

# **The Ukraine - Russia war explained: how the US exploited internal fractures in the post-Soviet order (plus lessons for Georgia)**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the deep causes of the Ukraine - Russia war. It argues that the war has both internal and external causes. The internal causes are rooted in the way the Soviet Union disintegrated. The external causes relate to how the US exploited the fractures in the post-Soviet order to advance its Neoconservative agenda aimed at establishing US global hegemony. The war has devastated Ukraine. The capture of Ukrainian politics by extremist nationalists prevented a compromise that addressed the political and demographic reality of post-Soviet Ukraine. In doing so, the nationalists made Ukraine a sacrificial pawn in the US project seeking global hegemony, with fateful consequences that may yet worsen further. Georgia's frozen conflict with Russia has some structural similarities. That said, Georgia can avoid Ukraine's fate by choosing a path of non-alignment. That will not be easy as the US is likely to try and sabotage that path, as non-alignment tacitly challenges US hegemony.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, US, Soviet Union, Georgia, Neoconservative, global hegemony, non-alignment.

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October 16, 2024

This paper was prepared for and presented at a conference held in Tbilisi, Georgia on October 11, 2024. The conference was organized by the Research Platform: Education for Development and Stability and sponsored by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia. The views expressed herein are those of the author.

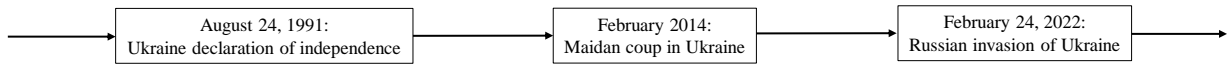
## **1. Introduction: the importance of history**

This paper explores the causes of the Ukraine - Russia conflict. The novel contribution is to distinguish between “internal” and “external” factors, and to show how those factors are linked and evolve through time. The US-sponsored eastward expansion of NATO (an external factor) plays a central role, but that expansion can only be understood by reference to the fractures (internal factors) bequeathed by the Soviet Union’s collapse.

The two sets of factors constitute two blades of a scissors, and explaining the conflict requires taking account of both blades. The external factors center on post-Cold War US geopolitical strategy, which is why the US is so deeply implicated, to the extent of being guilty of provoking conflict and obstructing peace. Those factors are echoed in Georgia, which is why the Ukraine conflict holds important lessons for Georgia.

The external and internal factors come into play at different moments and take time to work their full effect, which is why history is so important to understanding the conflict. The two sets of factors play out over a timeline which is shown in Figure 1 and has three key events. The first is Ukraine’s declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991. The second is the Maidan coup in February 2014 which overthrew Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich, who advocated Ukrainian autonomy and a non-aligned defense policy. The third is Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Figure 1. Critical dates on the Ukraine conflict timeline.



The Spartan timeline in Figure 1 is dramatically revealing. The US and its NATO allies view the conflict as beginning in February 2022, which enables them to ignore history. Russia views the conflict as beginning in February 2014, which makes history central to its political position. That fundamental difference blocks the possibility of a negotiated political settlement, and it is very hard to see how the difference can be reconciled as accounting for history yields a completely different narrative. Absent a reconciliation, the conflict will continue until exhaustion or force of arms compels a settlement of some kind.

The US/NATO denial of history confers a significant advantage in the accompanying propaganda war. Having the conflict begin with Russia's invasion is a simple easily understood narrative. The Western public has little knowledge of or interest in history, which is especially true in the US which is 6,000 miles away and isolated from the conflict. Nor is Western media interested in history, which is difficult to explain and a commercial dud given a disinterested public. That configuration helps explain the resilience in the West of the US/NATO narrative.

However, whereas denial of history works well for propaganda, it does not serve the cause of either truth or peace as it denies the causes of the conflict which must be addressed if peace is to prevail. That also makes the history of the conflict relevant to Georgia as it is afflicted by a frozen conflict with many similarities.

The balance of the paper is as follows. Section 2 introduces the distinction between internal and external drivers of the conflict and analyzes the internal drivers. Section 3 analyzes the external drivers of conflict. Section 4 describes events preceding the outbreak of war and explains Russia's invasion decision. Section 5 provides a brief assessment of the conflict and prognosis for peace. Section 6 presents some lessons for Georgia. Section 7 concludes the paper.

## **2. Understanding the Ukraine conflict: internal and external drivers**

The Western US/NATO account of the conflict is history-lite. The little bit of history that has managed to surface acknowledges and then dismisses NATO's post-1990 eastward expansion. A proper historical understanding begins with the break-up of the Soviet Union. That break-up is recounted by Vladislav Zubok (2021) in his book *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*, and the collapse is critical because it created the terrain for conflict.<sup>1</sup>

The conflict can be understood via the metaphor of a scissors. One blade is the internal conflict-prone environment created by the Soviet Union's break-up. The other blade is the interventions of the US, including the external eastward expansion of NATO. Both blades are necessary for understanding the causes of the conflict, its gradual escalation, and its political intractability.

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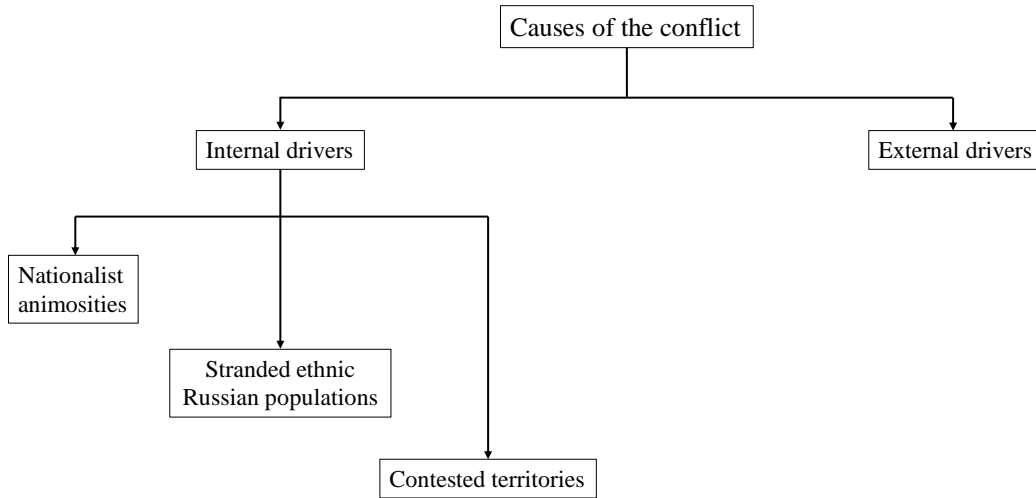
<sup>1</sup> Zubok, V. (2021), *Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Branko Milanovic provides a concise review, drawing parallels with Yugoslavia's disintegration. See *Collapse - The Fall of the Soviet Union by Vladislav M. Zubok*, Brave New Europe, February 16, 2024, <https://braveneweuropa.com/collapse-the-fall-of-the-soviet-union-by-vladislav-m-zubok>.

## ***2.a The internal blade: the break-up of the Soviet Union***

The break-up of the Soviet Union had nothing to do with democratic revolution. Instead, according to Zubok (2021), the seeds were already sprouting by the time Gorbachev came to power in 1985. The center was weakening and, sensing that weakening, the leaders of the Soviet Republics began to cultivate a resentful nationalist political discourse that claimed each had been economically exploited by the system and the other republics. That resentful nationalist discourse gave the existing leadership legitimacy, and it also sowed the seeds of secession which explains the domino like collapse. Once one republic left, all were quickly willing to leave. The existing leadership of the Republics became the inheritors of power, and they were then able to entrench and enrich themselves.

A version of that pattern is visible in all the former Republics, but it left behind three critical fractures: nascent nationalist animosities, stranded ethnic Russian populations, and contested territories. Those fractures are illustrated in Figure 2 which deconstructs the causes of the conflict. All three were especially prominent in Ukraine and they are key drivers of the Ukraine – Russia conflict. They are also present in Georgia. Of the three, the most important is nascent nationalist animosities because, as discussed in Section 4, they function as the scissor pivot pin that joins together the internal and external scissor blades of conflict.

Figure 2. Internal drivers of the Ukraine-Russia conflict.



### 2.a.1 Nationalist animosities

Nationalist animosities have proven particularly acute in Ukraine, and they have a long historical root. Ukraine was a major battleground in the Russian civil war of 1918-1922, as captured in Mikhail Sholokhov's epic novels *And Quiet Flows the Don* and *The Don Flows Home to the Sea*. Ukraine's nationalist animosity was further fueled by the horrors of Stalin's collectivization of Ukrainian agriculture in the 1930s which produced horrific famine that killed millions. Though the product of Stalin who was Georgian, and all (including Russians) suffered under Stalin, the blame is attributed to Russia which was the dominant Republic within the Soviet Union.

In the 1930s and World War II there was a virulent underground Ukrainian fascist nationalist movement led by Stepan Bandera. Those forces fought side-by-side with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union, and they enthusiastically participated in Ukraine's Holocaust

against its Jewish population.<sup>2</sup> After World War II through to the early 1950s, they continued a low-level insurgency in Western Ukraine, aided by Britain's MI5 secret service and by the US's CIA to a lesser degree.<sup>3</sup>

With the break-up of the Soviet Union, those fascist nationalist forces revived and were encouraged. They deepened significantly after the 2014 Maidan coup, and they have deepened further since the 2022 Russian invasion. Within Ukraine, Bandera is now a widely and officially celebrated figure who is especially popular in Western Ukraine. Streets are named after him, there are statues in his honor, his portrait is on a postage stamp, and he was declared a hero of the nation.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Bandera is celebrated by Ukraine's military and has special standing within the Azov brigade which is an elite and celebrated part thereof.<sup>5</sup> That ugly reality was widely recognized in the US and the West prior to the 2022 Russian invasion, but it has now been largely suppressed as part of the propaganda effort on behalf of Ukraine and against Russia.<sup>6</sup>

In that regard, the attitude of Israel toward Ukraine is instructive. During the conflict, Israel has shown little inclination to help Ukraine, despite both being closely allied with and

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<sup>2</sup> See "Ukrainian collaboration with Nazi Germany," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian\\_collaboration\\_with\\_Nazi\\_Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_collaboration_with_Nazi_Germany). As part of rehabilitating Ukraine in the eyes of Western public opinion, some historians are trying to downplay Ukraine's Holocaust responsibility. A leading figure in this revisionist history is Yale historian Timothy Snyder, who writes "the majority, probably the vast majority of people who collaborated with the German occupation were not politically motivated. They were collaborating with an occupation that was there, and which is a German responsibility (Snyder, T., "Germans must remember the truth about Ukraine – for their own sake," *Eurozine*, July 7, 2017)." Balanced against that, the Simon Wiesenthal Center reports Ukraine has never investigated a local Nazi war criminal or prosecuted a holocaust perpetrator (See "Nazi hunters give low grades to 13 countries, including Ukraine," *Kyiv Post*, January 12, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See "Anti-Soviet resistance by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Soviet\\_resistance\\_by\\_the\\_Ukrainian\\_Insurgent\\_Army](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Soviet_resistance_by_the_Ukrainian_Insurgent_Army).

<sup>4</sup> See "Stepan Bandera," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stepan\\_Bandera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stepan_Bandera).

<sup>5</sup> See "Azov Brigade," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azov\\_Brigade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azov_Brigade). Ido Vock, "Ukraine's problematic nationalist heroes," *New Statesman*, January 5, 2023. <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2023/01/ukraine-stepan-bandera-nationalist>.

<sup>6</sup> See Cohen, J., "Dear Ukraine, please don't shoot yourself in the foot," *Foreign Affairs*, April 27, 2015. Also see "Who are the protesters in Ukraine?" *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2014, and "A ghost of World War II history haunts Ukraine's stand-off with Russia," *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2014.

supported by the US. That restraint reflects the fact that Israel has repeatedly complained about the extensive presence of and official support for Neo-Nazi activity in Ukraine. Israel's stance is damning evidence of the ugly reality of the character of animosities within Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, revived nationalist animosities were especially severe and especially ugly in Ukraine. For purposes of understanding the war, the important point is those animosities created deep fissures that bled both inward and outward, as described below.

### *2.a.2 Stranded ethnic Russian populations*

A second fracture concerned stranded ethnic Russian populations living in the former Soviet republics. Once again, the problem was particularly acute in Ukraine, where the borders had been drawn under the Soviet Union to include large chunks of land that were linguistically and culturally Russian (about which more below).<sup>8</sup> The population problem was also significant in the former Baltic Republics, especially Estonia, as well as Georgia.

In 1989 ethnic Russians were 22.1 percent of Ukraine's population of 51.5 million.<sup>9</sup> As shown in Figure 3, they were heavily concentrated in the east and south of the country, in lands which had historically been part of Russia (about which more below). That pattern of concentrated numbers meant Ukraine was politically divided and, in a worst-case scenario, primed for civil war and secession. The stark political division is illustrated in Figure 4 which shows the winning vote share by oblast (province) in the second round of the 2010 Ukrainian presidential election. The eastern half of the country voted solidly for Yanukovich: the western

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<sup>7</sup> See "Israel's ambassador shocked by Lviv region's decision to declare tear of Bandera," *Kyiv Post*, December 13, 2018, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/7491>. Also see Sharon, J., "Nazi collaborators include in Ukrainian memorial project," *Jerusalem Post*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/nazi-collaborators-included-in-ukrainian-memorial-project-656253>.

<sup>8</sup> The territorial entity that is Ukraine is a product of the Soviet Union. It was created under the 1922 treaty that established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Ukraine did not formally exist in Tsarist Russia, which was divided into "guberniyas"(governates) that had minimal correspondence with what became the republics.

<sup>9</sup> See "Russians in Ukraine," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russians\\_in\\_Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russians_in_Ukraine).



half solidly for nationalist Tymoshenko.

Figure 3. Percentage of ethnic Russians in Ukraine according to 2001 Ukrainian census.  
Source: "Russians in Ukraine," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russians\\_in\\_Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russians_in_Ukraine).

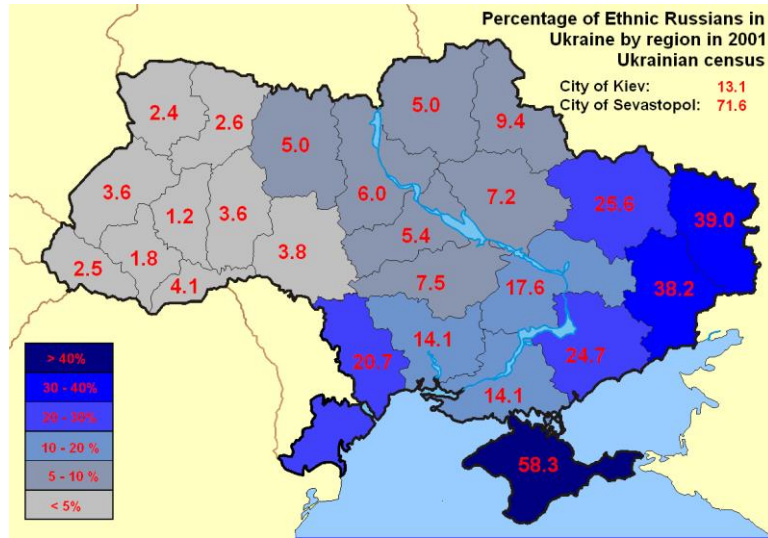
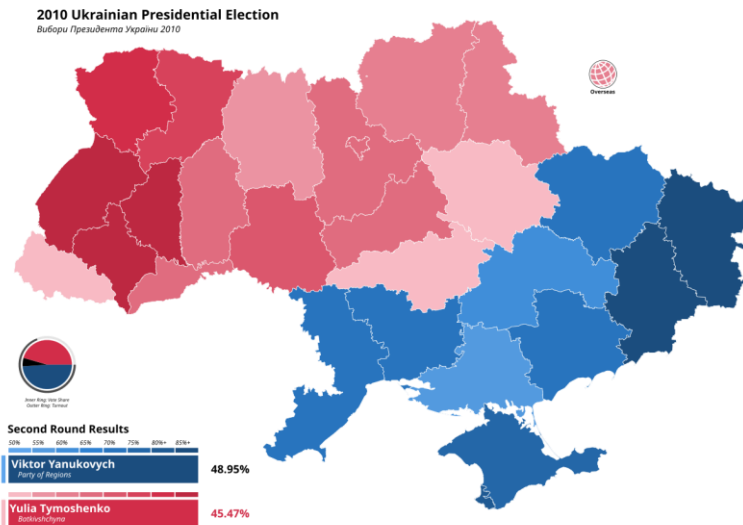


Figure 4. Map of the winning vote share by oblast and autonomous republic in the second round of the 2010 Ukrainian presidential election.

Source: "2010 Ukrainian presidential election," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010\\_Ukrainian\\_presidential\\_election](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Ukrainian_presidential_election)



The stranded ethnic Russian population problem then intersected with the national animosities problem. That is because the newly independent Republics pursued nationalist cultural cleansing policies that sought to erase the history and presence of Russian culture and language. Such cultural cleansing constitutes a form of political intimidation and discrimination. Once again, Ukraine was the worst on those counts, followed by the Baltic Republics. Ukraine's cultural cleansing is evident in a series of progressively more intolerant laws making Ukrainian the only official language and banning the Russian language. It is also evident in the outlawing and tearing down of monuments honoring Russian historical cultural and political figures, which has accelerated in the wake of Russia's invasion.<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, the fate and treatment of the stranded populations was also of political concern to Russia for reasons of ethnic identification. Those persons had been citizens of the Soviet Union and had become politically separated from Russia owing to the unexpected disintegration of the Soviet Union. Though they were not Russian citizens under the terms of the break-up, they were historically connected to Russia as Ukraine had been integral to the Tsarist Russian state which preceded the Soviet Union. Additionally, and inextricably, the stranded Russian populations provided an opening for Russia to establish a degree of soft power within former republics.<sup>11</sup>

### *2.a.3 Contested territories.*

The third fracture concerned contested territories. That fracture was the least important to begin with, but it has gradually risen to become a defining issue. Figure 5 shows a map of the historical

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<sup>10</sup> See "Language policy in Ukraine," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language\\_policy\\_in\\_Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_policy_in_Ukraine). See "List of Communist monuments in Ukraine," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_communist\\_monuments\\_in\\_Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_communist_monuments_in_Ukraine).

<sup>11</sup> See Sencerman, Ö., "Russian diaspora as a means of Russian foreign policy," *Military Review*, March-April, 2018, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2018/Sencerman-Russian-Diaspora/>.

evolution of Ukraine, starting with principality of Ukraine in 1654. That was followed by a two-hundred and fifty-year Tsarist expansion to the northwest. Thereafter, comes the critical 1922 addition of Novorossiya (New Russia), made up of land to the south and east. World War II saw further western additions made on the orders of Stalin. Lastly, in 1954 Nikita Khrushchev gifted the Crimea. The 1922 and 1954 additions are central to the conflict with Russia, while the 1939 and 1945 additions explain some of the tensions with Hungary and Poland.

Figure 5. Map showing the historical evolution of Ukraine.  
Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inaccurate\\_historical\\_map\\_of\\_Ukrainian\\_borders.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inaccurate_historical_map_of_Ukrainian_borders.jpg)



The map in Figure 5 has close correspondences with Figures 3 and 4. The 1922 and 1954 additions explain the demographic distribution within Ukraine, and they also explain the distribution of political alignments within Ukraine.

Russia has always felt territorially short-changed by the break-up of the Soviet Union. The 1922 and 1954 additions were made when Ukraine and Russia were joined at the hip via the Soviet Union, and break-up was deemed unimaginable. Russia initially accepted the break-up borders via the 1994 Bucharest Memorandum agreement with Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.

In return for border recognition, the three former republics returned all nuclear weapons and signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the problem of Russia's Black Sea naval base in Sevastopol was solved by a long-term lease arrangement signed in 1997 and extended in 2010 by the Kharkiv Pact.<sup>13</sup>

That fragile territorial equilibrium was shattered by the US-supported 2014 Maidan coup, which overthrew the elected president and installed an anti-Russian nationalist. The Russian response was to seize and annex Crimea. Civil war also erupted within Ukraine, with parts of the four eastern Donbas oblasts refusing to accept the legitimacy of the coup. That fused the territorial fracture with the stranded ethnic Russian population fracture.

There then followed a second fragile equilibrium in which Russia sought to work with NATO to resolve the civil war via the Minsk peace process that was initiated in 2014. The process aimed to end conflict in the Donbas and find a political solution that granted the Donbas region a mutually acceptable degree of autonomy.<sup>14</sup> That second equilibrium became increasingly frayed (about which more below) and finally collapsed with Russia's 2022 invasion and annexation of the Donbas oblasts. That annexation has elevated the contested territories fracture into a co-defining issue, along with Ukraine's relationship to NATO.

### **3. External drivers of conflict**

The other blade of the conflict scissors is external drivers of conflict of which there are four. Those drivers are shown in Figure 6. They consist of the US-led eastward expansion of NATO, US internal intervention in Ukraine, US Neocon geopolitical strategy and the US military-industrial complex (MIC), and democracy promotion. The US is the force behind all four

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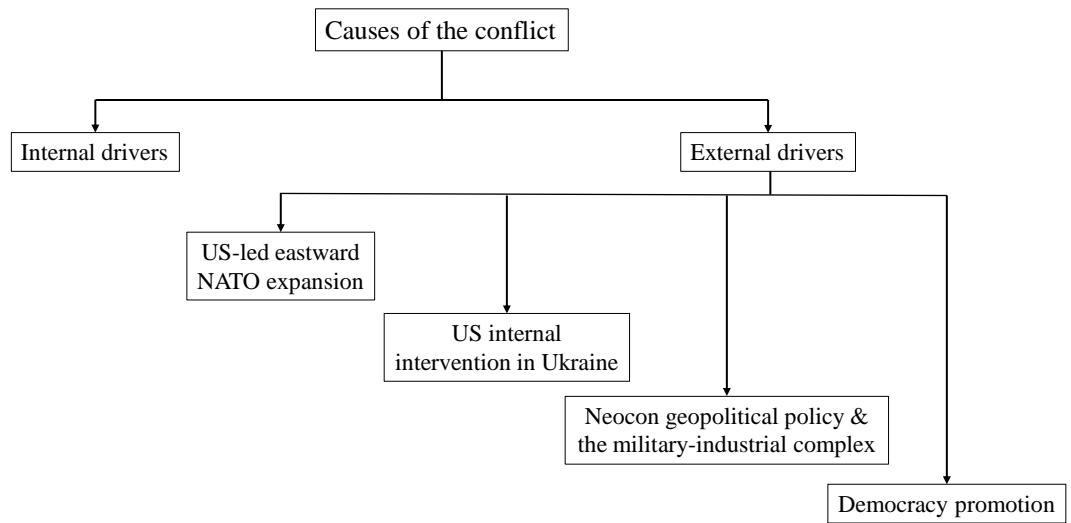
<sup>12</sup> See "Budapest Memorandum," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Budapest\\_Memorandum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Budapest_Memorandum).

<sup>13</sup> See "Kharkiv Pact," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kharkiv\\_Pact](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kharkiv_Pact).

<sup>14</sup> See "Minsk Agreements," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minsk\\_agreements](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minsk_agreements).

external drivers, which is why it can be legitimately said the US has provoked and sustains the conflict.

Figure 6. External drivers of the Ukraine-Russia conflict.



### ***3.a US-led eastward expansion of NATO***

The first and most important external driver is the US-led eastward expansion of NATO. That expansion is detailed in Figure 7 which shows country NATO accession dates.<sup>15</sup> The expansion agenda emerged out of Washington, DC and was officially green-flagged by the Clinton administration in 1994.<sup>16</sup>

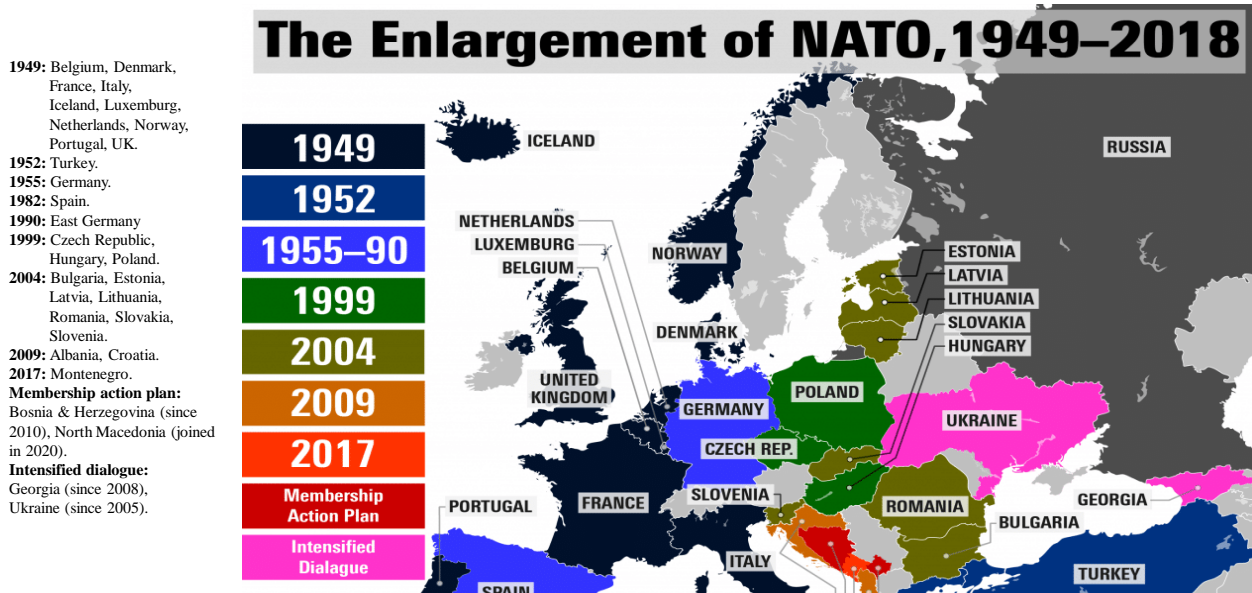
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<sup>15</sup> NATO expansion was US-led as the US is the overwhelmingly dominant force in NATO and nothing happens without its affirmative consent.

<sup>16</sup> See “Strengthening NATO and European Security,” The White House, <https://clintonwhitehouse5.archives.gov/WH/EOP/NSC/html/nsc-05.html>

Figure 7. NATO enlargement, 1949-2018.

Source: Military Caveats. <https://f0.wp.com/militarycaveats.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/The-enlargement-of-NATO-1949-2018.png?resize=821%2C548>.



An undisputed fact is that, except for East German membership, Russia has persistently objected to the expansion. Its argument has consistently been that eastward NATO expansion poses a threat to Russian national security. Russia also claims it violates the agreement with and assurances given to President Gorbachev, re ending the Cold War and dissolving the Warsaw Pact.<sup>17</sup> In 1994, President Yeltsin furiously and openly objected to NATO expansion in his summit with President Clinton.<sup>18</sup> That episode long precedes President Putin who has been tarred by Western media as the bogeyman, showing that the consequences of NATO expansion cannot

<sup>17</sup> There are multiple accounts of the expansion and Russia’s objections. For instance, see: Lauria, Joe, “Ukraine timeline tells the story,” *Consortium News*, June 30, 2023, <https://consortiumnews.com/2023/06/30/ukraine-timeline-tells-the-story/>; Sachs, Jeff, “The real history of the war in Ukraine: a chronology of events and case for diplomacy,” *The Kennedy Beacon*, July 17, 2023, <https://thekennedybeacon.substack.com/p/the-real-history-of-the-war-in-Ukraine>; and Carpenter, T.G. “Many predicted NATO expansion would lead to war. Those warnings were ignored,” *The Guardian*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/28/nato-expansion-war-russia-ukraine>.

<sup>18</sup> See “NATO expansion – the Budapest blow up 1994,” *National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-russia-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

be laid at Putin's doorstep. Yeltsin was the partner for peace, yet already the US and Europe had reneged on the understanding struck with President Gorbachev about ending the Cold War and beginning a new chapter of international relations that incorporated a peaceful Russia.<sup>19</sup>

From a strategic perspective, Figure 7 reveals a three-stage process. Stage 1 was the 1999 incorporation of major Central European former Warsaw Pact countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland). Stage 2 was the 2004 incorporation of the former Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), which marked a ratcheting up of the process by including elements of the former Soviet Union that bordered Russia. It also created a NATO "iron curtain" running from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Stage 3, which remains unfinished business, concerns the intensified dialogues with Ukraine and Georgia which aimed to incorporate those former Soviet Republics into NATO. That would massively expand NATO's penetration of the former Soviet Union and widen its encirclement of Russia.

Furthermore, Ukraine juts like a spear into the heart of Russia. At the closest point, its border is just three hundred miles for Moscow. Consequently, incorporation of Ukraine into NATO would strip Russia of its historically critical land buffer, and NATO short and medium range missiles could threaten the Russian heartland. All those fears have been proven true by the current conflict.

For those reasons, the threat posed by Stage 3 has proven the straw that broke the camel's back. Thus, Russia responded with military force to prevent further expansion. In 2008, Russia intervened with force to stop a US-encouraged attempt by Georgia to reoccupy South Ossetia, and in 2014 it intervened in Ukraine. The Georgia conflict has gone silent, but in Ukraine it has

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<sup>19</sup> Gorbachev's aspirations and understanding of the settlement were laid out in his July 6, 1989 speech to the Council of Europe, [https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2002/9/20/4c021687-98f9-4727-9e8b-836e0bc1f6fb/publishable\\_en.pdf](https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2002/9/20/4c021687-98f9-4727-9e8b-836e0bc1f6fb/publishable_en.pdf).

tragically deepened because of far worse internal fractures and worse US internal interventions.<sup>20</sup>

### *3.a.1 Did NATO expansion constitute a breach of agreement?*

The expansion of NATO raises several questions, the first of which is did expansion breach the agreement made with President Gorbachev. No formal treaty detailing a promise not to expand NATO beyond East Germany was ever signed. That said, there is evidence promises were made to Gorbachev that there would be no further expansion. The most compelling evidence is that of US Ambassador Jack Matlock Jr. who was the last US ambassador to the Soviet Union. He reports unambiguous promises that there would be no NATO expansion were given by President Bush, at the 1989 Malta Summit which ended the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> Swiss journalist Guy Mettan also documents how non-expansion security guarantees were given by US Secretary of State James Baker, German Chancellor Kohl, British Prime Minister Thatcher, and French President Mitterrand.<sup>22</sup>

### *3.a.2 Why was NATO expanded?*

Even counter-factually assuming there was no promise of non-expansion, there remains the fundamental question of why was NATO expanded? NATO was founded as a defensive alliance, which is its charter mission. It is easy to understand why Poland, Romania, and the former Baltic Republics would want to join NATO to secure defensive protection. However, the proper question, which is never asked, is why did the US or the UK want them to join? The new member countries brought modest military capabilities and bucket-loads of conflict risk. In other

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<sup>20</sup> It has been widely observed that the US would never accept Russian missiles on its borders, as shown by the 1961 Cuban missile crisis. That observation speaks to the rationality of Russia's objection to incorporation of Ukraine in NATO. It also speaks to the hypocrisy of US actions and criticisms of Russia.

<sup>21</sup> See Jack F. Matlock, Jr., "Today's crisis over Ukraine," *American Committee for US – Russia Accord*, February 14, 2022, <https://usrussiaaccord.org/acura-viewpoint-jack-f-matlock-jr-todays-crisis-over-ukraine/>.

<sup>22</sup> See Mettan, G., "Truths and lies about pledges made to Russia," *Swiss Standpoint*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.schweizer-standpunkt.ch/news-detailansicht-en-international/truths-and-lies-about-pledges-made-to-russia.html>.



words, they were a net negative security addition to existing NATO members, measured in terms of NATO's original purpose as a defensive alliance.

In similar vein, there was no "balance of power" rationale for expanding NATO as the Warsaw Pact was formally dissolved on February 25, 1991. Balance of power considerations have historically motivated the structure of Continental European alliances, and the balance had indisputably and comprehensively shifted in favor of NATO. According to that criterion, expanding NATO was unambiguously aggressive.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, there is the simple question of "how is US national security enhanced by having the US military on Russia's border, 6,000 miles away from the US on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean?" The answer is it does not. That shows the motive for NATO expansion was never US national security and was always US global hegemony. Asking the right question makes crystal clear NATO expansion was an aggressive move against Russia.

### *3.a.3 Were the consequences of NATO expansion unanticipated?*

A third question is, was NATO expansion a form of stumbling error with unanticipated consequences? The answer is it was not, and that answer is also crystal clear. Russia openly expressed its hostility to NATO expansion, as evident in the 1994 blow-up between President Clinton and President Boris Yeltsin in Budapest, when Yeltsin furiously objected to plans to expand NATO.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, in 2007, President Putin openly and vehemently objected to NATO expansion.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See "Warsaw Pact," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw\\_Pact](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw_Pact)

<sup>24</sup> See "NATO expansion – the Budapest blow up 1994," *National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nato-russia-russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>25</sup> See President Putin's speech at the Munich security conference, February 10, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

The issue of NATO expansion was also debated in the US, and the critics openly stated the consequence would be conflict with Russia. The most famous of these critics was George Kennan, founder of the “Containment doctrine” which guided US Cold War strategy. In a 1997 *New York Times* op-ed titled “A fateful error”, Kennan wrote that NATO expansion was a mistake which would lead to conflict.<sup>26</sup> Awareness of the consequences is evident from the scale and standing of the opposition to NATO expansion. That is visible in a 1997 letter to President Clinton which was signed by fifty leading US senior politicians, national security and foreign policy experts, and former high-ranking military and intelligence officers. Signatories included Bill Bradley, Robert McNamara, Paul Nitze, Sam Nunn, and Stansfield Turner.<sup>27</sup> The letter described NATO expansion as “a policy error of historic proportions” that would lead Russia “to question the entire post-Cold War settlement.” Yet expansion proceeded, with the first batch of new members being admitted in 1999.

The proposed expansion of NATO to include Ukraine was also discussed, and its consequences were also foreseeable and foreseen. The clearest statement of those consequences is in a confidential February 2008 letter (made available via *Wikileaks*) in which US Moscow Ambassador William Burns (later to become CIA Chief) warned that it would unambiguously cross Russia’s national security red lines.<sup>28</sup>

### ***3.b US internal intervention in Ukraine***

The second external driver of conflict is US internal intervention in Ukraine. Much of the evidence for that intervention concerns Victoria Nuland, who was US Assistant Secretary of

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<sup>26</sup> See George Kennan, “A fateful error,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/05/opinion/a-fateful-error.html>.

<sup>27</sup> See “Opposition to NATO expansion,” Arms Control Association, June 26, 1997, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1997-06/arms-control-today/opposition-nato-expansion>.

<sup>28</sup> See [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MOSCOW265\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MOSCOW265_a.html).

State for European and Eurasian Affairs in 2014 and who is deeply embedded in the US Neoconservative movement (about which more below). Moreover, she has continuously held important positions in the Bush, Obama, and Biden administrations, revealing the bi-partisan character of US policy on Ukraine. In the Bush administration she was US ambassador to NATO. In December 2013 Nuland revealed the US had spent \$5 billion on aid to Ukraine, classified as “democracy building”. During the 2014 Maidan coup she made several public appearances in Kiev supporting the coup activists, and a telephone call of hers with US Ukraine Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt was recorded. The call suggested the US was actively engaged in trying to influence Ukraine’s political situation, including actively seeking to obstruct European Union peace efforts, with Nuland declaring “Fuck the EU.”<sup>29</sup>

Five billion dollars was (and is) an extraordinarily large amount of money in a poor country like Ukraine which was also short of foreign currency.<sup>30</sup> US democracy building money is funneled through government agencies such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), both of which have been widely accused of foreign country meddling and political interference.<sup>31</sup> USAID has a legal mandate to ensure its economic support is consistent with US geopolitical interests, has a long history of cooperation with the CIA, works closely with the US State Department with an obligation to promote US foreign policy interests, and its current administrator is a member of the National Security Council (NSC). Consequently, such money tends to be channeled to actors aligned with US geopolitical interests – which in the case of Ukraine, meant weakening sympathies and links

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<sup>29</sup> See “Victoria Nuland,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victoria\\_Nuland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victoria_Nuland).

<sup>30</sup> In 2014, Ukraine’s GDP was approximately \$134 billion. Its modern era low-point was \$32 billion in 1999.

<sup>31</sup> See “National Endowment for Democracy,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Endowment\\_for\\_Democracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Endowment_for_Democracy) and “United States Agency for International Development,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_Agency\\_for\\_International\\_Development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Agency_for_International_Development).

with Russia.<sup>32</sup>

After the Maidan coup, the US stepped up its weapons deliveries to Ukraine. The Washington, DC based Stimson Center reports Ukraine received over \$2.7 billion in military assistance between 2014 and 2021. Between 2016 and 2020, Ukraine was the seventh largest recipient of US military assistance and the largest European recipient. That assistance had the US stepping directly into Ukraine's civil war, on behalf of the Maidan coup nationalist government. The assistance was also instrumental in prompting Russia to invade Ukraine in February 2022 (see Section 4 below).<sup>33</sup>

### ***3.c Explaining NATO expansion and intervention in Ukraine***

Eastward expansion of NATO and internal intervention in former Soviet Republics (especially Ukraine) are the means whereby the US exploited fractures in the post-Soviet order and provoked conflict. The next piece of the puzzle is why the US chose to go in that direction. The answer lies in US politics, the triumph of the Neocon movement, and the power of the military-industrial complex (MIC).

#### ***3.c.1 Neoconservatism and the Neocons***

The starting point is understanding Neoconservatism and the Neocons. Neoconservatism is a US political doctrine which rose to ascendancy in the 1990s. It holds that never again shall there be a

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<sup>32</sup> More generally, official democracy building money has parallels with money funneled through Political Action Committees (PACs) in US domestic politics. PAC money does not go directly to political parties and political actors. Instead, it indirectly benefits them by pushing their interests under the cover of a benevolently titled front organization. This problematic has now emerged in Georgian politics, prompting Georgia's government to require organizations receiving more than twenty percent of their funding from foreign sources to register with the government as of August 1, 2024. The US and the EU have decried this as undemocratic. However, the EU requires the work of grant recipients be consistent with its policy goals, which now include endorsing NATO which is contrary to Georgia's current foreign policy stance. Moreover, the US has laws that have similarities with that of Georgia, even though foreign money is of minor significance given the size of US political spending and the size of the US economy.

<sup>33</sup> See Yousif, E., "US military assistance to Ukraine," *Stimson Center*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/u-s-military-assistance-to-ukraine/>.

foreign power, like the former Soviet Union, which can challenge US global hegemony. The doctrine gives the US the right to impose its will anywhere in the world, which explains why the US has over 750 bases in over eighty countries, ringing both Russia and China.<sup>34</sup>

The Neocon objective is US global hegemony, and that objective has driven both eastward expansion of NATO and interference in former Soviet Republics aimed at fostering anti-Russian sentiment and provoking conflict with Russia. The Neocon doctrine initially seeded itself among hardliner Republicans like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, and it was then adopted in 1990s by Democrats under the leadership of Bill Clinton. Consequently, it became a bi-partisan US consensus. Moreover, Democrats added insidious cover by claiming the US motivation is promotion of democracy and human rights, which provides fig leaf cover for the goal of US global hegemony.<sup>35</sup>

As regards Russia, the Neocon playbook was explicitly laid out by former US National Security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in a 1997 *Foreign Affairs* article and in his 1997 book titled *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*.<sup>36</sup> Brzezinski

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<sup>34</sup> See Hussein, M. and M. Haddad, “Infographic: US military presence around the world,” *Al Jazeera*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive>.

<sup>35</sup> Neoconservatism is formally identified with the Project for the New American Century (PNAC) which was launched in 1997. The co-founders of PNAC were William Kristol and Robert Kagan. The latter is married to Victoria Nuland who played a leading role in pushing NATO’s eastward expansion and in the Ukraine Policy of the Obama and Biden administrations. PNAC founding supporters dominated foreign policy in the G.W. Bush presidency (2001-2009). They included Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz, who were instrumental in driving the 2003 invasion of Iraq (See *Wikipedia*, Project for the New American Century, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project\\_for\\_the\\_New\\_American\\_Century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_for_the_New_American_Century)). Subsequently, PNAC was replaced by the Center for New American Security (CNAS) which was founded in 2007. The creation of CNAS was sponsored by Hillary Clinton and CNAS was strongly supported by President Obama, showing how Democrats have become the most zealous supporters of Neoconservatism and the project of US global hegemony (See *Wikipedia*, The Center for New American Security, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Center\\_for\\_a\\_New\\_American\\_Security](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Center_for_a_New_American_Security)). Victoria Nuland is a former CEO of CNAS, showing her central role in the Neocon project, working with both Republicans and Democrats.

<sup>36</sup> See Brzezinski, Z., “A geostrategy for Eurasia,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1997 and Brzezinski, Z., *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997.

was a key figure in the formation of both Cold War and post-Cold War US policy. His views reflect his belief in US Neocon doctrine and his deep animus to Russia rooted in his Polish origins.<sup>37</sup> The goal was ensuring US global supremacy. The recommended strategy was incrementally surrounding and isolating Russia via NATO expansion, combined with intentional detachment of Ukraine from Russia. Brzezinski viewed Ukraine as essential to Russian power, writing as follows:

“Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire (Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 1997, p.46).”

Furthermore, Brzezinski casually floats the idea of dismembering Russia, speciously proposing it to be in Russia’s interests:

“A loosely confederated Russia – composed of a European Russia, a Siberian Republic, and a Far Eastern Republic – would also find it easier to cultivate closer economic relations with Europe, with the new states of Central Asia, and with the Orient, which would thereby accelerate Russia’s own development (*ibid.*, p.202).”

His writing speaks to the level of US aggression against Russia, and it foreshadows what has followed with extraordinary detail, to the extent of almost constituting a self-incriminating Neocon masterplan. The short-term plan was NATO expansion; the medium-term plan was turning Ukraine against Russia and detaching it from Russia; the long-term plan was dismembering Russia. Viewed in that light, US intervention in Ukraine was a stepping-stone to further attacks on Russia.<sup>38</sup>

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*Foreign Affairs* has special quasi-official standing, being the premier journal of the elite US foreign policy community.

<sup>37</sup> Brzezinski was born in Warsaw, Poland on March 28, 1928.

<sup>38</sup> The US has faithfully followed that aspect of Brzezinski’s plan, but it has not followed his advice about not antagonizing China. Brzezinski saw a Russia - China alliance as a grave threat to US hegemony, and he warned against antagonizing China over Taiwan by discarding the accord established by Nixon and Kissinger re ultimate

### *3.c.2 The military-industrial complex (MIC)*

Neocon doctrine guides US geopolitical thinking and strategy, and Neocon doctrine is supported by the MIC. That complex binds the US military, the US defense department and associated bureaucracies, and the massive defense industry which supplies the military. That creates a hugely powerful political economic interest that significantly determines foreign and national security policy. Moreover, the influence of the MIC ripples deep into US society. It influences Congress via political campaign contributions and promises of jobs and consultancies to politicians. It also exerts a massive influence on public opinion and public understanding of national security via a network of financial sponsorship that includes the mass media, thinktanks, universities, and the film and video game industries.<sup>39</sup>

The critical point is the end of the Cold War promised a major reduction in military spending, which posed a huge economic threat to the MIC. The Neocon project, with its goal of US global hegemony, defused that threat. It provided a justification for continued Cold War level military spending, and more. Additionally, that spending can continue forever because maintaining hegemony is a project without end.

### *3.c.3 European complicity.*

An additional piece of the puzzle is European complicity with the US Neocon project, exemplified by Europe's willing support of eastward NATO expansion and Europe's sabotage of the 2014 Minsk peace process. It is a puzzle because, as discussed further below, Europe has lost

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Chinese sovereignty. Instead, the 2012 Obama – Hillary Clinton pivot to Asia threatened China. That was ramped up by the 2016 Trump nationalist – racist turn against China, and the entire Nixon – Kissinger settlement has been irreparably smashed by the Biden – Pelosi embrace of Taiwan as an independent sovereign entity.

<sup>39</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the military-industrial complex and its activities, see Palley, T.I., “The military-industrial complex as a variety of capitalism and threat to democracy: rethinking the political economy of guns versus butter,” *Review of Keynesian Economics*, 12(3) (Autumn 2024), 308-347.

economically from the rupture of relations with Russia and it has borne the socio-economic backwash (e.g., refugee flows) from the conflict.

There are multiple explanations, but the most compelling is that Europe's military and foreign policy apparatus has been hacked by the US, and it now serves US rather than European interests.<sup>40</sup> The hacking process has the US government and its corporate partners placing a heavy thumb on the political scale of European countries. They do so by assisting friendly politicians, promoting supportive journalists and academics, and providing friendly political interests with financial and media support. Talking class professionals (journalists and academics) are helped with career advancement.

Europe also has its own MIC which is tied at the hip to the US via NATO. Additionally, Europe's defense industry wants to supply the US military, which is the world's biggest purchaser of equipment, and that requires supporting US policy. Lastly, history should not be neglected. Europe's elites have their own long-standing animus to Russia, which is especially acute in the UK, and in Germany to a lesser degree.<sup>41</sup>

### ***3.d Democracy promotion (and Autocracy Inc.)***

The fourth external driver of conflict has been the myth of democracy promotion, whereby a benevolent US is dedicated to globally promoting and protecting democracy. As mentioned above, that story has been especially embraced by liberal Democrat Neocons. The

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<sup>40</sup> See Palley, T.I. "Europe's foreign policy has been hacked and the consequences are dire," *Brave New Europe*, February 15, 2024, <https://braveneweuropa.com/thomas-palley-europes-foreign-policy-has-been-hacked-and-the-consequences-are-dire>.

<sup>41</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British animus to Russia was rooted in fear that Russia's expansion in Central Asia would threaten Britain's hold on India. It was also driven by fear of increasing Russian influence in the declining Ottoman empire, which motivated the Crimean War. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century through today, British animus to Russia is rooted in the 1917 Bolshevik revolution and the establishment of a Communist state, the execution of the Tsar and his close family, and the Soviet Union's default on World War I loans from Britain. That animus was drilled into Britain's political and security apparatus by Winston Churchill, who remains an iconic figure in British politics.



democracy promotion myth traces back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of “American exceptionalism” which promoted the idea that the US was as an exceptional nation, measured in terms of its ethical character and having a special mission. That idea is now bipartisan. For Republicans, the special mission is framed in terms of protecting and expanding freedom. For Democrats, it is framed in terms of a duty to safeguard and expand democracy.<sup>42</sup>

The democracy promotion narrative is a myth, and debunking it involves a long history of international relations that is far beyond the scope of the current paper. For current purposes, what matters is to recognize how the narrative has helped drive conflict in Ukraine. Here, it is important for three reasons. First, it has provided Western public opinion with justification for both eastward expansion of NATO and intervention in Ukraine and former Soviet Republics. Second, it has mobilized US and Western public opinion against Russia, and it keeps public opinion supportive of the war. Third, it has masked the reality of the motives behind eastward expansion of NATO and internal intervention in Ukraine. Metaphorically speaking, eastward expansion of NATO and US intervention in Ukraine have both surfed on the back of the democracy promotion narrative.

In effect, the democracy promotion myth has been critical for mobilizing Western public opinion on behalf of the Neocon project, and here it does double-duty. First, it enlists public support for the US global hegemony project by tricking the public into seeing US interventionism and militarism through the benevolent lens of democracy promotion, while disagreements and conflicts with others are interpreted as being with enemies of democracy. Second, it suppresses US domestic opposition to such policies, with the myth being a form of

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the history of American exceptionalism see “American exceptionalism,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_exceptionalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_exceptionalism).

intellectual blinders. The public is inhibited from seeing the reality of pursuit of selfish national interest, despite a long history of such action, some of which violates international law and includes overthrow of democratic governments. Furthermore, those who challenge the narrative risk being tarred as unpatriotic and undemocratic.

Since the myth facilitates the Neocon project, the democracy promotion narrative is embraced by the MIC which profits from that project. In effect, the narrative green-lights military spending and foreign interventions in the name of protecting and promoting democracy.

Over the last decade, the democracy promotion myth has been joined by a new “Autocracy Inc.” myth, according to which the US confronts an existential threat from foreign autocrats who seek to topple Western democracies and establish their own domination thereover. The “Autocracy Inc.” myth ramps up the case for US interventionism, militarism, and military spending. Now, not only is the US protecting and promoting democracy (the old “American exceptionalism” trope), but it also faces an existential threat from foreign autocrats. That new narrative creates a scenario of perma-conflict, justifying further increased military spending without time limit. That is even better than the Cold War, an end to which could be negotiated. With autocracy Inc., no such negotiation is possible.<sup>43</sup>

The democracy promotion narrative and its newer Autocracy Inc. sibling are extremely dangerous. The former encourages “self-righteous” interventionism, while the latter promotes “paranoia.” Each alone would be dangerous; together they risk being catastrophic. They both

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<sup>43</sup> The Autocracy Inc. hypothesis is associated with journalist-historian Anne Applebaum. See Anne Applebaum, “The bad guys are winning,” *The Atlantic*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/12/the-autocrats-are-winning/620526/>. The Autocracy Inc. narrative is strikingly inconsistent with the facts. Autocrats tend to keep their countries walled off, and none of the countries in the narrative have the wherewithal to take on the US and NATO. Instead, the evidence is the other way round, it being the US which has covered the globe with bases, garrisons, and multiple massive fleets based in foreign ports, as documented in footnote 32.

encourage foreign policy aggression and military interventionism, while simultaneously cloaking such behaviors as “benevolent selflessness” and “self-defense.” Both are now being employed to drum up public support for sustaining the Ukraine conflict.

The toxic effect of the myths work via their capture of Western public opinion. Shifting public opinion away from support for war is essential to ending the Ukraine conflict and preventing future conflicts. Changing public opinion is also needed as a check on the MIC and Neocon dominance of the US political establishment. Unfortunately, public opinion has been captured by the self-righteous crusading narrative of democracy promotion and the paranoid Manichaeic “good versus evil” narrative of Autocracy Inc., which pushes policy in the opposite direction. The twin narratives render compromise almost impossible, encourage conflict intensification, and strengthen the political grip of the Neocons and the MIC.

No algebra can discredit such thinking. All that is possible is appeal to logical argument, evidence, and history. Here, disdain for history kicks in again. The lack of interest in history means there is little likelihood of changing public understanding. Nor does the US establishment have any interest in doing so. Instead, the opposite is true. The establishment wants to sustain and nurture existing misunderstandings.

Worse yet, the more the US (with NATO help) seeks to impose global hegemony, the more it prompts other countries to respond and build up their armed forces. Additionally, economic sanctions by the West compel countries to find other economic partners. Consequently, the US can create a self-fulfilling prophecy which resembles Autocracy Inc., as countries under US threat will tend to cluster economically, diplomatically, and militarily. However, that clustering is defensive, and not offensive as claimed the Autocracy Inc. myth.

#### **4. The outbreak of war: Russia’s invasion explained**

Earlier, the paper used the metaphor of a scissors to explain the conflict. The internal fractures in the post-Soviet order constitute one blade. The external factors associated with US intervention constitute the other blade. Nationalist animosities are the scissor pivot point joining the blades together. Those animosities created internal divisions within former republics. They also provided the entry-point for the US to insert NATO into the Baltic Republics, and the entry point for internal interventions in other former Soviet Republics. Thus, they served both blades.

Russia's 2022 invasion should be understood as an escalation of a conflict that had already been triggered by the 2014 Maidan coup. Russia persistently opposed the expansion of NATO, but reluctantly accepted it. The 2014 coup was the straw that broke the camel's back, prompting Russia's annexation of Crimea and secession in the Donbas oblasts.

Thereafter, the Minsk peace process (2014-2021) created a period of "phony war" that delayed full-blown hostilities. Russia appears to have engaged the process in good faith, though its critics can claim its demands were unacceptable. However, France and Germany (the Normandy Group) who represented the US/NATO bloc, appear to have acted in bad faith. In a December 7, 2022, interview with *Die Zeit*, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel admitted that the Minsk Accord was "an attempt to give Ukraine time" in which to strengthen itself, while the US provided massive military assistance.<sup>44</sup>

Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems to have been prompted by a double trigger of diplomatic and military developments. On the diplomatic side, there was NATO's Brussels Summit declaration (clause 69) of June 14, 2021, which enshrined the hardline US position that

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<sup>44</sup> See "Putin says loss of trust will make future Ukraine talks harder," *Reuters*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-loss-trust-west-will-make-future-ukraine-talks-harder-2022-12-09/>.

Ukraine had a pathway to NATO membership regardless of Russian objections.<sup>45</sup> That position was reaffirmed with even stronger language in the November 2021 strategic partnership signed by the US and Ukraine.<sup>46</sup>

On the military side, there was evidence of an imminent Ukrainian military offensive against the Donbas secessionists, with Ukrainian forces now equipped with a decade of US military support. Such an offensive might have defeated the secessionists, putting Russia's hold on the Crimea at risk. Russia's invasion pre-empted that outcome.<sup>47</sup>

## **5. Conflict assessment and prognosis for peace**

### *5.1 Conflict assessment*

A balance sheet accounting of the war has Ukraine and Europe being clear losers. Russia's situation is mixed, while the US is the only clear winner. Ukraine is the biggest loser. Its economy and infrastructure have been decimated; large swathes of land have been mined or captured by Russia; millions have fled the country as refugees; tens of thousands have been killed or wounded; democracy is suspended; the proto-fascist extremists are politically in charge; and the country has many of the characteristics of a failed state.

Europe is also a major loser. It is suffering large Ukrainian refugee inflows and the socio-economic costs and adverse political backwash that generates. European energy prices stand to be permanently higher due to loss of cheap Russian energy supplies. The jump in energy prices caused temporary inflation, and it will result in permanently lowered real incomes and loss of

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<sup>45</sup> See "Brussels Summit communiqué," NATO, June 14, 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm).

<sup>46</sup> See "US-Ukraine charter on strategic partnership," US Department of State, November 10, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-ukraine-charter-on-strategic-partnership/>.

<sup>47</sup> See Jacques Baud, "The military situation in Ukraine," *The Postil Magazine*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.thepostil.com/the-military-situation-in-the-ukraine/>.

international industrial competitiveness. Europe has also forfeited the economic opportunity of capital goods exports to Russia owing to sanctions. Its beneficial trade and investment relationship with China is also being undermined as the US is insisting NATO allies move to a war footing vis-a-vis China, which is supportive of Russia and rejects US global hegemony.<sup>48</sup>

Russia's position is mixed but is net positive. On one hand, it has suffered tens of thousands of casualties and the destruction of much military hardware. It has also suffered loss of economic opportunity owing to sanctions and severing of trade opportunities with Europe, and there is the unresolved issue of the West's impounding of its foreign exchange reserves. On the other hand, it has achieved its goal of checking the US project of incremental strategic threat escalation versus Russia, and it has also substantially achieved its goal regarding neutralizing the security threat posed by Ukraine joining NATO. The war has also provided a reality check for the Russian military that promises to deliver future military improvements.

Additionally, Russia may reap important economic benefits as the war has given President Putin political power to crack-down on corruption and diminish the power of oligarchs.<sup>49</sup> It is also benefitting from an economic pivot to military Keynesianism and social democratic Keynesianism. As argued by Galbraith, the sanctions regime has been a form of policy gift, enabling and prompting Russia to undertake pro-development policy it might have

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Hudson has written insightfully about the US attempt to detach Europe from Russia and make Europe economically dependent on the US. See Hudson, M., "America's real adversaries are its European and other allies," *CounterPunch*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2022/02/11/americas-real-adversaries-are-its-european-and-other-allies/> and "Germany as collateral damage in America's new Cold War," *CounterPunch*, April 1, 2024, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2024/04/01/germany-as-collateral-damage-in-americas-new-cold-war/>.

<sup>49</sup> Western media have exploited the issue of Russia's oligarchs to drum up antipathy against both Russia and President Putin. The reality is the oligarch class was the creation of the US-sponsored economic reform program imposed immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991-1994). The IMF's "shock therapy" program privatized the Russian economy before an effective legal system was in place. The goal was to prevent the Russian state from ever resuscitating socialism. The oligarch class was created because it had access to Western credit and could scoop up assets at fire sale prices, and they were assisted by corrupt party bosses and insider management. The oligarch class became extraordinarily politically powerful, enabling it to twist Russian policy. Ironically, the war and sanctions may have undermined the oligarchs' power, freeing Russia to adopt more productive policies.

been politically unable to undertake otherwise.<sup>50</sup> An open issue is whether China and other countries can step in and supply the advanced technology products that the US/NATO bloc refuses to supply.

In the short-term, the US is the sole winner from the conflict, which helps explain its willingness to prolong and escalate the conflict. It has suffered no battlefield damage from the conflict, whereas Russia is suffering on-going military losses. Economic damage to the US has been limited to some temporary commodity inflation in 2022, and it has been offset by the benefits of military Keynesian stimulus that goes with providing weapons to Ukraine. Most importantly, the US has stepped into Russia's shoes as an energy supplier to Europe. That has increased US energy exports and benefitted the economies of its Gulf Coast states.

Geopolitically, it has also rendered Europe dependent on US energy, while separating Europe from Russia, which fits with the US project of global hegemony. Similarly, the accompanying ratcheting up of economic tensions between Europe and China also serves the US project of global hegemony, with Europe again bearing large costs from trade and investment losses.

In the long-term, the balance sheet picture looks worse for the US for geo-strategic reasons. First, except for NATO countries and Pacific countries allied with the US, most of the world appears to see some merit in Russia's security claims. Second, and most importantly, the US has succeeded in consolidating a comprehensive strategic Sino-Russian alliance which stands to permanently diminish its power and undercut the US global hegemony project. Unfortunately, those long-term adverse effects have little bearing on the conflict as they are largely irreversible, whereas the short-term benefits continue to flow. That configuration gives the US an incentive to

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<sup>50</sup> Galbraith, J.K., "The gift of sanctions: an analysis of assessments of the Russian economy, 2022 – 2023," *Review of Keynesian Economics*, 12(3) (Autumn 2024), 408-4227.

continue the war.

### *5.1 Prognosis for peace*

The above assessment suggests the outlook and prognosis for peace are grim. The war will continue for as long as the US enables Ukraine to fight by resupplying destroyed weaponry and by providing additional advanced weaponry, technical assistance, and military intelligence.

Furthermore, Neocons have ideologically-based difficulty compromising or retreating as that is a tacit denial of US hegemony. Consequently, the US is locked into keeping the conflict going.

That means shifting Western public opinion to compel the US to accept a compromise with Russia, is critical for ending the war.<sup>51</sup>

In Ukraine, democracy is suspended, and internal opposition to the war is suppressed. The nationalist extremists control the military and are the dominant political force, with President Zelensky as figurehead. That means Ukraine is also locked into conflict as the Nationalists are unwilling to compromise.

Russia is slowly grinding toward a victory of arms, with the risk of a nuclear event ever-present. It deems Ukrainian NATO membership an existential security threat, and its fears have been substantially validated by the war. It has also spent much blood and treasure for its war gains, which it will not surrender.

Putting the pieces together, that augurs for continued conflict until either the battlefield outcome is decisively settled or Western public opinion changes. The war should never have happened. The US project of global hegemony green-flagged Ukraine's adoption of positions that would lead to conflict, and the US then blocked all attempts to prevent the emerging

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<sup>51</sup> How Western public opinion is formed and how it can (or should) be changed is a massive topic in of itself. The issue is critical for the conflict outlook, but it is too large to be dealt with herein. That highlights the importance of the discussion in Section 3.d on the myths of democracy promotion and Autocracy Inc.



conflict.

The fateful 2014 Maidan coup set the ball rolling. The Minsk peace process offered an off-ramp but, it has now been revealed that the US and NATO were not interested in such. Instead, France and Germany stalled the process, buying time for the US to arm Ukraine, with the goal being defeat of the Donbas secessionists. Russia's proposal for a Ukraine treaty settlement in November 2021 offered the last opportunity for peaceful resolution centered on a demilitarized NATO-free Ukraine, but that proposal was dismissively rejected by the Biden administration. Peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in Istanbul in March 2022 offered an opportunity for a quick end to the war, but that was again blocked by NATO, with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson being the US messenger.

The war has not changed country attitudes, but negotiation possibilities have narrowed and worsened. Prior to the 2014 Maidan coup d'état, a *modus vivendi* was possible, with Ukraine retaining its 1922 based borders and Russia holding a lease on the Sevastopol naval base as per the 2010 Kharkiv Treaty. The 2014 coup permanently took that off the table, with Russia reclaiming Crimea which Khrushchev had gifted to Ukraine in 1954. The 2022 war has further changed the situation, with Russia annexing the Donbas oblasts that were incorporated in Ukraine in 1922.

Furthermore, Ukraine has lost its decision-making autonomy, and it has become akin to a car without a reverse gear. Before 2014, Ukraine could have independently negotiated an accord with Russia. Now, it is constrained internally and externally. Internally, Ukraine's extremist nationalists have absolute political and military control so that domestic political opposition to the war is impossible, and those extremists are willing to fight to the last Ukrainian. Externally, Ukraine needs some form of security guarantee to salvage its position at the negotiating table,

but the US (and NATO by extension) is unwilling to provide it. That unwillingness is because the war is being fought at little cost to the US, European elites have agreed for Europe to bear the economic and socio-political “backwash” costs of the war, and the US sees benefits in the damage the war is inflicting on Russia. Consequently, the US seeks to keep the war going.

In effect, Ukraine made itself a “sacrificial pawn” in the US global hegemony project. That role now consigns ordinary Ukrainians to fight a war of attrition against Russia over which they have no say. The war will only end when either Russia prevails on battlefield, the war goes nuclear, or Western public opinion turns against the war. In that regard, Germany is important as it is where public opinion is most likely to change.

## **6. Lessons for Georgia**

The Ukraine conflict holds enormously important lessons for Georgia as the two countries share significant structural similarities. Both Ukraine and Georgia were birthed via the break-up of the Soviet Union, and their birth process is marked by a similar pattern of political shifts.

In both, the Communist Party pivoted to a nationalist stance, and the party bosses inherited power and the ability to enrich themselves. That nationalist pivot fomented nationalist animosities, and in both there was the issue of stranded ethnic Russian populations which was aggravated by the nationalist turn.

Georgia has also experienced conflict with Russia related to national animosities and stranded ethnic Russian populations. There have been two episodes of such conflict. The first was in South Ossetia in 1991, immediately following Georgia’s declaration of independence, when ethnic Russians sought to separate from the newly formed republic. The second was in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, and again involved the stranded ethnic Russian populations. However, the second conflict was also significantly informed by NATO’s initiation

of an intensified dialogue with Georgia about joining NATO. The second conflict therefore has major similarities with the Ukraine conflict. Fortunately, it has gone into remission, though the international legal status of the two separatist regions is still contested.

That said, Georgia is fortunate because both the internal and external drivers of conflict are less intense. First, Georgia's nationalist pivot was not afflicted by anything akin to the toxic neo-Nazi forces associated with Stepan Bandera and the Azov brigade, with their history of extreme antisemitism and ethnic hatred. Second, the stranded ethnic Russian population problem in Georgia is smaller in scale and geography. Third, the contested territory problem associated with South Ossetia and Abkhazia is small compared to the problem of Crimea and the Donbas. Crimea has the Sevastopol naval base, and both Crimea and the Donbas oblasts have clear historical links to Russia that were questionably severed by the now disbanded Soviet Union.

As regards external drivers, Georgia is strategically less important to the US global hegemony project. Georgia is viewed as contributing to the encirclement of Russia. However, it is nothing akin to Ukraine which is a spear that juts into the heart of Russia, has a land border with Russia of 1,200 miles, and is three hundred miles away from Moscow at its closest point. Consequently, Ukraine's geography makes it an existential security threat to Russia, which is one reason why Ukraine is so attractive to the US as an instrument for weakening Russia and establishing US hegemony. Additionally, as articulated by former US Secretary of Defense Zbigniew Brzezinski, detaching Ukraine from Russia fundamentally weakens Russia by stripping it of connection to Europe, stripping it of important natural resources, and stripping it of population.

Lastly, Georgia has the benefit of hindsight regarding its own conflicts with Russia and seeing the effects of Ukraine's conflict with Russia. That hindsight may enable it to avoid the

disasters that have befallen Ukraine. Henry Kissinger once said: “It may be dangerous to be America’s enemy, but to be America’s friend is fatal.” Those words are extremely relevant to the Ukraine conflict and Georgia’s situation.<sup>52</sup> Ukraine has become a sacrificial pawn in the service of the US project of global hegemony, and it has suffered massively and now has few options. Except for Ukraine’s Bandera-Azov extremists, few can argue that has proven the best course for Ukraine. Georgia should seek to avoid that course and outcome.

### *6.1 Non-alignment: the way forward*

The simplest way out of the box is via non-alignment. In the 1960s and 1970s, the non-aligned movement sought to offer countries an alternative to picking sides in the Cold War. With the revival of Cold War conflict, the path of non-alignment is again appealing. Moreover, in some regards it is easier than it was in the first Cold War. That is because of the emergence of China as a manufacturing powerhouse, and because of the emergence of the BRICS economies. Those developments mean the global economy offers economic and trading partner choice, which creates options and provides protection against economic punishment.

That said, the US is likely to seek to punish countries looking to be non-aligned as non-alignment tacitly challenges its hegemony. In the 1970s, US policymakers were against the non-aligned movement, being guided by the dictum “if you are not with us, you are against us”. That dictum is likely to be replayed. Consequently, countries can anticipate being punished in fora such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, where the US still wields great power.

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<sup>52</sup> Kissinger’s statement is from 1968, and his words are a form of Freudian double-entendre. He was cautioning about the consequences of abandoning South Vietnam and the reputational damage that would cause. However, he also unintentionally spoke to the larger danger of becoming embroiled in the US project of global hegemony. Kissinger’s statement was made in a private telephone call on which William F. Buckley Jr. was taking notes, and which Buckley describes in his book *United Nations Journal: A Delegates Odyssey*, <https://skeptics.stackexchange.com/questions/56470/did-henry-kissinger-say-it-may-be-dangerous-to-be-americas-enemy-but-to-be-am>.

The US will also likely impede trade access to the US market, suspend tax treaties that facilitate doing business, and discourage foreign direct investment. The EU will likely copy-cat the US. That type of punitive behavior is already being seen in response to Georgia's commitment to build a deep-water Black Sea port in Anaklia as part of China's New Silk Road project.<sup>53</sup> That said, China's economic and manufacturing power and the interest of the BRICS in establishing a new financial order can mitigate that punishment.

A further factor in Georgia's favor is this is a favorable time to engage Russia, which has no interest in having another conflict on its borders. Thus, Russia is likely to engage Georgia on positive terms. The Georgian economy can gain from mutually beneficial trading relations with Russia. Economic gravity models suggest trade is best pursued with geographically close partners, which obviously includes Russia. Georgia's geography also confers a climate advantage whereby Georgia can become an exporter of high value agricultural products to Russia, where the market is large and the growing season is shorter. Russian tourism is another major trading opportunity as Russian spending on tourism is significant. Participating in China's New Silk Road project can make Georgia a logistics hub and middleman for Armenian and Azerbaijani trade. That portfolio of economic prospects can facilitate non-alignment by giving Georgia options and leverage.

Money is a great challenge for democracy and Georgian politics. The principal offerings of the US are military assistance and dollars. Both are potentially toxic for Georgia. US military assistance threatens to take Georgia down the same path as Ukraine. As for money, domestic money is toxic for democratic politics, as is now openly evident in the US. Foreign money can

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<sup>53</sup> See Castillo, N., "Georgia's Black Sea coast: the changing tide of Russian and Chinese presence," Caspian Policy Center, July 22, 2024, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/category/georgias-black-sea-coast-the-changing-tide-of-russian-and-chinese-presence>.

be even more toxic, especially in a poor country. That speaks to need to restrain the influence of foreign money which can easily purchase and distort domestic politics. Here, Georgia can learn from Ukraine's experience, where the US funneled billions of dollars prior to the 2014 coup, financing nationalist groups under the guise of democracy building (see Section 3.b). Given that, Georgia would be well-advised to heed the advice given the Trojans to "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts." Military assistance and dollars are both Trojan horses.

Lastly, Georgia will need to resist the siren call of nationalism, which can be so seductive and has already done damage. The great challenge is how to resolve the territorial dispute over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia's bright economic prospects offer reason for those regions to be open to reintegration. In return for Russian cooperation, Georgia will likely need a constitutional amendment committing it to neutrality and barring NATO membership. In this author's view that is squarely in Georgia's interest, but it will require amending Article 78 of the constitution which calls for "full integration" into NATO. That article is a hangover from the US and EU opportunistically exploiting nationalist animosities by offering Georgia the prospect of economic privileges in return for adopting an anti-Russian stance.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper has explored the deep causes of the Ukraine war. The paper argued the war has both internal and external causes. The internal causes are rooted in the way the Soviet Union disintegrated. The external causes relate to how the US exploited the fractures in the post-Soviet order to advance its Neocon agenda aimed at establishing US global hegemony.

The war has devastated Ukraine. It has destroyed Ukraine's economic foundation, triggered mass population flight, caused tens of thousands of deaths, and solidified the fascist nationalist grip on political and military power. Assisted by the US, Ukrainian nationalists

captured Ukrainian politics and refused to compromise with the complicated political and demographic reality of post-Soviet Ukraine. In doing so, they made Ukraine a sacrificial pawn in the US project seeking global hegemony, with fateful consequences that may yet worsen further.

Georgia has some structural parallels. That said, if wisdom prevails, there is a way out which is non-alignment. That will not be easy as the US is likely to try and sabotage that path, as non-alignment tacitly challenges US hegemony. If Georgia is in doubt, it should ask itself two questions. First, what is the US doing on the eastern side of the Black Sea, 6,000 miles away from its own nearest border which is protected by the Atlantic Ocean? Second, how does incorporating Georgia into NATO enhance US national security? The simple answer is the US is in Georgia to enhance its threat power in its campaign against Russia aimed at imposing US global hegemony, and having Georgia in NATO does nothing for US national security. That makes clear the US is using Georgia as a sacrificial pawn, which is a role Georgia should avoid.