UKRAINE AND RUSSIA: 1991 to 2022.

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How are we to make sense of what has transpired between Russia and Ukraine from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the start of the 2022 war between them? This is a highly controversial subject. Still, there is little harm in trying to develop a historical account of the unfolding of events that includes paying attention to the changing dynamics of European and international power dynamics.

Political scientists distinguish between a multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar international system. Meaning more than two, two, or one major power are prevalent. The multipolar system culminated in the horrors of World War I and World War II. Shortly after that war, it collapsed and was replaced by a bipolar division between the Soviet Union and the United States. Once the USSR disappeared by 1991, for 30 years there was a unipolar power system with the United States as the one dominant world superpower. The assessment that there has been a unipolar system may need some modification. Anyway, U.S. supremacy is now being challenged. But let us first go backwards.

At the end of the second World War, The USSR occupied seven eastern European nations. By the end of the 1940s, they had consolidated power in six of them, and these six were under the thumb of the Soviet Union. After Stalin’s 1948-1949 Berlin blockade, twelve European and North American nations founded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to militarily defend themselves from any Soviet threat. In 1955, the USSR established their own military alliance, The Warsaw Pact. The Soviets and the Americans each had consolidated their own spheres of influence.

In 1975, the G7 was established from major industrial powers across the planet. They met annually to discuss current issues facing all of them. The U.S. was one of the seven, the USSR was not. Then in the late 1980s and beyond when the Soviet Union began faltering, former satellite countries became independent. All this changed the power dynamic in Europe. Then in 1992, the treaty forming the European Union was signed, and this over time altered the economics and political dynamics in Europe.

Many former Soviet republics decide whether to remain part of Russia or become their own country. In a 1991 plebiscite, 90% of Ukrainians voting favored their country being an independent nation. The popularity of Ukraine independence was a blow to Russia. According to the Council of Foreign Relations Jonathan Masters, next to Russia, Ukraine “was the second most-populous and powerful of the fifteen Soviet republics, home to much of the union’s agricultural production, defense industries and military, including the Black Sea Fleet and some of the nuclear arsenal. Ukraine was so vital to the Union that its decision to sever ties in 1991 was the coup de grace for the ailing superpower.”

The new Ukrainian republic suddenly became the country with the third most nuclear weapons on the planet. About 1/3 of the USSR’s total nuclear arsenal was housed in Ukraine territory. The Ukrainians agreed to return their deadly weapons to Russia in return for an agreement where Russia would respect Ukraine’s sovereignty. There were two such arrangements between Russia and Ukraine. The first, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which Russia, the U.S. and the United Kingdom pledged to “respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine.” In 1997, there was the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation that recognized the inviolability of present borders, the respect for each nations’ territorial integrity, and pledged not to invade the other. These documents were indications of how the new Russia was willing to cooperate with and insure the sovereignty of a former Soviet socialist republic.

After all, with the collapse of the Soviet communist state, the world had a different power dynamic. Would Russia remain outside the other international groups or be included. The West took actions to welcome their former adversary. In 1994, Russia was invited to be a member of what became the G8. Their being invited was a way of being inclusive rather than exclusionary. In 1997, the European Union and Russia signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which dealt with coal, steel, mutual administrative assistance, and customs. The European Union website states the following, “The EU-Russia cooperation covered among others, trade and economy, energy, climate change, research and education, culture as well as various international security questions. Fostering people-to-people contacts and providing support to Russian civil society, human rights defenders and independent media has also been always an important element of the EU’s engagement in Russia. Moreover, the EU was a staunch supporter of Russia’s World Trade Organization (WTO) accession (completed in 2012).”

With NATO, there was a NATO-Russia Council. The NATO website says that following “the NATO-Russia Summit in Rome on 28 May 2002 by the Declaration on NATO-Russia Relations: a New Quality. The 2002 Rome Declaration built on the goals and principles of the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security. The NRC replaced the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), a forum for consultation and cooperation created by the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. The individual Allies and Russia have met as equal partners in the NRC.” Through early 2014, Russia was in cooperation not only with the G8, but with the EU and NATO.

Then in 2013 a nation bordering Russia was on the verge of joining the European Union. After six years of preliminaries on February 22, 2013, 315 of the 349 members of the Ukrainian parliament voted to approve their nation joining the EU. On September 4, 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich called a meeting of his political party. According to *Reuters* reporter Elizabeth Piper, some of Yanukovich’s party advocated aligning with Russia and not the EU. Some feared going against Russia could bring retaliation from Putin. Piper then writes, that Yanukovich replied, "Forget about it… forever!….We will pursue integration with Europe." Piper writes that he “seemed dead set on looking west.”

Just two months later, on November 9th Yanukovich and Vladimir Putin met secretly with no announcement nor publicity. They agreed that Ukraine would suspend its EU application and instead sign an agreement with Russia. Jovita Neliupšiene, foreign policy aide to the Lithuanian President, said Yanukovych had called her before announcing he was ditching the EU pact, arguing that the pressure from Moscow was irresistible. She said that Putin “threatened” Ukraine "with restricted imports of its goods to Russia, particularly from companies in eastern Ukraine, which accommodates the greater share of its industry and employs hundreds of thousands of people. Calculations suggest this would lead to billions in losses. These causes behind the decision were specified by President Yanukovych in the telephone conversation with the president earlier this week," Neliupšiene told a news agency. She was referring to a conversation between the Presidents of Ukraine and Lithuania. As far as we know, Russia had not made such demands on the five other countries bordering Russia when they joined the European Union. But with Ukraine Putin took a hard line, and got his way with Yanukovych.

On November 21, 2013, President Yanukovych announced he was suspending negotiations with the EU and had signed a deal with Russia. Almost immediately demonstrations in Kyiv against the Russian deal and the abandonment of joining the EU started. Between November 2013 and February 2014, 12% of Ukranians at one point or another participated in protests of the suspending of the application to the European Union. The rebels included Kyiv college students, right wing parties, many priests, both leftists. and less radical elements. The protestors at first demanded restarting the EU application but later opposed the corruption of the Yanukovych regime and were against participating in the Russian backed Eurasian Economic Union. Many protesters chanted “we will protect our children.” The protests were a self-described “Revolution of Dignity.” Here was a populist theme, the people against the corrupt governing elite. Then on the night of February 20,2014, between 50 and 100 protestors were slaughtered. That massacre was the final straw. On February 21, 2014, Yanukovich quietly abdicated and secretly departed Ukraine. The next day, February 22, 2014, 328 of the 450 seat Parliament were present and voted 328 to zero to remove Yanukovych.

The deal with Russia stood, Ukraine did not join the EU, but Ukraine was no longer an ally of Russia. The tide had turned. Five days later Vladimir Putin upped the ante. On February 27, 2014, Russian forces invaded Crimea, and soon after annexed it to Russia. What had led to these 2013-2014 crises was not Ukraine and NATO, but Ukraine and the European Union.

This Crimean annexation had significant consequences for Russia and Europe. On March 24, 2014, what had been the G8 became the G7 again when the remaining countries suspended Russia’s inclusion. Also, in March of 2014, the European Union levelled sanctions against Russia for its illegal annexation of Crimea. On April 1, 2014, NATO unanimously suspended cooperation with Russia. The die was cast. The efforts to include Russia in the major European organizations were disrupted in response to Russia taking over Crimea. From 2014 on Russia was on the outside. The invasion and annexation of Crimea by Putin was a major turning point in the evolution of European political dynamics.

This mention of NATO leads to the next relevant topic. What can account for the expansion of NATO following the collapse of the Soviet Union? Between 1949 and 1990, four other nations became NATO members, one of them Turkey joined in 1952. At the time, they shared a common border with Russia of 335 miles. Stalin did not raise a ruckus when Turkey joined NATO.

The issue of NATO expansion came up again when the USSR was in crisis.  Soviet leader Gorbachev in early February 1990 met with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker in Moscow. At the encounter, Baker posed a hypothetical to Gorbachev, what if you let your part of Germany go, and the U.S. agrees that NATO will “not shift one inch eastward from its present position.” Gorbachev responded that NATO expanding was not acceptable. Baker agreed.

Baker’s boss, U.S. President George H. W. Bush and his National Security Council advisers were not pleased with what Baker told Gorbachev. The President saw no need to make concessions about NATO’s future. Bush communicated these views both to German Chancellor Kohl and James Baker. At the President’s request, his secretary of state stopped using the phrase not one inch. Historian Mary Sarotte points out that when in the 1990 negotiations with Kohl on German unification, Gorbachev “had not secured any major concessions… either orally or in writing, on NATO or any other topic.” When in September 1990, a settlement on Germany’s unification was signed by the two Germany’s and the four powers that occupied Germany after World War II, it only addressed conditions about Germany’s unification, not one word on NATO expansion was included. There was never any other formal agreement that conceded that NATO would not expand. On the other hand, during George H.W. Bush’s presidency no new member was admitted to NATO.

When Bill Clinton became President in 1993, he heard specific requests from leaders of former Soviet satellites. Czech’s Vaclav Havel met with President Clinton on April 20, 1993. Havel said, “we are living in a vacuum” and pressed for full NATO membership. When Lech Walesa met with Clinton at this time, the Polish leader informed Clinton that “we are all afraid of Russia.” Should it happen that Russia “adopts an aggressive foreign policy, that aggression will be directed toward Ukraine and Poland.” Walesa said that “Poland cannot be left defenseless.”  This input confirmed Clinton’s belief, historian Sarotte reports, that NATO remains the key to stability in Europe. Still, she says, “the issue of NATO membership remained on the back burner in summer 1993.”

Then Russian leader Boris Yeltsin took an initiative that concerned the Clinton administration. On December 11, 1994, Yeltsin ordered Russian troops to invade Chechnya. To some, historian Sarotte writes, the Chechnya war was “a watershed moment.”  For those favoring NATO’s expansion, the Chechnya war, Sarotte writes, “seemed to prove that the states insisting Russia remained a military threat were right.” Secretary of State Warren Christopher said that Chechnya was “an alarm bell for Central Europe.” It “cast a dark shadow over our relationship with Russia,” and was “inconsistent with democracy.” Defense Secretary William Perry said that Clinton and Gore now came to believe “that right was on the side of the Eastern European countries that wanted to enter NATO soon, that deferring expansion until later in the decade was not feasible.”

The idea of the Clinton group was there should be a four-to-five-year time frame for these new admissions to NATO. While certainly the United States has an unenviable record of invading and dominating other nations and committing more than its share of abominations and atrocities, President Clinton and his major advisers became convinced that Russia’s own expansionist history had not ended with the demise of the USSR. They then proceeded to grant the wishes of three former Soviet satellites to join NATO. In 1999, Hungary, Czechia, and Poland became NATO members. Of course, Soviet troops had intervened in Hungary in 1956, and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Russia and the Soviets had a long record of oppressing Poland.

Then in 2004, when George W. Bush was President, seven additional nations obtained NATO membership. All had either been satellites or Soviet Socialist Republics. Whether reasonable or not, all feared the Russian bear. U.S. intentions may or may not have been to surround Russia, but the countries who entered NATO in the period 1999 to 2004 wanted to protect their territorial integrity from Russian aggressiveness. To these nations the Cold War was not dead and buried. Between 1949 and 2013 NATO had grown from 12 to 28 member states. The eagerness to join NATO after 1991 can be viewed as a freely chosen realignment of the European power system. It was due to the independent decisions of more than a dozen European nations. They were acting in response to what they thought the USSR did during the Cold War and their perception of contemporary Russian threats.

In assessing the dynamics of European life since the demise of the Soviet Union, something else needs to be added. The European Union (EU) has become a force. There were twelve member states in the EU when it was formed. The European Parliament is one of its government entities. It is elected and roughly proportioned by population. It has legislative, supervisory, and budgetary responsibilities. The Parliament has the duty to supervise each member state to ensure they are in accord with democratic principles. The EU also worked to develop other things. In 2002, the EURO went into effect as the common currency between member nations. According to the World Economic Forum, being in the EU has provided for monetary stability, increased capital inflows, and permanent increases in stock market indices. Between 1993 and 2004 both the EU and NATO brought in additional nations. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization had ten new members in those years, and the EU added thirteen. These were the years of peak enlargement for both.

By 2022, the EU had 447 million inhabitants and accounted for 1/6 of the world GDP with 16.6 trillion dollars of production. The EURO is the second most traded currency on the planet. Next to the U. S. the EU has the largest economy in the world and is America’s largest trading partner. The economic fortunes of the U. S. and EU are interdependent.

The U S population of 349 million had a GDP that year of $25.46 trillion. In contrast, the Russian GDP in 2022 was around $2.24 trillion with a population of 144 million. Russia has about 1/3 the population of EU countries. The EU GDP is over seven times larger than Russia’s. Russia has the eighth largest GDP on the planet, in terms of GDP per capita income it ranks 52nd.

Four of the seven nations bordering Ukraine in 2022 were EU members. In 2023, the President of the European Commission said Ukraine’s future is in our Union. That may be both Ukraine’s and the EUs assessment. Valdimir Putin from 2013 forward has used many of the means at his disposal to prevent the Ukrainians from making their own sovereign choices.

In coming to terms with the European political dynamics since the demise of the USSR, it becomes clear that there has been a major realignment of power dynamics, which includes the axis between the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. There are twenty-two members of NATO who are also part of the twenty-seven member European Union. These countries have all chosen NATO and the EU rather than the Russia sponsored alternatives. Any full consideration of post-Cold War Europe power system should consider the EU and NATO in tandem, as the intersection between the two is indispensable for making sense of today’s European politics. This new combined military and economic force covers so much of the European continent. The EU/NATO group overshadows, even dwarfs, any European rival.  As a new European political/economic/military order has emerged through both the EU and NATO, it is a mistake to consider Europe just through with what the EU has achieved without incorporating the NATO contribution. It is equally an error to single out NATO as a cause without fully including the EU at the same time. Then there is the U.S., which is central in NATO and the EU is its leading trading partner. In short, the U.S. while not a EU member, the EU/NATO ascendancy cannot be separated from U.S. involvement.

The EU/NATO intersection combined with its U.S. connections places Russia in a challenging spot. Russia itself had opportunities for closer ties with the EU and NATO, but these went away when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Since 2014, Russia could well have made it a top priority to reconnect to the G7, the EU, and NATO. Putin has not gone in that direction.

It was the desire by Russia not to let Ukraine pursue its own course in economics and politics in 2013-2014 that triggered a major change in European power dynamics. Many Ukrainians wanted to be free from Russian influence. This concern with remaining independent from Russia clearly was also shared by the many former satellites and Soviet Republics who pursued being part of NATO and the EU rather than getting closer to Mother Russia

Like many another country that had been part of or a satellite of the USSR, over time Ukraine turned toward the West for protection against Russia and increased economic opportunities. In June 2017, the Ukraine parliament passed legislation declaring joining NATO was a goal. Ukraine President Zelensky in September 2020 approved a strategy having being part of NATO as a goal. At the June 2021 NATO summit, they decided that having Ukraine join NATO was an aim. If opposition to NATO expansion was Russia’s main objection, would not the 2020 and 2021 actions be cause for Russia to immediately invade Ukraine to prevent that? Russia did not immediately invade Ukraine with the NATO actions as a justification.

What Putin did instead was to make proposals that would reverse the course of history. On December 17, 2021, Russia proposed a treaty with NATO. Russia wanted a binding guarantee that neither Ukraine nor Georgia would become part of NATO. That meant that Russia was opposed to allowing these two nations to make their own choices. Russia also wanted recognition of its own sovereignty over Crimea and Donbas. Putin demanded that NATO should withdraw its capabilities in former Soviet Union territories. In other words, if former Soviet countries wished to have a military force from NATO in their territory, Putin would deny them that option. Putin was basically admitting that if countries are given a free choice, they were not going to select Russia but their competitors. Not surprisingly, Putin on December 21, 2021, said if the West does not meet his demands, he could well take military action.

Is Putin the only super-power leader who wants to stack the deck in their favor and deny choice to others, of course not. But in this instance, his December 2021 proposals were an admission that he had been outmaneuvered. Putin had to know that his proposals would be rejected. In response to Putin’s proposals, U.S. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said, "We will not compromise the key principles on which European security is built, including that all countries have the right to decide their own future and foreign policy, free from outside interference." Putin had backed himself into a corner.

Not surprisingly, on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. There was an additional precipitating cause for his action that Putin left out of his December demands. While neither Ukraine nor Georgia were on the verge of being inducted into NATO, what was imminent was that Ukraine was about to apply for EU membership. Ukraine submitted the EU paperwork on February 28, 2022, four days after the war began. There is a resemblance between what Russia initiated in 2013 and 2022. The common element is that Ukraine was taking steps to join the European Union. It was deja vu all over again. Putin was willing to risk much to ensure Ukraine did not escape Russian oversight.

Is it an aberration in the international power system that a powerful nation that cannot get its way through free choice and peaceful competition resorts to military force? Let me count the ways. Still, for Russia there have been negative consequences of their aggression. As Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea led to the disentangling of Russia from the G8, the EU and NATO, their 2022 war against Ukraine led two long unaligned European nations, Finland and Sweden, to apply to NATO. For many European nations between 1991 and 2024, there have been more worries about the dangers of Russian aggression than NATO expansion.

By 2024, five nations belonging to both the EU and NATO border 11% of Russia. Mother Russia has never taken military action against any of these five when they were applying to the EU and/or NATO. Given this, is it or is it not peculiar that Russia has made an exception and twice invaded Ukraine around the time of an impending EU application?

It may be that Putin’s best chance of achieving his purposes with Ukraine is related to American domestic politics. When Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022, Donald Trump declared it the work of “genius.” Donald Trump’s 2023-2024 hostility to having the Congress pass aid to Ukraine had been influential in delaying additional Congressional funding. Trump’s 2024 announcement that he favored Putin militarily invading NATO nations also showed his choosing a U.S. adversary over its formal allies.

If one favors increased Russian power in the world order, backing Trump can foster that aim. If one sees Russia’s attempt to conquer Ukraine as disruptive of peace, then opposing Putin means opposing Trump. If one sees America as more of a danger than Russia, then again Trump is your man. If one views European political stability and national sovereignty as priorities, then you would be against the team of Putin and Trump. No matter where one sides among these or other alternatives, it is hard not to conclude that from 2013 to 2024 Putin’s policy in relation to Ukraine is to keep that nation in Russia’s orbit and to prevent Ukraine from making its own choices if that includes being part of the EU and/or NATO.

In conclusion: with the Russia-Ukraine war, humanity is once again in a tragic, horrendous situation. While there were 19 genocides between the 1960s and the early 2000s, this present conflict is the first European interstate extended war since 1945. This war may lead to greater catastrophe or remain confined to the current area. Allegations of abominations, atrocities, and other extensive war crimes have accompanied this standoff as it has with many others interstate conflicts. We can play the blame game all we want. We can try to articulate what led to this dreadful occurrence to our heart’s content. But when dust comes to dust, humanity is immersed in the all too familiar reality of being brutally lethal to members of our own species. The capabilities of Homo sapiens to develop technologically advanced weapons of mass destruction and use them on each other distinguishes us from any other species on the planet. Our extraordinary innovations in weaponry along with the increased percent of non-combatants murdered in war indicates that as civilization progresses so too often does our bestiality. The Russia-Ukraine War is no exception to this embrace of sophisticated barbarity.

