

The Ukraine crisis: A problem of trust

Many observers now believe a war between Russia and Ukraine is inevitable. Jim Hughes explains how the erosion of trust between Russia and the West has brought us to the brink of a conflict that could have far reaching consequences for Europe.

As Russia-Ukraine tensions appear to be escalating toward war, Western leaders show every sign of conforming to I.F. Stone's acute observation that "when war comes reason becomes treason". Nuance, balance, and expert analysis is washed over by a flood of escalating hyperbole and skewed polarising commentary. Two recent illustrations of this are public comments by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who having ordered 2,000 British anti-tank missiles sent to Ukraine, [threatened](#) that Russia faced a "new Chechnya" if it invaded Ukraine, and a recent article in the [Financial Times](#) by Robert Gates, former Director of the CIA and US Secretary of Defense, who argued for the US and its NATO allies to "exacerbate" the current crisis.

On the first comment, it is clear foolishness to draw an analogy between Chechnya's wars and Putin's current policy. There were two wars in Chechnya. The first, in 1994-6, was waged by Western supported Boris Yeltsin, who despite systematic Russian atrocities was indulged by Western leaderships. US president Bill Clinton infamously compared Yeltsin's actions in this war to those of Abraham Lincoln in the US civil War. Many Western commentators predicted wrongly that the war would be a "tombstone" for Russian power. The war destroyed much of the modern infrastructure of Chechnya and caused thousands of casualties on both sides, and ended in a stalemate.

It is the second Chechnya war (1999-2008) that was led by Putin (first as Prime Minister and then as President). The second war ended in victory for Russia, and minimal Russian casualties, largely by two tactics. First, Russia copied NATO's tactics in the Balkans of deploying overwhelming distance bombing from land and air against insurgents, which displaced the bulk of the civilian population temporarily into neighbouring regions. Second, unlike the military defeats of US and British counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia successfully eliminated the insurgency by coopting a proxy leadership in Chechnya under Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov, and has used it since to stabilise the region. It is unlikely that Putin would draw any lessons from Chechnya, as Ukraine has a modern professional army that will need to be neutralised by different methods. However, if Putin were to draw any analogies from the Chechnya experience, they would be highly positive from a Russian perspective.

The commentary by Mr Gates, a seasoned presence in the US intelligence community, correctly focuses our attention to the background and context of the current crisis, locating it to the early 1990s and the fall of the USSR. The fall may have occurred in 1989-91, but the current crisis demonstrates that its ripple effects continue to shape international relations in Europe (and in Eurasia). Gates explains that "Almost everything Putin does at home and abroad is rooted in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which for him marked the collapse of the four-century-old Russian empire and Russia's position as a great power." Mr Gates sees the current crisis as an opportunity for the US and its NATO allies to "exacerbate" tensions in order to weaken Putin. It is as if he wants to call the bluff of a nuclear armed state.

The Gates comment is more useful for drawing our attention to the reasons why trust has broken down between Russia and the US and its NATO allies. From the Russian perspective, the erosion of trust began with commitments given by US and Western leaderships at the time of the unification of Germany in 1990 that there would be no expansion of NATO to the East. This is a controversial issue, with many Western commentators keen to disinform and dismiss Russia's claims about a breach of commitment by pointing to the fact that there was no formal treaty or agreement that NATO would not enlarge. A good illustration of this position is the [Chatham House report of May 2021](#), where the Russian charge was dismissed as one of many "myths".

What is the difference between a treaty, an agreement, a guarantee, an obligation and an assurance in international relations? One might think that the first is legally embedded, usually, and therefore is more enforceable. In fact, as history shows, and recent history affirms, any international agreement whether legally formalised or informally stated, is only as good as the interests of the parties in remaining committed to abiding by it.

The United States has abrogated several international agreements in recent decades, treaties included ([the ABM Treaty](#), [the INF Treaty](#), the [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change, [the JPA on Iran](#)). The British government has demonstrated a lack of commitment to the Good Friday Agreement during Brexit, repeatedly threatening to break international agreements with Ireland and the EU. Such abrogations undermine trust, which is a key ingredient in stable international relations. The absence of trust is also a key driver of war.

What security guarantees were given to Russia by the US and its allies during and after the collapse of Soviet power in Eastern and Central Europe in 1990? In 2018, William J. Burns, current Director of the CIA and a veteran US foreign policy professional, published his memoir, [The Back Channel](#). In 1989-90 he was in the lead team of policy planning in the State Department, managing the collapse of the USSR. He describes (p. 55) a meeting between Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet leader Gorbachev and his foreign minister Shevardnadze in Moscow in February 1990, at the pivotal moment in the unification of Germany. According to Burns, Baker gave a guarantee to the Soviet leaders that “there would be no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction or forces “one inch to the East” of the borders of a reunified Germany.

From the perspective of the US and its allies, especially those at the eastern interface with Russia, Putin’s annexation of Crimea and military support for the secessionists in Eastern Ukraine since 2014 is a clear breach of Russia’s commitments to guarantee the sovereignty of Ukraine given in the Budapest Memorandum of 1994.

Once broken, trust is challenging to repair and disinformation whataboutery can only deteriorate the crisis. War is made more likely by the absence of trust. In this crisis, the unpredictable consequences of war have the potential to reach far beyond Russia’s likely territorial ambitions in Eastern Ukraine, north of Crimea, and along the Black Sea littoral. A good place to start rebuilding trust is to revisit the security architecture and mutual guarantees given in the early 1990s in a manner which restores their credibility.

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