

Former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union: The U.S. and NATO Are Provoking the Ukrainian Crisis

Encircling Russia and Arming Ukraine Are What's Provoking the Bear

By [Washington's Blog](#)

Global Research, September 05, 2014

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Jack Matlock, U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1987 to 1991, says that the U.S. and NATO are to blame for the Ukraine crisis:

The fact is they are going to intervene until they are certain that there is no prospect of Ukraine becoming a member of NATO. And all of the threats by NATO and so on to sort of increase defenses elsewhere is simply provocative to the Russians. Now, I'm not saying that's right, but I am saying that's the way Russia is going to react. And frankly, this is all predictable. And those of us who helped negotiate the end of the Cold War almost unanimously said in the 1990s, "Do not expand NATO eastward. Find a different way to protect eastern Europe, a way that includes Russia. Otherwise, eventually there's going to be a confrontation, because there is a red line, as far as any Russian government is concerned, when it comes to Ukraine and Georgia and other former republics of the Soviet Union."

There needs to be an understanding between Russia and the Ukrainians as to how to solve this problem. It is not going to be solved militarily. So the idea that we should be giving more help to the Ukrainian government in a military sense simply exacerbates the problem. And the basic problem is Ukraine is a deeply divided country. And as long as one side tries to impose its will on the other—and that is what has happened since February, the Ukrainian nationalists in the west have been trying to impose their will on the east, and the Russians aren't going to permit that. And that is the fact of the matter. So, yes, there simply needs to be an agreement.

And most of the—I would say, the influence of the West in trying to help the Ukrainians by, I would say, defending them against the Russians tends to be provocative, because—you know, Putin is right: If he decided, he could take Kiev. Russia is a nuclear power. And Russia feels that we have ignored that, that we have insulted them time and time again, and that we are out to turn Ukraine into an American puppet that surrounds them. And, you know, with that sort of psychology, by resisting that, in Russian eyes, he has gained unprecedented popularity. So, it seems to me that we have to understand that, like it or not, the Ukrainians are going to have to make an agreement that's acceptable to them, if they keep their unity.

Ukraine is not a member of NATO. And why we react as if it is and has any claim on our cooperation in defending them from Russia, this is simply not the

case.

We've previously reported that it's the [West's encirclement of Russia](#) – breaking a [key promise](#) which led to the break-up of the Soviet Union – which is behind the Ukraine crisis.

Matlock confirmed that the U.S. and the West promised that the U.S. and Nato would not move East and try to encircle Russia:

When the Berlin Wall came down, when eastern Europe began to try to free itself from the Communist rule, the first President Bush, George Herbert Walker Bush, met with Gorbachev in Malta, and they made a very important statement. One was we were no longer enemies. The second was the Soviet Union would not intervene in eastern Europe to keep Communist rule there. And in response, the United States would not take advantage of that.

Now, this was a—you might say, a gentlemen's agreement between Gorbachev and President Bush. It was one which was echoed by the other Western leaders—the British prime minister, the German chancellor, the French president. As we negotiated German unity, there the question was: Could a united Germany stay in NATO? At first, Gorbachev said, "No, if they unite, they have to leave NATO." And we said, "Look, let them unite. Let them stay in NATO. But we will not extend NATO to the territory of East Germany." Well, it turned out that legally you couldn't do it that way, so in the final agreement it was that all of Germany would stay in NATO, but that the territory of East Germany would be special, in that there would be no foreign troops—that is, no non-German troops—and no nuclear weapons. Now, later—at that time, the Warsaw Pact was still in place. We weren't talking about eastern Europe. But the statements made were very general. At one point, Secretary Baker told Gorbachev NATO jurisdiction would not move one inch to the east. Well, he had the GDR in mind, but that's not what he said specifically.

So, yes, if I had been asked when I was ambassador of the United States in Moscow in 1991, "Is there an understanding that NATO won't move to the east?" I would have said, "Yes, there is." However, it was not a legal commitment, and one could say that once the Soviet Union collapsed, any agreement then maybe didn't hold, except that when you think about it, if there was no reason to expand NATO when the Soviet Union existed, there was even less reason when the Soviet Union collapsed and you were talking about Russia. And the reason many of us—myself, George Kennan, many of us—argued against NATO expansion in the '90s was precisely to avoid the sort of situation we have today. It was totally predictable. If we start expanding NATO, as we get closer to the Russian border, they are going to consider this a hostile act. And at some point, they will draw a line, and they will do anything within their power to keep it from going any further. That's what we're seeing today.

In March, Matlock said:

How would Americans feel if some Russian or Chinese or even West European started putting bases in Mexico or in the Caribbean, or trying to form governments that were hostile to us? You know, we saw how we virtually went ballistic over Cuba. And I think that we have not been very attentive to what it takes to have a harmonious relationship with Russia.

In the Orange Revolution in Kiev, foreigners, including Americans, were very active in organizing people and inspiring them.

I have to ask Americans: How would Occupy Wall Street have looked if you had foreigners out there leading them? Do you think that would have helped them get their point across? I don't think so. And I think we have to understand that when we start directly interfering, particularly our government officials, in the internal makeup of other governments, we're really asking for trouble. [The U.S. State Department spent [more than \\$5 billion](#) dollars in pushing Ukraine towards the West. The U.S. ambassador to Ukraine (Geoffrey Pyatt) and assistant Secretary of State (Victoria Nuland) were also recorded [plotting the downfall of the former Ukraine government in a leaked conversation](#). [Top-level U.S. officials](#) literally [handed out cookies](#) to [the protesters](#) who overthrew the Ukrainian government. And the U.S. has been doing everything it can to trumpet pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian propaganda. So - without doubt - the U.S. government is heavily involved with fighting a propaganda war regarding Ukraine.]

Now, what have we been telling the Ukrainians, the Georgians—at least some of us, officials? “Just hold on. You can join NATO, and that will solve your problems for you.” You know, and yet, it is that very prospect, that the United States and its European allies were trying to surround Russia with hostile bases, that has raised the emotional temperature of all these things. And that was a huge mistake. As George Kennan wrote back in the '90s when this question came up, the decision to expand NATO the way it was done was one of the most fateful and bad decisions of the late 20th century.

I just hope everyone can calm down and look at realities and stop trying to start sort of a new Cold War over this. As compared to the issues of the Cold War, this is quite minor. It has many of the characteristics of a family dispute. And when outsiders get into a family dispute, they're usually not very helpful.

We should start keeping our voice down and sort of let things work out. You know, to ship in military equipment and so on is just going to be a further provocation. Obviously, this is not something that's going to be solved by military confrontations. So, I think if we can find a way to speak less in public, to use more quiet diplomacy—and right now, frankly, the relationships between our presidents are so poisonous, they really should have representatives who can quietly go and, you know, work with counterparts elsewhere.

We do have to understand that a significant part of the violence at the Maidan, the demonstrations in Kiev, were done by these extreme right-wing, sort of neo-fascist groups. And they do—some of their leaders do occupy prominent positions in the security forces of the new government. And I think—I think the Russians and others are quite legitimately concerned about that.

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