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## **Peace in the Cross-Hairs: NATO expansion collides with Russian security**

With the mainstream media offering only the US/NATO perspective, attention focusses on the Russian ‘threat’ and dismisses Russia's legitimate security interests. Past commitments made and broken by NATO are downplayed. Heightened tensions can only be understood by examining Russia’s perspective too.

**What are Russia’s basic concerns?** When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, the West assured Russian leaders it would not expand “one inch” east of Germany. US former ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock recalls this vividly in a recent article, “[I was there](#): NATO and the origins of the Ukraine crisis.” NATO now has troops, ships and planes along Russia's borders.

President Vladimir Putin expresses concern about Russia’s legitimate security concerns. Issues relating to European security architecture are much broader than Ukraine. Putin [underscores](#) three core points: that NATO abandon its eastward expansion, not deploy strike weapons near Russian borders, and return to NATO’s infrastructure in Europe as of 1997 when the Russia-NATO Founding Act was signed.

Almost 40 years ago, the US, Europeans and Soviet Union set up the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to guarantee indivisible security for all. All 57 participating countries (including the US and Canada) have agreed not to strengthen their security at the expense of others. Russia wants security for all, not just NATO’s 30 countries.

**Draft treaties.** The draft treaties Russia presented to the [US](#) and [NATO](#) in December 2021 make this point. The principle of indivisible and equal security for all countries was agreed by OSCE countries at [Istanbul](#) (1999) and reaffirmed at [Astana](#) (2010). The countries expressly agreed not to strengthen their security at the expense of others.

The US and NATO responded to some points (January 26) but not all. Russia conveyed its [reaction](#) (February 17), stating the US had “failed to provide a constructive response” regarding security for all. As well, Russia wrote individually in January to all OSCE countries, including Canada, demanding clear answers on how they each intended to fulfil their obligations under the OSCE agreements.

Putin [warned](#) earlier that if the West continued its aggressive policies (NATO's expansion and missile deployment in eastern Europe), Russia would take military-technical reciprocal

measures. In [his words](#), "They have pushed us to a line that we can't cross." Russia's initiative has shaken Western complacency, triggering a succession of high-level meetings between Russia and Western leaders.

**Washington** seeks to narrow the debate to Ukraine, which it alleges the Russians are poised to invade. To date, Russia has insisted repeatedly it will not initiate an invasion but will support Donbass if the latter is attacked. Russia's recognition (February 21) of the two Donbass republics changes the stakes.

Washington threatens new sanctions of unprecedented severity, which could include major Russian banks, high-tech goods, the SWIFT financial messaging system, and the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. Britain and Canada say the same. On January 11, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau asserted any Russian incursion into Ukraine would have "serious consequences", including sanctions. The US, UK and Canada are avoiding Russia's basic concern – security for all.

**France and Germany** are concerned such sanctions could badly hurt their own economies and have reached out to Russia. President Macron met Putin (February 7) for meaningful [discussions](#) on Russia's security concerns. Chancellor Scholz did the same (February 15), [saying](#) "European security is possible only with Russia's participation."

**Regarding Ukraine**, there are two narratives: Western and Russian. Both are documented in my book [Oil and World Politics](#). The West accuses Russia of annexing Crimea in March 2014 and supporting Donbass separatists in eastern Ukraine. Russia sees a Western-inspired coup in February 2014, deplors hostile Ukrainian laws and actions against Russian-speakers, and calls for referenda in Crimea and Donbass to separate from Ukraine.

We are seeing a war of nerves. Washington professes an imminent Russian attack. Russia has said repeatedly it has no intention of invading Ukraine but is concerned for the safety of Russian-speakers in Donbass. It [claims](#) Ukraine has over 100,000 troops (half its army) at the contact line, ready to attack Donbass.

Until Russia's recognition of the two Donbass republics on February 21, Moscow emphasized the 2015 Minsk-II Agreement as the only roadmap to peace. The Agreement required Ukraine to negotiate with the two Donbass republics on autonomy within a federalized Ukraine. Ukraine stalled for seven years. On January 26, France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine met in 'Normandy format' to resuscitate Minsk-II, to little avail.

Russia [is adamant](#) that Ukraine remain out of NATO. Russian diplomats [advocate](#) a neutral Ukraine like Austria or Finland. The US and NATO refuse to close the door on Ukraine. Meanwhile, NATO countries refuse to defend Ukraine, although reportedly [US mercenaries](#) are

present in Ukrainian trenches, and [UK](#) special forces are training Ukrainians in sniping and sabotage.

**NATO**, from Washington's viewpoint, is a tool for keeping Europe on side against Russia. NATO is expensive. It is good for weapons sales. But NATO needs a *raison d'être*. The new building alone cost US\$ 1.2 billion. Washington calls NATO a defensive organization. Russia notes NATO actions in Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

**Energy security and pipeline politics** are also part of the story. Nord Stream 2 is a recently-completed gas pipeline, directly from Russia via the Baltic Sea to Germany. Its start-up awaits approval from the German energy regulator. It's a joint Russian-European project. The European Union gets 40 percent of its gas from Russia. Europe is experiencing an acute gas shortage.

Some countries (notably Germany, Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy) want the pipeline. Germany sees gas as a transition fuel to renewable energy after phasing out nuclear and coal. Poland and Ukraine oppose the project. Both countries have gas pipelines crossing from Russia to Europe and fear Nord Stream 2 will reduce gas (transit fees) through their pipelines. For details see my recent article, [Pipeline politics and the Ukraine crisis](#). On February 21, Germany [suspended certification](#) of Nord Stream 2 in light of the new crisis.

Since the project's inception, Washington has gone to great lengths to get it cancelled for geopolitical and commercial reasons. Washington sees Russian energy trade with Europe as a threat to US leadership in Europe. Blocking Russian gas to Europe could weaken Russia politically and economically. Commercially, fracking has made the US a major exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG). Washington wants to muscle in on Europe's gas market. But US gas sells at high short-term 'spot' prices, currently five times higher than Russian long-term prices. Obviously, Europe prefers the much cheaper Russian gas.

Russia sounds resigned to new sanctions. Putin [told media](#) on February 18, "Sanctions will be imposed in any case. Whether they have a reason today, for example, in connection with the events in Ukraine, or there is no such reason - it will be found."

European countries appear divided, as sanctions could make it difficult for them to buy Russian gas and oil. Moreover, war could also disrupt the transit of Russian gas through Ukraine. So far, European countries have resisted the pipeline's cancellation. With gas reserves already at an all-time low, gas 'spot' prices soaring and crude oil reaching US\$100 per barrel, Europe faces the spectre of extraordinary energy costs, not just gas but oil and electricity too. It would experience

an economic crisis unparalleled since World War II. Europe has no viable alternative to Russian gas.

The debate now is what constitutes a Russian attack on Ukraine – a ground invasion or a lesser intervention. With Russia’s recognition of the two Donbass republics, does its military support constitute an invasion of Ukraine? The impending Russian invasion failed to occur on February 16, the date touted by US, Canadian and British officials. With Russian troops now entering Donbass, the situation has become uncertain.

Some analysts, such as [Alexander Mercouris](#), speculated whether Washington quietly seeks to transform Western Ukraine into a rump European-oriented state, abandoning Russian-speaking Eastern Ukraine to a Russian takeover. Washington could then achieve what it wants: sanctions on Russia and cancellation of Nord Stream 2.

Ukraine is just a pawn in the game. Events in Donbass unfold daily, with intensified military bombardment ([February 17](#)), orders to civilians to evacuate to Russia ([February 18](#)), and powerful explosions in Donbass cities ([February 18](#)). Following public debates in the Russian дума (parliament), President Putin signed decrees (February 21) recognizing the two breakaway republics, Donetsk and Lugansk, as independent states and extending to them military protection.

**Sources of up-to-date analysis.** Where can we turn to understand the Russian perspective? Russian leaders themselves are articulate in official sites (in English), [President of Russia](#) and [Minister of Foreign Affairs](#). News outlets giving the Russian perspective are [RT](#) and [TASS](#).

Here are some insightful analysts, with hyperlinks to their latest articles. Two in Ottawa are [Paul Robinson](#) and [Patrick Armstrong](#). In the US are [Anatol Lieven](#) and [Scott Ritter](#), and in Europe [Gilbert Doctorow](#), [Glenn Diesen](#), [Richard Sakwa](#) and [Pepe Escobar](#). Three analysts with daily blogs are [MK Bhadrakumar](#), [Moon of Alabama](#) and [The Saker](#). UK-based [Alexander Mercouris](#) has a daily video commentary. Several of these experts are Russian-speaking. All are missing from the mainstream media.

**Postscript.** NATO countries, including Canada, express outrage and promise sanctions following Russia’s formal recognition of Donetsk and Lugansk. Implications are far-reaching, for European security, war in Ukraine (ominous), Minsk-II (dead), sanctions (likely), Nord Stream 2 ([suspended](#)).

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