

The Backstory to the Russia-Ukraine Confrontation: The US-NATO Encirclement of Russia

By [Washington's Blog](#)

Global Research, March 04, 2014

Region: [Europe, Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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The Big Picture: The U.S. and NATO Have Been Trying to Encircle Russia Militarily Since 1991

The American press portrays Putin as being the bad guy and the aggressor in the Ukraine crisis.

Putin is certainly no saint. A former KGB agent, Putin's net worth is estimated at some [\\$40 billion dollars](#) ... as he has squeezed money out of the Russian economy by treating the country as his own personal fiefdom. And [all sides appear to have dirt on their hands](#) in the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

But we can only see the bigger picture if we take a step back and gain a little understanding of the history underlying the current tensions.

Indeed, the fact that the U.S. has allegedly [paid billions of dollars to anti-Russian forces in Ukraine - and even purportedly picked the Ukrainian president](#) - has to be seen in context.

Veteran New York Times reporter Steven Kinzer [notes](#) at the Boston Globe:

From the moment the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the United States has relentlessly pursued a strategy of encircling Russia, just as it has with other perceived enemies like China and Iran. [Background [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).] It has brought 12 countries in central Europe, all of them formerly allied with Moscow, into the NATO alliance. US military power is now directly on Russia's borders.

"I think it is the beginning of a new cold war," warned George Kennan, the renowned diplomat and Russia-watcher, as NATO began expanding eastward. "I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely, and it will affect their policies."

Stephen Cohen - professor emeritus at New York University and Princeton University who has long focused on Russia - [explained](#) this weekend on CNN:

We are witnessing as we talk the making possibly of the worst history of our lifetime. We are watching the descending of a new cold war divide between west and east, only this time, it is not in far away Berlin, it's right on Russia's borders through the historical civilization in Ukraine. It's a crisis of historic magnitude. If you ask how we got in it, how we got into the crisis, and how therefore do we get out, it is time to stop asking why Putin - why Putin is doing

this or that, but ask about the American policy, and the European Union policy that led to this moment.

I don't know if you your listeners or views remember George Kennan. He was considered [a] great strategic thinker about Russia among American diplomats but he warned when we expanded NATO [under Bill Clinton], that this was the most fateful mistake of American foreign policy and that it would lead to a new Cold War. George lived to his hundreds, died a few years ago, but his truth goes marching on. The decision to move NATO beginning in the 90's continuing under Bush and continuing under Obama, is right now on Russia's borders.

And if you want to know for sure, and I have spent a lot of time in Moscow, if you want to know what the Russian power elite thinks Ukraine is about, it is about bringing it into NATO. One last point, that so-called economic partnership that Yanukovych, the elected president of Ukraine did not sign, and that set off the streets – the protests in the streets in November, which led to this violence in and confrontation today, that so-called economic agreement included military clauses which said that Ukraine by signing this so called civilization agreement had to abide by NATO military policy. This is what this is about from the Russian point of view, the ongoing western march towards post Soviet Russia.

Jonathan Steele [writes](#) at the Guardian

Both [John Kerry's threats to expel Russia from the G8](#) and the Ukrainian government's plea for Nato aid mark a dangerous escalation of a crisis that can easily be contained if cool heads prevail. Hysteria seems to be the mood in Washington and Kiev, with the new Ukrainian prime minister claiming, "We are on the brink of disaster" as he calls up army reserves in response to [Russian military movements in Crimea](#).

Were he talking about the country's economic plight he would have a point. Instead, along with much of the US and European media, he was over-dramatising developments in the east, where Russian speakers are understandably alarmed after the new Kiev authorities scrapped a law allowing Russian as an official language in their areas. They see it as proof that the anti-Russian ultra-nationalists from western Ukraine who were the dominant force in last month's insurrection still control it. Eastern Ukrainians fear similar tactics of storming public buildings could be used against their elected officials.

Kerry's rush to punish Russia and Nato's decision to respond to Kiev's call by holding a meeting of member states' ambassadors in Brussels today were mistakes. Ukraine is not part of the alliance, so none of the obligations of common defence come into play. Nato should refrain from interfering in Ukraine by word or deed. The fact that it insists on getting engaged reveals the elephant in the room: underlying the crisis in Crimea and Russia's fierce resistance to potential changes is Nato's undisguised ambition to continue two decades of expansion into what used to be called "post-Soviet space", led by Bill Clinton and taken up by successive administrations in Washington. At the back of Pentagon minds, no doubt, is the dream that a US navy will one day replace the Russian Black Sea fleet in the Crimean ports of Sevastopol and Balaclava.

Vladimir Putin's troop movements in Crimea, which are supported by most Russians, are of questionable legality under the terms of the peace and friendship treaty that Russia signed with Ukraine in 1997. But their illegality is considerably less clear-cut than that of the US-led invasion of Iraq, or of Afghanistan, where the UN security council only authorised the intervention several weeks after it had happened. [Indeed, top American leaders [admit](#) that the Iraq war was for reasons different than publicly stated. And the U.S. military sticks its nose in other countries' business [all over the world](#). And [see this](#).] And Russia's troop movements can be reversed if the crisis abates. That would require the restoration of the language law in eastern Ukraine and firm action to prevent armed groups of anti-Russian nationalists threatening public buildings there.

Again, we don't believe that there are angels on *any* side. But we do believe that everyone has to take a step back, look at the bigger picture, calm down and reach a negotiated diplomatic resolution.

And see [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#) (interview with a 27-year CIA veteran, who chaired National Intelligence Estimates and personally delivered intelligence briefings to Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush and the Joint Chiefs of Staff).

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