



## How the Wolfowitz Doctrine Shaped Putin's Outlook

### Description

One year has passed since Russia crossed the border into Ukraine, and the Cold War, confined to the literature of the twentieth century, returned once again with the West bleeding Russia through a buffer state. The war has not been about preventing the cannibalization of Ukraine into Russia. Rather, the war is about maintaining U.S. dominance in the United States European Command (EUCOM).

The Wolfowitz Doctrine, named after then U.S. under-secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz, was leaked to *The New York Times* in 1992. The crux of the policy underscored American supremacy at all costs in a post-Soviet world and “stamping out rivals wherever they may emerge.” In addition, U.S. leadership would place defense agreements as the cornerstone of its policy and inadvertently monopolize the global arms trade through treaties. Furthermore, it would prevent allies from developing their defense systems and increase reliance on American-manufactured hardware. Finally, interoperability formed the basis for amalgamating competing factions within NATO.

If this all sounds familiar, as it should, then it is essential to understand when this doctrine formed, how it came about, and why it still shapes many individuals' views of the West—including Russian president Vladimir Putin's.

### The Fall of the USSR and the Broken Promise

The United States' victory against the Soviets laid the foundations for the Wolfowitz Doctrine. First, the expulsion of the Soviets from Afghanistan, due to Pakistan's tactical use of guerrilla warfare, helped drained the Soviet economy and the USSR to its collapse in 1991. Secondly, the United States' own victory over Saddam Hussein through a “tune-up” war in the same year, allowed Washington to showcase its supreme military might, regain some lost pride after the defeat in Vietnam, and rebuild the confidence of its allies.

In conjunction with this, the Wolfowitz Doctrine stipulated that the United States could silence and integrate two former major powers, Germany and Japan, “into a U.S.-led system of collective security and the creation of a democratic zone of peace.” Russia, on the other hand, was dealt with differently—the country fell off the radar. It became insignificant as a geopolitical competitor in the eyes

of the West, as its gestures of peaceful offerings were rebuffed and guarantees given to it regarding NATO's expansion forfeited.

A record of the minutes, declassified and released by the National Security Archives, recounts the meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Secretary of State James A. Baker III in Moscow. Baker promised NATO would not expand under any circumstance. He further went on, and stated that "NATO is the mechanism for securing U.S. presence in Europe...We understand that only for the Soviet Union but for other European countries.... it is important to have guarantees that if the United States keeps its presence in Germany within the framework of NATO, not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction will spread; in an eastern direction... Germany's unification will not lead to NATO's military spreading to the East."

In the same meeting, Gorbachev proposed to Baker that as the Soviet Union had dissolved, the need for NATO was no more, and a newly created Russia be allowed to join NATO. Baker dismissed this as a "dream." However, when Boris Yeltsin came to power, he also proposed joining NATO, and took a step further by labeling membership to NATO as a "political aim for Russia." In 1994, Russia signed the NATO Partnership for Peace program, which aimed to bridge the divide between the two entities and lead to a pathway to NATO membership.

As the United States realized its privileged position as an uncontested power, it went back on Baker's word. After all, these "guarantees" were given to the Soviet Union—not to Russia. Taking advantage of this technicality, the United States pushed for former Warsaw Pact countries—such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary—to join NATO at the Washington Summit in 1999. Russia opposed the inclusion, but besides a symbolic murmur, Moscow could do nothing to prevent such an endeavor. The successor state of the mighty Soviet Union was not its equal, and thus not considered important enough to be involved in global decisionmaking. Yet, despite its reduced size and sphere of influence, Russia persisted in being considered a key player in international affairs.

### **Putin's Ascent and the End of Patience**

In 2000, three weeks before his ascension to the presidency, a young and bold Vladimir Putin was interviewed by the BBC's David Frost. He clarified his intention: "Russia is a part of European culture, and I do not consider my own country in isolation from Europe. Russia is part of the European culture. And I cannot imagine my own country in isolation from Europe and what we often call the civilized world. So it is hard for me to visualize NATO as an enemy."

When the 9/11 attacks occurred, it provided Putin with an opportunity to prove that Russia was willing to engage with the West in its fight against terrorism, as it saw similar security-related issues in Chechnya. Russian intelligence cooperated with the initial U.S. phase of the invasion of Afghanistan by providing crucial logistical, topographical, and urban data entry points into Afghanistan, especially the areas in and around Kabul. Putin also influenced former Central Asian states to open supply routes into Afghanistan for George W. Bush's War on Terror. There was never any reciprocation or appreciation for this gesture by the United States, as it overreached and established bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. America had established itself in Russia's backyard, and did so as a "favor" to help its security problems and prevent any form of galvanization of groups venturing out of Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, despite these amicable efforts and out-of-the-box thinking by Putin, NATO and the

United States could not lose their Cold War mentality—the alliance pushed even more aggressively with its expansion. In 2004, seven countries—Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia—were granted NATO membership. The alliance had not only moved more than an “inch” from Germany, against what was promised by Baker, but was now standing firmly on Russia’s doorstep. George Kennan, the former American ambassador to the Soviet Union and the architect of containment, himself rejected the idea of expanding NATO and warned of its potential consequences. He professed that this “fatal error” could “inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion.”

The tipping point came in 2007, when Putin had lost patience with the arrogance shown by his Western counterparts. At the Munich Security Conference, Putin declared that he thought “it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization 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? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them.”

## Consequences

America’s position of not granting Russia a dignified parity status only further inflamed Putin. He, along with much of Russia’s political elite, could only come to the conclusion that the United States had no intention of working with Russia in a responsible and respectful manner. Washington was doing nothing more, the Kremlin realized, than carrying out a plan determined in 1992 to impose its will upon the world and “stamping out rivals wherever they may emerge.”

This would be further confirmed in Putin’s mind by American actions in Ukraine, meddling in the country’s political affairs and chalking out a path for the country towards eventually joining NATO and the European Union. The back and forth between both sides led to the Euromaidan Revolution, essentially setting up an everlasting division in Ukrainian politics that only deepened by the year.

From Putin’s perspective, invading Ukraine in 2022 was the only option to signal to the Transatlantic alliance that Russia is now in an economic and geostrategic position to counter any further expansion—that Moscow remembers how the broken promises Baker made to Gorbachev, that the line has been drawn in the sand, and the Wolfowitz Doctrine shall advance no further.

*by Sameed Basha*

*Image: Shutterstock.*

## Category

1. Main
2. Politics-Geopolitics-Gov.-Events

## Date Created

02/27/2023