

Russia's Goal "Conquering Ukraine", Say Western Media. Not So, Say Experts

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The Ukrainian former defense minister Oleksii Reznikov recently stated that the Kremlin's goal is to "destroy" Ukraine completely, "assimilating" its citizens into the Russian Federation. Such wild claims have not been much challenged by journalists and opinion-makers in the West. After all, according to Western media Russian President Vladimir Putin's "plan" is and has always been "to conquer" Ukraine all along. This pervasive Western narrative, also pushed by Kyiv, far from being a kind of self-evident truth, is challenged by voices within the US Establishment [such as Jeffrey Sachs](#) and by many respected scholars in the West, including some who are very critical of Moscow. Such a one-sized narrative in fact removes any context regarding the current crisis and completely ignores Russian perspective, goals, and security concerns.

Although a harsh critic of Russian ongoing military campaign in Ukraine, Wolfgang Richter (a Senior Associate in the International Security Division at the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik - SWP) acknowledged, for example, in a 2022 [article](#) that in December 2021, Moscow had "made clear in two draft treaties" what it was after: "preventing a further expansion of NATO to the east and obtaining binding assurances to this end." The Alliance and Washington, however, according to Richter, "were not prepared to revise the principles of the European security order" and thus Moscow obviously "did not accept this and resorted to the use of force."

According to this expert, although the US is "far from the theater of conflict in Europe", French and British nuclear weapons and "the deployment of US sub-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe and NATO's conventional forces on Russia's borders" are indeed a security risk in the European continent from Moscow's perspective. This is so, he argues, quite convincingly, because Russia understands that a future threat could arise from the new American intermediate-range weapons in the continent, which could even reach Russian strategic targets (in the European part of the country) "should Washington and

NATO partners decide to deploy them.” Moreover, NATO’s enlargement “has created more potential deployment areas in Central and Eastern Europe.” The Kremlin sees the Atlantic Alliance today, after all, as merely an American tool to advance its geopolitical interests (to the detriment of Russian security).

Sometimes, critics claim that the fact that Moscow cooperated in varying degrees with NATO from the nineties to around 2010 “proves” that Russian claims about NATO’s enlargement should not be taken seriously. This fact, if anything, corroborates Moscow’s arguments.

In his 2018 associated professorship habilitation [thesis](#), Sao Paulo University History Professor Angelo de Oliveira Segrillo describes Putin as a moderate (albeit ambiguously) “Westernist”, rather than an Eurasianist, citing as evidence for it the Russian President’s well known admiration for Peter the Great. Segrillo argues that Putin was never a radical Westernist such as Boris Yeltsin, but rather a pragmatic and moderate one, while also being a gosudarstvennik, that is, someone who advocates for a strong State, in line with Russia’s political tradition. The Brazilian professor thus compares Putin to the French leader Charles de Gaulle, who often opposed Washington and NATO not simply out of an “anti-Western stance” but as someone who is in a position of defending the national interests of one’s own country.

Alas, whether the aforementioned thesis is fully accurate or not, that being something which interests mostly historians and biographers anyway, one can in any case argue that far from being staunchly “anti-Western” due to the supposed personal inclinations of the President (as Western propaganda would have it), the Kremlin in fact has had to take a defensive and counter-offensive approach towards the US-led West over the latter’s many provocations and developments which, from a Russian perspective, constituted crossing red lines.

In the NATO-Russia Founding Act of May 1997, NATO in fact pledged to limit the number of stationed troops, [promising](#) not to bring about any “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces”, while claiming it had no plan to deploy nuclear weapons in the accession countries. Such agreements eroded over several episodes, as Ritter [demonstrates](#). Countries that did not belong to the CFE started joining the Alliance in 2004 and, to make matters worse, Washington in 2007 established a permanent military presence on the Black Sea. The US had withdrawn from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002 which for the Kremlin was a threat to strategic stability, a perception enhanced by Washington’s 2007 bilateral agreements with the Czech and Poland to deploy missile defense systems in these countries (allegedly to counter an Iranian “threat”).

NATO’s war against Serbia in 1999 (denounced by Russia) had of course already violated the ban on the use of force, and the 1997 and 1999 agreements. Moreover, the brutal invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 demonstrated America’s capacity and willingness to break international law, by relying on a “coaling of the willing” of new Eastern European partners and allies (even without NATO consensus). One could also cite Western recognition of Kosovo’s (unilateral) declaration of independence and the 2008 offer of the prospect of joining NATO to Ukraine and Georgia which, according to Richter, was “the breaking point in NATO’s relations with Russia.”

The 2014 [Crimea](#) referendum and the [Donbass War](#) might have been the culmination of the erosion of an already declining European security order, argues Richter but such erosion “had already begun in 2002 with the growing potential for conflict between Washington and Moscow”, George W. Bush having played an important role in this.

Which brings us to the current situation. For American political scientist John Mearsheimer, if Kyiv and Moscow had reached a deal, which could have happened if it were not for Western interference, Ukraine today would control a greater share of territory. As he [writes](#), "Russia and Ukraine were involved in serious negotiations to end the war in Ukraine right after it started on 24 February 2022". Regarding that, he adds: "everyone involved in the negotiations understood that Ukraine's relationship with NATO was Russia's core concern... if Putin was bent on conquering all of Ukraine, he would not have agreed to these talks." The main issue was NATO.

To sum it up, although at times Russia considered the possibility of engaging in further dialogue and cooperation with NATO, there have always been tensions about the Atlantic Alliance's [expansion](#), and Moscow security concerns pertaining to it, far from being a mere excuse, are in fact well-founded.

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