



Deeper look into Russia's invasion of Ukraine

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24 – which the Ukrainian government and people have determinedly resisted, spurring support for them in the United Nations and elsewhere – has entered its second week, with Russia seizing a strategic port south of the country.

Some 20 countries, mostly members of NATO (the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the European Union, are sending weapons to Ukraine as NATO moves military equipment and 22,000 more troops into member-states bordering Russia and Belarus.

Undeterred, Russia has sustained heavy artillery shelling of Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, and is moving large ground forces towards it. Shelling of other major cities has reportedly killed 350 civilians and injured 2,000 others. The UN high commissioner for refugees talked of an “exodus” of a million people from Ukraine to neighboring countries.

Last Wednesday the overwhelming majority of UN member-states voted to “deplore” the aggression, demanding the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces and condemning President Vladimir Putin's order to put Russian nuclear forces on alert.

The UN General Assembly vote was 141-5, with 35 abstentions. While the approved resolution isn't legally binding, its political impact worldwide cannot be ignored.

Earlier, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group condemned Russia's invasion and the “horrificing” suffering it inflicted on the people. They pledged a \$3-billion package of support for Ukraine.

Meantime, the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor confirmed having started an investigation into possible war crimes in Ukraine and began collecting evidence. He based his action on alleged atrocities that 39 countries had formally referred to the Court.

Causing a huge financial impact worldwide was the spike of Brent crude oil price to \$117 per barrel.

While blame is now being heaped on Russia for all the invasion's dire consequences, an opinion piece in the Guardian on March 1 seeks to provide a broader and deeper perspective.

Written by Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute in Washington DC, the article looks back to the Bill Clinton administration's decision to enlarge NATO in the late 90s.

“Russia’s military offensive against Ukraine is an act of aggression that would make the already worrisome tension between NATO and Moscow even more dangerous,” Carpenter wrote. Although “Putin bears primary responsibility for this,” he stressed, “NATO’s arrogant, tone-deaf policy toward Russia over the past quarter-century deserves a large share as well.”

For 25 years, analysts committed to a US foreign policy of “realism and restraint” had worried that continuing to expand NATO “would not end well,” he observed. The war in Ukraine now provides “definitive confirmation that it did not.”

The Clinton administration had already decided to include in NATO some former Warsaw Pact members, he recalled, before it invited Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary to become members. In 1998, the US Senate ratified the three countries’ NATO membership. “It would be the first of several waves of membership expansion” that provoked Russian opposition and anger.

Carpenter cited the following reactions of two State Department officials and foreign policy experts then:

- In her memoir, Clinton’s secretary of state Madeleine Albright conceded that then Russian President Boris Yeltsin and others strongly opposed the NATO expansion, seeing it as “a strategy for exploiting [Russia’s] vulnerability and making Europe’s dividing line to the east leave them isolated.”
- Similarly, Strobe Talbott, then deputy state secretary, warned: “Many Russians see NATO as a vestige of the Cold War, inherently directed against their country. They point out that they have disbanded the Warsaw Pact, their military alliance, and ask why the West should not do the same.” (The Warsaw Pact was set up by the Soviet Union in 1954 as counterpart to NATO which had been organized in 1949.)
- George Keenan, the acknowledged “intellectual father” of America’s containment policy during the Cold War, reacted to the 1998 Senate action: “I think it is the beginning of a new cold war. I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely, and it will affect their policies.”

More pointedly, Keenan said: “I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else.”

“(Keenan) was right,” wrote Carpenter, “but the US and NATO leaders proceeded with new rounds of expansion, including the provocative step of adding the three Baltic republics [Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia], which ‘perched’ NATO on the borders of Russia.” He pointed out the three countries not only had been part of the former Soviet Union; they had been part of the Russian empire during the czarist era.

It took some time for Russia to publicly react to the NATO expansion.

In March 2007, Carpenter quoted President Putin as complaining, in his address to the Munich security conference: “NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders... [The expansion] represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our Western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact [in 1991]?”

Moving on to Robert Gates, defense secretary in both George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, Carpenter quoted him as saying, in his memoir: “...the relationship with Russia had been badly mismanaged after [George HW] Bush left office in 1993.” In what he termed an “implicit rebuke” of the younger George Bush, he quoted Gates as asserting that “trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching.” The attempt, Gates contended, was a case of “recklessly ignoring what the Russians considered their own vital national interests.”

Still, US anti-Russian actions continued. Carpenter wrote: “The Obama administration’s shockingly arrogant meddling in Ukraine’s internal political affairs in 2013 and 2014 to help demonstrators overthrow Ukraine’s elected pro-Russian president was the single most brazen provocation.” That meddling, he concluded, led to Moscow’s seizing and annexing Crimea in February 2014 – “and a new cold war was underway with a vengeance.”