

# Ukraine's NATO Bid Risks Even Worse U.S.-Russia Ties

Ukraine has made new moves towards joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which would cross a Russian “red line” and further deteriorate U.S.-Russia relations, argues Will Porter.

By **Will Porter** *Special to Consortium News*



It's been four years since the hectic “Euromaidan” protest movement culminated in a coup that deposed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Though civil war grinds on in the eastern half of the country, Ukraine has wandered in and out of American news cycles since the dramatic change of government in Kiev.

But a more recent development has implications that are rarely explored in American media, despite what it could mean for broader U.S. international relations. Ukraine is vying to take its place as NATO's newest member state, a move that could seriously escalate tensions between Washington and Moscow beyond their current high point.

“It's safe to say that Russia would be, and has been, opposed to NATO membership for Ukraine,” James Carden, former advisor to the State Department's U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, said in an email exchange.

Neighboring states such as Ukraine and Georgia, Carden added, “are red lines for Russia and we should take them at their word.”

While Ukraine's original application to join the alliance came in 2008, subsequent political complications put the issue on the back burner. It wasn't until 2014 that the Ukrainian parliament voted to end the country's “non-aligned” status and renew the push for membership.

In a March Facebook post, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said Ukraine's “next ambition” on its path to membership was to seek a Membership Action Plan (MAP). Countries seeking to join NATO must go through a multi-step process that ensures the prospective member meets the alliance's various obligations in areas ranging from military spending to law.

“This is what my letter to [NATO Secretary General] Jens Stoltenberg in February 2018 was about, where, with reference to Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, I officially [put forward] Ukraine's aspirations to become a member of the Alliance,” Poroshenko wrote on Facebook.

The renewed effort to join the alliance, if successful, could further ratchet up tensions between Russia and the United States, who—in case anyone could forget—preside over the world’s two largest hydrogen bomb arsenals.

### **Not One Inch**

Founded in 1949 as a bulwark against alleged Soviet expansionism in post-war Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization functions as a mutual defense pact between its 29 member states. Until the early 1990s, NATO existed ostensibly to counter the Soviet Union’s analogous alliance, the Warsaw Pact.

In December of last year, the National Security Archive at George Washington University published a series of declassified documents which reveal that strong assurances were given to the crumbling USSR that NATO, in the words of then-Secretary of State James Baker, would not advance “one inch eastward” in the post-Soviet era.

Yet between the time those promises were made, beginning in early 1990, and the present, NATO has expanded to encompass thirteen additional states, all of them in Eastern Europe. In 1999, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary joined; in 2004 the alliance expanded to include Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, while Albania and Croatia followed in 2009.

The addition of NATO’s newest member, Montenegro, in 2017 provoked a hostile Russian response after it became clear the new member would join in on European Union sanctions targeting Russia. Given the agreements set out in the waning days of the Cold War, the Russians have looked on subsequent NATO expansion as part of an aggressive policy designed to hem in its borders.

Ukraine is no exception. In a 2014 interview with Bloomberg News, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Ukraine’s acceptance into NATO would amount to a setback for regional security, and explained the general Russian position on the question.

### **It Started in the Nineties**

“The attempts to draw Ukraine into NATO would be negative for the entire system of European security and we would be categorically against it,” Lavrov said.

“In my view, it all started ... back in the 1990s, when in spite of all the pronouncements about how the Cold War was over and that there should be no winners yet, NATO looked upon itself as a winner,” Lavrov said. “All these commitments have been, to one degree or another, violated.”

The Russian perception of being surrounded was again intensified in 2002, when

the George W. Bush administration unilaterally pulled out of the landmark Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The agreement was signed in 1972 to slow down the Cold War nuclear arms race and prevent either power from building defenses against the other's missiles. A "balance of terror" was maintained to deter nuclear war, or at least that was the logic underpinning the treaty.

Bush portrayed the treaty as an outdated artifact, only serving to codify a "hateful relationship," but its abrogation heightened Russian anxiety as it opened the way for a U.S. advantage of first strike capability by defending against a nuclear retaliation from Moscow. It effectively ended Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD).

Though Bush announced the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty as a response to the 9/11 terrorism attacks he had by requirement of the treaty to inform Russia four months before September 11. Washington's argument that the deployment of anti-ballistic batteries in Romania and Poland are intended to defend against Iran were dismissed by Moscow, especially after the nuclear deal with Teheran effectively ended an alleged Iranian nuclear weapons program.

Not long after the ABM was scrapped, the United States began selling or otherwise deploying missile systems of various types across Eastern Europe, and now conducts dozens of joint military exercises just beyond Russia's borders every year. In 2016, NATO staged significant war games with 31,000 troops on Russia's borders. For the first time in 75 years, German troops retraced the steps of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.

That led then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to accuse NATO of "war-mongering" against Russia. "What we shouldn't do now is inflame the situation further through saber-rattling and warmongering," Steinmeier stunningly told *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper. "Whoever believes that a symbolic tank parade on the alliance's eastern border will bring security is mistaken." Instead Steinmeier called for dialogue with Moscow. "We are well-advised to not create pretexts to renew an old confrontation," he said, saying it would be "fatal to search only for military solutions and a policy of deterrence."

### **Nyet Means Nyet**

The trouble Ukrainian NATO membership would stir up was seen as early as 2008 when a leaked State Department cable, entitled "Nyet Means Nyet: Russia's NATO Enlargement Redlines," made clear that the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO remains an "emotional and neuralgic" issue for Russia.

"Strategic policy considerations also underlie strong [Russian] opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia," the document concludes. "In Ukraine,

these include fears that the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which could force Russia to decide whether to intervene.”

Derived from discussions between former U.S. Ambassador William Burns and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the document represents high-level U.S. recognition of the Russian position behind closed doors, but it remains unclear whether policymakers are treating the issue with appropriate sensitivity.

“Many [policymakers] inhabit a kind of fantasy land . . . in which Russia was never promised anything regarding NATO expansion,” Carden said. “Total nonsense, but that is the position of the American establishment in a nutshell.”

Carden added that U.S. officials view Russian opposition to NATO expansion as a “cover story,” rather than a genuine grievance, but that is not reflected in the documentary record.

### **‘Stealing Russia’s Girlfriend’**

Of all of Russia’s neighbors, Ukraine is an especially touchy matter due to the informal but highly significant U.S. role in the country’s 2014 revolution.

In a leaked recording of a phone conversation between then-Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Victoria Nuland, and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, the two Obama administration officials casually discuss hand-picking members of Ukraine’s post-coup state, before the coup happened.

The leak was a minor scandal at the time in the West, but the outrage was directed more at Nuland’s profane remark about the European Union rather than the fact that American officials were selecting the political leadership of a foreign country over the heads of its citizens. Instead of addressing its content, Obama White House spokesman Jay Carney accused Russia of leaking the recording.

A February 2014 appearance on Comedy Central’s “The Colbert Report” was a unique source of insight on the American establishment’s thinking on Ukraine. Gideon Rose, editor of Foreign Affairs, the media arm of the Council on Foreign Relations, appeared on the show to explain Ukraine’s political troubles. Through a few humorous analogies, Rose portrayed the situation as first and foremost a struggle between the United States and Russia.

“[Ukraine is] basically Robin to Russia’s Batman,” Rose said, drawing laughter from the audience. “The challenge here is to attract it to the West—to get it to flip sides.” He went on to make a silly comparison of likening U.S. policy to

attempting to “steal Russia’s girlfriend.”

To that end, the American role in Ukraine’s revolution went far beyond organizing the transitional government in Kiev.

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which describes itself as a private non-governmental organization, spent over \$4.5 million on some 70 separate projects in Ukraine in 2014. Hundreds of thousands of dollars went toward setting up media and activist groups in the country’s highly volatile political climate.

Despite its NGO status, since its inception in 1983 the vast majority of the NED’s funding has come from U.S. government agencies. The Endowment’s 2014 annual report, for example, shows it received \$135 million in grant money from the State Department in that year alone.

In the largest of the NED’s 70 projects in Ukraine, the endowment gave \$476,630 to the International Republican Institute (IRI), an American nonprofit chaired by Sen. John McCain. A page on the NED’s website (now defunct, but resurrected with the Wayback Machine) characterized the project as, “Reaching out to voters.”

In a 1991 column in *The Washington Post*, David Ignatius said the NED has “been doing in public what the CIA used to do in private...”

Documents released through a 2004 Freedom of Information Act request revealed that the IRI had trained leaders of the 2004 coup in Haiti and funded opposition groups in the months leading up to the ouster of Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The Haitian uprising was led by right-wing paramilitary groups, closely mirroring hardline elements within Ukraine’s own opposition. Organizations at the vanguard of the Ukrainian coup included the Svoboda Party, known to openly admire WWII Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera, as well as the ultra-nationalist Social National Party, whose founder Andriy Parubiy became Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council in the post-coup state.

The neo-Nazi Azov Battalion also spearheaded many street protests during the coup, and was later incorporated into Ukraine’s armed forces to put down a separatist uprising in the country’s Russophone Donbass region.

While the full significance of the IRI’s involvement in the 2014 coup in Ukraine remains unclear, the Institute’s track record of training opposition figures to topple elected governments raises questions about its role, as well as the American government’s role in funding such organizations.

Like the NED, the IRI is also a direct recipient of large sums of American government money, receiving \$36 million in federal funds in 2004, the same year of the Haitian coup.

### **Approaching a Boiling Point**

In the last year, the already strained relationship between the U.S. and Russia has rapidly declined to what some describe as worse than Cold War levels.

The News Hostility Scoreboard is almost too long to detail in one place:

- The ongoing, seemingly never-ending, Russiagate controversy;
- The death of Russian defense contractors in Syria in an American airstrike, among other alarming developments in that country;
- The expulsion of 60 diplomats over alleged Russian involvement in an attempted assassination in the UK (reciprocated by Russia);
- The sale of Javelin missiles to the Ukrainian government, to be used in its war in the Donbass;
- Trump's Nuclear Posture Review, which lowers the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons;
- Proposed and imposed economic sanctions; the list goes on.

Expanding NATO to include yet another Russian neighbor can only exacerbate the trend, increasing the likelihood for a real conflict between the world's largest powers.

Nevertheless, in March NATO's website was updated to officially include Ukraine as an aspirant nation, alongside Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Macedonia. The page is aptly titled "Enlargement."

So, is NATO membership for Ukraine a foregone conclusion?

Not quite, Carden said, "but given who sits in the Oval Office right now, it would be impossible to rule anything out."

"I think as long as Merkel remains at the helm in Germany the chances are slim," Carden said. "She, among all Western leaders, seems to understand that Ukrainian membership would be nothing short of disaster for the alliance."

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