



The War in Ukraine Was Provoked—and Why That Matters to Achieve Peace

Description

George Orwell wrote in 1984 that “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” Governments work relentlessly to distort public perceptions of the past. Regarding the Ukraine War, the Biden administration has repeatedly and falsely claimed that the Ukraine War started with an unprovoked attack by Russia on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In fact, the war was provoked by the U.S. in ways that leading U.S. diplomats anticipated for decades in the lead-up to the war, meaning that the war could have been avoided and should now be stopped through negotiations.

Recognizing that the war was provoked helps us to understand how to stop it. It doesn't justify Russia's invasion. A far better approach for Russia might have been to step up diplomacy with Europe and with the non-Western world to explain and oppose U.S. militarism and unilateralism. In fact, the relentless U.S. push to expand NATO is widely opposed throughout the world, so Russian diplomacy rather than war would likely have been effective.

The Biden team uses the word “unprovoked” incessantly, most recently in Biden's [major speech](#) on the first-year anniversary of the war, in a recent [NATO statement](#), and in the most recent [G7 statement](#). Mainstream media friendly to Biden simply parrot the White House. The *New York Times* is the lead culprit, describing the invasion as “unprovoked” no fewer than 26 times, in five editorials, 14 opinion columns by NYT writers, and seven guest op-eds!

There were in fact two main U.S. provocations. The first was the U.S. intention to expand NATO to Ukraine and Georgia in order to surround Russia in the Black Sea region by NATO countries (Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Georgia, in counterclockwise order). The second was the U.S. role in installing a Russophobic regime in Ukraine by the violent overthrow of Ukraine's pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovich, in February 2014. The shooting war in Ukraine began with Yanukovich's overthrow nine years ago, not in February 2022 as the U.S. government, NATO, and the G7 leaders would have us believe.

The key to peace in Ukraine is through negotiations based on Ukraine's neutrality and NATO non-enlargement.

Biden and his foreign policy team refuse to discuss these roots of the war. To recognize them would undermine the administration in three ways. First, it would expose the fact that the war could have been avoided, or stopped early, sparing Ukraine its current devastation and the U.S. more than \$100 billion in outlays to date. Second, it would expose President Biden's personal role in the war as a participant in the overthrow of Yanukovich, and before that as a staunch backer of the military-industrial complex and very early advocate of NATO enlargement. Third, it would push Biden to the negotiating table, undermining the administration's continued push for NATO expansion.

The [archives](#) show irrefutably that the U.S. and German governments repeatedly promised to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not move "one inch eastward" when the Soviet Union disbanded the Warsaw Pact military alliance. Nonetheless, U.S. planning for NATO expansion began early in the 1990s, well before Vladimir Putin was Russia's president. In 1997, national security expert Zbigniew Brzezinski [spelled out](#) the NATO expansion timeline with remarkable precision.

U.S. diplomats and Ukraine's own leaders knew well that NATO enlargement could lead to war. The great US scholar-statesman George Kennan called NATO enlargement a "fateful error," writing in the [New York Times](#) that, "Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking."

President Bill Clinton's Secretary of Defense William Perry considered resigning in protest against NATO enlargement. In reminiscing about this crucial moment in the mid-1990s, Perry [said the following](#) in 2016: "Our first action that really set us off in a bad direction was when NATO started to expand, bringing in eastern European nations, some of them bordering Russia. At that time, we were working closely with Russia and they were beginning to get used to the idea that NATO could be a friend rather than an enemy ... but they were very uncomfortable about having NATO right up on their border and they made a strong appeal for us not to go ahead with that."

In 2008, then U.S. Ambassador to Russia, and now CIA Director, William Burns, sent [a cable](#) to Washington warning at length of grave risks of NATO enlargement: "Ukraine and Georgia's NATO aspirations not only touch a raw nerve in Russia, they engender serious concerns about the consequences for stability in the region. Not only does Russia perceive encirclement, and efforts to undermine Russia's influence in the region, but it also fears unpredictable and uncontrolled consequences which would seriously affect Russian security interests. Experts tell us that Russia is particularly worried that the strong divisions in Ukraine over NATO membership, with much of the ethnic-Russian community against membership, could lead to a major split, involving violence or at worst, civil war. In that eventuality, Russia would have to decide whether to intervene; a decision Russia does not want to have to face."

Ukraine's leaders knew clearly that pressing for NATO enlargement to Ukraine would mean war. Former Zelensky advisor Oleksiy Arestovych declared in a [2019 interview](#) "that our price for joining NATO is a big war with Russia."

During 2010-2013, Yanukovich pushed neutrality, in line with Ukrainian public opinion. The U.S. worked covertly to overthrow Yanukovich, as captured vividly [in the tape](#) of then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State [Victoria Nuland](#) and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt planning the post-Yanukovich

government weeks before the violent overthrow of Yanukovych. Nuland makes clear on the call that she was coordinating closely with then Vice President Biden and his national security advisor Jake Sullivan, the same Biden-Nuland-Sullivan team now at the center of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Ukraine.

After Yanukovych's overthrow, the war broke out in the Donbas, while Russia claimed Crimea. The new Ukrainian government appealed for NATO membership, and the U.S. armed and helped restructure the Ukrainian army to make it interoperable with NATO. In 2021, [NATO](#) and the [Biden Administration](#) strongly recommitted to Ukraine's future in NATO.

In the immediate lead-up to Russia's invasion, NATO enlargement was center stage. Putin's [draft US-Russia Treaty](#) (December 17, 2021) called for a halt to NATO enlargement. Russia's leaders put NATO enlargement as the cause of war in Russia's National Security Council [meeting on February 21, 2022](#). In his [address to the nation](#) that day, Putin declared NATO enlargement to be a central reason for the invasion.

Historian Geoffrey Roberts [recently wrote](#): "Could war have been prevented by a Russian-Western deal that halted NATO expansion and neutralised Ukraine in return for solid guarantees of Ukrainian independence and sovereignty? Quite possibly." In March 2022, Russia and Ukraine reported progress towards a quick negotiated end to the war based on Ukraine's neutrality. [According to Naftali Bennett](#), former Prime Minister of Israel, who was a mediator, an agreement was close to being reached before the U.S., U.K., and France blocked it.

While the Biden administration declares Russia's invasion to be unprovoked, Russia pursued diplomatic options in 2021 to avoid war, while Biden rejected diplomacy, insisting that Russia had no say whatsoever on the question of NATO enlargement. And Russia pushed diplomacy in March 2022, while the Biden team again blocked a diplomatic end to the war.

By recognizing that the question of NATO enlargement is at the center of this war, we understand why U.S. weaponry will not end this war. Russia will escalate as necessary to prevent NATO enlargement to Ukraine. The key to peace in Ukraine is through negotiations based on Ukraine's neutrality and NATO non-enlargement. The Biden administration's insistence on NATO enlargement to Ukraine has made Ukraine a victim of misconceived and unachievable U.S. military aspirations. It's time for the provocations to stop, and for negotiations to restore peace to Ukraine.

Correction: An earlier version of this article misstated the date of William Burns' 2008 cable warning about NATO enlargement. That error has been fixed.

JEFFREY D. SACHS

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