

## The Ukraine War of 2022, a podcast of 2/23/2022

This is Ron Stockton

Well, it's February, 2022 and once again we are facing an international crisis over Ukraine. We had a previous crisis back in 2014 when a harmonic convergence of circumstances produced a not-good outcome. Let me summarize what happened:

There were ongoing debates over whether Ukraine should join the European Union or accept a Russian counter-offer. Generally speaking, western Ukraine had always looked to the West, eastern Ukraine had always looked to Russia. Geography and politics seem to overlap in Ukraine. Then there was a parallel debate over whether to join NATO. And there were the so-called Maidan pro-democracy demonstrations against the corrupt Russia-backed leader Yanukovich. He had taken Russian-friendly positions on both of those controversial issues. Ultimately, as the protests accelerated, Yanukovich fled into Russia. President Putin alleged that this had been an American-instigated coup;



Putin responded by supporting calls for autonomy by Russian-friendly elements within the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, collectively called Donbas. [He kicked off the 2022 escalation by officially recognizing those two regions as independent states with expanded borders]. This is the industrial heartland of Ukraine and contains about 10% of its population. According to the census, 57% identify as Ukrainian and 35% as

Russian (perhaps some actual Russians working in the mines and factories). At the same time 75% claim Russian as their language. Only 24% claim Ukrainian. [Side Note: Religiously of the 65% who identify as Christian – many are disaffiliated – 78% claim an Orthodox affiliation]. President Putin supported these independence movements, ostensibly to protect the Russians from Ukrainian oppression. Putin also annexed the Crimean peninsula, a strategically significant area previously owned by Russia but inexplicably transferred to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954. (If you are not familiar with that geography you might check a map on the internet).

Those Russian actions caused the new Ukrainian government to abandon the previous position that Ukraine would be a non-aligned state, friendly to all sides. Now they called for NATO membership. By 2017, the current president, Zelinsky was urging an accelerated process of admission.

The debate over NATO membership has an important context. NATO was created in 1949 to resist Soviet expansion. Its anti-Russian clause has now been removed but the spirit is still there. And expansion into the East European states has generated serious tensions. I recently heard an interview with James Baker, now quite old but still intellectually strong. He was Secretary of State in the early 1990s under George Bush, the Father. I admired Baker and consider him one of our great Secretaries of State. He was asked if he had made any mistakes during his term in office. He said, “I think we were not sufficiently attentive to Russia’s legitimate security concerns. We did what we thought we could get away with.” He specifically mentioned expanding NATO and providing weapons to Poland.

To understand Putin’s view on NATO expansion, we need to keep in mind three kinds of states. First are the states that were a part of the USSR. That would include the Baltic states, Georgia, and Ukraine. Then there are states that were not a part of the USSR but were allied states in Eastern Europe that were a part of the Warsaw Pact. That would include Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Then there were other communist or socialist states such as Albania and the former Yugoslavia. Those were geographically far away from Russia. To Putin, each of those was in a different security category.

Let’s review what happened with NATO in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Up until that time, Russia led what was called the Warsaw Pact. It was an alliance of Soviet States designed to answer NATO. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact disappeared. As early as 1990 NATO admitted three previous communist states: Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. These were states that had moved rapidly away from communism and their previous Russian ties. Russia did not object to their membership. Then in 2004 came a second wave of admissions. Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia were admitted.. They were former communist states but were not geographically close to Russia. But three other countries were also admitted in that year. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were a different ball game. These were the Baltic states, formerly a part of the Soviet Union. They were of fundamental security importance to Russia. With them admitted, NATO was knocking on Russia’s door. In times past, those states had definitely been aligned with Russia’s enemies, and had been definite security threats. The thought of NATO arms, and commitments, flowing into places just across the border from St. Petersburg generated real fears in the Kremlin.

There were other waves of NATO admissions of former communist states: Albania and Croatia in 2009. Montenegro in 2017; and North Macedonia in 2020. But these were not geographically close to Russia.

But then came Ukraine. Maybe in 2014 someone should have been paying more attention to 2008. Back in that year, NATO had set up a process to admit Georgia as a member. Georgia was a former Soviet state that physically touched Russia. Putin reacted swiftly to what he saw as a threat. This was the Georgia War. He also supported two break-away regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was a model he would use in Ukraine – If you threaten us, we will rip out chunks of your country – literally.



Ukraine aligned with the West. Ukraine integrated into the West European economic system and the American-led military alliance. *That* was a threat. From a Russian point of view, there were deep historic ties between these two countries, Russia and Ukraine, not to mention fundamental security ties. Of course, the Ukrainians saw it differently. They remembered Russian domination and the vast starvation that had taken place in the 1930s during the implementation of communism. Talk about oil and water.

Let me tell you a personal story. I first encountered this issue back when I was a sophomore in college. That would have been around 1961. I was taking a class in international relations. Our professor told us to go to the library and find a journal called *Foreign Affairs*. This is a wonderful journal that publishes articles by prominent leaders. We were supposed to find an article and write a summary of it. I found an article by the former Polish foreign minister Adam Rapacki. At the height of the Cold War in the 1950s he called for a neutral, nuclear-free zone covering central Europe. Of course it would have included Germany so it was dead in the water. There was no way the Germans would let the American army leave. But still, the idea of big blocks of territory, de-linked from the Cold War, was an intriguing idea. And to a 19-year-old just venturing out into the world of global politics, it was a fascinating idea, a new way of thinking.

Now in 2022 we have a new Ukraine crisis, Phase II of 2014 if you wish. Again it involves NATO and Putin's insistence on an assurance that Ukraine would never be admitted. No one has been willing to make such a commitment. The Americans persist in statements that Ukraine had the right to choose its own destiny. As if this were a moral choice or a First Amendment issue. Putin has now moved at least 130,000 Russian soldiers to the Ukraine border, along with heavy artillery and tanks and other armaments. This does not look good.

So let's go back to 2014. At that time I noted two patterns. The first was that for Americans with no ties to this region, there was surprise and befuddlement that the U.S. was suddenly involved in a conflict in Ukraine, a place that many had never heard of. All we could figure out was that President Putin was an expansionist bully in the tradition of Stalin or the Tsars or even Adolph Hitler. He wanted to re-create the Soviet Union, maybe without the "Soviet Socialist" part. The second pattern I noticed was that those from Eastern Europe were well aware of the tensions and were not at all surprised at what happened.

As I would often do when there was an international crisis, I convened a Faculty Forum of people on campus who could add insights into a situation. I did not feel sufficiently informed myself to address the specifics. My colleagues did that quite well. But I did address the US role. I used an approach I had used in class, to report the perspectives of experts and then let students sort out the conclusions.

I decided to summarize the ideas of three key security experts. Remember, this was 2014.

The first was Samuel Huntington, from his famous book on *The Clash of Civilizations*. This book has been justly criticized for its oversimplified conclusions, but its basic thesis is telling. Huntington said that in the aftermath of the Cold War, conflicts would be less likely to involve conventional state-to-state warfare and would be more likely to involve conflicts between members of different cultural groups within states or across state boundaries. He specifically mentioned Ukraine as a place where cultural factors could explode into a polarized east Ukraine versus west Ukraine, pro-Russia versus pro-West conflict. Huntington's critics have often failed to note that he also said that those cultural conflicts were not deterministic but were often driven by the struggle over state interests and the control of resources. And that both sides would be receiving outside support by parties hoping to advance their own interests.

The second observer I quoted was one of the greatest of America's diplomats, George F. Kennan. He was a State Department specialist on the Soviet Union after World War II. He wrote the famous "X" article published anonymously in 1948 in *Foreign Policy*. In that article he said that Stalinist aggression was really just traditional Russian geopolitics, trying to control the countries on Russia's borders. Our policy should be to recognize its interests but to "contain" the Soviet Union by blocking its further expansion beyond those borders. This article became the basis of the U.S. policy of Containment for the rest of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union disappeared in 1991, and NATO decided to add Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Kennan was appalled. Here are excerpts from his interview with Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* in 1998.

I think it is the beginning of a new cold war. The Russians will react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. We have signed up to protect a whole series of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way. What bothers me is how superficial and ill informed the whole debate was.

The third strategic thinker was Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago. While Huntington and Kennan are now deceased, Mearsheimer is thriving. I have an earlier podcast of my introduction to him and his co-author Stephen Walt when they spoke on the Ann Arbor campus about their book *The Israel Lobby*. Mearsheimer is a leading proponent of the "realist" school of international relations. This school emphasizes that countries have interests that transcend governments. International relations work best when countries focus upon their interests rather than upon their ideologies, and when countries respect each other's interests. He feels that a major point of tension is that the West wants to incorporate Ukraine into NATO. Here are excerpts from an essay written at the time in the *New York Times*. He started with the decision of President Obama to get tough with Russia by imposing sanctions and increasing support for Ukraine's new government.

This is a big mistake. This response is based on the same faulty logic that helped precipitate the crisis. Instead of resolving the dispute, it will lead to more trouble... Washington played a key role in precipitating this dangerous situation, and Mr. Putin's behavior is motivated by the same geopolitical considerations that influence all great powers, including the United States. The taproot of the current crisis is NATO expansion and Washington's commitment to move Ukraine out of Moscow's orbit and integrate it into the West." When NATO announced in 2008 that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of NATO, "Russia drew a line in the sand." American policymakers claim to be "surprised" at Putin's reaction. President Obama accused him of having "a different set of lawyers making a different set of interpretations." But this is not an issue of law. "International law and human rights concerns take a back seat when vital security issues are at stake... The West has few options... while Moscow has many cards to play." The US needs Russian help in Iran and Syria. Moreover, Russia "could badly damage Ukraine's struggling economy and even cause serious economic problems in the European Union due to its role as a major gas supplier... Mr. Putin is unlikely to back down. When vital interests are at stake, countries are willing to suffer great pain to ensure their security." What should President Obama do? First, emphasize that Georgia and Ukraine will not become members of NATO. Second, make it clear that we will not interfere in future Ukrainian elections or be sympathetic to a virulently anti-Russian government in Kiev. Third, demand that the Ukrainian government respect minority

rights, especially regarding Russian as an official language. Ukraine should remain a neutral buffer state between Russia and NATO.

Let me emphasize that Kennan and Mearsheimer are not isolationists. They are firm advocates of American interests. But they feel that we should use our power in a wise, prudent, and effective way that might actually advance our interests rather than diminish them.

Finally, in that Faculty Forum I decided to read for the audience my own observations on this crisis. I had posted these thoughts on Facebook a few weeks earlier. I emphasized that I was not in the same league with those great intellectuals I had just discussed, but I did share their *realpolitik* approach to the situation in Ukraine. Here is what I said:

To understand U.S. interests in Ukraine think back to two incidents in the 1960s. The first is the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviet Union put nuclear missiles in Cuba. No president would allow such a thing. This was our neighborhood. President Kennedy reacted with determination. The U. S. fleet stopped the Soviet ships from getting through. It was very tense but in the end, Khrushchev saw the light and there was a “deal.” Russia would withdraw its missiles from Cuba and we would withdraw our missiles from Turkey. Our border was important to us just as theirs was important to them. No war.

The second incident involves the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy was asked what he would do as President if an aide interrupted his breakfast to tell him Russia had invaded Czechoslovakia. Without batting an eye, he said, “I would have a second cup of coffee.” In other words, Czechoslovakia was *their* backyard. We were not about to violate their security space.

As we look at what is going on in Ukraine, remember these two stories. In 1962 the Republicans did not challenge Kennedy. The issues were too serious for partisan squabbling. In 1968 there was also little partisan debate. The Johnson administration criticized Russia for its brutality, but no one thought we should get involved in a place where the Soviets had significant interests (and military strength).

For what happens next in Ukraine, keep three things in mind. First, this is Russia’s backyard. Second, this is peripheral to our core security interests. We are not going to engage in a military confrontation with Russia. We have other issues where we need their cooperation. Third, this is a problem for the European Union. It is their neighborhood. They should take the lead.

Obama should express concerns, work for a negotiated outcome, and have a second cup of coffee.

On Facebook, I added two supplementary comments.

In the interest of explaining why our country should be cautious in dealing with the Ukraine situation, I failed to mention that I am very sympathetic to the protesters. That regime is corrupt to the core. It took a thriving country and in 21 years turned it into an impoverished land with rigged elections and a tendency to lock up its opponents. I cannot see why anyone would walk across the street to save that government. The hope of the protesters is that association with the EU might ameliorate some of the damage. I suspect they are correct. Putin has also behaved like a bully, cutting off trade with Ukraine and jacking up their gas prices to intimidate them into breaking off EU talks. If I were a Ukrainian I would probably be in Maidan square along with the rest of them.

My second comment had to do with Crimea. In the 2014 Faculty Forum, none of the panelists addressed the issue of Crimea from a Russian perspective. Let me quote myself a couple of days

before the forum: “If I were the President of Russia there are no circumstances under which I would allow the Crimea to fall under the control of NATO.” This is where the Black Sea fleet is based, and it has been the site of furious battles against foreign invaders. The Crimean War and World War II are significant examples.

And here we are in 2022, discussing the same issues. I can’t help but note that no one, unless I have missed it, is demanding the return of Crimea to Ukraine. Words of condemnation, for sure. But “serious consequences”? No. I think NATO has resigned itself to a Crimean Reality.

I guess I am of that school of thinking that you can change policies but you cannot change geography. I keep thinking of what General Giap said to the Americans during the Vietnam War: You will kill far more of ours than we will kill of yours, but in the end you will leave, because this is our country, not yours.

That is shockingly realistic. And it was exactly what happened.

But I also keep thinking of the Lithuanian military officer with whom I had lunch a few years ago. He was not very sanguine about Russia’s motives, and he was VERY, VERY happy that Lithuania was in NATO and enjoyed its protective umbrella.

Thanks for listening. I know there are quite a few important topics that I did not discuss. The German interests and the issue of NordStream 2, the big pipeline from Russia to Germany would be one. Or the vast amount of money the Russian oligarchs have invested in the West. Or the grievous and dangerous divisions that have weakened the American political system, and the role Russia played in hardening those tensions. Or what will happen next. I keep hoping this is a power play by Putin to bully Ukraine into a friendly stance that excludes NATO. A Ukrainian Canada, foreign, friendly, and near. And NOT friendly to anyone who hates us, even if we deserve it. A 3,000 mile border without a single military fortification. Maybe. But perhaps Putin wants more. Much more, Perhaps by the time you listen to this, the Russian air force will be bombing Kiev, and the Russian army advancing into the country.

I also know some of you will not like my ideas, but I think I should share them with you, given that sharing ideas was my chosen profession.

And, after all, life is a series of difficult choices.

Thanks for listening.

I hope I have provoked you. In a good way.

Well, that was what I wrote Wednesday afternoon. My wife and I watched *Lion in Winter* that evening. By the time it ended and we checked the news, the Russians were bombing Kiev.

Maybe to finish off, I should read to you what I posted on Facebook a week ago. I called it “Saddam and Vlad.”

*Back in the fall of 1990, Saddam Hussein was in a dispute with OPEC over the price of oil. Let's be more specific. Saddam was in a dispute with Kuwait over high oil production, which he thought was driving oil prices down. He moved tens of thousands of soldiers up to the Kuwaiti border. When this happened, I was impressed. I thought, "Wow. This guy is*

*smart. He is intimidating the heck out of OPEC. They will reduce production of oil, and drive up the price so that Saddam can rebuild his country after the destruction of the Iran-Iraq War."*

*Was I wrong!*

*I under estimated how stupid that man was. Did he not think that the Americans would respond to such an action as taking over Kuwait, which controlled 15% of the world's oil production?*

*Now Vladimir Putin has put a hundred thousand plus soldiers on the Ukraine border. I would like to think that he is just using a realpolitik ploy, trying to intimidate the Western alliance into agreeing to turn Ukraine into a Russian Canada: Totally independent but foreign, friendly, and near (and no alliances with potential enemies). I still hope that is true but as I used to tell my students, "Never underestimate the role of human stupidity in explaining historical outcomes."*

Well, that was a week or so ago. I guess with certain people, you can never tell what comes next. I noticed that the total politburo -- oops. Excuse me. Legislative chamber, the Duma – voted yes on whether to proceed with military action. Not a single dissenting vote. I guess that tells us that this is a one-man show. A bit like Saddam.

This is the worst decision in global politics since George W Bush decided to overthrow Saddam. And now we Americans know how the world felt when we conducted that invasion. The fact is, we are not sure where this will stop. I suspect my Lithuanian friend is very nervous right now.

