

# BROWN POLITICAL REVIEW

## Memo to Some: America is Not the Only Imperialist State

Michael Farrell-Rosen

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The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) released a statement in February directly addressing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, calling the attack an “extreme and asymmetrical escalation” but opposing “other forms of military or economic brinkmanship,” which would include sanctions on Russia. The organization blamed the conflict on the United States and its membership in NATO, declaring that the “DSA reaffirms our call for the United States to withdraw from NATO and to end the imperialist expansionism that set the stage for this conflict.” When commenting on the situation, Senior Fellow Ted Galen Carpenter at the libertarian Cato Institute affirmed that, “It was entirely predictable that NATO expansion would ultimately lead to a tragic, perhaps violent, breach of relations with Moscow.” The responses from the DSA and Carpenter reflect a trend in rhetoric from some purported “anti-imperialist” organizations wherein true anti-imperialism is conflated with a bastardized anti-American imperialism. This line of thinking lacks the imagination to center any power but the United States in international conflicts. An examination of recent history demonstrates that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine should be viewed as an imperialist endeavor in its own right, and not as a consequence of American foreign policy.

When the DSA criticizes NATO “imperialism,” the organization is in part referring to the organization’s expansion in the past 30 years. In 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became the first states formerly in the Soviet sphere of influence to join the organization. In 2004, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia also became members. The aforementioned commentary from the Cato Institute points to the addition of these countries as the impetus for the Russian invasion in Ukraine. The article cites an admission by

former President Bill Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright: "[Russian President Boris] Yeltsin and his countrymen were strongly opposed to enlargement, seeing it as a strategy for exploiting their vulnerability and moving Europe's dividing line to the east, leaving them isolated." The DSA and Carpenter view Russia's aggression in Ukraine as a logical redress to NATO's eastward encroachment. Albright's claim is their smoking gun showing that the United States was cognizant of Russian fears but continued its "imperialist" ambitions in admitting more and more Eastern European countries to the consortium.

These "anti-American imperialist" analyses deny agency to the states that have joined NATO in the past two decades. A *Dissent* magazine article by Gregory Afinogenov summarizes it best: "The truth is, NATO has no more devoted accomplice than Vladimir Putin." The treaty's swelling membership is a result of imperialism—Russian imperialism—rather than an example of it. To that point, for the first time ever, a majority of Finns favor their country joining NATO following the invasion of Ukraine. To argue that the admission of these European countries to the treaty constitutes imperialism ignores the opinions of the polity in those states. The history of support for NATO in Estonia, the northernmost Baltic state, situated between Russia and the rest of Europe, exemplifies this. In March 2002, a poll found that 65 percent of Estonians supported joining NATO. A 2018 Pew Research report found "NATO is generally seen in a positive light across publics within the alliance, despite lingering tensions between the leaders of individual member countries." NATO might actually be most popular in the former Warsaw Pact states closest to modern Russia. Emphasis on the treaty and the United States by the DSA and Carpenter effectively ignores this popular support in the expansion countries, as well as when and why they joined. Each instance of Russian aggression—or more accurately, Russian imperialism—pushes European states closer to NATO and the United States.

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There are also economic reasons that former Warsaw Pact countries are looking west instead of towards Russia. The United States, Canada, and the states of Western Europe are some of the wealthiest places in the contemporary world. It should come as no surprise that the citizens of Poland and Ukraine find the prosperous, liberal democracies of NATO more appealing than a Russia still recovering from the end of the Cold War and the 1998 Russian Financial Crisis. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of Ukraine stood at \$7,600, higher than Poland's \$6,100. By 2020, Poland's had reached

\$34,200, while Ukraine's had only risen to \$13,100. Poland's greater integration with the liberal West, including NATO and the United States, has resulted in better outcomes for its citizens.

This context exposes the inaccuracy in calling the United States and NATO the effective aggressors in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as the DSA and Carpenter's analyses imply. The expansion of NATO may align with some form of US imperialism, yet the countries of Europe, including Ukraine, have agency in determining their geopolitical positioning. Moreover, the real imperialistic threat is not the United States, but Russia. Afinogenov writes in *Dissent*, "For Putin, resisting NATO is in fact secondary to the larger goal of reuniting Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians under Russian rule—or, failing that, at least ensuring that Russian speakers across the former Soviet Union are either in a secure alliance bloc with Russia...or are governed by it directly." Russia has framed its aggression in an explicitly nationalistic manner that denies Ukraine's sovereignty. This can only be described as imperialistic.

It is disappointing that some of the strongest voices opposing American imperialism in all its excesses—in Libya, Iraq, and so on—are so blinded by their conception of American hegemony that they cannot identify Russia as the most pressing global threat. Anti-imperialist voices are those most likely to deny American exceptionalism when it is used as a cudgel to invade and control sovereign nations. The DSA and Carpenter's views are simply an inversion of that same exceptionalism, where the facile characterization of the United States as the "good guy" (and the only good guy) is replaced by the opposite: a narrow conception of a single "bad guy." In reality, the nuances of geopolitics require a more sophisticated analysis, where imperialism can exist outside of American foreign policy.