

The Myth about NATO Expansion



President George Bush with the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and US secretary of state James Baker in 1989.

by Michael Curtis

Perhaps the most notable achievement of the war criminal Vladimir Putin is his gift for disinformation and deception, the creation of an alternative reality. His shameful mastery is illustrated by his justification not simply of his aggression against the independent country of Ukraine, but of the brutal attack on the hospital and maternity ward in Mariupol by the allegation that neo-Nazis, with Nazi flag and photos of Hitler, were hiding in the medical facilities of the city which in fact had been without water, electricity, and heat for a week. Putin informs us that Russia is bringing justice by a variety of actions: by attacking the care home for disabled, near Kharkiv, and destroying a kindergarten in Dnipro in central Ukraine, destroying 48 schools, and apartment buildings. The gifted propagandist Yevgeny Prigozhin, close to Putin, has released a film *Blazing Sun* which depict Russian mercenaries entering Ukraine in order to

refrain Ukrainian authorities for committing genocide against its own people.

Harry Potter lovers will be surprised they are unaware that U.S. government is training birds infected with or carrying bacteriological weapons to fly from Ukraine to Russia.

The world is still searching to explain the "root causes" of the unprovoked aggression by Putin against a neighboring country. His actions are reminiscent of the tragedy in 1932-33 when the mania of Joseph Stalin forced famine, the Holodomor, which caused the death of four million Ukrainians who were forced to eat grass, tree bark, flowers, rats, dogs, and even children. Ostensibly, Putin claims his policy is to prevent expansion of NATO, which has been unjustly expanded, and the desire of Ukraine to be a member of NATO. The brutal attack ironically stems from the fact the Ukraine wanted protection from a Russian attack.

In bizarre fashion Putin's misrepresentations throw guilt on the West and are the basis for justifying Russian offensiveness. Accordingly, Western shipments of weapons, anti-tank and anti-aircraft, to Ukraine become legitimate targets for Russian armed forces, missile strikes and bombings, and raise the risk of escalation of the conflict. The result, as expressed by NATO and by President Joe Biden is that neither NATO nor the U. S. will take action that might enter into direct conflict with Russia, or send fighter jets from Poland to the Ukraine air force, for fear, as Putin has stressed, this would lead to World War III.

Western public opinion polls in recent years indicated that support for NATO operations in the Baltic NATO countries was not high. Paradoxically, Putin's aggression has caused a change, leading to greater action and agreement by NATO countries in their defense capabilities, and congruently the increase of the standing of the EU on the global stage. In view of the increasing stages of its terrorist acts, the

present security threat of Russian aggression appears to be a turning point in the history of Europe. Germany, after hesitation, has decided to increase defense spending, as have countries like Finland and Sweden, usually neutral in military issues. The EU agreed to use its resources to provide weapons, initially 500 million euros, to a third country through the European Peace Facility, the new off-budget fund which is part of its collective responsibilities to aid Ukraine with military equipment, fuel, medical supplies, and humanitarian assistance.

Ukraine is articulating desperate pleas for more aid to bolster its defenses. For NATO and the U.S. the question arises: is there a Red Line, which does or will determine the extent to which they will engage in that aid and raises the problem of the possibility of direct confrontation with Russian forces, in the air, on the ground, or the sea? The immediate controversial problem is the proposal by Poland to deliver, and by what method, fighter jets to Ukrainian pilots.

In recent years a number of events have emboldened Putin, who now perhaps is following the adage of Lenin that the Western capitalists will sell the rope with which we will change them. After Syria had used toxic gases to kill at least 1,400 people including 426 children, the British House of Commons voted 285-272 not to support a U.S. led punitive raid on Syria for deploying biological weapons. On August 20, 2012, President Barack Obama declared that use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government would be crossing a redline, requiring U.S. military intervention. But when, a year later, Syria fired rockets filled with sarin gas, killing 1,400, no action was taken. Putin saw this as the beginning of an American retreat.

At the core of Putin's galaxy of lies and misstatements is the allegation that the West tricked the former Soviet Union by breaking promises made at the time when the Soviet Union was ending, that NATO would not expand to the East. Though Putin

has little real regard for international law, in his speech in 2007 to the Munich Security conference he accused the West of violating that law, breaking assurances, lying, and betraying Russia.

That allegation should be examined. The basis of the betrayal assertion can be traced to the conversations and commitments alleged made by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker while George H.W. Bush was president and the treaty signed on September 12, 1990 on how NATO troops would operate in the territory of the former East Germany, the German Democratic Republic, GDR.

The assertion by Putin is that James Baker in discussion on February 9, 1990 with Soviet Head of State Mikhail Gorbachev promised that NATO would not expand to the East if the Soviet Union and its successor Russia accepted unification of the two parts Germany. Baker is alleged to have said the current military sovereignty of NATO will not extend eastwards.

On February 10, 1990 Chancellor Helmut Kohl told Gorbachev that naturally NATO could not extend its territory to the current territory of the GDR.

Similarly, NATO Secretary-General Manfred Werner on May 17, 1990 said that "the very fact that we are not ready to station NATO forces behind the borders of the Federal Republic of Germany gives the Soviet Union solid security guarantees," but he was referring to NATO forces in East Germany, GDR, not making a broader commitment. Werner said that once Soviet forces had withdrawn, the German forces assigned to NATO could be deployed in the former GDR.

But the conclusion is arguable, even mistaken. According to the final treaty in September 1990 and reunification of the two states, foreign stationed NATO troops could cross the old Cold War line at the discretion of the German government.

There were no written guarantees about the limits of NATO expansion.

Gorbachev in an interview in 2014 said that NATO expansion had not been discussed in 1990, and there was no NATO promise not to expand, and that the discussions were all about GDR territory. The reality is that, after the end of the Soviet Union, the issue of the expansion of NATO did not depend on Russia's attitude, but on the general geopolitical situation, and on the degree to which U.S. presidents made it a priority, and on whether Russia itself might join the alliance. Gorbachev criticizes NATO enlargement, but made clear there was no promise made about broader enlargement.

The NATO- Russia Founding Act and a new forum the NATO -Russia Council were established in 1997, creating a new relationship between NATO and Russia which allowed Russian diplomats access to NATO headquarters in Brussels. The Council is supposedly a mechanism for regular consultation and decisions on security issues. At first, the two sides did not consider one another as adversaries, but relations have deteriorated, though the channels of communication remain open.

The record is clear. The Act has no impact on NATO enlargement. It does not prohibit permanent NATO bases in Central and Eastern European countries.

NATO, founded with 12 members, now has 30 and three aspiring members, ranging from Greenland with population of 56,000 to the U.S. with 334 million. its newest member is North Macedonia, with two million, admitted in 2020.

It is not easy for NATO with its 30 members, and the EU with 27 countries with different aims and priorities to establish a common foreign and defense policy facing the issue of how to deal with Putin. Moreover, Western leaders including Biden have acquiesced in the conviction, asserted by Putin, that a

conformation between NATO and Russia could provoke World War III. But it is important that the attitude and policies of NATO and the U.S. not be determined by threats or false statements by Putin.

The champion Mike Tyson got it right. Everyone's got a plan until they get punched in the face. The free world must be concerned not simply with the future of Ukraine but with principles of civilized existence.