

Current Controversies

Did NATO Actions Contribute to Putin's Decision to Invade?

BY ROBIN COLLINS

People disagree over the primary causes of Putin's 2022 aggression. Economist Jeffrey Sachs is one of many who believes Russian leaders saw NATO enlargement as "a central reason for the invasion." Russians are told the expansion is a form of peacetime encirclement and will "oblige" more bordering states to respond if Russia attacks any NATO member. (NATO's Article 5 is not an obligation but an expectation of retaliation that is legally justified in the event of aggression.)

But the response to the Kremlin's recent actions has also demonstrated that NATO membership is not needed. Article 51 of the UN Charter allows for collective self-defence. Indeed, this was the clause ostensibly in use by President Putin to justify his own "special military operation".

David Parnas objects to NATO leaders' use of the phrase "unprovoked war" because it suggests that Russia had no concerns that it might try to solve by a military operation. Major NATO expansion took place long before the Ukraine invasion, at the 2004 Istanbul summit, when seven Central and Eastern European states joined. Ukraine changed its constitution post-Maidan coup-revolt to accommodate NATO entry. Were these sufficient "provocations" to lead Putin to cross the border in 2022 into the Donbas, and on to Kyiv?

Putin insists Ukraine is already under NATO control, and alliance military infrastructure was being built within Ukraine. Recent airfield con-



Woman in an anti-war demonstration in London, UK | © Semyon Borisov, Unsplash

struction, however, was in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. And generally speaking, the 1997 NATO-Russia Foundation Act, including prohibiting permanent deployment of combat forces in new NATO member countries, has also been respected.

Some NATO members courted Volodymyr Zelensky, and before him Petro Poroshenko. But any individual NATO member's decision is not a "NATO" position. It is significant, as Putin acknowledges, that prominent NATO members showed no interest in offering Ukraine a timeline to join the alliance. In April 2022, President V. Zelensky vehemently criticized Germany and France for blocking Ukraine at the 2008 summit: "I invite Ms. Merkel and Mr. Sarkozy to visit [the under-siege city of] Bucha and see what the policy of concessions to Russia has led to in 14 years."

Putin's own attitude towards alliances hasn't always been caustic (as he pointed out last February.) "We have consistently proposed various cooperation options, including in the NATO-Russia Council and the OSCE formats..." In 2000, "I asked [US President Clinton]

how America would feel about admitting Russia to NATO."

He was brushed off. In retrospect, that was a lost opportunity to realign European security arrangements. Putin said in his pre-invasion speech that "[t]he problem, of course, is not NATO itself" but rather an 'anti-Russia' entity being "placed under full external control... settled by the armed forces of NATO countries and [that] is supplied with the most modern weapons."

CAUGHT IN A POLARIZED IDEOLOGICAL QUAGMIRE?

There are "hawks" who reject any talk of compromise to end the conflict, even dismissing concerns about escalation to nuclear war as unfounded. Anything but complete military victory for Ukraine is appeasement and capitulation to aggression.

Some others (mostly but not entirely in certain left-wing circles) resist unreservedly condemning the invasion as a breach of international law. Why? Does calling it illegal compromise painting NATO or the USA as the ultimate culprit in every disaster?

It seems common sense to condemn



© Placidplace Pixabay

both Putin's invasion without qualifications and to accept there will be necessary concessions to reach a ceasefire and eventual peace agreement. But it obliges us to juggle the two concepts simultaneously.

Recently, activist lawyer Dimitri Les-caris asked whether the newly-declared "independent" People's Republics in the Donbas had the right to call for Russian military intervention: "From a moral perspective I understand perfectly well what Russia did; from a legal perspective it is a debatable question." And hadn't USSR leader Mikhail Gorbachev been assured NATO would not expand eastward, he asked?

While Gorbachev had agreed to German reunification based on the promises made and because he believed the future Soviet Union would need to integrate into Europe, he also hoped that future security should be based on "new structures created within a pan-European framework" such as the OSCE. Not NATO.

Activist Yves Engler in a recent webinar was more circumspect. He accepts that the Russian invasion is a violation of international law. But he also highlights Canada's role in "provoking" it, in part through the Canadian embassy's participation in the ouster of Putin-leaning Victor Yanukovich in 2014 by harbour-

ing anti-government protesters during the uprising.

Activist Tamara Lorincz steps out further: "**Russia's invasion of Ukraine was not only provoked by the US/Canada/NATO, but it was long planned by them** from the US-led coup in Kyiv with Canada's complicity in 2014.

"This terrible war raging in Ukraine is much more complicated than Russia's war against Ukraine. It is also a NATO-backed Ukraine war against the Russian speaking minority in Donbass. And it is our war; it's a NATO proxy war against Russia that Canada is deeply involved in."

NEW MINSK?

Matthew Hoh (Centre for International Policy) claims the purpose of the Minsk II agreement was for the West "to use the time to arm Ukraine and prepare for eventual war with Russia and not to prevent such a war..." How credible is this widely circulating argument?

In an interview with the French newspaper *Libération*, (former French president) François Hollande, stated unequivocally that never "did I suggest that we would have signed the Minsk Agreements to allow the Ukrainians to prepare for war." He also said in December 2022 that the accords "have

given the Ukrainian army this opportunity" to strengthen itself. "The Minsk agreements and the resulting ceasefire didn't allow the area controlled by separatists to expand. This is one of its merits." And now "**the Minsk agreements can be resurrected to establish a legal framework already accepted by all parties.**"

In her interview with *Die Zeit*, December 7, 2022, Angela Merkel reiterated that NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia was a bad idea: "Neither of these countries had the necessary prerequisites for this... " But Merkel saw Minsk as a pause to enable a ceasefire and to establish the future peace. It "was an attempt to give Ukraine time. It has also used this time to become [militarily] stronger, as can be seen today," she added.

French President Emmanuel Macron worked hard in February 2022 to convince both Putin and Zelensky to comply with the Accords, as he saw them as the "only path on which peace can be built."

But David Parnas writes soberly that "there was some hope that time would allow Ukraine to heal and find a way for all parts of Ukraine to work together within a united Ukraine. The decision of the parties not to implement the ceasefire that they had agreed on, but to continue to try to unify the country by military means made things worse. I think the shotgun wedding is off and a clean separation agreement is needed."

Rideau Institute President Peggy Mason believes, however, that "some form of Minsk II will need to be achieved at some point, although there may well need to be an interim ceasefire/armistice stage, lasting for some time."

The necessary ceasefire, armistice or border agreements leading to an eventual sustainable peace will be difficult. Nonetheless, neither the **NATO Provoked It!** nor the **No Concessions to Aggression!** narratives will get us closer to ending the bloodshed. ■

Robin Collins writes about ideas, peace, and disarmament from Ottawa.