

# Biden's Escalation With Russia Over Ukraine Is a Terrible Idea

Wednesday 26 January 2022, by [BRODER David](#), [SAKWA Richard](#) (Date first published: 26 January 2022).

**Western governments are being called on to send more weapons to Ukraine — an arms buildup that will only escalate a potentially disastrous conflict. What we really need is a comprehensive peace settlement for the region.**

In recent weeks, Western media have turned to well-worn analogies from the 1930s to explain the stakes of a potential “hot war” between Ukraine and Russia. The need to avoid “[appeasing](#)” the Kremlin is taken to justify increased military aid to Ukraine, while the question of the country’s right [to join](#) the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is routinely cast as a matter of national survival.

Professor Richard Sakwa, author of [Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderland](#), paints a more complicated picture of Ukrainian-Russian relations. His analysis emphasizes a long-standing opposition within Ukrainian society between forces upholding a “pluralist” idea of the country and its relations with its neighbors, and nationalist movements committed to NATO membership and breaking ties with Russia.

The Maidan protests of 2014, the armed conflict in the Donbass region, and the Russian annexation of the Crimea each appear to have harshened these divides. Yet Ukrainians have expressed support for processes like the Minsk II agreement and Normandy Format talks as well as candidates committed to de-escalation — including current president [Volodymyr Zelensky](#) upon his election in 2019. Yet, in Sakwa’s words, in Ukraine a raucous hard-right minority has “held policy hostage” — an impasse that has also allowed hard-liners in Moscow to gain strength.

*Jacobin*’s David Broder interviewed Sakwa about the roots of the current tensions and the prospects of peaceful resolution.

**DB | In Western media, Ukraine is often near-totally defined by its antagonism with Russia; a Times headline cited a general saying “Ukrainians are ready to tear apart Russians with their bare hands.” Especially after the 2008 NATO summit, it’s also assumed that Ukrainians want to join NATO, but Russia is stopping it. What evidence is there for that?**

**RS |** This goes much further back even than NATO’s 2008 Bucharest summit, which invited both Georgia and Ukraine to ultimately join. It’s the way that Ukrainian policy was defined for a long time in terms of the so-called European choice — which itself was highly contested, with poll after poll showing that the Ukrainian public is divided. It’s wobbled a bit over the years, but basically the western part, what we would call the Galician element, really wants to not just join the West, but to tear up all ties with Russia.

Postcolonialism, if that model can be used in this case, assumes a hybridity after you’ve been colonized, like at the linguistic and cultural levels, whereas the cultural separatists believe that it’s post-colonial with a hyphen, that you have to expunge all former links. But the southern and eastern

parts of the country are more inclined to maintain close links with Russia. In a way, there is a basis to Vladimir Putin saying that Russians and Ukrainians are one people in terms of culture, history, intermarriage and so on. He never said that they should be one state — and that's a fundamental difference.

I traveled through the Donbass in 2008, and you'd see painted on buildings everywhere, "No to NATO." Whereas now we've seen the WikiLeaks State Department documents, published in 2010-11, showing endless messages from the US ambassador in Kiev saying ultimately people wanted NATO. This was a fanciful and artificial idea from the beginning, assuming that the choice was simple and unequivocally toward the West. Russia was then framed as holding Ukraine back geopolitically, developmentally, and above all in terms of democracy.

It's a much more complex situation, as opinion polls even today show. Gerard Toal and his colleagues have shown that an astonishingly high proportion — 30 or 40 percent of the population, even with Crimea and Donbass not included — want close relations with Russia. Some even want to join the Eurasian Economic Union. So, this is what Zbigniew Brzezinski, and earlier and above all, Samuel Huntington, described as a cleft country, a divided country. So, it's wrong to assume that they have opted unequivocally for NATO. But this choice has been imposed since the emergence of the neonationalist government in February 2014 after the Maidan events.

**DB | From Volodymyr Ishchenko's analysis of this polling divide, we get the impression that, while in the 1990s, support for joining NATO was very low, this has risen, and it's easy to imagine that the 2014 war would harden antagonisms. Yet Volodymyr Zelensky's election in 2019 was widely seen as expressing a popular will to cool tensions: in that election, pro-Maidan forces lost support, while he spoke of upholding Minsk II. Why hasn't that played out in practice?**

**RS |** Yes, Zelensky was elected as the peace candidate. But I'd go further and say when Petro Poroshenko was elected in May 2014, he was also putting himself forward as the peace candidate — people also elected him seeing him as an oligarch with close ties with Russia and so on. Yet neither of them could go forward with cooling tensions.

In December 2019, the Normandy Format met with Germany, Ukraine, Russia, and France, and Zelensky's chief of staff tried to go forward with that process. Yet even while they were meeting, people were mobilizing in the Maidan saying that they wouldn't accept any negotiation or any implementation of the Minsk II agreement if it involved giving any autonomy to the Donbass.

So, the first factor is that there's a very highly mobilized, radicalized minority within Ukraine, which holds policy hostage. Second, this minority — though there's a silence about some of its more odious extremes — is supported geopolitically by the Western powers, by what I call the Atlantic power system. It's not just NATO, but, scandalously in my view, the European Union, which really hasn't upheld its own principles.

Zelensky has been even worse than Poroshenko in undermining Russian-language cultural and media institutions in Ukraine and for pushing a distorted view of history. So, in a sense, external and internal factors have coalesced. But despite all that, opinion polls show Ukrainians are still divided, although there has been a coalescence in favor of defending Ukrainian state sovereignty.

In fact, Ukrainians in general are a very peace-loving people. That's why it's so catastrophic that now we're talking about war and conflict. But all this is part of a bigger picture, a second cold war. If it is indeed a genuine cold war, then we need to learn how to manage conflict. I'm arguing that today we're in a slow-motion Cuban missile crisis. In October 1962, it was resolved peacefully.

Jupiter missiles were taken out of Turkey, and the Soviet Union removed its missiles, and the United States promised not to invade Cuba.

That is ultimately what Putin wants, and Boris Yeltsin before him, and before that, Mikhail Gorbachev always argued the expansion of the Atlantic military security system to Russia's borders was unacceptable. So, this question has been dragging on for thirty years now. Putin said in his 2018 State of the Nation speech, "You didn't listen to us then, so listen to us now" — when he announced hypersonic missiles and so on. That's the background to where we are today.

But ultimately, society is internally divided within Ukraine. There's a huge peace contingent, yet the worst elements of the Ukrainian polity are exacerbated by Western support for short-term geopolitical advantage. Even not long ago, Ukraine was committed to neutrality. If Ireland can be neutral, if Austria can be neutral, if Finland can be neutral, then why can't Ukraine, especially since there's a large constituency for it within Ukraine itself? This was, after all, official Ukrainian policy until the neonationalist seizure of power in 2014.

**DB | Some coverage emphasizes Mikhail Gorbachev's remarks that the eastward expansion of NATO was never discussed at the end of the Cold War, i.e., to deny the Russian government claim that "promises were made but not kept." But they perhaps miss his wider point, i.e., the post—Cold War expansion didn't include Russia and seemed directed against it. How seriously should we take the proposal raised by Gorbachev, and indeed both Yeltsin and Putin after him, of some sort of "greater Europe" including Russia, as an alternative to this second cold war?**

**RS |** Absolutely so. It isn't just Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin who all advanced this idea. It's, of course, a Gaullist idea that ultimately Europe needs to take control of its own destiny. François Mitterrand also talked about a confederation of Europe.

Gorbachev made a misleading statement that there had been no promises not to enlarge NATO, but no one quite understands why. All the National Security Archive documents published in 2017 show that dozens of Western leaders said that NATO would not expand beyond the united Germany. That is unequivocal. That's part of the extraordinary propaganda war we're engaged in now, when Western scholars and politicians say there was no promise.

But ultimately, two peace orders were on offer at the end of the Cold War, both good ones. There was the Western one, "Europe whole and free." But the "common European home" one was based on the idea of a transformation. It wasn't even that NATO enlargement, as such, was so bad, but that it took place without an adequate framework in which the security interests of Russia could be taken into account.

A "common European home" is the only way forward. People may mock it now, but I don't. And there's plenty of people within Russia who argue this as well — liberals and even some conservatives. There's the question of what form it would take. Gorbachev and others really wanted the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to become the major security body, with a Security Council acting like a regional United Nations, which would have resolved the issue. Then, NATO could have expanded. In many ways, some of the arguments in favor are quite good. NATO stops small states from going to war with each other, and hopefully it will continue to prevent Turkey and Greece coming into conflict.

But Russia has to be made part of the security order in some way or another, and that's what has not happened. There was the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council of 1997, and then the NATO-Russia Council of 2002, but these were what I call mitigation measures, not actually solving the question.

Undoubtedly, since 2018, Putin and his team — his hard-liners — have said, “Enough of this, we can’t trust the West, they’re moving at the border.” And it’s not just NATO: it’s the anti-ballistic missile installations being built in both Romania and Poland, and the MK-41 Aegis Ashore. So, when there’s endless provocations, what Moscow would consider military exercises — B-52 bombers flying along the border that can carry nuclear bombs, warships in the Black Sea endlessly — common sense says that ultimately there’ll be a pushback. And what’s so frightening today in this second cold war is that very few in the West really understand how high the stakes are.

**DB | We’ve said Ukraine isn’t a monolith, but certain forces want to push tensions with Russia for their own reasons. But something similar might be said of Russia itself. Beyond Alexei Navalny — with his comments in Time accusing the West of playing into Putin’s hands, but also calling for the West to stop “appeasing” him — there’s also opposition forces that criticize Putin but not from a pro-Western perspective. What store should we put by the idea that Putin is making these demands to manage the domestic political situation, rallying the population around the spectacle of conflict — or, as some say, even trying to push up gas prices?**

**RS |** One of the more disturbing elements today is that liberals in Russia try to compensate for their domestic weakness by leveraging Western support, which only weakens them at home. Opinion polls show only 1-2 percent support for Navalny, when he was at liberty, and even today despite the huge publicity. So, liberals are locked in this death spiral where they get cast in all this dreadful Cold War language as “Fifth Columnists” and “diversionaries,” whereas of course most of them are not, wanting to see more constitutional rights, democracy, and so on. That’s the dangerous game they’re playing with the West.

But domestic public opinion in Russia is not militantly readying for war — it’s absolutely the opposite. The same is true in Ukraine, by the way; it’s only the Western population that seems to have whipped itself up into a frenzy now. Ukrainians are peaceful and so are Russians.

But the substantive point, which Western commentators endlessly make, that Putin is engaged in saber-rattling to divert from sagging domestic popularity, is completely false. His popularity has dipped, but it’s still at stellar levels (65 percent support) for someone who’s been in power for twenty years. I’m not a hard-line offensive realist of the John Mearsheimer sort, arguing that domestic politics has no input into foreign policy and security making, though I’m sympathetic to his argument.

I’ve always defended a “factional” view of Russian politics: there are very powerful, different tendencies, all the way up from society to the divided elite. And as far as I understand it, since autumn 2019, the so-called pragmatists within the Kremlin and the ruling elite have lost their position. Basically, the hard-liners have said, “Enough is enough: we’ve been taken as fools by the West, we really need to start pushing back.” Unfortunately, part of that was squeezing the domestic opposition as well, which I think is — as it was in the Soviet times — a huge self-inflicted blow. This internal repression doesn’t help the credibility of Russia’s foreign policy actions. These could be quite sensible in the way we’ve been saying — there’s a clear security issue there. But that’s undermined, for example, by the attempts to close [human-rights watchdog] Memorial. For me, the existence of Memorial, while it could continue working in a more or less normal manner, was a symbol that ultimately there was still a level of pluralism and openness. But since autumn 2019, the government has been pushing back quite dramatically against that.

**DB | British media coverage often centers on our responsibility not to “appease” Putin. We also have this World War II analogy in German politics, with its Green Party foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, saying Berlin has a duty to protect these states for**

**“historical reasons.” The idea that small countries like the Baltic states should be able to choose for themselves, and not be left defenseless, which Putin is effectively arguing for, sounds appealing at a certain level. But clearly there’s also a problem with this analogy insofar as it reimports into Western politics a trope that demonizes all critics, or those who aren’t hard-line supporters of the arms buildup, as latter-day “appeasers.”**

**RS** | The tendency you mention is even worse than it was in the first Cold War, because back then there was at least some diversity and debate. I’ve mentioned De Gaulle’s France, and within West Germany, there was the *Ostpolitik* line of change through engagement, beginning even in the early 1960s. What’s so shocking today is that there are so few voices in opposition. Instead, we have this endless trumpeting of the unity of the Atlantic powers. Unity is only a good thing if it’s united around a sensible policy, not if it’s an echo chamber of false analysis talking about plucky little Ukraine facing up to Russia as a revisionist power. Germany is to be commended to its approach to history, but there’s nothing more dangerous than misapplying that to a different historical moment. Any idea of talking about engagement — classic German policy — and even the pushing forward of Nord Stream 2 is considered “appeasement” of Russia.

This is a complete misunderstanding of where we are today. Putin does not wish to recreate a Soviet empire. Our defense minister in Britain, Ben Wallace, said this week that Putin is an ethnonationalist. This couldn’t be more mistaken: Russia today has at least 150 major nationalities. Putin has been condemning ethnonationalism endlessly: it would tear the country apart. So, if Western politicians get the basic things wrong, they’ll also get the big geopolitical things wrong.

So, my view is that this present situation is far more dangerous because there’s just a few brave souls out there who are condemning it. I’m delighted to see the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft has developed; there’s a few people in the United States, shockingly few in the United Kingdom — and I think the tide has turned in Germany too, especially with the Greens, who are just Clintonian liberal interventionists of the worst order — Cold War hawks.

Foreign policy should always be a balance between interests and values. If Russia was just willy-nilly wanting to invade and suppress Ukrainian democracy, then I’d be the first to support Ukraine. But that’s not what we’re talking about. Putin’s so-called revisionism is not of an Adolf Hitler sort. This endless, even implicit, *reductio ad Hitlerum* is just nonsense in this case. When Putin came to power, he even said Russia would join NATO. The elite and the leaders in Russia are rational. They’re not trying to recreate an empire. They’re simply saying, “Look, our back is to the wall. Listen to us.”

The solution is very simple: neutrality for Ukraine. No one is taking it over. Putin has supported the Minsk II agreement, which is a framework for the return of the Donbass to Ukrainian sovereignty. So, where is the empire in that? Today, there are 2.5 million people in the Donbass with their own views. Putin initially mobilized because Ukraine has 100,000 troops also on the border, with the Turkish drone missiles that showed their efficacy in the second Nagorno-Karabakh war last year between Armenia and Azerbaijan. So, there was genuine alarm in Moscow that they could do what Croatia did in Operation Storm, in attacking the Serbian enclaves way back in the mid-1990s. It’s a complicated situation, but the basic lines are fairly simple and clear.

**DB** | **Earlier, you compared this situation to a “Cuban Missile Crisis in slow motion.” In that case, there was a sort of mutually acceptable face-saving through de-escalation on both sides. Is that the likely outcome here: another round of the Normandy talks or of the Minsk agreements?**

**RS** | There’s talk of a new Joe Biden-Vladimir Putin summit, possibly as early as this coming week, which I very much welcome. And negotiations are important in all of this. My view is it’s 50-50. I

think people haven't understood that we were lucky in October 1962 because we had basically sensible leaders, above all Jack Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, and back channels and so on. I think there's almost none of this now and that we're closer to a genuine conflict. The West and, of course, the British are just blundering in there, adding fuel to the flames; even the Germans are not giving overflight permission for British forces and equipment flying to Ukraine.

I think it could go either way. The Russians can't just stand down now without anything, and the West is offering almost nothing. At the margins, they are engaging, which is good. Making some minor offers — also good. But this isn't on the necessary scale. The Russians are now saying we need to go back to the Gorbachev agenda of sorting out a European peace order.

You mentioned that each country can make their choice; but the other half of the peace order established in 1990 was that security is indivisible. The Russians are saying, "Guys, where's our security? We've been left on the outside."

Now we're closer to war. I don't think that means an occupation of Ukraine. More probably, it would mean long-distance artillery, air strikes, and so on to try to degrade Ukrainian forces and get the West into serious negotiations. So far, they've been going through the motions, but there has to be some sort of declaration. The Cuban crisis was resolved by concessions so both sides could save face. Today, we need not just face-saving, but substantive moves.

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