence, but it was also afraid of the diffusion of popular protests from Ukraine to Russia. However, anger about EU and NATO expansion and the Kosovo precedent, together with fears about diffusion, do not by any means justify Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty.



[Ivo H. Daalder](#)

Strongly Disagree, Confidence Level 10 In the 1990 Charter of Paris, Russia accepted that all European nations are free to choose their alliances—a fundamental precept of the post-Cold War European security order. Russia did not oppose NATO enlargement in 1990 (to East Germany), in 1999 (to Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary), in 2004 (to the Baltic states, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia), and in 2009 (Albania and Croatia).



[Keith Darden](#)

Disagree, Confidence Level 7 Russia is concerned about the extension of U.S. power and influence to its immediate borders, particularly to areas that it considers historically Russian. Even if NATO and the EU did not exist, the presence of anti-Russian governments tied to the United States there would be considered a threat that Russian policymakers would work to counter—through economic pressure, covert action, and, if necessary, direct military confrontation.



[Masha Gessen](#)

Disagree, Confidence Level 10 I am taken aback by the question, which uses Kremlin

terminology. What the hell is “near abroad”? Ukraine is a sovereign country, as separate from Russia as, say, Finland. Incidentally, if Finland chose to join NATO, I bet we would be talking about it in terms of Finland’s choice, not NATO’s expansionism. And so have the 45 million people of the sovereign state of Ukraine, who sought the support and protection of Western powers, which have failed to protect them from Russian aggression.



James Goldgeier

Strongly Disagree, Confidence Level 10



Nikolas K.

Strongly Disagree, Confidence Level 10 This is the wrong question to ask. Expansion of NATO and the EU would not have been a problem if Russia were on track to join both organizations, for instance. The problems have arisen from the incompatibility of promising Russia a substantive “voice” in both organizations as they expanded, while simultaneously assuring new members that Russia would have no effective influence and certainly no “veto” over them.



Fiona Hill

Disagree, Confidence Level 9 The expansion of NATO was a factor shaping Putin’s views of the West and its intentions, and the European Union’s expansion was the proximate trigger for the events in Ukraine, but there were many other factors at play. NATO’s bombing of Belgrade in 1999 played more of a role in shaping Putin’s views about NATO’s intentions than the expansion did. The so-called color revolutions, Western support for regime change during the events of the Arab Spring, and Putin’s perceptions of Western involvement in fueling the protests in Russia in 2011–12 as well as in Ukraine in 2013 were also key factors. Putin’s actions in the near abroad are the result of a complex set of foreign policy and domestic drivers.



[Robert Jervis](#)

Agree, Confidence Level 9 Although Putin surely had multiple motives, NATO expansion was asking for trouble, which is why most IR experts (or at least those in the Realist community) opposed it at the time.



[Stephen Kotkin](#)

Strongly Agree, Confidence Level 9 Russian revision of the 1991 settlement would likely have happened even without extreme NATO expansion. Great powers often revise the status quo when they can.



[Ivan Krastev](#)

Disagree, Confidence Level 8 NATO and EU expansion probably were among the factors that contributed to Russia's aggression in its neighborhood, but I do disagree that, in the absence of NATO's expansion, Russia would have respected the sovereignty of its neighbors.



[Robert Legvold](#)

Agree, Confidence Level 7 This is a more complex issue than the question implies. NATO enlargement stimulated a basic mistrust of the United States and NATO allies. It was not the proximate cause for Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine, but an important part of the context. The cause was a combination of U.S. and EU actions in the February phase of the Ukrainian crisis and Putin's miscalculations about the opportunity that the rebellion in the Eastern Ukrainian provinces represented for Russia.



[Michael Mandelbaum](#)

Strongly Agree, Confidence Level 10 NATO expansion provoked Russian aggression against Ukraine indirectly. By excluding Russia from the Western-designed European security system, and by breaking what the Russians had every reason to believe was a promise to not expand the Atlantic Alliance (while making it clear that Russia itself was not welcome in it), NATO expansion did a great deal to foster a sense of hostility to the West in Russia. Putin has exploited and capitalized on that sense to justify his aggressive foreign policies toward the near abroad. Even without NATO expansion, Russia would not be a model democracy, but the default option for Russian foreign policy would not be anti-Western and anti-American. And Putin, or whoever was leading Russia, would find it much more difficult to whip up popular and elite support for the kind of policy he is following in Ukraine.



[Kimberly Marten](#)

Disagree, Confidence Level 10 The West did indeed provoke a sense of betrayal and wounded Russian pride by expanding NATO and the EU. This background mood explains why the Russian public accepts Putin's actions. But the choices he made are his and his alone. There is no evidence that Russian political leaders have actually believed that Russian security is threatened by NATO or EU expansion; indeed, former Russian President Boris Yeltsin and former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov explicitly accepted expansion in signing the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Putin has used NATO expansion as an excuse for actions that have bolstered his own goals of making Russia a great military power once more, as well as making himself a place in history for achieving it.



[Michael McFaul](#)

Strongly Disagree, Confidence Level 10



[John J. Mearsheimer](#)

Strongly Agree, Confidence Level 9 Russian leaders and elites made it clear from the mid-1990s forward that they viewed NATO expansion as a serious threat and a violation of a tacit bargain made at the end of the Cold War. Putin and other Russian leaders were especially exercised when NATO announced in April 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually join NATO; they warned it would lead to a crisis. Indeed it helped cause the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008. Yet Western leaders foolishly continued to pursue NATO and EU expansion, and that eventually led to the present crisis.



[Sarah E. Mendelson](#)

Strongly Disagree, Confidence Level 10 The statement is biased as written (the term “near abroad” is problematic, for example).



[Alexander J. Motyl](#)

Strongly Disagree, Confidence Level 10 All such claims are based on the usually implicit assumption that Putin was paranoid, aggressive, and imperialist to begin with. In other words, such claims assume what they purport to demonstrate. That’s bad reasoning.



[Mitchell A. Orenstein](#)

Strongly Disagree, Confidence Level 8



Cynthia A. Roberts

Disagree, Confidence Level 7 Russia seeks to be the regional hegemon and is willing to use its partially modernized military to assert its claims. The West made policy errors and should have anticipated the geopolitical consequences of expanding into the former USSR.



Stephen Sestanovich

Disagree, Confidence Level 8 Annoyed him? Sure. But people don't invade other countries because they're annoyed.



Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson

Agree, Confidence Level 7 A significant portion of recent developments in Ukraine and U.S.-Russian relations in general may be the result of a spiral. All other things being equal, major states prefer to keep other major states at arms-length (physically)—they prefer not to have other major players on or near their borders. NATO expansion since the mid-1990s, although understandable due to post-Cold War power dynamics, may have left Russia feeling betrayed (in light of Western pledges in 1990) and isolated writ large. We can criticize it, but we should not be surprised that Russia acted as it did when it looked as if Ukraine might be lost as a buffer zone between Russia and the West (and perhaps even join NATO or the EU outright). With Russia already fearing encirclement, Ukraine's loss would have left Russia even more isolated and confronted with Western power at its front door. Western actions since the mid-1990s may not have provoked Russian actions, but they helped set the stage on which Putin deemed action in Ukraine reasonable and in its self-interest.



Jack Snyder

Agree, Confidence Level 7 Without NATO/EU expansion, Putin would probably have chosen to continue to manipulate and dominate Ukraine without a military invasion.



[Angela Stent](#)

Disagree, Confidence Level 10 The West should have worked harder in the 1990s to create a Euro-Atlantic security architecture in which Russia had a stake. But the countries of Central and Eastern Europe had every right to join NATO and the EU after being under Russian/Soviet domination for decades or even centuries. Russia made little effort to come to terms with its lost empire. Is it entitled to dominate these countries forever?



[Kathryn Stoner](#)

Disagree, Confidence Level 8 If this were Russia's true reason for grabbing Crimea, then why did it not act strongly ten years ago or at least closer to the time when NATO expanded? The EU is not a military alliance and Ukraine was merely pursuing closer trade ties. NATO will not expand into Ukraine or further East. NATO expansion took place 20 years ago and it is hard to argue this is a clear trigger for Russia's actions. Putin has a vision of Russia as a rising superpower and wants to assert Russian dominance in this sphere of influence. He overlooks the fact, however, that his neighbors are sovereign states and have been so for two decades.



[Daniel Treisman](#)

Neutral, Confidence Level 1 NATO expansion did not make Putin's actions inevitable. And Putin might have acted similarly even without NATO expansion. But NATO expansion—especially given the way that it was done—increased the odds of Putin (or any other Russian leader in his place) taking some action aimed at increasing Russian control in its “near abroad.” Noting this does not, however, in any way justify Putin's actions, as is sometimes implied. It does not make the West in any way responsible or to blame for Putin's actions. And that is why the use of the word “provoked” is problematic. It suggests (a) that NATO and EU expansion were the only causes and were sufficient in themselves and (b) that Putin may have been in some sense justified because of the West's actions, or that the West “shares the blame.” Neither is the case. Had the survey statement been “The West increased the odds of Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression in...” I would have strongly agreed, with level of certainty 8. Given the question's actual wording, I agree with some of the implications of the sentence and disagree with others, so I choose “neutral” and low confidence.



Dmitri Trenin

Agree, Confidence Level 9 The root cause of the present crisis is the failure of the West to integrate Russia into a common security system. The mistake made after World War I and avoided after World War II with regard to Germany, was made again.



Stephen M. Walt

Strongly Agree, Confidence Level 9 NATO expansion is not the only reason for Russia's harsh reaction, nor is it a justification for some of what Russia has done. But as critics of expansion warned in the 1990s, the decision to move NATO eastward helped poison relations between Moscow and the United States and made Russian leaders far more sensitive about subsequent Western efforts to strengthen ties with Ukraine. Expanding NATO increased the alliance's defense burden without making it stronger, and made friction between East and West more likely. On balance, it was a strategic error.



William C. Wohlforth

Neutral, Confidence Level 8 What provoked Russia to move so dramatically was potential expansion to Ukraine rather than the earlier expansion as implied by the question. I think if the West drew the line at the Baltics, it would likely have been OK.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/1071272>

Why Ukraine Should Not Withdraw from Donbas

Emil A. Souleimanov

October 2014

In his most recent *Foreign Affairs* article,^[1] Alexander J. Motyl provocatively explains why Ukraine should withdraw from Donbas, a contested area in southeastern Ukraine, a portion of which is currently occupied by the Russian army and pro-Russian separatists. According to Motyl, rather than annexation, Russia is interested in the Donbas area remaining a formal part of Ukraine, thereby providing it with an effective tool with which to shape Kyiv's internal and external policies. According to Motyl, relinquishing control over Donbas would alleviate Ukraine of a "devastated, unstable, and permanently insecure rust belt that will continue to do what it has done since independence in 1991: serve as a channel for Russian influence on Ukraine's internal affairs and a home to political forces that oppose reform and integration with the West."

Emil A. Souleimanov is an associate professor of Russian and East European Studies at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. His work primarily focuses on security and conflict in the post-Soviet area.

Motyl's argument certainly has its strengths, particularly given that the Kremlin has thus far demonstrated reluctance to militarily invade southeastern Ukraine and annex the Donbas area in the same way it annexed Crimea. Indeed, losing Crimea and Donbas, Ukraine's historically most pro-Russian and least pro-Ukrainian areas, might paradoxically help to cement the notion of Ukrainian statehood in the rest of the country, thereby helping it to move closer to the West without the risk of inducing internal turmoil. Moreover, the provisions of the OSCE-brokered Minsk contact group's ceasefire agreement^[2] containing references to the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces as prospectively autonomous parts of a decentralized Ukraine suggest that Kyiv might have jumped into "Putin's trap." Nevertheless, when analyzed in the context of Moscow's longstanding goals in Ukraine, losing Donbas would not be a solution to the current crisis, kickstarting instead the process of Russia-backed expansion into Ukraine's other provinces. Given the psychological impact of such a territorial loss on Ukrainian society and Western reluctance to provide Ukraine with tangible support in its growing confrontation with Russia, the effects of losing Donbas could be devastating for Ukraine.

Indeed, a withdrawal from Donbas would not stop the territorial expansion of the pro-Russian separatists (or, by extension, of Moscow itself), and would rather encourage further expansion. A strategically located crossroads simultaneously situated deep within the heart of Ukraine and yet beyond Kyiv's control that both enjoys close ties with Russia and depends on it economically and politically, Donbas will likely become a breeding ground for Moscow-orchestrated efforts to destabilize the

neighboring areas of southern and eastern Ukraine, with the aim of expanding into them. Donbas, comprised of two provinces, Luhansk and Donetsk, is in fact just a tiny portion of what Russian strategists have recently come to designate as “Novorossia” or “New Russia”—a vast area of southern Ukraine stretching from the Romanian border in the west to the Russian border in the east. It is widely known that a number of Russian ideologists and politicians with close ties to the Kremlin have in recent months openly and consistently laid claim to “New Russia” as a historical part of Russia. Consisting of seven to eight Ukrainian provinces, or roughly one-third of Ukrainian territory, “New Russia” is believed to form an integral part of the “Russian world”, another newly invented construct used to legitimize Moscow’s current and potential territorial claims in the post-Soviet space—claims that extend well beyond Ukraine’s current borders.

Ukraine’s withdrawal from Donbas as a consequence of the Kremlin’s failure to impose its will on Kyiv, using Donbas as a tool to block Ukraine’s possible NATO and EU accession will be little consolation for Moscow, which is interested in much more than this tiny area. As Motyl and others have acknowledged, Russia’s key priority in Ukraine is to control the country as a whole. Stripped of Crimea and Donbas, Ukraine will appear as an increasingly unified country in terms of its pro-Western orientation, which would translate into the ultimate failure of Russia’s policy in and toward Ukraine. Moscow therefore needs to either control Kyiv politically or to undermine Ukrainian statehood.

Were Kyiv to withdraw from Donbas—thereby rendering Moscow’s strategic goal of controlling the country politically in vein—Moscow would likely nevertheless seek to attain the latter goal, effectively relaunching the “New Russia” project. This is why, and herein lies my primary disagreement with Motyl, a withdrawal from Donbas would be vastly problematic for Ukraine’s security, which ultimately trumps any possible benefits resulting from a potential withdrawal. Utilizing its control over Donbas as a strategic outpost, Moscow may use its extensive experience with hybrid or non-linear warfare to destabilize the neighboring areas to the east of Luhansk and Donetsk provinces with the aim of establishing allied separatist “republics” or carrying out provocations in an effort to legitimize incursions into mainland Ukraine from the Donbas area. Over time, these separatist “republics” may declare independence from Kyiv, seeking closer ties with and patronage of Russia. In order to avert prospective Western accusations of further antecedence in Ukraine’s internal affairs, Moscow would refrain from annexing the Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics”, and possibly also other self-styled entities, established within Ukraine’s newly occupied provinces. Moscow may or may not recognize their independence formally, but it will certainly provide security guarantees to them the way it has done to Georgia’s occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Importantly, a minority of Ukrainians in the country’s southern and eastern provinces is still sympathetic to Russia’s advances. This crucial minority could be used by Russian-backed separatists as their power base in the country. Ukraine’s unwillingness or inability to fight for Donbas, resulting in its

de facto withdrawal from the area and thereby relinquishing it to Moscow's control, would be considered a sign of weakness that would only strengthen the impression of Ukraine as a failed state in the minds of some of its citizens.

Lacking natural frontiers and terrain that disables effective guerilla tactics (Ukraine's southeastern provinces are flat and sparsely wooded), the Moscow-backed Donbas separatists may with relative ease push as far westward as the Dnieper River. Moreover, with the central government lacking tangible economic and military support from the West and with separatists backed by regular, though misguided, Russian army units, they would have the potential to threaten Ukraine's central areas as well as Kyiv itself, forcing the central government into further concessions. For purposes of further territorial expansion, control over Donbas is all the more important given the fact that the Crimean peninsula is connected to mainland Ukraine through a narrow strip of land that is much easier to defend.

Another reason why Kyiv should not abandon Donbas is the enormous demoralizing effect that such a move would likely impose on Ukrainian society. A withdrawal from Donbas would dramatically weaken the Ukrainians' key commitment to defending their country against all odds. Ironically, Kyiv's surrender of Crimea without firing a single shot months ago seems to have caused more distress and humiliation to ordinary Ukrainians than the Ukrainian military's recent failures in Donbas caused by the Russian army's direct intervention. Given the Kremlin's far-reaching goals in Ukraine, such demoralization would have devastating consequences for Ukrainians' determination to sacrifice for the sake of defending the rest of their country. Under such dramatic circumstances, the risk of a central government accepting any Moscow-imposed conditions would be much higher than it is currently. Ukraine, as the weaker side of the conflict, may only win a war with Russia by making the cost of war unbearable for the latter's public opinion; unwilling to resist, Ukrainians would risk losing all chances to defend their statehood.

Facing a military confrontation with its much stronger neighbor, Ukraine has no easy options on the table. In spite of the challenges, abandoning Donbas is neither the best option for the future of Ukrainian territorial integrity and statehood nor for enduring peace. Therefore, the provisions of the Minsk protocol – if they hold – envisaging Ukraine's renewed authority over the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces are to be regarded as the lesser evil.

[1]_ <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141946/alexander-j-motyl/putins-trap>

[2]_ <http://www.osce.org/home/123257>

<http://www.thewashingtonreview.org/articles/why-ukraine-should-not-withdraw-from-donbas.html>