Why Did Russia Launch This Catastrophic War?

Vladimir Putin's Annual Press Conference, December 23, 2021:

Diana Magnay (*Sky News* Presenter):

> What is it that you think that the West does not understand about Russia or your intentions?

Vladimir Putin:

> Does the West understand or fail to understand something? You know, sometimes I get the feeling we [Russia and the West] live in different worlds. I just talked about things that are obvious. How can you not understand them?

A few weeks ago, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a "partial mobilization" of Russia's armed forces and, not for the first time, threatened the West with nuclear annihilation. Given the seriousness of the threat—as well as the undeniable destructive power of the person who made it—the obvious question to ask is: *How are we to avoid nuclear war?* Basic common sense informs us that to answer this question satisfactorily we must first answer another: *Why is nuclear war being threatened in the first place*? What would compel the undeniably popular leader of a proud and culturally rich country of 144 million people to so brazenly jeopardize the future survival of his own people—and, indeed, the survival of the human species? What on Earth could possibly have led to this?

Many in the West have suggested that the answer to this question is obvious: it is that Putin is insane or dying or frustrated in his failure to resurrect the Tsarist empire or Soviet Union and/or destroy Ukraine. Such answers, however, are at best extremely simplistic and, at worst, distract us from the true—or, at the very least, far more significant—causes of the current crisis. Let us try to understand just what those causes are.

First, it is incumbent upon us to spend some time reflecting upon the fallout of the war in Ukraine so far. In short, Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in February of this year—in addition to being unquestionably illegal[1]—has led to a moral and humanitarian catastrophe not just for Ukraine, but for the world. It has killed tens of thousands of Ukrainians, including nearly 1,000 children. It has led to the displacement of 7 million people. It has physically maimed thousands of people—in many cases, permanently—and led to a soaring mental

health crisis among both Ukrainian adults and children. It has shattered Ukraine's economy, caused severe damage to numerous historical and cultural sites, and virtually destroyed entire cities.

Russia's economy has also been hit hard by the war and, in particular, by Western sanctions. Thousands of Russians who worked for Western firms prior to the invasion have lost their jobs as their employers have fled the country. Inflation has skyrocketed, while internal forecasts have predicted that the economy will remain in a recession until 2024. There have been reports of long queues for and even shortages of basic goods such as sugar and buckwheat, while Russian industry is struggling to import critical advanced technology and Russian airlines have struggled to find spare parts to repair their planes. Russia's recent decision to cut gas supplies to Europe, though potentially devastating for Europeans, is also potentially severely harmful for Russia, given its overwhelming dependence on energy exports and its likely inability to find similarly profitable export markets in Asia.

Furthermore, owing to Ukraine's status as the "world's breadbasket," the war has had profound ramifications outside of Eastern Europe: millions of citizens in developing countries, including many children, are now facing severe malnutrition or even starvation. Poorer Westerners, though far less adversely affected than those in the developing world, are also struggling to cope with the consequent steep increases in food and energy costs.

In addition to causing a near-unfathomable amount of human suffering, the war threatens the future of organized human existence. This is for two reasons.

First, and as previously indicated, the war has significantly increased the likelihood of a direct military confrontation between the world's two foremost nuclear superpowers, namely the U.S. and Russia. Indeed, since the war began, Russia's political and media elites (in addition to Putin himself) have repeatedly threatened to employ nuclear weapons to achieve their declared military objectives to "denazify" and "demilitarize" Ukraine. It is similarly significant that one month before the invasion, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* ominously decreed that human civilization is "at doom's doorstep," and placed their famous Doomsday Clock at 100 seconds to midnight—"the closest it has ever been to civilization-ending apocalypse." Several months into the war, we are unquestionably much closer to crossing the threshold into full-blown Armageddon—and Putin's recent threat has, if anything, pushed us even nearer to the nuclear precipice.

Second, the war has led to a "gold rush" for new fossil fuel projects as the West has attempted to wean itself off Russian gas and oil. This, according to the Climate Action Tracker research group, risks locking the world into "irreversible warming," which in turn will help us continue on the path we are already on toward rising sea levels, the flooding of coastal cities, drought, the destruction of marine and land-based ecosystems, and the mass migration of humans and other species.

The war has also had a profoundly negative impact on Russia's own security—a particularly ironic fact given that one of Putin's explicit goals in launching the war was to "guarantee the security of our Motherland." This is for two reasons. First, NATO expansion—Russia's core security concern[2]—has accelerated as a direct consequence of Russia's invasion. Since the start of the war, Finland, Sweden, and even Ukraine itself have submitted applications to join the alliance, while the leaders of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina have also renewed calls for their own admittance. Moreover, Germany—a country which almost single-handedly destroyed Russia twice in the last century—has significantly ramped up its military spending, while it and many other NATO countries have supplied Ukraine with new and highly sophisticated weaponry. NATO has also added four further battlegroups to its eastern flank in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia, while both Moldova and Ukraine have been pulled further into the West's orbit by being granted European Union candidate status. What's more, Zelensky recently approved Ukraine's formal application for "fast-track" NATO membership.

Second, the war has deleteriously affected Russia's own military. Tens of thousands of Russian soldiers are estimated to have been killed or wounded: even Putin's press secretary, Dmitri Peskov, has admitted that Russian casualties have been "significant." In addition, the Russian army has lost hundreds of tanks and many thousands more armored vehicles and, perhaps most crucial of all, its reputation as a feared fighting force has been shattered. The fact that Russia failed even to occupy Kharkiv, a Russian-speaking city just 25 miles from its border, speaks volumes about its army's military capabilities—or, rather, its considerable frailties.

It is thus difficult to disagree with veteran foreign correspondent Patrick Cockburn's assessment that Putin's decision to invade Ukraine "will probably be remembered as the most disastrous decision in Russian history." I, however, would be tempted to go even further: by pushing the world significantly closer to climate catastrophe and nuclear Armageddon, Putin's decision to invade may well end up ranking as the single worst decision in *human* history—assuming, of course, that our species lives long enough to remember the war's bloody aftermath.

Why, then, did Russia launch such a catastrophic, criminal war? Let us try to understand the war's causes from the Russian perspective. To do so is not to justify or excuse, but to try to comprehend the worldview that led to the war, in the hope that this might help us to end it. To understand Russian decision-making, we must revisit the following history:

- The Second World War.
- The history of NATO expansion and aggression, and the unilateral U.S. withdrawal from nuclear arms treaties.
- Russia's specific concerns regarding Ukraine.

The Second World War

The victory of the Soviet Union, the predecessor of the Russian state, over Nazi Germany in World War II has played a significant role in defining contemporary Russia's identity and worldview. Famously, the Nazi invasion was almost completely unanticipated by the Soviet leadership, who believed that Hitler would not contemplate breaking the nonaggression pact between the countries signed two years earlier, and that, moreover, the Nazis would not dare fight a war on two fronts (a major reason for the German defeat in World War One). As William L. Shirer notes in his magisterial work, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*:

> *"It is almost inconceivable but nevertheless true that the men in the Kremlin, for all the reputation they had of being suspicious, crafty and hardheaded, and despite all the evidence and all the warnings that stared them in the face, did not realize up until the last moment that they were to be hit, and with a force which would almost destroy their nation."*

As many as 27 million Soviet citizens died during the war, including approximately 14 million ethnic Russians. During the siege of Leningrad alone, approximately 1.1 million people died —more than the *combined* deaths of *all* U.S. and U.K. citizens during the war. (Notably, Putin's 1-year-old brother, Viktor, also died during the siege.) Desperate hunger led many civilians to eat wallpaper, sawdust, and cats; many even resorted to cannibalism. Tens of thousands of Soviet cities, towns, and villages were also destroyed during the war, as well as thousands of churches and hundreds of synagogues. Overall, the Nazi invasion led to the Soviet Union losing up to a third of its wealth and one-eighth of its citizenry; it took eighteen years for the country to recover its pre-war population levels.

The war is not ancient history for Russians. Every year, on May 9—Russia's "Victory Day," a deeply emotional public holiday commemorating the Russian victory in World War Two (or the "Great Patriotic War," as it is known in Russia)—Russians march in major cities across their country holding placards with pictures of their relatives who fought or served during the war. Hundreds of thousands of Russians still have vivid memories of what happened during the war years; the stories of their immense suffering are, in turn, faithfully transmitted from generation to generation. To give just one illustrative anecdote: when I was on holiday in St. Petersburg a few years ago, my tour guide informed me that her grandmother, who miraculously survived the siege of Leningrad, does not celebrate her own birthday. "She considers May 9 her birthday," my tour guide said. "It is the only day which is sacred to her."

Thus, a major event in Russia's contemporary history—the Nazi invasion—involved the failure of its political leadership to take a security threat sufficiently seriously on its border, and this failure not only led to the deaths of tens of millions of its citizens, but almost completely obliterated the nation itself. Russia, in other words, is a country which, for

perfectly comprehensible historical reasons, is *extraordinarily sensitive* about any potential military buildup on its borders. It is a country which is committed to never making the same mistake again.

NATO Expansion

Besides the Second World War, there are other crucial pieces of historical context that are worth mentioning. Western leaders misled Russia during the 1990s about NATO expansion after the admission of a unified Germany into the alliance (Germany, it bears repeating, is a country which had almost destroyed Russia twice in the preceding century). As declassified documents released in 2017 by the National Security Archive at George Washington University show, such promises were made on multiple occasions by various Western leaders and officials, including most famously by Secretary of State James Baker, who told president of the U.S.S.R. Mikhail Gorbachev *three times* that NATO would not expand "one inch to the East" of Germany. As the introduction to the published archive notes:

> *"U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's famous 'not one inch eastward' assurance about NATO expansion in his meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on February 9, 1990, was part of a cascade of assurances about Soviet security given by Western leaders to Gorbachev and other Soviet officials throughout the process of German unification in 1990 and on into 1991. … The documents show that … subsequent Soviet and Russian complaints about being misled about NATO expansion were founded in written contemporaneous memcons [memoranda of conversations] and telcons [telephone conversations] at the highest levels."*

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO has added 14 members—almost doubling the alliance's size—in five separate waves of eastward expansion: the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined in 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined in 2004; Albania and Croatia joined in 2009; Montenegro joined in 2017; and the latest member, North Macedonia, became a member just two years ago, in 2020. Furthermore, at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, NATO explicitly declared that both Georgia and Ukraine would eventually become members of the alliance. (The Summit Declaration reads: "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.")

In short: Western promises of NATO non-expansion were repeatedly made, and they were repeatedly broken. In fact, it is worse than this: since these promises were made, other explicit promises to other countries (namely, Georgia and Ukraine) have been made which further contradict the original promises given to Soviet (or Russian) leaders in the 1990s. Thus, NATO, the world's most powerful military alliance whose original *raison d'être* was to confront and contain the Soviet presence in Central and Eastern Europe has, since the fall of

the Soviet Union, expanded closer and closer to Russia's borders. What's more, it has issued official, explicit statements to the effect that it will come closer still. Is it any wonder the Russians are nervous?

NATO apologists typically try to counter this point by arguing—or, more typically, simply asserting—that Russia has no reason to be fearful of NATO's expansion because NATO is a "defensive," rather than offensive, military alliance. This assertion, however, is simply impossible to square with NATO's recent history:

- In 1999, NATO illegally bombed Yugoslavia, killing hundreds of civilians and, according to Amnesty International, committed war crimes.
- In 2001, NATO illegally attacked Afghanistan, leading to a disastrous 20-year occupation which killed hundreds of thousands of people and also led to credible allegations of war crimes.
- In 2003, multiple NATO countries, including most notably the U.S. and the U.K., illegally invaded Iraq, resulting in, according to one estimate, a million deaths. Even Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister at the time, has admitted that the Iraq War led to the rise of ISIS. (NATO was also directly involved in providing military training assistance in Iraq from 2004-2011.)
- In 2011, NATO illegally defied a U.N. mandate to implement a no-fly zone over Libya to enact regime change in the country. Among other things, the intervention empowered Islamic extremists, precipitated the return of slavery to the country, and led to Libya's former leader, Muammar Gaddafi, being sodomized with a knife shortly before being executed.[3]

These aggressive military interventions—and their almost uniformly disastrous consequences—are not the only reasons Russia has to be fearful. In particular, decisions by the U.S. to unilaterally withdraw from crucial nuclear armament treaties over the last two decades have significantly exacerbated Russia's security concerns.

- In 2002, the U.S. withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, a Cold War era agreement often described as the "cornerstone of strategic stability" in Europe.
- In 2019, the U.S. pulled out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), another critical nuclear agreement responsible for the elimination of thousands of mid-range Soviet and U.S. nuclear missiles.
- In 2020, the U.S. withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, yet another vital agreement which allowed the signatories to aerially monitor each other's military forces and activities.

In addition to this, the U.S./NATO has deployed "missile defense systems" in Poland and Romania, ostensibly to counter the threat of an attack from Iran. The Russians, understandably, view such deployments as potentially offensive systems designed to

undermine their own security—a belief supported by the fact that Putin's proposal for the U.S. to build a joint missile defense system in Azerbaijan, a country more than a thousand miles closer to the Iranian border than Poland and Romania, was ignored.

Russia's Concerns Regarding Ukraine

Russia has particular reasons to be worried about Ukraine's incorporation into a hostile military alliance. Quite apart from the fact that Ukraine constitutes one of the traditional invasion routes into Russia, the Kremlin has been alarmed by the empowerment of far-right groups and undisguised Russophobia across Ukraine ever since the U.S.-backed "Euromaidan" uprising of 2014, which removed the elected president, Viktor Yanukovych, from power.

The problem of far-right groups and Russophobia should not, of course, be overstated. For however serious the problem of Russophobia or neo-fascism is in Ukraine, it did not preclude Ukraine's current president, Volodymyr Zelensky, a Russian-speaking Jew, from winning a landslide election back in 2019. Moreover, by illegally annexing Crimea and fomenting a separatist war in the east of Ukraine in 2014, Russia itself clearly bears significant responsibility for the increase in anti-Russian sentiment throughout the rest of the country.

However, the problem should not be understated, either. As Ukraine expert Lev Golinkin, writing in *The Nation*, recently put it:

> *"Today, increasing reports of far-right violence, ultranationalism, and erosion of basic freedoms are giving the lie to the West's initial euphoria [after the 2014 "Euromaidan Revolution"]. There are neo-Nazi pogroms against the Roma, rampant attacks on feminists and LGBT groups, book bans, and state-sponsored glorification of Nazi collaborators.*
>
> *These stories of Ukraine's dark nationalism aren't coming out of Moscow; they're being filed by Western media, including US-funded Radio Free Europe (RFE); Jewish organizations such as the World Jewish Congress and the Simon Wiesenthal Center; and watchdogs like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Freedom House, which issued a joint report warning that Kiev is losing the monopoly on the use of force in the country as far-right gangs operate with impunity."*

Moreover, as Golinkin points out, by incorporating the infamous Azov Battalion—previously described by *TheNew York Times* as "openly neo-Nazi"—into Ukraine's National Guard, "Ukraine is [thus] the world's only nation to have a neo-Nazi formation in its armed forces." Indeed, in 2014, as a consequence of the battalion's actions during the post-Euromaidan separatist war in eastern Ukraine, the group was praised by then President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, as consisting of "our best warriors."[4])

Clearly, the presence of neo-Nazis in Ukraine is exploited by Russia for its own propagandistic purposes. Putin himself often suggests, preposterously, that the government in Kiev is a full-blown neo-Nazi regime. Nevertheless, it is a simple and unarguable fact that *there are* neo-Nazis in Ukraine; indeed, according to the country's former president, they constitute the nation's "best warriors." For a nation that lost tens of millions of its own citizens at the hands of the Nazis during World War Two, one can certainly understand why such facts—coupled with the constitutionally dubious nature of Yanukovych's removal and the subsequent enormous increase in military aid and training from (and with) Russia's main geostrategic rivals (i.e., the U.S./NATO)—would make Russia exceedingly anxious.[5]

One final point on the issue of Russia's security is worth making. Those who claim that Russia's security concerns are legitimate typically appeal to a specific analogy in order to support their view: they ask how the *U.S.* would react if Mexico or Canada were to announce their intention to join a Russian- or Chinese-led military alliance.

This analogy has wide appeal: notable proponents of it include the acclaimed international relations scholar John Mearsheimer ("Imagine the outrage in Washington if China built an impressive military alliance and tried to include Canada and Mexico in it"), the celebrated late historian of Russia Stephen F. Cohen ("Imagine a Russian-Chinese 'sphere' in Canada or Mexico"), the world-renowned philosopher and political activist Noam Chomsky ("We can imagine, for example, how the U.S. would have reacted, say, during the Cold War if the Warsaw Pact had extended to Latin America, and Mexico and Canada were now planning to join the Warsaw Pact"), and, perhaps most significantly, current Russian president Vladimir Putin ("What would the Americans say if we stationed our missiles on the border between Canada and the United States, or between Mexico and the United States?").

This analogy is usually cited in order to argue that America would react aggressively to any attempt by Russia or China to incorporate Mexico or Canada into their own military alliance. Thus, it is claimed that the U.S. is being *hypocritical* when it criticizes Russia for expressing concerns about NATO expansion—or, for that matter, when it denounces Russia for undertaking aggressive actions aimed at countering such expansion (by, e.g., invading Ukraine).

The charge of hypocrisy is difficult to refute, not least because something not too dissimilar to this hypothetical scenario has historical precedent (*cf.* the Cuban Missile Crisis).[6] But the analogy is also in many ways seriously deficient—and, what's more, deficient *in Russia's favor*. To make the analogy more precise, we would need to add U.S. analogues to all of the previously discussed Russian concerns (i.e., the fear of a neighboring military power due to a previous war, the broken promises about NATO expansion, and the rise of hostile elements within a nearby country). Once this analogy has been properly fleshed out, could one

seriously suggest that the U.S. would not act (at least) as aggressively as Russia has? More to the point, could one *seriously* argue that, in such an analogous scenario, the U.S. would have precisely *zero* legitimate security concerns?

To ask these questions is, I think, to answer them.

The Failure of Diplomacy

But why did Putin invade Ukraine rather than addressing security concerns peacefully, through negotiation and diplomacy?

A close look at the history of NATO is revealing. In particular, Russia tried for over 30 years to acquire some binding agreements on NATO non-expansion. But this effort failed largely for two reasons:

1. Senior U.S. and NATO officials refused to concede that Russia could prevent Ukraine's (or any other non-NATO country's) accession to NATO through diplomatic channels.
2. The one legal document which would have effectively guaranteed Ukraine's permanent non-accession to NATO, Minsk II, failed to be implemented.

Over the last 30 years, multiple Russian leaders have warned about the threat NATO expansion poses to Russian security. In 1995, Russian President Boris Yeltsin informed U.S. President Bill Clinton that "the borders of NATO expanding towards those of Russia" would "constitute a betrayal" and "humiliation" of the Russian people; in 1997, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev warned the U.S. Congress that he believed NATO expansion was "a mistake, it is a bad mistake, and I am not persuaded by the assurances I hear that Russia has nothing to worry about"; and in a famous speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin labeled NATO expansion a "serious provocation that reduces mutual trust." Indeed, in December last year, just two months before its invasion of Ukraine, Russia publicly published proposed draft treaties with NATO and the U.S,, demanding an end to any further eastward expansion of the alliance—a demand which NATO unanimously rebuffed, and which the U.S. in particular rejected as a "complete non-starter."

Russian perceptions that NATO expansion was a mistake have been echoed over the years by some of the most senior members of the American political and intellectual establishment. Distinguished former statesman George Kennan, famous for his advocacy of the policy of "containment" during the Cold War, in 1998 labeled NATO expansion "a tragic mistake" for which there was "no reason whatsoever." Influential *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman in 1996 similarly described NATO expansion as "the most ill-conceived project of the post-cold-war era." Celebrated liberal senator Daniel Moynihan in 1998 also warned that, by expanding NATO, "we [the U.S.] have no idea what we're getting into." Perhaps the foremost statesman warning of the perils of NATO expansion, however, has been former

Ambassador to Moscow and current CIA Director William J. Burns. In his recently published memoir, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal*, Burns recounts how, while working as a counselor for political affairs at the U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1994, he reported back to Washington that "hostility to early NATO expansion is almost universally felt across the political spectrum here." (Burns himself was of the mind in the mid-1990s that "NATO expansion was premature at best, and needlessly provocative at worst.") Then, in 2008, in a memo to then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Burns was significantly more forthright—as well as eerily prescient:

> *"Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin's sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests. At this stage, a MAP [Membership Action Plan, a necessary precursor to joining NATO] would be seen not as a technical step along a long road toward membership, but as throwing down the strategic gauntlet. Today's Russia will respond. Russian-Ukrainian relations will go into a deep freeze. … It will create fertile soil for Russian meddling in Crimea and eastern Ukraine."*[7]

Undeterred by such warnings from Russian leaders and even members of its own establishment, the U.S. pressed ahead with NATO enlargement. Moreover, Western leaders have repeatedly made it emphatically clear that their rejection of Russian demands is both *principled* and *nonnegotiable*.

Thus, Secretary of State Antony Blinken affirmed in January this year that "there are core principles that we are committed to uphold and defend, including Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the right of states to choose their own security arrangements and alliances." On this core principle, Blinken added, "there is no change; there will be no change." Similarly, former U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said in early February that "as an alliance we must draw lines in the snow and be clear there are principles upon which we will not compromise." He added: "That includes the security of every NATO country and the right of every European democracy to aspire to NATO membership." The alliance's Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, also echoed this point just weeks before the invasion: "The big powers cannot decide about the smaller ones. […] [One should uphold] the sacred and important principle of the right of every nation to decide its own path and to respect that decision." Moreover, Stoltenberg added, this "sacred principle" would not be "compromise[d]."[8]

Ignoring the plausible charge of U.S./NATO hypocrisy in flaunting this principle of free political association (given the U.S.'s repeated overthrow of democratically-elected governments around the world and, most jarringly in this instance, its putting heavy pressure on Germany for many years to shelve its Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline with Russia), the implication of Blinken's, Johnson's, and Stoltenberg's words are clear and worth re-

emphasizing: *Russia cannot, and moreover has no right, to prevent NATO's eastward expansion through diplomacy or negotiation.* This, in turn, has the inevitable, but only rarely noted corollary: *the only way in which Russia can directly prevent NATO expansion is through force.*

This is not to say, of course, that this principle of free political association does not have a certain ring of plausibility. After all, *why shouldn't* it be the case that countries—and supra-national institutions such as NATO—be free to make their own decisions regarding their political futures? *Why should* a third country be able to effectively veto any decisions made between two or more sovereign nations or supra-national institutions? If Ukraine wants to become a member of NATO—and pre-war and current polls, as well as its own constitution and indeed recent formal membership application, make it emphatically clear that it *does* want to become a member—then *surely* it should only be up to NATO, and not Russia, to decide whether or not to admit it?

Plausible though this chain of reasoning undoubtedly is, however, Russia's reply to it is not easily dismissed. In particular, Russia argues that, although it agrees with the principle of free political association all other things being equal, the principle nevertheless *conflicts* in this specific context with the legal principle of the "indivisibility of security" to which Western countries are signatories (*c.f.*, 1975 Helsinki Act, the 1990 Charter of Paris, the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Summit, and the 2010 OSCE Astana Summit). In particular, and in the words of the latter two agreements, each state is obliged "not [to] strengthen [its] security at the expense of the security of other states." Thus, Russia argues, Ukraine has no right to join NATO, given that its membership would, they allege, weaken Russian security, even if it strengthens the security of Ukraine and other NATO members. NATO, rather unsurprisingly, responds to this by reiterating its point that NATO expansion does not pose a security threat to Russia—a claim the invalidity of which we have already discussed.

However, the alliance also notes, correctly, that these agreements affirm the "inherent right" of each nation "to choose or change its security arrangements." Indeed, it seems clear that, on this particular legal issue, Russia's and the West's arguments cancel each other out: the principle of free political association is, upon reflection, simply *incompatible* with the principle of the indivisibility of security. The central problem, in other words, lies not with any diplomatic sophistry on behalf of Russia or the West, but with the inherently contradictory nature of the original agreements themselves.

The Failure of Minsk II

Setting this tangled legal issue to one side, one should note that, in the case of Ukraine specifically, Russia had one final legalistic-diplomatic recourse to prevent NATO expansion. These were the Minsk Accords, in particular, the "Minsk II Agreement," drawn up in February

2015 by the governments of France, Germany, Ukraine, and Russia, and subsequently endorsed by the U.S, the European Union, and the United Nations. The central purpose of Minsk II was to end the conflict between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region of southeastern Ukraine: its crucial provisions included the demilitarization of the Donbas region (and, hence, an end to the fighting) in exchange for the region's "autonomy"—an autonomy which, the Russians hoped, would imply its having an effective veto of major Ukrainian government foreign policy decisions including, most crucially, any decision to join NATO.

For seven years, Russia had been consistently and vociferously calling for the agreement's implementation. Shortly after the agreement was signed, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov remarked that "the agreement was supported at the highest level and we hope that all parties will honor their commitments." In 2019, president Vladimir Putin affirmed that "our position is very simple: we stand for the implementation of the Minsk agreements." In 2021, foreign minister Sergei Lavrov emphasized "the absolute necessity of the full, consistent, comprehensive implementation of the Minsk Package of Measures." And just weeks before the invasion, Putin himself reiterated his "belief [that] there is simply no alternative" to the full implementation of the Minsk accords.[9] Since 2015, Germany and France had also repeatedly called for Minsk II's implementation; indeed, they were even occasionallyjoined, somewhat half-heartedly, by the U.S.

The Ukrainian government, however, staunchly resisted implementing the agreement. In June 2018, then Interior Minister Arsen Avakov stated: "The Minsk process has played its role and at the moment it is dead. The Minsk process in its current form does not solve the problems of Ukraine in any way." Former President Petro Poroshenko—who had been president of the country when the original agreement was signed—echoed Avakov's remarks: "The Minsk format of negotiations no longer exists," he said. In early February this year, Oleksiy Danilov, the head of the National Security Council of Ukraine, repeated this point: "It's impossible to implement [these] documents. … If they [the Russians, Germans, and French] insist on implementing the agreements as they are, it will be very dangerous for our country." Valeriy Chaly, a member of the original Ukrainian delegation to Minsk, agreed with Danilov's remarks: "The circumstances have changed significantly, so the Minsk agreements are no longer the political decisions that can be used. They need to be totally renegotiated."

It is primarily for these reasons that Ukraine specialist Anatol Lieven, in addition to pointing out before the invasion that "the only basis for a settlement is that of the Minsk II Protocol" and remarking (correctly) that "the depth of Russia's commitment to this [the Minsk II] solution would of course have to be carefully tested in practice," blamed the failure of Minsk II squarely on "the refusal of Ukrainian governments to implement the [Minsk II-based] solution and the refusal of the United States to put pressure on them to do so." Similar views

have also been expressed by others, including fellow Ukraine expert <u>Lev Golinkin</u>.(Golinkin also <u>attributes</u> the Minsk Accords' "continued derailment" to the influence of the Ukrainian far-right, for whom the agreements are "anathema.")

The Missing Diplomatic Solutions?

Some have argued that, in spite of more than 30 years of failed diplomacy between Russia and the West and, in particular, the failed implementation of Minsk II, there were nevertheless other diplomatic options that Russia could have pursued. Here I will address two of the more promising—but, I will argue, nonetheless very far from convincing—of such proposals.

The first has been suggested by Noam Chomsky, a scholar who is highly critical of both NATO expansion and Putin's "criminal invasion." In particular, Chomsky has <u>claimed</u> that Putin should have "grasped [French President Emmanuel Macron's] tentative proposals … to try to reach an accommodation with Europe, to take steps toward a European common home."

It is true that Macron had made earlier suggestions to this effect. In a <u>press conference</u> with Putin held just weeks before the invasion, Macron said that "I believe in Europe and European unity, and this is a fundamental matter," and also explicitly affirmed his belief that "Russia is a European country" and that "Europe should be able to work with Russia and find ways to build the future in Europe with Europeans." However, in the same press conference Macron also described NATO's "open-door policy" as "very important"—indeed, even "<u>essential</u>"—and that "it would be very difficult" for NATO to "change its stand" on this issue. Moreover, Macron emphasized the "existing differences, misunderstandings, and the different views that NATO and Russia have had on [the issue of NATO expansion] in the past few decades," and reminded his Russian counterpart that the Paris Charter—which, as previously mentioned, codified the importance of the "indivisibility of security"—"also states clearly, in black and white, the need to respect sovereignty, territorial integrity, and human rights."

In other words, on the core issue of NATO expansion, Macron offered essentially nothing. Moreover, when specifically pressed on the Russian argument appealing to the indivisibility of security, he fell back on the standard NATO talking point that this principle must not preclude "respect" for states' "sovereignty"—a sovereignty which would, presumably, imply states' rights to choose their own security alliances, including, crucially, the right to become a member of NATO.[10]

The second such diplomatic solution has been suggested by the contents of a recent <u>Reuters</u> report, which has claimed that "as the war began" Putin rejected a Ukrainian peace offer which included a commitment by Ukraine not to seek NATO membership. Crucially,

Reuters' sources for this claim—described anonymously as "three people close to the Russian leadership"—disagree as to *when* exactly the alleged peace offer was made: two of the sources claim that the offer was put forward "immediately after" the invasion, while the third source claims the offer was made "just before" the invasion.

Quite apart from the fact that the sources themselves disagree about a crucial fact pertaining to the alleged peace deal, there are other reasons to be skeptical of the report's veracity. In particular, as the article itself notes, the Ukrainian leadership has refused to confirm the deal's existence, while the piece also admits that "Reuters was unable to verify independently that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy or senior officials in his government were committed to the deal." (The Russians, in turn, vigorously deny that such a deal was ever put forward.) Moreover, the purported existence of the deal is extremely difficult (although not technically impossible) to reconcile with other plausible reports to the effect that Russia was prepared to accept a similar peace settlement relatively early on during the invasion.

Assuming the deal was in fact offered, however, then Putin should, naturally, be vigorously condemned for not taking it. Nevertheless, even it was (sincerely) offered, it is not too difficult to guess what Putin's reasoning for rejecting it might have been: namely, that after *30 years* of trying to engage the West in diplomatic negotiations over NATO expansion, the offer had simply come *too late in the day*: the decision to invade had almost certainly already been taken (indeed, according to the majority of the sources, the invasion itself was *already underway*), the democratically elected government in Kyiv would soon (Putin incorrectly believed) be overthrown, and relations with the West had, in any case, already been shattered. In other words: Putin had, at that point, finally snapped.[11]

Today, Russia finds itself in a slightly paradoxical situation: it is a country with undeniably legitimate security concerns, but it nevertheless seems to have no legitimate means of addressing them. Indeed, with multiple Western leaders currently vehemently expressing their support to help Ukraine "win" the war, it would appear that Russia has no way out: either it continues fighting this catastrophic, immoral, and illegal war to the bitter (and possibly apocalyptic) end, or it stops fighting, abandons its annexed/occupied regions in the east and south of Ukraine, and ultimately admits defeat—which would, of course, leave its very real security concerns completely unaddressed.[12]

Having said this, it is crucial to note that *Russia's* inability to legitimately address its security concerns does *not* mean that there is *no* acceptable wayof addressing them. On the contrary, there is. In particular, *we*—that is, citizens of NATO (or NATO-candidate) countries —*do* have the means of addressing them. More specifically, we can—and should—pressure our *own* governments to understand the legitimacy of Russia's security concerns and, in particular, compel them to sign binding agreements with Russia so as to guarantee the latter's security and, most crucially, to prevent any further expansion of the alliance.

Indeed, given that NATO does, by and large, consist of democracies, and given that, as Article 10 of NATO's Founding Treaty affirms, any issue pertaining to expansion requires the "unanimous agreement" of all NATO's current members, we have good reason to be optimistic. For these two facts mean that any decisions pertaining to NATO expansion can in principle be influenced by public pressure—in theory, by a successful pressure campaign in just *one* NATO country.

Clearly, however, pressuring one's elected representatives to enact such legislation—in addition to persuading one's fellow citizenry of the necessity of such political action—will be a far from straightforward task. One obvious hurdle to overcome is the fact that Western public support for NATO has significantly increased since Russia's invasion. Such a shift in attitudes is certainly understandable, especially with our daily news filled with stories of the (genuinely horrific) human suffering unleashed by Russia's war. Furthermore, in many cases, it is likely that any attempt to persuade one's fellow citizens or elected representatives that Russia's security concerns are legitimate and need to be resolved will induce the terse response that, given Russia's aggressive behavior, the *last* thing the West should do is to attempt to address its security concerns: Russia, many will claim, should not be "rewarded" for its behavior; on the contrary, it must be "punished."

As understandable as this response might be, it is, I believe, nevertheless gravely mistaken. To continue to "punish" Russia for its behavior is, *ipso facto*, to continue a war that has already cost tens of thousands of lives; it is to condemn millions in developing countries to malnutrition and even starvation; and it is, most crucially of all, to push the world ever closer to the brink of nuclear apocalypse. Indeed, however strong one's moral urge to "punish" Russia might be, it surely cannot outweigh the importance of our own species' continued survival.

Some also resist the need to negotiate with Russia not by appealing to moral principles, but rather to concrete outcomes. As Andriy Zagorodnyuk, the Ukrainian former defense minister, has put it:

> *"Any concessions [to Russia] would reward and legitimize its [Russia's] strategy. Far from stopping Russia's pursuit of its broader military goals, it would feel emboldened. […] It would [also] open the door to similar cases around the world. We do not want to live in a world where brute force decides which country we live in and which regime we belong to. We do not want to live in a world where only large countries can be truly sovereign."*

Such an argument is, in effect, a version of the "domino theory" applied not to communism, but to violators of international law: if we don't stop Russia from invading Ukraine, this argument runs, then perhaps it will attack Poland, Moldova, or one or all of the Baltic states; moreover, China might invade Taiwan, North Korea could attack South Korea, and Iran could even bomb Israel.

Quite apart from the fact that there is no direct evidence that any of these scenarios might actually occur—Russia, after all, can hardly be expected to invade Poland if it can't even conquer Kharkiv—it is also completely unclear how, even assuming that this "domino theory" is true, why *Western* countries have not also (in Zagorodnyuk's words) "opened the door" to similar acts of aggression. To give just a few notable examples: in recent years, the West has illegally and brutally enacted regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya; it has implemented a murderous and illegal sanctions campaign aimed at regime change against Venezuela, Syria, Iran, and Cuba; it has supported Saudi Arabia, one of the world's most oppressive states, in its catastrophic military intervention to defeat the Houthis in Yemen; and it is a staunch supporter of Israel, a country which both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have labeled an "apartheid" regime and which regularly uses force to annex territory and illegally expel Palestinians from their land.

Russia, in other words, is very far from having a monopoly on the use of force to achieve political or geostrategic objectives; indeed, we know this because we and many of our most favored allies frequently do exactly the same thing.

Arguably, it is scholar and activist Noam Chomsky who has made the most compelling and succinct argument in favor of the necessity of Western negotiations with Russia. As he recently put it:

> "*There are, basically, two ways for this war to end: a negotiated diplomatic settlement or destruction of one or the other side, either quickly or in prolonged agony. It won't be Russia that is destroyed. Uncontroversially, Russia has the capacity to obliterate Ukraine, and if Putin and his cohort are driven to the wall, in desperation they might use this capacity. That surely should be the expectation of those who portray Putin as a "madman" immersed in delusions of romantic nationalism and wild global aspirations.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *A diplomatic settlement differs from capitulation in one crucial respect: Each side accepts it as tolerable. That's true by definition, so it is beyond discussion.*
>
> *Proceeding, a diplomatic settlement must offer Putin some kind of escape hatch—what is now disdainfully called an "off-ramp" or "appeasement" by those who prefer to prolong the war. […]*
>
> *Proceeding with truism, to oppose or even act to delay a diplomatic settlement is to call for prolonging the war with its grim consequences for Ukraine and beyond. This stand constitutes a ghastly experiment: Let's see whether Putin will slink away quietly in total defeat, or whether he will prolong the war with all its horrors, or even use the weapons that he indisputably has to devastate Ukraine and to set the stage for terminal war.*"

In other words, avoidance of this "ghastly experiment" *necessarily* entails making some concessions to Russia. What exactly these concessions will involve is an open question at this point. At a bare minimum, any negotiated settlement will likely require a written guarantee of Ukraine's non-accession to NATO—and, hence, an explicit rejection of Ukraine's recent "fast-track" application to the alliance—as well as recognition of Crimea as part of Russia. (Some experts, including the distinguished professor of international relations John Mearsheimer, have suggested that this is *all* that would be required.) Indeed, President Zelensky's suggestion back in March that he is "prepared to discuss" Ukraine's neutrality constituted an extremely promising step in this direction. Since then, however, Zelensky's position has hardened significantly: in a recent address to the United Nations, Zelensky claimed that "neutrality" itself "creates the conditions for war." Moreover, following Russia's recent illegal annexation of (parts of) the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions in eastern and southern Ukraine, Zelensky signed a decree declaring negotiations with Putin's government "impossible." (Zelensky clarified, however, that he is "ready for a dialogue with … another president of Russia.")

Thus, it seems clear that it is *Western* countries—and, more specifically, NATO countries—that are best positioned to address Russia's core security concerns: indeed, given the moral inadmissibility of Russia's invasion and the fact that Ukraine itself has effectively committed not to enter into peace negotiations until Putin is removed from power (an unlikely prospect in the near future), it would seem that we are only the *only* ones capable of legitimately addressing them. More specifically, *we* are the ones who can offer binding, written guarantees that the alliance will (truly) not expand one inch beyond its currently-held territory—including, most crucially, to Ukraine. Our job, as activists and concerned citizens, should be to persuade our fellow citizens and elected officials of the truth of this proposition—and, as soon as possible, to get them to act upon it.

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1. As various legal scholars have noted, Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter is clear that force can only legitimately be used in two cases: first, when there is an explicit Security Council resolution authorizing such a use of force; and second, in "self-defense" against "armed attack" (Article 51). Given that there was no U.N. Security Council resolution authorizing Russia's use of force, the only legal recourse that Russia has is to claim self-defense—which is precisely what Putin did. However, given that Ukraine was not actually attacking (or even planning an imminent attack on) Russia on the eve of the invasion, it is difficult to disagree with international law expert Marcelo Kohen's assessment that Putin's proffered justification is "baseless." ↩

2. One might conceivably argue that Russia does not currently regard NATO expansion as a major security concern, given Putin's <u>recent statement</u> that Finland and Sweden's possible entry into NATO would not pose "an immediate threat" to Russia. I will have much more to say about NATO expansion later on in this article, but for now let me just make the following three points. First, Putin's public statements have, as many Western commentators have noted, become <u>increasingly unhinged</u> and bizarre over the last few months. The fact that he is uttering these words *now* may either be a sign of his continuing mental deterioration, or an attempt to save face given the disastrous consequences of his "special military operation." Second, Putin's statement directly contradicts not only many of his <u>recent</u> <u>previous</u> <u>assertions</u>, but also statements by other members of the Kremlin elite—most notably, Putin's official spokesman <u>Dmitri Peskov</u> and Deputy Foreign Minister <u>Sergei Ryabkov</u>—who *have* explicitly said that Sweden and Finland's potential NATO membership poses a threat to Russia. And third, it is a simple fact that Finland and Sweden are *already* in many ways *de facto* members of NATO: the two countries share military intelligence with the alliance, buy NATO-compatible military equipment, and participate in <u>regular training exercises</u> with the alliance. Putin, then, should arguably be understood as merely claiming that he is not overly concerned with such *de facto* membership being *de jure* certified. However, in the case of Ukraine, it is *precisely de facto* membership which concerns him; in particular, he is seeking *de jure* assurances that Ukraine will not join NATO as a means of ensuring Ukraine's *de facto* neutrality. ↩

3. Rather tellingly, on its <u>official website</u> NATO barely expends any effort trying to defend the claim that it is a "defensive" organization: in responding to the "myth" that its aforementioned military interventions "prove that the Alliance is not defensive," NATO spends just three short paragraphs making a series of debatable assertions in support of the interventions' (exceedingly dubious) legal and moral *legitimacy* (e.g., "The former Yugoslavia did not break up because of NATO")—which is, of course, orthogonal to the issue of whether or not they were ultimately "defensive" interventions. ↩

4. In a recently published (and much-cited) article, Monash University PhD candidate Alasdair McCallum argues that "the Azov-Nazi connection" is a "myth." Upon inspection, however, the article turns out to be nothing short of an academic fraud. For instance, according to McCallum, "The Azov Regiment has been repeatedly reconstituted [and] its extremist early leaders such as the odious Andriy Biletsky are long gone." Clicking on McCallum's hyperlink, one is taken to a June 2022 *Wall Street Journal* article which explicitly notes that Biletsky, Azov's first commander, "joined Azov in 2014 after leading political groups that openly espoused neo-Nazi and white supremacist ideas." The article goes on to note that, although Biletsky left the regiment in October 2016, he "is still actively involved with Azov, maintaining regular contact with its members and participating in their training"; moreover, the article points out that Biletsky now heads an extremist right-wing party, National Corps, which is "aligned with" Azov. (The Atlantic Council has gone even further, and noted that it is "next to impossible to draw a clear line between the [Azov] regiment itself and the wider Azov movement, including the National Corps.") In other words, *McCallum's own sourcing contradicts his own core thesis*. Other examples of such attempted whitewashing could also be cited, including McCallum's description of Azov's neo-Nazi Wolfsangel symbol —which resembles a swastika—as a "fearsome, pseudo-pagan regimental emblem." (McCallum, citing a May 2022 *Times* news article, also incorrectly suggests that Azov has "abandoned" the symbol, when in fact it is still prominently displayed on Azov's YouTube channel and its official website; indeed, in a recently recorded press conference, the symbol is clearly visible on the sleeves of multiple Azov commanders' uniforms. ↩

5. In his address to the Russian people on the eve of the invasion, Putin cited an additional security concern, namely, that Ukraine "aspire[s] to acquire nuclear weapons." It is true that some Ukrainian politicians have suggested that Ukraine renounce its nonnuclear status including, just days before the invasion, President Zelensky himself. However, as the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has pointed out, Ukraine currently lacks the nuclear material, expertise, facilities, and delivery systems required to make and employ a nuclear bomb. "Even in the best of circumstances," the Bulletin explains, any Ukrainian attempt to build viable nuclear weapons "would take years to bring to fruition—and would likely be found and stopped before succeeding." For these reasons, the Bulletin has tersely described the Kremlin's nuclear pretext for the invasion as "dangerous nonsense." ↩

6. In 1962, the Soviets deployed nuclear missiles to Cuba. The U.S. responded aggressively with an illegal naval blockade ("quarantine") of the island and the dropping of practice depth charges on Soviet submarines. This almost led to World War Three. The U.S. also seriously considered a full-blown invasion of the island, but ultimately decided against it for fear of inducing a retaliatory nuclear strike. Moreover, U.S. aggression was undertaken despite the existence of a clear diplomatic path out of the crisis. President John F. Kennedy infamously rejected Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's eminently reasonable offer to publicly withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba in exchange for the public withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey. ↩

7. *Cf.* Kennan: "Of course there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are—but this is just wrong." ↩

8. *Cf.* Javier Colomina, NATO's special representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia: "We've been extremely clear with the Russians: We won't compromise on our basic principles. We won't compromise on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine or Georgia. I think it's 100 percent clear from NATO that we won't compromise on our open-door policy." ↩

9. Illustrating profound hypocrisy, just days after this statement, Putin announced Russia's recognition of the independence of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic in southeastern Ukraine, and subsequently claimed that the "Minsk peace deal no longer exists." ↩

10. In a fascinating March 2022 interview for this magazine, editor of *The Nation* Katrina vanden Heuvel claimed that "Ukraine couldn't have joined NATO under its own NATO charter, because of territorial integrity issues and economic issues"—a point which could, in turn, be used to justify the assertion that Russia's invasion of Ukraine had nothing to do with NATO expansion. NATO's founding document, however, actually makes no such claim. Furthermore, the key NATO document which *does* come close to making such a claim—"Study on NATO Enlargement"—*also* states that "Resolution of such [ethnic or territorial] disputes would be a factor [*note*: not a *decisive* factor] in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance," and goes on to note that "There is no fixed or rigid list of criteria for inviting new member states to join the Alliance. Enlargement will be decided on a case-by-case basis. … Ultimately, Allies will decide by consensus whether to invite each new member to join according to their judgment of whether doing so will contribute to security and stability in the North Atlantic area at the time such a decision is to be made." In other words: ongoing territorial disputes may be a *factor* in deciding whether or not to admit a new country, but they do not n*ecessarily preclude* membership. Furthermore, *even if* vanden Heuvel were correct in her suggestion that NATO's charter (or one of its official documents) precludes Ukraine's becoming a member of NATO, this would only rule out *de jure,* and not *de facto*, membership: it would do nothing to prevent Ukraine, for instance, from participating in NATO training exercises, or buying NATO-compatible military equipment. And nor, for that matter—especially given its long history of broken promises and extensive history of violating international law—would it have been at all inconceivable that NATO might simply violate its own charter.

Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that Ukraine's ongoing territorial dispute with Russia over the status of Crimea was actually *one of the main reasons why* Putin was so concerned about Ukraine's potential NATO membership. As he said just weeks before the invasion:

> "It is written into Ukraine's doctrines that it wants to take Crimea back, by force if necessary. This is not what Ukrainian officials say in public. This is written in their documents. Suppose Ukraine is a NATO member. It will be filled with weapons, modern offensive weapons will be deployed on its territory just like in Poland and Romania – who is going to prevent this? Suppose it starts operations in Crimea, not to mention [the] Donbass for now. This is sovereign Russian territory. We consider this matter settled. Imagine that Ukraine is a NATO country and starts these military operations. What are we supposed to do? Fight against the NATO bloc? Has anyone given at least some thought to this? Apparently not." ↵

11. One should resist the natural urge to regard the Reuters report as suggesting that Russia's invasion was never about ensuring Ukraine's neutrality. For the fact that Putin (allegedly) rejected a Ukrainian peace offer of neutrality *around the time of the invasion*—a time at which many experts believed Kyiv's government would be overthrown within days—does not entail that he would have rejected a similar peace offered well before it; or, indeed, that he would reject a similar peace deal if it was offered today. ↩

12. A useful distinction that one might be tempted to draw at this point is between *subjective* and *objective* security concerns. Thus, for instance, some U.S. officials might well be subjectively concerned that Russia might invade the U.S. at some point in the near future, but this worry is not one which is grounded in objective reality. Conversely, prior to Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, although there were objective reasons for why the Soviet Union should have been anxious, the country was—tragically—insufficiently subjectively concerned. When I speak of Russia having "legitimate security concerns," I mean that Russia had objectively valid reasons for being concerned about its security situation—ones which, as a matter of fact, it subjectively recognized. ↩