

What lies behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

*Why did Russia choose to invade Ukraine in 2022? **Robert H. Wade** argues the conflict can only be understood in the context of American policy towards Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union.*

Political leaders present their publics with narratives that justify what they are doing or intend to do. A crucial decision in constructing such narratives is when to start the clock. In conflict situations, each side normally starts the clock with the enemy making an apparently unprovoked attack. Each side claims to be innocent and starts the clock at a time when the enemy can be shown as the unprovoked aggressor.

In the case of Russia's invasion first of Crimea in 2014 and then much of eastern Ukraine in 2022, the standard western narrative starts the clock with Russia's actions. These have been presented as an unprovoked attack on innocent and unified Ukraine, which was exercising its sovereign right to forge a stable and European democracy on Russia's doorstep, including its decision to join both the European Union and NATO. Western democracies, notably the US and the UK, came in strongly to support the government and population seeking to exercise this sovereign right as a flourishing democracy.

Red lines

The Russian narrative, or rather that of the community of Russians wanting to keep the West at arms' length, which now controls the Russian state under Putin, starts the clock at least as far back as the Second World War, when Germany and its allies killed some 8-9 million soldiers and another 16-17 million civilians. It remains an issue of deep resentment in the Russian elite to this day that western states and media largely ignore the vital Russian role in the defeat of Nazi Germany.

The Second World War experience fortified the conviction that Russia must have a buffer zone around its borders, especially its western borders, where Russia has

substantial control and potentially hostile states do not. This includes unimpeded access to Sevastopol in Crimea, Russia's only ice-free port, a critical security concern.

Russia's leaders have said repeatedly since the breakup of the Soviet Union that they will resist allowing a rival great power to incorporate a state on their doorstep into a hostile military alliance. They are in effect applying the US's [Monroe Doctrine](#) to their own "near-abroad". The US would not tolerate Mexico or Canada making a military alliance with China or Russia. Russia's resistance to Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO follows the same logic.

A geopolitical pivot

The US foreign policy establishment has long considered Ukraine to be a "geopolitical pivot" in its drive to subordinate Russia and secure US primacy over the whole of Eurasia.

In early 2008, US Ambassador to Moscow William Burns sent a cable to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice with the unusual title, "Nyet means nyet: Russia's NATO enlargement red lines". He explained that "Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite". The cable received no reply. Two months later, at their summit in Bucharest, NATO leaders issued a formal declaration that "Georgia and Ukraine will be in NATO".

Russia invaded Crimea in February 2014 and war broke out between Russian separatist groups in Donbas (supported by Russian regular troops) and Ukrainian forces. In February 2015, a peace agreement – [Minsk II](#) – was negotiated and signed, with France and Germany acting as mediators. It was never fully implemented. The fighting subsided, but did not end.

Fast forward to 19 February 2022. Ukrainian President Zelensky gave an impassioned speech at the Munich Security Conference. He insisted that Ukraine must have a clear path to join NATO and regretted that Ukraine had given up its nuclear arsenal at the end of the Soviet Union, which was then the world's third biggest nuclear arsenal.

As reported by [observers of the OSCE](#) (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe), just at this time in February 2022, the Ukrainian military dramatically increased

its shelling of the Russian-speaking and Russian Orthodox-believing Donbas region of eastern Ukraine (where referendums in 2014 were claimed to have supported independence from Ukraine).

The Ukrainian military attack on Donbas gave Putin his *casus belli*. The military invaded on 24 February. At first it seemed as though he wanted to make a blitzkrieg attack on Kyiv, overthrow the democratically elected government of Zelensky, and install a government that would do the Kremlin's bidding. It became clear within days that this was not going to work.

Existential enemies

Putin's actions [played into the West's trap](#). Regime change in Moscow is a longer-term US and NATO objective. The more immediate objective is to invoke Russia as an existential enemy and to provide glue for cooperation between the West's often fractious member states under US leadership. To justify US primacy, to present a unitary front in NATO, to justify big increases in western military budgets, Russia must be presented as the common enemy that aims to sweep across much of Eastern Europe once it conquers Ukraine.

Western military firms need the West to believe it faces existential enemies in the form of major states – not just slippery “terrorists” or “a bunch of midgets”, as [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey](#) labelled the Islamic State. The share prices of major US arms manufacturers shot up as the Russian invasion looked likely.

The key point was made by Georgy Arbatov, a political scientist and advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev and other secretaries of the Communist Party, and founder and director of the Institute for US and Canada at the Russian Academy of Science. He said to a group of senior US officials in 1987: “We are going to do a terrible thing to you – we are going to deprive you of an enemy.”

This is how one can understand the West's persistent rebuff to the efforts of Gorbachev, Yeltsin and early Putin to establish non-adversarial relations with western states. The West needs Russia as an enemy to provide internal unity. It is no surprise that alarm bells rang in western capitals when it became known that within days of Russia's invasion, peace negotiations had started between Russian and Ukrainian delegations

under Belarus and then Turkish mediation, which continued through March and April 2022.

Both sides [made statements that agreement was near](#). This included on Russia's red lines that Ukraine should not join NATO and that Ukraine should only hold military drills with foreign military participation after agreement with "guarantor states", which includes Russia. This would make Ukraine a genuinely neutral state in-between Russia and the West.

But Ukraine then advanced a treaty text that would require western states to come to Ukraine's aid with a bigger commitment than even that contained in [NATO's Article 5](#), a commitment that might bring the US into direct conflict with Russia. It is no surprise that the US did not want a peace agreement that included this text. Then came the revelations of [the Russian military's atrocities in Bucha](#), March 2022, including mass murder and rape, which stiffened Ukrainian determination and western determination to fight towards victory over Russia.

The endgame

In the longer term, the West also wants Russia to be a deferential cooperative partner, especially as China grows stronger. The last thing it wants is a China-Russia axis. Yet ironically, this has been the result so far.

Russia now fills China's strategic gaps in food, energy and raw materials. It makes China stronger, which accelerates the end of American primacy over Eurasia. Meanwhile, the war has strengthened US primacy over Western Europe, as seen in NATO's dependence on American armaments and in American fossil fuel companies' profits from the cut-off of Russian oil to Europe.

The war endgame has somehow to resolve Ukraine's existential need not to face again the situation where its population is fighting by itself if Russia invades. And it must resolve Russia's existential need not to face a hostile western military alliance and western troops right on its border. As though this is not difficult enough, the endgame must also build Ukrainian constitutional protections for the large minority of the population who before 2014 were Russian speaking and Russian-Orthodox believing and who since 2014 [have been systematically discriminated against](#).

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