



Ukraine War: The West must take responsibility

At the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, mainstream media blamed Vladimir Putin for launching the attack, and in effect, destabilising the region. However, some took dissenting views of the general Western take of the invasion. Political scientist John J. Mearsheimer, R. Wendell Harrison, Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, and foreign policy expert Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defence and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, argued that the reckless expansion of NATO provoked Russia. Here are excerpts of what they said

The West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis: John J. Mearsheimer

In an article published on 11 March 2022 in The Economist titled "Why the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis," John J. Mearsheimer shared his views. Here is an excerpt.

The war in Ukraine is the most dangerous international conflict since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Understanding its root causes is essential if we are to prevent it from getting worse and, instead, to find a way to bring it to a close.

There is no question that Vladimir Putin started the war and is responsible for how it is being waged. But why he did so is another matter. The mainstream view in the West is that he is an irrational, out-of-touch aggressor bent on creating a greater Russia in the mould of the former Soviet Union. Thus, he alone bears full responsibility for the Ukraine crisis.

But that story is wrong. The West, and especially America, is principally responsible for the crisis which began in February 2014. It has now turned into a war that not only threatens to destroy Ukraine but also has the potential to escalate into a nuclear war between Russia and NATO.

The trouble over Ukraine actually started at Nato's Bucharest summit in April 2008, when George W. Bush's administration pushed the alliance to announce that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members."

Russian leaders responded immediately with outrage, characterising this decision as an existential threat to Russia and vowing to thwart it. According to a respected Russian journalist, Putin "flew into a rage" and warned that "if Ukraine joins NATO, it will do so without Crimea and the eastern regions. It will simply fall apart."

America ignored Moscow's red line, however, and pushed forward to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's border. That strategy included two other elements: bringing Ukraine closer to the EU and making it a pro-American democracy.

These efforts eventually sparked hostilities in February 2014, after an uprising (which was supported by America) caused Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, to flee the country. In response, Russia took Crimea from Ukraine and helped fuel a civil war that broke out in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

The next major confrontation came in December 2021 and led directly to the current war. The main cause was that Ukraine was becoming a de facto member of NATO. The process started in December 2017, when the Trump administration decided to sell Kyiv "defensive weapons." What counts as "defensive" is hardly clear-cut, however, and these weapons certainly looked offensive to Moscow and its allies in the Donbas region.

Other NATO countries got in on the act, shipping weapons to Ukraine, training its armed forces and allowing it to participate in joint air and naval exercises.

In July 2021, Ukraine and America co-hosted a major naval exercise in the Black Sea region involving navies from 32 countries. Operation Sea Breeze almost provoked Russia to fire at a British naval destroyer that deliberately entered what Russia considers its territorial waters.

The links between Ukraine and America continued growing under the Biden administration. This commitment is reflected throughout an important document—the "US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership"—that was signed in November by Antony Blinken, America's secretary of state, and Dmytro Kuleba, his Ukrainian counterpart.

Unsurprisingly, Moscow found this evolving situation intolerable and began mobilising its army on Ukraine's border last spring to signal its resolve to Washington. But it had no effect, as the Biden administration continued to move closer to Ukraine. This led Russia to precipitate a full-blown diplomatic stand-off in December.

As Sergey Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, put it: "We reached our boiling point." Russia demanded a written guarantee that Ukraine would never become a part of NATO and that the alliance remove the military assets it had deployed in eastern Europe since 1997.

The subsequent negotiations failed, as Blinken made clear: "There is no change. There will be no change." A month later Putin launched an invasion of Ukraine to eliminate the threat he saw from NATO.

At this point, it is impossible to know the terms on which this conflict will be settled. But, if we do not understand its deep cause, we will be unable to end it before Ukraine is wrecked and NATO ends up in a war with Russia.

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The US and NATO helped trigger the Ukraine war: Ted Galen Carpenter

In an article published on 7 March 2022 published in The Newsweek titled "The US and NATO helped trigger the Ukraine War," Ted Galen Carpenter shared his thoughts. Here is an excerpt.

Vladimir Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a monstrous act of aggression that has plunged the world into a perilous situation. By any reasonable standard, his move was an over-the-top response to any Ukrainian or NATO provocations. However, that conclusion is different from saying that there were no provocations, as far too many policymakers and pundits in the West are doing now.

It has become especially fashionable in such circles to insist that NATO's expansion to Russia's border was in no way responsible for the current Ukraine crisis. Many dismiss all arguments to the contrary as "echoing Putin's talking points," "siding with Putin," or circulating Russian propaganda and "disinformation." Leaving aside the ugly miasma of McCarthyism enveloping such allegations, the underlying argument is factually wrong.

Russian leaders and several Western policy experts were warning more than two decades ago that NATO expansion would turn out badly — ending in a new cold war with Russia at best, and a hot one at worst. Obviously, they were not "echoing" Putin or anyone else.

George Kennan, the intellectual architect of America's containment policy during the Cold War, perceptively warned in a 2 May 1998 New York Times interview what NATO's move eastward would set in motion. "I think it is the beginning of a new cold war," he stated. "I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake."

Yet US and European officials blew through one red light after another. George W. Bush began to treat Georgia and Ukraine as valued US political and military allies, and in 2008, he pressed NATO to admit Ukraine and Georgia as members.

French and German wariness delayed that endeavour, but the NATO summit communique affirmed that both countries would eventually achieve that status.

In late 2013 and early 2014, the United States and several European governments meddled shamelessly to support the efforts of demonstrators to unseat Ukraine's generally pro-Russia president, Victor Yanukovich, some two years before the expiration of his term.

That campaign was especially inappropriate since Yanukovich became president in 2010 as the result of an election that even the European Union and other international observers acknowledged was reasonably free and fair.

In a democratic system, the legal way to remove a president from office is, depending on a specific country's constitutional rules, through a parliamentary vote of no-confidence, impeachment, or

defeat in the next election. Angry street demonstrations do not fit into any of those categories, yet the US and its allies backed that illegal process.

A recording of the infamous leaked telephone call between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt confirmed the extent of Washington's meddling in the affairs of a sovereign country.

The Ukraine episode proved to be an intolerable provocation to neighbouring Russia. Putin responded by annexing the strategic Crimea peninsula and the US and its NATO partners then imposed economic sanctions on Russia. The new cold war was on in earnest.

Yet Washington still refused to back off. Instead, the Trump and Biden administrations poured weapons into Ukraine, approved joint military exercises between US and Ukrainian forces, and even prodded the allies to include Ukraine in NATO war games.

In late 2021, it became clear that the Kremlin's restraint had run dry. Moscow issued demands for security guarantees, including a draw-down of military forces already deployed in NATO's eastern members. With respect to Ukraine, the demand was very clear and uncompromising: Not only would Kyiv never receive a membership invitation, but NATO weapons and troops would never be deployed on Ukrainian soil. When the West failed to provide those guarantees, Putin launched his devastating, full-scale war.

Moscow's cruel overreaction deserves emphatic condemnation. However, the culpability of the US and its NATO allies also is sizable.

One can readily imagine how Americans would react if Russia, China, India, or another peer competitor admitted countries from Central America and the Caribbean to a security alliance that it led — and then sought to add Canada as an official or de facto military ally. It is highly probable that the US would have responded by going to war years ago. Yet even though Ukraine has an importance to Russia comparable to Canada's importance to the US, our leaders expected Moscow to respond passively to the growing encroachment.

They have been proven disastrously wrong, and thanks to their ineptitude, the world is now a far more dangerous place.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defence and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 950 articles on international affairs.