



NIAS-Europe Studies Brief

# Ukraine and beyond: The US Strategies towards Russia

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## Introduction

The long-festering disagreements between the US and Russia have finally come to the fore in the crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, resulting in an almost complete rupture in relations between the two countries.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, despite several attempts at resetting the relationship, US-Russia relations have remained strained, particularly after the Presidency of Vladimir Putin. There have been sporadic instances of cooperation, for instance initially after 9/11 when Russia offered its support to the US. But neither side has been able to overcome the Cold War mentality and engage.

## Issues in US-Russia Relations before the Invasion of Ukraine: Issues Galore

Just after the Cold War, the US and Russia developed close ties. During this period, Washington and Moscow “negotiated a treaty to reduce strategic nuclear weapons (START II), signed a multilateral treaty on conventional forces in Europe, negotiated the terms for German reunification and a unified Germany's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and agreed on a charter for European security and stability after the Cold War” and even jointly sponsored a major conference in Madrid on the Middle East and Iraq's aggression against Kuwait (Rumer and Sokolsky 2019). Russia required the US' support to deal with domestic political pressures while the US sought to integrate Russia into the world economy and ensure that its nuclear weapons remained safe and secure (Mackinnon 2021). However, even during that period, there was unease among Russians about NATO, as was evident from a 1992 speech by the then Russian foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, accusing NATO of meddling in Russia's backyard and saying “the former Soviet space cannot be considered as an area for full implementation of CSCE norms. This is essentially post- imperial space where Russia will need to defend its interests with all available means, including military and economic” (Quoted in Trenin 2011: 84). However, Kozyrev soon assuaged Western concerns over his speech by clarifying that he had only pointed out what could happen if nationalist forces assumed power in Russia. In hindsight, what Kozyrev said was true; Russia was never able to accept NATO's expansion into the post-Soviet space. US criticisms of Russian wars in Chechnya and Russia's objection to NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 meanwhile added to the tensions in the bilateral relationship.

After 2000, post the rise of Putin, Russia shook off years of economic chaos, supported by rising oil and gas prices, and started enjoying more domestic political stability. Putin himself was initially willing to cooperate with the US and NATO and reportedly even wanted Russia to join NATO. In an interview with BBC's David Frost, Putin remarked that he would not

rule out joining NATO “if and when Russia’s views are considered as those of an equal partner... Russia is part of the European culture. And I cannot imagine my own country in isolation from Europe and what we often call the civilised world” (quoted in Rankin 2021). Russia provided intelligence support during the US operations in Afghanistan post 9/11 and opened its airspace for US aircrafts and relations continued to be stable.

However, Washington’s decision to withdraw from the anti-ballistic missile treaty in 2002, followed by the so-called colour revolutions like the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia (2003), the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine (2004), and the “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan (2005), followed by the US invasion of Iraq triggered paranoia in Russia of US attempts at regime change in these countries, which it felt would eventually be inimical to it. Russia’s offensive against Georgia and the US-NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 added to the growing bitterness in the relationship. Putin also believed that street protests against the rigging of Russian elections in 2012 were engineered by the US (Mackinnon 2021). Meanwhile, Russia supported the Nicolás Maduro’s regime in Venezuela, killed or attempted to assassinate former Russian officials on foreign soil, and gave asylum to US whistleblower, Edward Snowden. Added to all this, Russia’s growing closeness with China and its push for a multipolar world, which many in the US see as being directed against it, as well as American accusations of human rights violations in Russia against those opposed to the Putin regime, have contributed to the distance between the US and Russia. The 2012 Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law and Accountability Act and 2016 Global Magnitsky Act imposed sanctions on Russian officials responsible for human rights abuses and corruption. The mass protests in Ukraine in 2014 leading to the fall of the pro-Russian government under President Viktor Yanukovich were as far as the Russians were concerned the final straw proving that the West meant to encircle Russia. After Yanukovich fled, the first act of the Ukrainian parliament was to revoke the legal status of Russian as a national language and block access to Russian news, TV channels, and radio. This was opposed by the minority ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine. Russia acted quickly, backing ethnic Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine through a hybrid war and annexing the Crimean Peninsula after a referendum, which was not internationally recognised. More importantly, the annexation was a violation of the terms of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which Russia, the US, Ukraine, and the UK had promised to uphold Ukraine’s territorial integrity. This triggered more Western sanctions on Russia. Soon thereafter, Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war to support its long-time ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This intervention was also an assertion of Russia’s status as a global power, capable of intervening in faraway countries, and therefore a direct challenge to US primacy. Russia’s alleged attempts to intervene in the 2016 US presidential election and mutual accusations of espionage further embittered relations. These accumulated grievances have wrecked Russia-US relations. But as far as the Russians are concerned, the original sin lies with NATO expansion as expounded by Putin in 2007: “NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask against whom is this expansion intended.” (Putin 2007). Russia claims that during the US-Soviet talks on German reunification in 1990, the US had promised that NATO would not expand eastwards, a claim that Washington denies, saying that states have a sovereign right to choose their alliances. While Russia was unhappy about NATO expansion in 1999 and 2004, it was too weak then to object though it saw it as a threat to its security and as an instrument of democracy promotion led by the US. In 2008, when NATO offered membership prospects to Ukraine and Georgia at its Bucharest Summit, Russia responded forcefully.

### **Russian Strategies and American Responses to the war in Ukraine**

Russia is a country with no geographical barriers and it has always been attacked by forces coming from the European plains as Napoleon and Hitler did in more recent history. The distance between the Ukrainian border and Moscow is less than 500 kilometres. If Ukraine and Georgia join NATO, Russian dominance over the Black Sea would come to an end as Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania, all Black Sea basin countries, are NATO members. Therefore, for the Kremlin, Ukraine is critical in its national security calculations. Adding to this is the historical and cultural significance of Ukraine to Russia; both claim their heritage from Rus or Kievan Rus or Ancient Rus, which united several tribes and clans of different ethnicities under the Byzantine Church in the 10th century. Crimea is where St Vladimir converted the Slavs to Christianity. Moreover, Russians and Ukrainians have very close family ties, and most Ukrainians speak Russian. So, Ukraine becoming a part of NATO was something that Russia could not accept.

After the fall of the pro-Russian government and the annexation of Crimea, Russia has been helping ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine against Ukraine. The ethnic Russians claim that they have been discriminated against and that the Ukrainian government has been waging a war against them. Therefore, between 2014 and 2021 the Donbas region has been mired in war, leading to over 14,000 deaths.

On 10 November 2021, the US and Ukraine signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership even as tensions between Ukraine and Russia hit an all-time high. The Charter affirmed that “the United States and Ukraine intend to continue a range of substantive measures to prevent external direct and hybrid aggression against Ukraine and hold Russia accountable for such aggression and violations of international law, including the seizure and attempted annexation of Crimea and the Russia-led armed conflict in parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, as well as its continuing malign behaviour.... The United States supports Ukraine’s efforts to maximize its status as a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner to promote interoperability” (State Department 2021). This provoked Russia further and it started amassing tanks and other military hardware along its border with Ukraine. The US warned Russia against invading Ukraine even as Russia presented its detailed security demands to the West in December 2021. These demands included NATO ceasing all military activity in eastern Europe and Ukraine and that NATO never accept Ukraine or other former Soviet nations as members. After diplomatic talks between Russian and American officials failed in Geneva in January 2022, NATO put its troops on standby even as the US reaffirmed its commitment to NATO’s “open-door” policy while offering a “principled and pragmatic evaluation” of Moscow’s concerns in a written response to Russian demands. Despite many attempts at diplomatic reconciliation, on 21 February 2022, Russia recognised the two breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk, and Luhansk, as independent entities and ordered Russian troops to “maintain peace” in the region. The US responded by implementing sanctions on Russia’s sovereign debt, cutting off Russia’s government from Western financing, and halting progress on Nord Stream 2. On 24 February, Putin announced a “special military operation” in Ukraine to protect people who have been facing “humiliation and genocide” perpetrated by the Kiev regime and “to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine,” while evoking the examples of Western actions in Belgrade, Iraq, Libya, and Syria (Putin 2022). However, Putin’s objective of quickly capturing Kiev and forcing a quick surrender by Ukrainian forces seems to have failed. This is largely because of the support that Ukraine has received from NATO; it has received training and weapons from NATO countries since 2008 (Michaels 2022). Since the military operation was announced, the US and NATO have been

openly sending weapons to Ukraine and diplomatically and economically isolating Russia. The stand-off now appears to have become a “frozen conflict.”

The US has responded forcefully to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, using all the political, military, and economic might at its disposal, short of a direct war with Russia. Despite overwhelming support for Ukraine at the UN, the US has not been able to isolate Russia completely, as major countries like India and China have not completely come on board with the US despite immense pressure on them to do so. Second, the US, through NATO and on its own, has been sending military weapons and aid to Ukraine as well as sharing intelligence inputs. Military weapons include long-range artillery, armoured vehicles, radar, ammunition, as well as drones. The US Congress passed the Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act (2022) to expedite aid to Ukraine just as President Franklin D Roosevelt did, under the Lend-Lease Act, to the British Empire, China, and Greece in March 1941. Thus far, the aid announced by the US, including a package currently in the Senate, is over USD 50 billion. Third, the US has imposed an array of sanctions on Russia. Russia has been thrown out of the SWIFT payment system, meaning it can no longer initiate, but more importantly, receive international financial transactions. Its largest banks and prominent individuals have been sanctioned. MNCs have backed out of Russia. While initially the US strategy was to help defend Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, over time, its goalposts have changed. Today, its strategy appears to be, as its Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said, to “weaken Russia.” The aid, weapons, intelligence, and training to the Ukrainian armed forces from the US have successfully stalled the advance of Russian forces westwards. But American efforts have not led to an end to the war, nor has it weakened Russia as much as Washington hoped. This is largely because many countries, including those in Europe, continue to buy oil and gas from Russia though they have reduced the volumes. Moreover, sanctions have affected American allies as much as Russia. Finally, it launched an all-out information war against Russia, which it appears to have won thanks to Western media and social media.

### **Post-Ukraine war: Likely US-Russia relations**

US strategies towards Russia since the fall of the USSR have reeked of its inability to let go of its Cold War mentality. It has insisted on NATO expansion and promotion of democracy despite Russia’s objections. Its inability to treat Russia as an equal partner and accord it the status of great power has only served to push Russia out of any meaningful engagement with the European security architecture. Even though China is the US’ only credible competitor, the US deep state is more focused on Russia, a strategy which can only weaken the US vis-à-vis China. Again, given the strength of Russia-China ties today, further hostility between the US and Russia will only serve to tilt the balance of power in favour of China. This is a scenario of which the US would do well to steer clear off. The only positive outcome for the US from the Ukraine crisis is that NATO has become much more united and will be strengthened further with Finland and Sweden as new members of the alliance.

There seems to be no immediate end in sight to the Ukraine War. However, the war cannot go on forever as history shows us that even the Cold War ended eventually as did the US occupation of Afghanistan. Russia might emerge as a much weaker country after the war though it might succeed in wresting eastern Ukraine from the rest of the country and making Ukraine landlocked. This might be something that Washington will have to live with, even if it cannot accept it.

Though the US and Russia are unlikely to suspend diplomatic ties over Ukraine, sanctions on Russia will take time to get lifted even if there is a resolution of the Ukraine crisis. Moreover, the issue of alleged “war crimes” by Russian soldiers will continue to bedevil US-Russia relations, particularly under the Democratic administrations in the US. Therefore, it will be

some time before US-Russia relations get back on an even keel. The best the US can do is to reconcile to Russia's demands for a sphere of influence in its near abroad though it is unlikely that they will have any productive engagement in the near future. In any case, we are likely to witness a change in the world order to a bipolar or multipolar world by the end of the 2020s. In that scenario, US-Russia ties will be different from what they are today with the structure of the international system changed by then.

The Ukraine crisis is not as much about Ukraine as it is about the conflict between the US and Russia. It boils down to the inability of these two states to trust each other and to their irreconcilable worldviews where the US wants to remain the primary power in the world and Russia wants to be recognised as one of the major powers in a multipolar world and refuses to acknowledge American exceptionalism. Even after Putin's presidency ends, leaders who follow him will have the same worldview and therefore cooperating with the US would be difficult. This will have repercussions for regional and global stability even after the Ukraine crisis ends. In short, the bilateral relationship will continue to be antagonistic barring any miraculous reset in relations.

As two countries with the largest number of nuclear weapons, Russia and the US must work together to prevent the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. There are also several global challenges like climate change, governance of the global commons, work at the international space station, and pandemics like COVID-19 that compel them to work together. It is imperative that they keep their channels of communication open to engage collaboratively. The fact that the Pentagon has established a new hotline with Russia's ministry of defence to prevent "miscalculation, military incidents and escalation" in the region after the Russian invasion of Ukraine certainly gives hope that all ties will not be cut off between the two countries even if adversarial relations continue.

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