



(Photo by Dmitry Kostyukov, Agence France-Presse)

Russian convoys poured into Georgia during the 2008 conflict, part of the force that dealt a devastating blow to Georgia's ambition to reestablish control over breakaway territory.

Defining a New Security Architecture for Europe that Brings Russia in from the Cold

John Mearsheimer, PhD

Editor's note: This article is adapted from a speech made during a roundtable discussion on 2 March 2015 at the Press Club in Brussels, Belgium.¹

The subject I have been asked to talk about is how to create a new security architecture in Europe that brings the Russians out of the cold and promotes peace in the region.

I think that the best we can hope for at this point in time is to return to the status quo ante, and by that I mean the situation that existed here in Europe before 2008. I think there's no hope of creating a radically

new security architecture. And, I even think it's going to be extremely difficult to go back to the pre-2008 situation in Europe. I think the best way to understand the options that we face is to start with a discussion of the history of the past twenty-five years, which can be divided roughly into two periods. The first period is from 1990 to 2008, and the second period is from 2008 up to the present. I think the period from 1990 to 2008 was really the golden period. Europe was remarkably peaceful—save for what

happened in the Balkans, of course. But there was virtually no serious possibility of a conflict between Russia and the West during those years. All seemed to be going very well here in Europe on the security front, which raises the obvious question: Why was that the case? There are two reasons.

One, NATO remained intact, which meant the Americans remained militarily committed to Europe, allowing them to serve as the pacifier in the region. The United States was, in effect, the ultimate arbiter and a higher authority that maintained order. Its military presence in Europe made it almost impossible for any of the states that fell underneath its security umbrella to fight with each other. This is

the principal reason why no European leader since the end of the Cold War has asked the Americans to leave. And, it's the principal reason the Russians were perfectly happy to allow the United States to remain in Western Europe after they retreated when the Cold War ended.

So, the American pacifier was an important part of the story. The second part of the story is that the West—



(Photo by Maxim Shemetov, Reuters)

Russian servicemen march during celebrations to mark Victory Day in the Crimean port of Sevastopol 9 May 2014. Russian troops invaded Crimea in February 2014, and the territory of Crimea was officially annexed by Russia 18 March 2014.

and here we are talking mainly about NATO—did not threaten the Russians in any meaningful way. There is no question that the Russians were opposed to NATO expansion. The Russians opposed both the first tranche of expansion in 1999, as well as the second tranche in 2004, but the Russians did not view those initial moves eastward as a mortal threat. So, between 1990 and 2008, all was well in Europe. Again, that was because of the American pacifier and because the West was not a serious threat to Russia.

But, that situation began to change in 2008, which was a fateful year. First of all, there was the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008. At the end of that summit, NATO said in no uncertain terms that both

Georgia and Ukraine would become part of NATO. The Russians, in response, made it perfectly clear at the time that this was unacceptable. And they made it clear they would go to great lengths to prevent that from happening. Nevertheless, NATO did not back off. Furthermore, in May of that same year, the European Union (EU) announced that there was going to be an Eastern Partnership, which in effect meant that the EU too

the West, with the Americans in the driver's seat, continued to push a policy that called for peeling Ukraine away from Russia's orbit and making it part of the West. EU expansion was one of the key strategies underpinning that policy. NATO expansion and democracy promotion were the other two underlying strategies. Democracy promotion in principal is an attractive idea to virtually all of us in the West. But, the fact is that democracy

promotion in the hands of the United States is mainly about toppling leaders who are seen as anti-American or anti-West, and putting in their place leaders who are pro-American or pro-West. Of course the Orange Revolution was all about doing just that. Toppling [Viktor] Yanukovich was all about putting a leader in power in Kiev who would be pro-West.

So, this tripe-prong strategy—NATO expansion, EU expansion, and

democracy promotion—bothered the Russians greatly. And, it all came to a head with the coup in Kiev on 22 February 2014. We then had a major crisis that we still face and which shows no signs of going away. What is the solution to this problem? I think the only possible solution is to go back to the situation that existed before 2008. Otherwise, there is no hope of settling this matter. What in particular has to be done? Ukraine has to be turned into a neutral buffer state. The West has to recognize that there is no way it can continue to pursue a set of policies that are designed to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's border. The Russians will not tolerate this and will instead go to great lengths to



(Photo by Cornelia Smet, EC - Audiovisual Service, European Union, 2011)

European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso and European Union (EU) Council President Herman Van Rompuy meet with Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich 19 December 2011 in Kiev, Ukraine. The EU and Ukraine agreed to the terms of a free trade and political association treaty, creating tension between the West and Russia.

would be moving eastward toward Ukraine. Not surprisingly, in August 2008, you had a war between Georgia and Russia, which was in good part a result of the April 2008 decision to eventually include Ukraine and Georgia in NATO. The Georgians thought that NATO would back them if they got into a crisis or a conflict with the Russians. They of course were wrong; nevertheless, that was the first big piece of evidence that trouble was in store in Eastern Europe.

Barack Obama, as you know, was elected in November 2008. He came into office with the goal in mind of resetting relations between Russia and the United States. He failed. And, the reason he failed is that



(Photo by Evan Vucci, Associated Press)

President Barack Obama meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin 17 June 2013 in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. Relations between the United States and Russia have been strained, in part from Western policies that call for bringing countries such as Ukraine into the NATO fold and the European Union.

wreck Ukraine to prevent it from becoming part of the West. This is what is going on now. Putin is basically telling the West they have two choices. Either they back off, or he will work to damage Ukraine so badly that it cannot join the West.

If you want to end this crisis, and you care greatly about the Ukrainian people, and you don't want to see their country destroyed, then it's imperative that we back off and give up on the idea of making Ukraine part of the West. Instead, we must work to make Ukraine a neutral buffer state, which it was effectively between 1991 and 2014. I am talking here about returning to the status quo ante. This means, of course, that NATO expansion must be explicitly taken off the table, and it means that EU expansion must also be explicitly taken off the table. And, it means that the United States and its European allies have to stop democracy promotion in Kiev that aims to put in power individuals who are pro-Western and anti-Russian.

Now, the question is, how likely is it that the West can do a 180-degree turn and abandon its present policy and adopt one that's designed to make Ukraine a neutral buffer state? I think it's very unlikely this will happen. I think there are a number of reasons for that. First of all, Western leaders are so deeply invested in the present policy that it is going to be very difficult for them to move away from it and instead work to make Ukraine neutral. Remember that NATO expansion into Ukraine has been at the heart of the West's strategy since 2008. I think it would be hard to turn that ship around. Second, I think that Putin, and the Russians more generally, do not trust the West anymore. And, any promises that we make will be hard to sell in Moscow. I think the waters have been so thoroughly poisoned in recent years that convincing the Russians that the West has good will and wants to work with them will be difficult. Third, I think NATO itself is in trouble independent of this crisis. For starters, the United States is pivoting to Asia. And, if

Uncle Sam pivots to some place he has to pivot away from another place, and where the United States is going to pivot away from is Europe. China is a potential peer competitor, and all that is needed is a major crisis in Asia and the United States will focus its attention on that region in laser-like fashion. When that happens, America's interest in Europe will diminish significantly. I like to tell students that historically the United States has cared greatly about three areas of the world outside of the Western Hemisphere: Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf. And, over our entire history, Europe has been the most important area of the world for us outside of the Western Hemisphere. We are undergoing for the first time in our history a fundamental transformation in our strategic priorities. Asia is going to become the most important area of the world for the United States, the Persian Gulf is going to be the second most important area, and Europe is going to become a distant third.

So, if China continues to rise, we are eventually going to pivot, and that means that we're going to greatly

reduce our presence in Europe, and we are going to be much less interested in Europe than we have been over the course of our history. At the same time, if you look at what's happening among America's allies in Europe, it seems clear they're not spending much money on defense, and it doesn't look like they are going to come together to take up the slack if the United States pivots to Asia. I think the principal bellwether of the trouble ahead is what's happening in Britain. Defense spending is shrinking, and, by the year 2019, all British troops will be removed from the European continent. This is an event of great significance. So, what I am saying to you is that even if we are able to turn around Western policy and convince Putin that the West has good intentions, the future of NATO is uncertain, which means a lot of trouble ahead. For all these reasons I'm quite sure you cannot go back to the status quo ante in Eastern Europe.

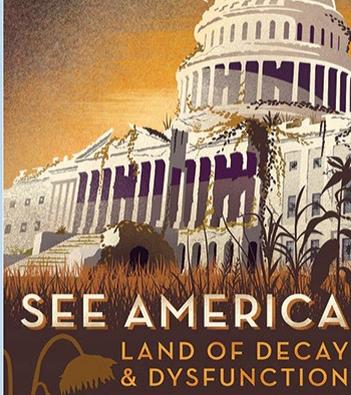
My bottom line is that we had an excellent situation with regard to European security before 2008. And we, meaning the West, blew it big time. ■

Biography

Dr. John Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science and the co-director of the Program on International Security Policy at the University of Chicago. A graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, he spent five years in the U.S. Air Force. He received an MA in international relations from the University of Southern California, and an MA and a PhD in political science from Cornell University. Mearsheimer has published five books and numerous articles about security issues and international politics, has received a number of teaching awards, and is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

HOW THE WEST PROVOKED PUTIN

FOREIGN AFFAIRS



Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault

The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin

John J. Mearsheimer

According to the prevailing wisdom in the West, the Ukraine crisis can be blamed almost entirely on Russian aggression. Russian President Vladimir Putin, the argument goes, annexed Crimea out of a long-standing desire to reconstitute the Soviet empire, and he may eventually go after the rest of Ukraine, as well as other countries in eastern Europe. In this view, the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 merely provided a pretext for Putin's decision to order Russian forces to seize part of Ukraine.

But this account is wrong: the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis. The taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West. At the same time, the EU's expansion eastward and the West's backing of the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine—beginning with the Orange Revolution in 2004—were critical elements, too. Since the mid-1990s, Russian leaders have adamantly opposed NATO enlargement and in recent years, they have made it clear that they would not stand by while their strategically important neighbor turned into a Western bastion. For Putin, the illegal overthrow of Ukraine's democratically elected and pro-Russian president—which he rightly labeled a “coup”—was the final straw. He responded by taking Crimea, a peninsula he feared would host a NATO naval base, and working to destabilize Ukraine until it abandoned its efforts to join the West.

Putin's pushback should have come as no surprise. After all, the West had been moving into Russia's backyard and threatening its core

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If you found Dr. Mearsheimer's comments provocative or intriguing, your attention is invited to an earlier manuscript he penned, published in the September-October 2014 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, in which he treats the thesis of Western culpability for events transpiring in Ukraine in much greater detail. The article can also be found at: <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/Ukraine%20Article%20in%20Foreign%20Affairs.pdf>.