Experts say the U.S. made one big mistake in dealing with Putin
by Zeeshan Aleem MSNBC March 5 2022

The prevailing wisdom in the West is that Russian President Vladimir Putin was never interested in President Joe Biden's diplomatic efforts to avert an invasion of Ukraine. According to this theory, Russia's horrifying and illegal invasion of Ukraine could never have been prevented.
But, Zeeshan Aleem asks, "what if that prevailing wisdom isn't accurate?

According to a line of widely overlooked scholarship, forgotten warnings from Western statesmen and interviews with several experts — including high-level former government officials who oversaw Russia strategy for decades — this narrative is wrong," writes Aleem. "The abundance of evidence that NATO was a sustained source of anxiety for Moscow raises the question of whether the United States' strategic posture was not just imprudent but negligent."

Many of these analysts argue that the U.S. erred in its efforts to prevent the breakout of war by refusing to offer to retract support for Ukraine to one day join NATO or substantially reconsider its terms of entry. And they argue that Russia's willingness to go to war over Ukraine's NATO status, which it perceived as an existential national security threat and listed as a fundamental part of its rationale for the invasion, was so clear for so long that dropping support for its eventual entry could have averted the invasion.

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The fact that the NATO status question was not put on the table as Putin signaled that he was serious about an invasion — so plainly that the U.S. government was spelling it out with day-by-day updates — was an error, and potentially a catastrophic one. It may sound cruel to suggest that Ukraine could be barred, either temporarily or permanently, from entering a military alliance it wants to be in. But what's more cruel is

that Ukrainians might be paying with their lives for the United States' reckless flirtation with Ukraine as a future NATO member without ever committing to its defense.

Analysts say it's widely known that Ukraine had no prospect of entering NATO for many years, possibly decades, because of its need for major democracy and anti-corruption reforms and because NATO has no interest in going to war with Russia over Ukraine's Donbas region, where Russia has meddled and backed armed conflict for years. But by dangling the possibility of Ukraine's NATO membership for years but never fulfilling it, NATO created a scenario that emboldened Ukraine to act tough and buck Russia — without any intention of directly defending Ukraine with its firepower if Moscow decided Ukraine had gone too far.

But for the West to offer to compromise on Ukraine's future entry into NATO would have required admitting the limitations of Western power.

"It was the desire of Western governments not to lose face by compromising with Russia," Anatol Lieven, senior research fellow on Russia and Europe at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft and the author of "Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry," told me. "But it was also the moral cowardice of so many Western commentators and officials and ex-officials who would not come out in public and admit that this was no longer a viable project."

The U.S. must do everything it can do to end this war — which is already brutalizing Ukraine, rattling the global economy, and could quite easily spiral into a nuclear-armed confrontation between the U.S. and Russia, if things get out of hand — as swiftly as possible, including negotiating on Ukraine's NATO status and possible neutrality with an open mind. And over the longer term, Americans must realize that in an increasingly multipolar world, reckoning with the limits of their power is critical for achieving a more peaceful and just world.

In 1990, the West led the Soviets to believe NATO would not expand further eastward across Europe in exchange for Germany reunification and the agreement that the new Germany would be a NATO member. Most famously, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker once assured Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that the NATO alliance would move "not one inch eastward" in exchange for this agreement, but as the late Princeton

University scholar Stephen Cohen pointed out in 2018, this pledge was in fact made multiple times by several Western countries.

These assurances were not honored, and NATO has expanded eastward over the years to include many more countries, all the way up to Russia's borders.

"It is the broken promise to Gorbachev that lingers as America's original sin," Cohen said then.

NATO's expansion was hugely controversial in policy circles in the 1990s. As foreign policy commentator Peter Beinart has noted, around the time the Clinton administration was considering NATO in the '90s to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic — a debate that almost caused President Bill Clinton's Secretary of Defense William Perry to resign — many influential voices dissented:

George Kennan, the living legend who had fathered America's policy of containment against the Soviet Union, called NATO expansion "a strategic blunder of potentially epic proportions." Thomas Friedman, America's most prominent foreign policy columnist, declared it the "most ill-conceived project of the post-Cold War era." Daniel Patrick Moynihan, widely considered the most erudite member of the US Senate, warned, "We have no idea what we're getting into." John Lewis Gaddis, the dean of America's Cold War historians, noted that, "historians—normally so contentious—are in uncharacteristic agreement: with remarkably few exceptions, they see NATO enlargement as ill-conceived, ill-timed, and above all ill-suited to the realities of the post-Cold War world."

The major concern was that expansion would backfire — that it would, as Kennan put it in 1997, "inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion." Indeed, Russia hated it. As Lieven previously told me, for decades the Russian political establishment and commentators have vociferously objected to NATO expansion and "warned that if this went as far as taking in Georgia and Ukraine, then there would be confrontation and strong likelihood of war."

Russia perceives NATO as an existential threat

Russia is no longer at the helm of a global superpower, but it is still, at the very least, a regional great power, and as such it devotes considerable resources to exerting its influence beyond its borders and using the states around it as buffers. Russia views Ukraine, a large country to which it has long-running cultural and historical ties, as a particularly critical buffer state for protecting its capital.

The issue that Russia saw in NATO was not just an expanding military alliance, but one that had shifted gears to transforming and proactively intervening in global affairs. After the end of the Cold War, NATO's raison d'être no longer existed, but instead of disbanding, its mission shifted to democracy promotion. The carrot of membership in NATO was used to encourage countries to adopt liberalization and good governance and align with U.S. political, economic and military interests.

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Of particular concern to the Russians have been NATO's operations outside of NATO countries. The Russians were shocked by NATO's bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, where NATO not only intervened in the affairs of a non-NATO country, but took sides against the Serbs, allies of the Russians, and did so without United Nations Security Council approval. NATO has also been involved in regime change and nation-building projects in places like Libya and Afghanistan.

"NATO is a defensive organization; I don't think it had any plans on Russia," Thomas Graham, a former special assistant to the president and senior director for Russia on the National Security Council staff from 2004 to 2007, said regarding NATO's expansion of territory and widening scope of operations. "All that said … if you put yourself in the position of people in the Kremlin, you can see why they came to that conclusion."

Things turned up a notch in 2008, when NATO declared that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members" of NATO. It did not specify a timeline, and it was assumed that it was conditional on the countries adopting political reforms, but it infuriated the Russians.

As a way to reassert its dominance in the region, Russia invaded Georgia later that year. In another sign of Russia's intolerance of losing out to Western influence in those countries, Putin annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea in 2014 in the wake of the protest-spurred ouster of Ukraine's Russia-friendly president, which the West favored.

John Mearsheimer, an international relations scholar at the University of Chicago, argued that a number of factors, including Ukraine's potential integration into the Western European economy, played a role in Russia's concerns in 2014, but NATO enlargement was the "taproot" of the crisis and Russia wanted to make sure that, among other things, a NATO base couldn't be set up in Crimea as Ukraine drifted toward the U.S.

Mearsheimer also warned that this was foreshadowing, and Ukraine's pseudo-membership status was going to bait Moscow and result in catastrophe. "The West is leading Ukraine down the primrose path, and the end result is Ukraine is going to get wrecked," he said in a lecture.

Russia has grown concerned again about Ukraine for a number of reasons. Analysts like Lieven and Beebe point out that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has taken a number of sharp measures to eradicate Russian influence in Ukraine recently by doing things like banning the use of Russian language in schools and state institutions, shutting down Kremlin-linked television stations and arresting some of the most prominent Russo-sympathetic leaders in the country — all while cooperating on the ground with NATO. Russia read this as a sign that Kyiv was throwing its lot in with the U.S. and the prospect of an agreement ensuring autonomy for the separatist-held Donbas region, crucial to Russia's plan to thwart Ukraine's NATO entry, might be dead.

All this brings us to the crisis at hand. The takeaway of this very quick survey is not to convince you to agree with Russia's assessment that NATO posed an existential threat to it or that it is justified in its great power politicking. As Beebe put it, whether or not Russia's perception is accurate or justified "is immaterial to whether that perception is genuinely held and to whether they will act on that perception." What matters is that there is clear evidence that Russia sees NATO as destabilizing, pro-democratic and anti-Russian — and clear evidence that it was willing to use force to counter NATO's enlargement.

Moreover, Putin sent clear signals that he was serious about pulling the trigger if he didn't get something. Shifting some 150,000 troops along Ukraine's border for weeks was a real cost, and it placed pressure on him to not back down without extracting a major concession and risk losing face in front of Russia's political elite.

"I thought, and continue to think, that we should have made a deal, that there was a deal to be had — not a deal that we liked, obviously, but a deal that the realities of the situation that we're facing required," Beebe said.

Graham, the former NSC official, also said the U.S. made a mistake in its approach. Ukraine's future NATO membership didn't necessarily have to be permanently taken off the table, but the U.S. "had to be prepared to talk about it in a serious way," he said.

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Emma Ashford, resident senior fellow with the New American Engagement Initiative in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, wrote in an email that it was a "pity" that "NATO's open-door principle was not up for debate." Though she was skeptical about the political ability of the West to "promise to close NATO's open door, particularly in a way that would have been credible to Moscow," she said there were potential ways to deal with Moscow's concerns, such as "a moratorium on NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, conventional arms control agreements limiting the scope of NATO military integration and cooperation with Ukraine, or some form of negotiated Ukrainian neutrality."

It seems unjust that Ukraine might not be let into an alliance it wants to be part of to protect itself from a country like Russia. I would say it is. But alliances choose their own members and must weigh the geopolitical consequences of expanding them — the enhanced possibility of war chief among them. As with so many issues in politics, justice is circumscribed by practical matters that require us to contemplate the possibility of making things worse through imprudent action.

As Stephen Wertheim, a senior fellow in the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me,

NATO’s oft-touted “open door” policy is supposed to be based on Article 10 of the treaty, but the meaning is often misunderstood.

"In recent decades, the open door has instead come to entail dangling the possibility of membership to other states, never foreclosing that possibility, and sometimes speaking as though states have a right to join NATO if they so choose (when in fact they have a right merely to ask to join)," he wrote.

That dangling is incredibly dangerous, and it's possible that it just caused Ukraine to experience the worst of all worlds: not receiving NATO protection while also enduring one of the most aggressive forms of Russian domination possible.

Many of the experts I spoke to said Ukraine's neutrality or some kind of altered NATO status should be part of the discussion in diplomatic backchannels. Critics will say this constitutes “appeasement” of Putin. But as Biden has already made clear, the U.S. is not willing to wage war with Russia, and it certainly isn't going to allow Ukraine into NATO when Russia is attacking it, since that would require all of NATO to go to war with Russia. The issue now is to think clearly about how to end a conflict that could spiral into World War III.

It is imperative that America develops a clearer understanding of its adversaries and behaves more judiciously in an increasingly multipolar world. It is not difficult to imagine the U.S. making a miscalculation over what China would be willing to do to secure its domination of the South China Sea. The U.S. may want to be the only great power in the world, free to expand its hegemony with impunity, but it is not. Refusing to see this is dangerous for us all.