

## Why Ukraine **should** be barred from NATO

News coverage of the current tensions between NATO and Russia over Ukraine (e.g. “Families of diplomats told to leave Ukraine: Russian buildup stokes fears of invasion soon,” from the November 26th edition of the *National Post*) conveys the impression that an aggressive and hostile Russia is entirely to blame. However, while the Russian demand that Ukraine be barred from NATO may, at first glance, appear to be an outrageous violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, the historical facts lead to a very different interpretation.

As anyone who was around before 1990 knows, at one time Russia (or, more properly put, the Soviet Union) was the arch-enemy of the Western democracies. There was a real ideological and geopolitical rivalry between the West (with its belief in individual freedom, small government and free markets) and the Soviets (with their belief in the merits of central planning and state control of the economy).

However, the internal contradictions and gross inefficiencies of communism eventually led to the collapse of the Soviet Union together with the other states that made up the Communist Bloc. For a brief, glowing moment, we appeared to be at what the writer Francis Fukuyama termed “the end of history.” As formerly communist states appeared to adopt democratic governments and free markets, the big questions concerning which political and economic systems were best appeared to have been settled.

Fukuyama, though, was naive. While the ideological differences may have been settled, the human thirst for power meant that conflict would almost certainly continue.

For a short time it seemed as though Russia and its former satellite states would be peacefully incorporated into an undivided Europe. In 1990, U.S. President George H.W. Bush, himself a veteran of WWII and therefore conscious of the enormous losses Russia had suffered during the war, agreed to block NATO expansion into Eastern Europe in exchange for Russian acquiescence to German reunification. Bush understood that a nation which had suffered over 20 million dead in WWII had a legitimate fear of encroachment from Western Europe.

Bush also understood that the Soviet Union was the most recent incarnation of the Russian empire, and that imperial powers should be treated with respect. American recognition of Russia’s great power status and regional importance was necessary to forge the bonds of trust upon which a more cooperative relationship could be built.

Perhaps even more importantly, though, the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union was an astonishing achievement that called for a generous response. The Soviet Union, with its vast nuclear arsenal, held the power to end life on earth. As Russia gave up its empire without dragging the world into war, gratitude and relief demanded that we not take advantage of their time of weakness.

During the Clinton administration, however, relations took a turn for the worse. Western banks, using local oligarchs as front men, financed the asset-stripping of Russian state industries in a cruel mockery of privatization. Billions of dollars left Russia while the vast majority of the Russian people suffered from sliding living standards and reduced longevity. The average life expectancy in Russia fell from almost 70 years in 1990 to under 65 years by 1994. Understandably, many Russians do not remember the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of superpower status with any great fondness.

To add insult to injury, meanwhile, from the mid-1990s onward NATO, ignoring the promise made to Russia in 1990, began to admit members which had been part of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact security alliance (Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) and even the Soviet Union itself (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania). This enraged Boris Yeltsin, the Russian leader from 1991 through to 1999, but neither he nor Russia could halt NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe, despite the fact that the end of the Cold War had made the alliance an anachronism.

This memory of powerlessness in the face of Western ruthlessness drives current Russian attitudes towards the West. We are not seen by the Russians as trustworthy. Rather, we are seen as greedy bullies who took advantage of a proud and distinguished nation when it was weak and needed our help.

Keeping this history in mind, we can see that placing the blame for the current crisis in Ukraine on the Russian demand that Ukraine be barred from joining NATO is astonishingly mendacious. We are the ones who reneged on our promise not to expand NATO to the east. All we need to do to reduce tensions in the region is honor that promise. If we fail to do so and if fighting does break out over Ukraine, any blood that is spilled will be on our hands.