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Did Putin Start the Russia-Ukraine War?

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Abstract

This paper provides a detailed analysis of the origins and development of the Russia-Ukraine war, challenging the simplified narrative that blames Vladimir Putin entirely. It explores the complex links between NATO expansion, Western interventions, and Russia's security concerns, showing that the war's start goes beyond Putin's desire for glory. The study looks at the key historical guarantees made to Moscow and shows how breaking these promises increased Russian mistrust of the West. A simple blame game overlooks the deeper causes of the crisis, delaying diplomatic efforts and peace talks. The paper summarises the main issues at the end and discusses the way forward.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine War, NATO Expansion, Putin, Western Interventions, Crimea, Euromaidan, Minsk Agreements, Peace process.

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has emerged as one of the most significant geopolitical crises of the 21st century. While Western narratives often place the blame squarely on Russian President Vladimir Putin, a deeper analysis of historical events and Western actions suggests that the origins of this war are more complex. From broken Western promises post-World War II to NATO's expansion and Western interventions, a pattern of provocation emerges, challenging the simplistic notion that Putin alone initiated the war. This article examines these events, analysing whether Putin truly started the Russia-Ukraine war or if it was a

culmination of historical grievances and geopolitical manoeuvres by the West. [1]

Background of the Russia-Ukraine War and the Current State

The Russia-Ukraine conflict started on 24 Feb 2022 and can be termed as largest war in Europe since World War II. It is already three years and the conflict resolution is not in sight in spite of many attempts for Peace. The origins of the conflict trace back to centuries of intertwined history between Russia and Ukraine and the eastward expansion of NATO. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine emerged as an independent nation. Many Russians including Putin consider this as a historical mistake

as both the countries are historically, culturally, ethnically and religiously are very closely related. Modern Ukrainians wanted to join the European Union for the sake of development. However, they feared Russia's intervention; thus, as a security guarantee, they wanted to become part of NATO. So for Ukraine EU and NATO membership are interrelated. Russia was worried about the deployment of NATO forces closer to its borders and thus was against this move for security reasons. Euromaidan protests led to change of regime in Ukraine and as a retaliation Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. This action was widely condemned by the international community and led to the imposition of sanctions against Russia.

Eastern Ukrainians with Russian majority were not in favour of joining EU or NATO, but wanted closer ties with Russia. With Russia support, pro-Russian separatist movements gained momentum in Ukraine's eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, leading to armed conflicts. These developments marked the beginning of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This planned and all out aggression resulted in widespread destruction, large civilian casualties and a massive displacement crisis. Millions of Ukrainians took refuge in neighbouring countries and many foreigners staying in Ukraine went back to their countries. The invasion was met with fierce resistance from Ukrainian forces, supported by Europe and USA, resulting in stringent economic sanctions on Russia. Ukraine, in return got substantial military and humanitarian aid. In the end the paper gives out

As of May 2025, the conflict continues with no ceasefire in sight. Recent diplomatic efforts have intensified, under President Donald Trump, who has pledged to end the war. Over the past two months, the U.S. has engaged in separate talks with both Ukraine and Russia to facilitate a resolution. The humanitarian situation remains critical, with ongoing reports of civilian casualties and infrastructure damage. Ukrainian President Zelenskyy has consistently called for increased international support and accountability for alleged war crimes committed during the conflict. The global community watches closely as efforts continue to negotiate peace and address the complex issues at the heart of this enduring conflict.

With this as a background, the article analyses various international events which led to the Russia-Ukraine war, efforts by Putin to resolve the crisis, aspirations of the Ukrainian people to politically motivate the Ukrainian Government to apply for NATO membership and finally Western influence on this war. Was Putin cornered and was not left with no other option but to attack Ukraine?

1945 Yalta Conference and the Western Promise to Respect Russia's Sphere of Influence

By early 1945, the tide of World War II had turned against Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union had already advanced deep into Eastern Europe, liberating (or occupying) countries such as Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Meanwhile, the Western Allies were making progress from the west following the D-Day landings in France.

The Yalta Conference, held from February 4 to 11, 1945, was a crucial meeting between the three Allied leaders—Winston Churchill (United Kingdom), Franklin D. Roosevelt (United States), and Joseph Stalin (Soviet Union)—as World War II neared its end. The conference took place in Yalta, Crimea, in the Soviet

Union and focused on shaping the post-war world order. It aimed to address three main issues: the division of Germany and its post-war occupation, the establishment of the United Nations (UN), and the future of Eastern Europe, especially Poland.

While all three leaders were committed to defeating Nazi Germany, Stalin had a distinct interest in securing a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Given the USSR's immense sacrifices in the war—millions of Soviet citizens had died—Stalin was determined to ensure that future threats to Soviet security could be contained by establishing friendly communist governments in the region.

During the conference, Roosevelt and Churchill reluctantly agreed to Stalin's demands that Eastern European countries maintain governments friendly to the USSR. However, they also urged Stalin to commit to holding free elections in these nations. One of the most contentious issues was Poland, where Stalin established a pro-Soviet government despite promises of democratic elections. In exchange for his cooperation, the Western Allies implicitly acknowledged Soviet dominance over Eastern Europe, marking the onset of a divided Europe.

Although there was no formal document stating that the West would permanently respect the Soviet sphere of influence, the agreement at Yalta effectively permitted Stalin to expand Soviet control over Eastern Europe. The Cold War soon followed as tensions escalated between the Western bloc (led by the U.S. and Britain) and the Soviet-controlled Eastern bloc.

The Yalta Conference had a major influence on the future of Europe. The Western promise to respect Russia's sphere of influence became one of the most controversial aspects of the conference, influencing events such as the Berlin Crisis, NATO's formation, and the Cold War rivalries that followed. All these outcomes were further ratified at the Potsdam Conference (July 17 – August 2, 1945), held in Potsdam, Germany.

Formation of NATO and the European Security Situation

After World War II, Europe was divided into the Western and Eastern blocs. The Soviet Union extended its control over Eastern Europe, establishing communist governments in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and East Germany. Western nations, led by the United States and Britain, feared further Soviet expansion.

Accordingly, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established on April 4, 1949, as a military alliance among the United States, Canada, and ten European nations: Belgium, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. The primary goal of NATO was to counter the growing threat of the Soviet Union in Europe following World War II. [3]

In response to NATO, the Soviet Union formed the Warsaw Pact in 1955, uniting the USSR, Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. The pact solidified Soviet control over Eastern Europe and served as a direct military counterbalance to NATO. The main threat posed by the Warsaw Pact was the potential for Soviet-led invasions into Western Europe, which escalated Cold War tensions and led to the militarization of both alliances. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO was seen as a threat to the Soviet Union. However, after the Cold War, the Soviet Union sought a change in the European

security situation and aimed for economic development, desiring secure borders with Europe.

Breaking of the Berlin Wall and NATO Expansion Negotiations

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, was a defining moment in European history. It led to German reunification and the rise of Western Europe again after the Second World War. In 1990, diplomatic discussions occurred between the U.S., Western European leaders, and the Soviet Union regarding NATO's potential expansion. The key person, in these negotiations was James Baker, the U.S. Secretary of State under President Bush. During meetings with Gorbachev and Soviet Foreign Minister, Baker reportedly assured them that NATO would not expand "one inch eastward" beyond Germany if the Soviet Union accepted German reunification under NATO. This assurance was not written but is very well documented in various reports and diaries. [24].

Later, Western officials, including German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and French President François Mitterrand, expressed concerns about NATO's expansion into former Warsaw Pact countries, fearing it would provoke Moscow. Despite these informal assurances, NATO expanded eastward in subsequent years. With this, the geopolitical situation in Europe was changing; the Soviet Union, once an ally, was being considered Europe's biggest enemy. [23]

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent Eastern European states, fearing Russian influence, sought NATO membership. By 1999, NATO admitted Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, followed by further expansions in the 2000s. Russia viewed this expansion as a betrayal of Western assurances made in 1990, which worsened tensions between NATO and Moscow.

Disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Security Dynamics of Newly Independent States

The Soviet Union formally disintegrated on December 26, 1991. This marked the end of the Cold War and birth of 15 newly independent states. The dissolution left a big power vacuum, both politically and in terms of security, for ex-Soviet states across Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Some of these countries faced major Security challenges. Many states inherited parts of the Soviet military but lacked the resources to maintain them effectively. Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan inherited Soviet nuclear arsenals, creating immediate international security concerns. Unresolved territorial disputes and ethnic tensions led to conflicts, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh war and tensions in Chechnya. Additionally, with the former Soviet states wanted to join EU for economic development. As they feared Russia due to this reason, they wanted to join NATO to safeguard their security. [4]

However, the responses to these security dilemmas varied among the newly independent nations that were led by Russia. Russia inherited the bulk of the Soviet military and nuclear arsenal. It formed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to maintain influence over the former Soviet states and opposed NATO's expansion to the East, which later led to conflicts such as the 2008 war with Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan initially possessed Soviet nuclear weapons but agreed to denuclearize under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in exchange for security assurances from both Russia and the West. The Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia,

Lithuania) felt the most threatened, and with their quest to join the EU, they joined NATO and the European Union in 2004. [5]

The Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were not initially interested in becoming separate states but later declared their independence. They maintained close security ties with Russia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These countries began looking toward China for economic and military cooperation through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Countries in the Caucasus region, namely Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, took different paths due to their security issues and economic opportunities. Georgia sought NATO membership but faced Russian military intervention in 2008. Armenia aligned with Russia via CSTO due to its conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan pursued a balanced strategy, leveraging energy resources to maintain independence from both Russia and NATO.

The Warsaw Pact was dissolved in 1991, leading former Soviet satellite states like Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join NATO in 1999. Russia opposed NATO expansion, viewing it as a direct threat, which fuelled tensions in the region.

NATO Bombing of Serbia/Belgrade in 1999

Serbia's bombing by NATO in 1999 was a turning point in history, where NATO unilaterally used force in Eastern Europe in an area that was under Soviet Union Influence. This event can be said to be the starting point of the Russia-Ukraine war of today. Russia viewed the 1999 NATO bombing of Belgrade as a breach of promises and an act of interference in Eastern Europe. Russia condemned the bombing as a violation of international law and the UN Charter, arguing that it was undertaken without UN Security Council authorization. Russia and China were known to be against this at the UNO; thus, NATO took the task on its own. Russian President Boris Yeltsin viewed this as Western military aggression, reinforcing his fears about NATO's intentions. However, NATO justified its actions due to the failure of diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation in Kosovo. NATO leaders claimed that it was necessary to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians by Serbian forces. [7]

Serbia's bombing by NATO was named 'Operation Allied Forces.' The irony is that the operation was named Operation Allied Forces, yet the original Allied partner from the Second World War, Russia, was excluded, and the bombings occurred from the airbases in Germany and Italy. [8] The breakup of Yugoslavia and the dissolution of the Soviet Union occurred nearly concurrently. Russia was undergoing structural reforms that were accompanied by a steady decline in its economy and production until 1999. Accordingly, relations between Russia and its allies, including Yugoslavia, were largely neglected until 1999. Putin viewed the operation as NATO interference in Russia's area of influence and blamed it on a weakened Russia from 1990 to 2000, preparing to revive its strength. The quest to make Russia powerful again helped Putin in the 2000 elections.

During the Kosovo War, Putin was head of Russia's influential Security Council in President Yeltsin's government. Serbia was Russia's ally, but it could not stop NATO bombing. But then on June 10, Serb forces began to withdraw from Kosovo as NATO troops prepared to arrive. The Kremlin then ordered a battalion of about 200 Russian soldiers in 30 armoured vehicles to leave their barracks in Bosnia and get to Kosovo ahead of NATO. It is

believed that Putin was one of the architects of the move. Russian forces made it and beat NATO to the main airport and secured it, not allowing any further NATO landings. It is said that the Russians rolled down Main Street and were 'back onto the world stage'. It was the moment when the Russian tide, which had been going down since the collapse of the Soviet Union, began to rise again. NATO's military commander, General Wesley Clark, ordered British General Michael Jackson to occupy the airport and shoot the Russians if they resisted. His reply has gone down in history: 'Sir, I am not starting World War III for you'.

The Russians eventually became part of the peacekeeping mission and stayed in Kosovo until 2003. Kosovo declared independence in 2008. Putin has used this 'Kosovo precedence' to argue Russia's case in Ukraine. After invading Crimea in 2014, Moscow organized an independence referendum. The document formally declaring the subsequent independence from Ukraine mentions the Kosovo story as part of a legal justification to secede. Putin, in one of the interviews with Western press, has said, "Our Western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law ... but by the rule of the gun," he said in a 2014 speech defending his effort to annex Crimea. "They have come to believe ... they can decide the destinies of the world. This happened in Yugoslavia; we remember 1999 very well." This event cemented Russia's scepticism regarding Western narratives and unilateral actions.

Putin's Early Efforts to Reconcile with the West

After assuming office in 2000, Vladimir Putin sought to integrate Russia with the West, even suggesting the possibility of NATO membership. Putin wanted Russia to join NATO but did not want his country to have to go through the usual application process and stand in line. However, the West largely dismissed these overtures, signalling that Russia would not be welcomed as an equal partner. [9] In the overall power game, the West was worried about its supremacy and arms sales. If there were no enemy of the West like Russia, countries would stop acknowledging the supremacy of the West and would not buy their arms. A peaceful world is not good business. This rejection played a significant role in shaping Putin's increasingly assertive foreign policy.

Further, after the 9/11 attacks, Putin extended support to the United States in its fight against terrorism, allowing logistical routes through Russia for NATO forces in Afghanistan. However, despite this cooperation, the U.S. continued policies that disregarded Russian security concerns, such as expanding NATO and developing missile defence systems in Eastern Europe.

U.S. Withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and the Start of a New Arms Race

On June 13, 2002, the US unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty (having given notice six months earlier). The next day, Russia responded by declaring it would no longer abide by the START II treaty, which had not entered into force. George W. Bush argued that the treaty was hindering the United States from protecting itself against "terrorists" and "rogue states." [10]

The ABM Treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union (and later Russia) prohibited both the USA and Russia from deploying missile defences against long-range ballistic missiles and from establishing the foundation for such defences. The treaty was based on the premise of mutual assured destruction, and the likelihood that if either power constructed a strategic defence, the

other would bolster its offensive nuclear forces to overwhelm it. The superpowers would, therefore, find themselves in a never-ending offensive-defensive arms race as each tried to ensure the credibility of its offensive nuclear force. The treaty did, however, allow both sides to build Defences against short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. The ABM Treaty was negotiated and signed concurrently with SALT I—which capped and later reduced the strategic nuclear arsenals of the two superpowers. For this reason, both countries considered the treaty a "cornerstone of strategic stability." However, with the Cold War over, missile Defence advocates believed that the ABM Treaty's ban on nationwide missile Defences and its constraints on development and testing hindered the United States from developing and deploying defences against the proliferating threat of ballistic missiles, especially from countries pursuing nuclear weapons capabilities and long-range missiles. [11]

Russia was concerned that the deployment of missile Defence systems in NATO countries near its borders would make its own Defences vulnerable. They stated that it would be impossible to ascertain whether a missile launched was for defensive or offensive purposes. This decision accelerated an arms race and intensified tensions, as Russia viewed U.S. missile Defence systems in Eastern Europe as direct threats to its security. [12]

2011 Snow Revolution in Russia and U.S. Support for Opposition

Mr Putin first rose to power in 2000 following Boris Yeltsin's resignation. His rule during the first eight years, from 2000 to 2008 (first and second presidential terms), was marked by economic stabilisation, centralisation of power, and the war in Chechnya. Russia experienced strong growth due to rising oil prices. From 2008 to 2012, Putin remained Prime Minister under Dmitry Medvedev due to constitutional limits. However, most analysts agree that Putin remained the de facto leader. This period saw the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and a more assertive Russian foreign policy. During these four years, the West and the USA viewed this as an opportunity to remove Putin from the Russian scene and tried their utmost for regime change, which was known as the Snow Revolution. [13]

The 2011 Snow Revolution in Russia was a major political movement marked by nationwide protests against alleged electoral fraud in the Russian parliamentary elections. While the movement was locally driven by the middle-class urban population and opposition parties, its nature took a sharp geopolitical turn when the Russian government began accusing the U.S. and Western European countries of actively supporting the protest movement and attempting to undermine Putin's grip on power. The protests erupted in December 2011 after parliamentary elections were criticized for lacking transparency. The U.S. then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, voiced concerns over the fairness of the elections. Putin took Clinton's public criticism of the election process and the results as meddling in the internal affairs of Russia and an attempt at regime change in Russia. [14]

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOS) and U.S.-funded institutions, such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), USAID, and Freedom House, came under Putin's radar. These NGOs and Western funding agencies were accused of providing financial and logistical support to civil society groups, independent media outlets, and opposition politicians within Russia. These agencies claimed to support democracy, but Russia perceived their involvement as a front for regime change.

Putin, who returned to the presidency in 2012 after a four-year stint as prime minister, responded with an all-out crackdown on foreign-funded NGOS and political opposition. As soon as he resumed power, Putin put a curb on NGOS receiving foreign funding and engaging in political activity. He enacted a law that was aimed squarely at limiting external interference in domestic politics. In 2012, USAID was expelled from Russia after being accused of interfering in political affairs. In subsequent years, several U.S.A. and European NGOS were declared “undesirable organisations” and banned from operating in Russia. The Russian leadership saw the Snow Revolution and similar movements as examples of Western hybrid warfare, where information, funding, and civil unrest are used as tools to destabilise sovereign governments.

From 2012 to the present, Putin has tightened his grip on power, amended the constitution in 2020 to potentially remain in office until 2036, and overseen a growing rift with the West, particularly concerning Ukraine. In Putin’s view, the Defence of Russia’s political integrity necessitated a firm stance against external attempts to influence its elections and governance.

Euromaidan Protests in Ukraine and Western Support

After President Vladimir Putin began clamping down on foreign-funded NGOs and Western-backed opposition movements in Russia, much of that external attention and influence shifted to Ukraine, a country with deep cultural, historical, and strategic significance to Moscow.

The Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, which began in 2013, marked a significant turning point in Eastern European geopolitics, with long-lasting consequences felt throughout the region. Although the movement is often portrayed as a spontaneous popular uprising in favour of democracy and European integration, it was deeply motivated by Western strategic interests, particularly following Russia’s effective curbing of U.S. and Western NGO activity during the 2011 Snow Revolution. Throughout the early 2010s, Western governments and NGOS heavily invested in Ukrainian media, civil society, and youth movements promoting democratic reform, European integration, and anti-corruption. [16]

The Euromaidan protests are linked to NATO. It started in November 2013 when then-President Viktor Yanukovich, under Moscow’s pressure, halted plans to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Many young, pro-European protesters gathered at Kyiv’s Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), calling for closer ties with the West and condemning government corruption. The protests rapidly evolved into a significant political crisis. The Euromaidan movement benefited from substantial support from Western powers. [17]

By February 2014, violence in Kyiv had escalated. Armed confrontations between protesters and police resulted in numerous deaths. Yanukovich, who had backing in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, fled to Russia amid mounting public pressure. The Ukrainian parliament voted to dismiss him, leading to the establishment of a new interim government supported by the West. Russia perceived this as a coup facilitated by Western powers and as a direct threat to its strategic interests.

The Euromaidan protests were not solely focused on domestic reform; rather, they became a main issue for Ukraine to join NATO and the European Union. It also affected the geopolitics in the region. The ousting of Yanukovich, who was pro-Russia, followed by Western support for a new regime, was viewed by Moscow as a blatant provocation. In retaliation, Russia aggressively reasserted

its influence, beginning in Crimea, then moving to Donbas, and culminating in its invasion in 2022. What started as a protest for European integration transformed into a battleground for the future of the post-Soviet region.

Annexation of Crimea in 2014

Shortly after Yanukovich’s removal, Putin took steps to secure Crimea, a region historically linked to Russia and the base of the crucial Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol. In his 2014 Presidential address, he stated, “after the Maidan, the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol turned to Russia for help in defending their rights and lives, in preventing the events that were unfolding and are still underway in Kiev, Donetsk, Kharkov and other Ukrainian cities. Naturally, we could not leave this plea unheeded; we could not abandon Crimea and its residents in distress. This would have been betrayal on our part.” [18]

In March 2014, after a controversial referendum that drew condemnation from much of the international community, Russia annexed Crimea. Moscow justified its actions by stating the need to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the region, pointing to fears of NATO potentially accessing Crimea through a new Ukrainian government.

This event signified a critical geopolitical shift. The annexation was the first major territorial alteration in Europe since World War II, resulting in a serious deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. The U.S. and the EU responded by imposing sanctions, while NATO bolstered its presence along eastern borders. [19]

Concurrently, the pro-Russian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in Eastern Ukraine declared independence, sparking a brutal civil war. Although Russia denied direct involvement, it faced extensive accusations of supplying military and logistical aid to the separatist forces.

Ukraine’s NATO Aspirations and Final Expansion of NATO

NATO move eastward, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, especially into former Warsaw Pact countries. Russia has perceived this action as a strategic encroachment. At the heart of this geopolitical friction lies Ukraine, a country that has persistently expressed interest in joining NATO since the early 2000s. [20]

Ukraine’s desire to join NATO was officially expressed for the first time in 2002 and gained momentum after the 2004 Orange Revolution. The ascent of Putin in 2000, alongside Russia’s economic and military expansion, significantly influenced this shift. Russia strongly opposed these ambitions, viewing Ukraine as both a buffer state and a part of its historical and cultural influence. Despite early support, Ukraine’s NATO aspirations encountered internal political splits and widespread public uncertainty, particularly in the eastern and southern parts of the country, where many of the Russian-speaking population reside.

A pivotal moment occurred in 2014 with Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine. This situation brought in a notable change in Ukrainian public sentiment towards endorsing NATO membership to protect the nation’s sovereignty. In 2014, the Ukrainian government formally renounced its non-aligned status, subsequently embedding NATO membership as a strategic objective in its constitution in 2019. [21]

NATO, however, adopted a careful approach. The alliance offered military assistance and training, yet full membership was postponed to avoid annoying Russia. Under Putin, Russia viewed

NATO's ongoing eastward expansion and Ukraine's alignment with the West as a serious threat. By late 2021, Moscow presented a series of security demands, including a request for legally binding assurances that NATO would stop its eastward expansion and specifically not allow Ukraine to join. The West dismissed these demands, reaffirming NATO's right to set its own membership policies. Accordingly, Ukraine's ambition to join NATO became central to the worsening relations between Russia and Western nations. Although Ukraine had not yet gained NATO membership by 2022, its relentless efforts to join, along with NATO's unwavering support, fuelled Russia's offensive in 2022. With support from President Biden, Western Europe continued to reject Russian demands and encouraged Zelensky to do the same, promising full support should any situation arise.

Peace efforts between 2014 and 2022

From 2014 to 2022, many diplomatic initiatives were taken to ease the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with a focus on the Donbas crisis that arose after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Although there were many negotiations and international mediations, these attempts did not succeed in achieving the desired peace.

The major diplomatic effort during this time was the Minsk Agreements I and II, negotiated in two stages—Minsk I in September 2014 and Minsk II in February 2015. These agreements, facilitated by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), France, and Germany, tried to end the fighting in the Donbas region. Minsk II aimed to look at a ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weaponry, and constitutional reforms. It also included granting special status to Donetsk and Luhansk. Both parties accused each other of breaching the agreements, leading to a low-intensity conflict along the contact line for years.

In 2019 elections, Zelensky became President of Ukraine, sparking renewed hope for peace. As a political outsider and former comedian, Zelensky ran on a promise to end the war in Eastern Ukraine. He successfully negotiated a new ceasefire in July 2020, resulting in a notable decrease in violence for many months. Zelensky also held direct discussions with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the Normandy Format summits, which also included France and Germany. In 2022, Ukraine presented a ten-point Peace Formula at the G20 Summit in Indonesia, highlighting the importance of restoring territorial integrity, withdrawing Russian forces, and pursuing accountability for war crimes. This initiative was clearly rejected by Russia, which stated that it would not return any territory it had captured. [22]

All peace initiatives failed due to a combination of mutual distrust, differing interpretations of the Minsk Agreements, and Russia's broader strategic aims. Moreover, Russia's refusal to acknowledge its direct involvement in the conflict, insisting instead on a civil war narrative, hindered any meaningful negotiation. The culmination of these unresolved tensions and failed diplomatic channels set the stage for the full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, as Russia abandoned negotiation in favour of coercive force.

Western Support for Ukraine's War Effort

Since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, Ukraine has been getting military, financial, and diplomatic support from the US and European Union members. Initially, the support was presented as a defensive reaction to Russian aggression; however, this support has extended hostilities and diplomatic rift between Moscow and the West.

Immediately after the initial invasion, Western governments acted quickly to offer extensive support for Kyiv. The United States became Ukraine's primary military supporter, providing financial assistance. This aid included sophisticated weaponry like Javelin anti-tank missiles, HIMARS rocket systems, Patriot air defence batteries, and eventually, long-range missiles along with armoured vehicles. Western European partners considered this aggression an attack on Europe and soon joined the war effort. They supplied both lethal aid and vital logistical support. The UK, Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states particularly excelled in equipping and training Ukrainian forces. The West ensured strong support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial rights. The European Union and international financial institutions provided multi-billion-dollar packages to stabilise Ukraine's economy and support its war efforts. Sanctions on Russia intensified, targeting its energy exports, financial system, and prominent institutions to weaken its capacity to fund the war.

Over three years, the ongoing Western support was responsible for repulsing Russia's capture of territories closer to Kyiv and stalemated at many other fronts. In fact, Russia would have got a free run if the US and Western support had not been there. Western assistance has clearly improved Ukraine's ability to defend itself and regain territory, however it has also prolonged the war. As the war enters its fourth year, the global community is confronted with the truth that while external aid is vital, it has also perpetuated a conflict with no definitive resolution in sight. Despite Western leaders' commitment to backing Ukraine's conditions for peace, which include fully reinstating its 1991 borders, this inflexible approach has complicated the path to compromise.

During his second term, President Trump has sought to negotiate peace in the Russia-Ukraine war by engaging in direct discussions with Vladimir Putin. He has suggested a ceasefire aligned with the current frontlines and has proposed postponing Ukraine's NATO membership and accepting Crimea as Russian territory. However, these suggestions have attracted criticism for possibly undermining Ukraine and prioritising Russian interests. A recent encounter with President Zelenskyy at Pope Francis's funeral underscored existing tensions, as Zelenskyy called for a firmer U.S. response to Russia. Despite several rounds of negotiations in Riyadh, no tangible ceasefire has been established, leaving both Ukraine and its European allies doubtful about Trump's strategies.

Summary and the Way Forward

While doing research on this article, it is amply clear that the causes of the Russia-Ukraine war cannot be attributed to Putin's aggression and ego alone, as is widely perceived and published. Instead, it is the outcome of long-standing geopolitical tensions arising from historical mistrust, failed promises, and shifting power dynamics. Starting from the 1945 Yalta Conference to the full-scale invasion in 2022, both Russian actions and Western policies fuelled the conflict, which has continued for the last three years.

Russia Security Concerns overlooked by West: This is the most relevant factor where, West consistently overlooked Russia's security concerns despite prior formal and informal commitments. The growth of NATO, especially following the Berlin Wall's collapse, along with the installation of missile defence systems close to Russian borders, were a direct violations of the post-Cold War agreements. Russia viewed these actions as a Western effort to isolate and weaken Russia in general and Putin in particular.

Putin Early Efforts to Reconcile with West: During the early years of his presidency, Putin made several attempts to incorporate Russia with Western political and security structures, such as closer relation with EU and NATO. However, these efforts were largely rejected which widened the rift.

Geo Political Events Intensifying Russia's Apprehension: Events like NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999, the U.S. exit from the ABM Treaty in 2002, and American support for opposition movements during Russia's 2011 Snow Revolution intensified Russian apprehension towards Western motives. Putin understood clearly that if he remains a meek observer, NATO will keep taking benefit out of it, whereas aggressive posture will keep NATO in check.

Russia considered Protests in Ukraine as West Influenced: The Euromaidan protests favouring EU and NATO membership with the Western backing marked a significant turning point. Change in regime in Ukraine was also manipulated by Western Europe and US. Russia perceived this as a clear instance of direct interference in Ukraine which was a buffer state between Russia and West.

Historical Connection between Russia and Ukraine: Putin has always considered Russia and Ukraine very close to each other historically, culturally and religiously. They have a common origin since 980 CE with Kievan Rus Empire formed under Vladimir the Great and their conversion to Christianity. Putin considers separation of Russia and Ukraine a historical mistake and has mentioned so in many forums. Western intervention in Ukraine working against Russian interest is not acceptable to Putin

Peace Efforts: Despite various peace efforts, such as the Minsk I and Minsk II and President Zelensky's ceasefire initiatives, after his assuming Presidency, peace is not in sight. While Western support for Ukraine has been crucial for its defence and sovereignty, it has also extended the conflict. President Trump has tried to negotiate peace in the Russia-Ukraine war by engaging in direct discussions with Vladimir Putin and Zelensky and has taken a few positive steps towards the end of the conflict. He has also applied pressure on Countries like India, China, and some European countries to stop buying Russian energy and thus drain Russia of funds. Recent actions of the US in Venezuela have affected Russian pride and dominance to a great extent. This action will make Russia think of stopping the war with Ukraine and look into its economy, internal situation and influence in world affairs. Only time will tell the outcome of this complicated issue.

Conclusion

Putin has been a strong leader and has been the head of Russia since 2000. He undertook the task of making Russia great again, both economically and strategically, starting early in 2000 by sending Russian troops to Kosovo to counter NATO expansion. While Putin's actions, including the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine, are central to the conflict, a deeper examination reveals decades of Western provocations and broken promises. From NATO expansion to U.S. unilateral military actions, Russia's security concerns have largely been ignored. There was also an attempt by the West and the U.S. to remove Putin from the presidency or to portray him as an aggressor after 2014. All these factors have contributed to the outbreak of the war. Instead of engaging in a one-sided blame game, a more nuanced approach is needed to understand and resolve this complex geopolitical struggle. Any peace initiative mediated by the U.S., the West, or the UN must take into account the conflict's history.

Russia's interests must be considered, and the sovereignty issue of Ukraine should also be kept in mind. Supporting one country over another will lead to an endless war, resulting in more tensions in the region, destruction, and casualties on both sides.

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Data Availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the finding of this study are available within the articles and its supplementary materials. Data that support the findings of the study are available on reasonable request.

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