NATO Set Precedents for Russia's Attack on Ukraine

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Western leaders and their allies in the establishment news media are practically apoplectic about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Objectively, there is much to denounce regarding Moscow's actions. Even though the architects of NATO's expansion to Russia's border and the Ukrainian government's increasingly evident eagerness to become an Alliance member and military asset constituted serious provocations, they did not reach the level that justified a massive military offensive threatening the country's independent existence. Moscow's actions were brutal, over-the-top, and deserve universal condemnation.

However, the West's reaction is not just tinged with hypocrisy, it is fully marinated in it. Politicians and pundits insist or imply that Russia's attack on Ukraine is a unique development in Europe since the end of World War II, and that Moscow's breach of the peace poses an existential threat to the "rules-based international order" that the United States has led since 1945. Comparisons to Adolf Hitler's rampage have become so frequent in news media coverage of the Ukraine war that they are already a cliché.

There are several problems with the argument that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is uniquely evil. One is a whiff of racism—the belief that Europe is supposed to be a more "civilized" region than other parts of the world. The underlying message is that while military aggression and widespread bloodshed is to be expected when dealing with such "lesser" societies, it is simply intolerable to see it happen in Europe (or any part of the West). CBS News correspondent Charlie D'Agata was especially brazen in expressing that view, telling viewers that Ukraine "isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan that has seen conflict raging for decades." The corollary message is that while the United States might be able to stand by when such barbarism erupts elsewhere in the world, it cannot do when it involves Europe.

Another problem with the attempt to portray Russia's use of force against Ukraine as somehow unique, is that NATO as an entity and NATO powers acting outside the framework of the Alliance had previously committed multiple acts of flagrant aggression. For example, NATO member Turkey invaded the Republic of Cyprus in 1974 and seized more than a third of the island. Ankara then proceeded to establish a puppet state, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the occupied territory.

In marked contrast to the expressions of outrage among the Western powers and the imposition of "crushing" sanctions against Russia for its actions in Ukraine, the U.S.-NATO response to Turkey's aggression was perfunctory and anemic. Even the handful of (ineffective) sanctions

that the United States and its European allies imposed on Ankara were lifted in a few years. To this day, Turkey continues the illegal occupation of its neighbor's territory, yet it remains a member of NATO in good standing. Western news media coverage of Russia's aggression against Ukraine almost never mentions the Cyprus precedent.

Even brief references to NATO's air wars against Bosnian Serb forces in 1995 and against Serbia in 1999 are almost as rare. Yet those episodes demonstrated that the Western official portrayal of NATO as a purely defensive military alliance is a lie. Both military actions clearly were offensive, rather than defensive, since neither the Bosnian Serbs nor Serbia had attacked or even threatened to attack a NATO country. The 1999 war over Kosovo was an especially egregious case of Western aggression, since Serbia was a recognized member of the United Nations and other international organizations. It is hard to make a legal distinction between NATO's 78-day air war against Serbia and Russia's current assault on Ukraine. NATO's amputation of Kosovo from Serbia following the 1999 war also set a precedent for Moscow's 2014 actions in Crimea and its current aims in eastern Ukraine.

U.S. and NATO conduct outside of "civilized Europe" has been extremely ugly as well. Even if one concedes that the Alliance was justified in using force in Afghanistan as a response to the 9-11 attacks on a NATO member, that episode hardly warranted a military occupation lasting two decades. The Alliance's behavior elsewhere was even worse. Although the Iraq War was not an official NATO mission, the dominant role the United States played, as well as the extensive involvement of other Alliance members, puts that conflict as another entry in the category of flagrant Western aggressions. So, too, was the 2011 NATO war to oust Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi.

With all of those offenses on the U.S.-NATO ledger, it is a bit much to watch US and European leaders act as though Russia's assault on Ukraine is utterly outside the norm. Indeed, the Western track record demonstrates that the concept of a U.S.-led, rules-based international order is little more than a self-serving fiction. The United States and its allies have abided by those "rules" only when it has been in their interest to do it. Whenever it served their purposes to ignore or even flagrantly violate those rules, they never hesitated to do so. The brutal truth is that the Western powers set multiple precedents for Russia's current binge of aggression.

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