

How Putin's obsession with NATO has led to the brink of war in Ukraine

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In response to the rising threat of a Russian military invasion of Ukraine, NATO forces in the region have begun mobilizing.

Spain announced Thursday that two of its warships were en route to the Black Sea, the body of water that borders southern Ukraine, to partake in military exercises originally planned for later this year. Spain may also send fighter jets to Bulgaria, where the Dutch government is sending F-35s, while, according to military analyst Gustav Gressel, senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, France hopes to lead an Enhanced Forward Presence battalion of fighters in Romania. On Friday, the Kremlin demanded that NATO



fighters leave both Romania and Bulgaria, demands falling on deaf ears.

Russian President Vladimir Putin at a meeting on Oct. 21, 2021, in Sochi, Russia. (Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images)

and exercises in the Black Sea are sending a strategic message, Nicolò Fasola, an expert on NATO and Russian security, told Yahoo News. “And in this case, the message is ‘NATO is united, NATO is resolved and NATO is strong.’”

The expansion of NATO membership to countries that were once part of the Soviet-era bloc is at the heart of the standoff in Ukraine. In talks with the West last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin insisted that Ukraine be barred from entering NATO, a demand that the U.S. and NATO flatly rejected.

Founded in 1949, NATO is the peacetime alliance formed by the U.S., Canada, and nine Western European countries to check Soviet advances after World War II. This week its leaders reiterated that it remains a protective alliance whose aim is to maintain European security. NATO’s deployments on members’ territories “are defensive, proportionate and in line with our international commitments,” NATO notes on its website. Its “enhanced forward presence in the eastern part of our alliance is not meant to provoke a conflict but to prevent a conflict. It is a response to Russia’s use of military force against its neighbors ... including a major build-up of Russian forces in and around Ukraine.”

There is no mistaking the long-standing animosity between Russia and NATO, with whom Putin’s government broke ties in 2021, calling back its NATO mission in Brussels. For months, Russian officials have been demanding that NATO stop expanding, bar Ukraine and Georgia from joining, and kick out members that have joined since 1997. History, spheres of influence, and the prospect of self-governance have everything to do with Russia’s ongoing aggressions against Ukraine, which was also once part of the Soviet Union.

While NATO isn't obliged to fight in Ukraine, its bolstered arsenal

NATO EXPANSION ROILS RUSSIA



“What contemporary Russia wants to do is to ascend again to the recognized rank of great world power,” said Fasola. And Ukraine, with its aspirations to join NATO and the European Union, threatens that.

“Putin’s beef with NATO is real,” Evelyn Farkas, former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for

Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia, told Yahoo News. “He wants a sphere of influence, and he wants to ensure that there are no democratic powers tempting the countries that he believes should be in Russia’s sphere of influence to join NATO or the European Union.”

To comprehend what is currently playing out in Ukraine and Eastern Europe requires looking back to the formation of the Soviet Union, a grand socialistic experiment, almost a century ago, in December 1922. With Russia as its command center, the USSR initially included Ukraine, Belorussia (now Belarus) and what today are Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Over the decades, it encompassed 15 different republics, some of them forced into Russia’s bear hug, most notably the Baltic countries — Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

After World War II, Soviet expansion continued to Eastern and Central Europe, creating Soviet satellites that, while not officially part of the Soviet Union, were deeply influenced by Moscow and were obliged to join the Soviet military alliance, the Warsaw Pact, which famously stomped out a revolution in Hungary in 1956 and a move toward liberalization in Czechoslovakia in 1968. These Soviet satellite countries included Poland, the former Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary and East Germany, which reunited with West Germany in 1990, with the crumbling of the Berlin Wall.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, which Putin in 2005 described as “a genuine tragedy” for Russia and “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century,” many of these former republics and Soviet satellites looked westward. In 2005, many joined the European Union, and between 1999 and 2004, nine of them joined NATO out of fear that Russia would reach out and grab them again. The attraction was NATO’s Article 5, stating that an attack on one member would be regarded as an attack on all.

Russia has been complaining about the military alliance, whose members now number 30, pretty much ever since, all the more since NATO defensive troops and military installations are positioned at, or near, its borders in five of those countries. Poland and Romania in particular have Aegis Ashore weapons systems, which Russia fears could be converted to launch nuclear missiles. (Four countries in Europe are sites of NATO’s nuclear weapons: the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy, with only Germany and Italy capable of reaching Russia, said Fasola.)

One of Russia's demands of NATO is that it retract memberships for countries that have joined since 1997, which Fasola explained means the former Soviet republics and satellite countries. "All those countries that Russia is implicitly referring to by setting a date of 1997 are the countries that were formerly members of the Warsaw Pact, and that entered NATO in the 1990s," Fasola said.

Russia does not want to see NATO expand to include the former Soviet republic of Georgia, and particularly Ukraine, once the cultural jewel of the Soviet Union. Last year Putin published a discourse laying out his view that Russia and Ukraine are Slav brothers, bonded by history and language. Most Ukrainians, however, don't feel the same.



A man wields a pickaxe to participate in the destruction of the Berlin Wall.

In a December 2021 [poll](#) commissioned by the New Europe Center, a foreign policy think tank in Kyiv, the majority, 61 percent, want to join the European Union, while 53 percent want to join NATO. In 2014 when then-President Viktor Yanukovich, backed by Moscow, instead blocked their application to EU membership, saying they should instead set their gaze back to the East, Ukrainians rose up in the streets and tossed him out. That was the year that Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, occupying it ever since. Russia also kicked up a proxy war in Ukraine's east, arming and backing Russian rebels there, in a showdown that has killed 14,000 Ukrainians.

What Putin is apparently trying to do, analysts say, is to re-create Russia's sphere of influence among the former Soviet republics and satellite states, and to drive a spike between Eastern and Western Europe. And what is motivating him, experts say, is a desire to see fledgling democracies such as Ukraine's fail.

"Putin wants to ensure the survival of his regime of autocratic political order and the kleptocratic economic system," said Farkas. "He regards what is happening over the border in Ukraine as a threat to his system, because if democracy takes off in Ukraine, if it functions there, the Russian people will see that and they will view it as an alternative" to the increasingly oppressive government in Russia. "He has likely been made more paranoid, by [recent uprisings] in Belarus, and more recently in Kazakhstan" — both of which Russian forces helped subdue. "All of that," she said, "has heightened his interest in eliminating the threat posed by Ukraine and democracy in Ukraine."

Farkas views Russia's growing aggressiveness with Ukraine with deep consternation, saying that Putin is trying to rearrange the world order.

"Americans should care," she told Yahoo News, "because if Putin gets away with what he's doing in Ukraine, he'll turn his attention to other states that were in the Soviet sphere of influence," such as the Baltics and Poland, all NATO members. "And then he will start threatening their sovereignty. And the U.S. will have an obligation to protect those countries under NATO's Article 5. If we don't, then NATO will fall apart. And if NATO falls apart, then Putin will do everything he can in Europe, and then all the Europeans will have to fend for themselves."



Relatives of Ukrainian servicemen who died during the defense of Donetsk Airport hug next to a memory wall in Kyiv on Friday. (Sergei Supinsky/AFP via Getty Images)