



Escalation in Ukraine - NATO & Russia | Prof. Kuznick

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AcTVism Munich (acTV): In our last interview, you stated that conditions were favorable for Russian deployment to the two breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine. Yesterday, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the deployment of troops and recognized the regions as independent. Before we get into the role of NATO, can you recap the recent developments that have led to this action?

Peter Kuznick (PK): Well, if we listen to Putin's speech last night, he's obviously fed up. He's had it up to here with the West ignoring Russia's legitimate security concerns. The West has got one narrative. Russia's got a completely different narrative. And the way Putin described it, these grievances, these accumulated 30 plus years of grievances, Putin just sees as having pushed him past his limit. He was not only angry. He was enraged. And we could see this building. You go back, I go back to March 1st, 2018, his State of the Nation Address, which I see as a real turning point. The US had now said that the main threats to American security is not global terrorism. It's Russia and China and the US security statement at that point. The US had put out his new nuclear posture review. The US was clearly talking about a new Cold War with Russia and China. And Putin says in that speech, where he announces that Russia has five new nuclear weapons, all of which can circumvent US missile defence, he says, You didn't listen to us. Listen to us now. The West did not listen. And then he's simply been escalating this. You could trace this back to 2007. We just talked about the 15th anniversary of his 2007 Munich speech, where again, he lays this out. He says American unipolarity is terrible for the world and for the United States. He says that the US has become a hyper militarist state, invading other countries at will. He says that NATO is expanded to Russia's border. This is not anything new. If anybody has been alert, paying any attention, they knew that something was coming and the troop build-up clearly presaged something major happening. I was very disappointed by what Putin said yesterday. This is a terrible mistake and unjustified, in my opinion, precisely because he had actually finally captured the attention and interests of the West. I mean, what he'd been doing, the mobilisation and the other statements had made clear how serious Russia is about demanding the West pay attention and take serious Russia's national security concerns. And when it comes to Ukraine

in the Donbass, there was the Minsk II agreement from 2015, which now Germany and France and Hungary and other countries we're talking about. And so even though Zelensky didn't want to talk about it and Biden hasn't really wanted to talk about it, the world was moving toward more diplomacy. I thought this is a great opportunity for Putin to declare victory, say, That we said all along we weren't going to invade. We just wanted diplomacy, wanted serious discussions of this and then to defuse the tensions, to withdraw the forces and give diplomacy a chance. He could always bring those troops back to the border there. But giving diplomacy a chance now, given the energy situation and given the military balance of forces in the region and given the new political concerns and geopolitical concerns, he was in a very good position to do that. And unfortunately, he went the opposite direction. It's only a first tentative step, and it's possible to limit this before there's a real disaster. But it does not look promising. And if we look at Putin's words, the same Putin's words from last night's speech, it does not look promising.

acTV: In his speech, Putin justified his actions by citing NATO's growing influence in Ukraine. For example, he explained that Ukraine can host nuclear weapons, conducts NATO-led military exercises, as well as surveillance and reconnaissance operations. He also spoke about NATO's history of expanding to Russia's borders and ignoring the security guarantees it has requested. How legitimate are these reasons as justification for deploying troops in eastern Ukraine?

PK: These points have a lot of legitimacy as part of the timing that the West does not appreciate that there has been in 2019 when Zelensky came to power, he said he's going to have a friendly relationship with Russia and is going to resolve the conflict. And he began to have meetings and it looked like they were moving toward some kind of understanding. And then there were so many protests against him for appeasing Russia, for being conciliatory to Russia, and somehow they accused him of selling out Ukrainian interests. So big demonstrations, the right wing mobilised against him, but there are also some more democratic elements mobilising against him, and he caved in. He capitulated to that. And then he arrests Russia's most friendly oligarch in Ukraine, put him under house arrest. He shuts down three friendly to Russia television networks. He starts talking bad about Putin and Russia, accusing them of aggression. And then on top of that, he gets more weapons from the West and from NATO, he has more NATO trainers inside Ukraine, and so Putin is looking at this and he sees that what's developing they refer to as an anti-Russia on Russia's borders. And we know it's going way back as you say, we can trace this back to 1990, the promises given, the assurances given verbally and not in writing to Gorbachev that NATO would not expand one inch to the East. We could trace it back to the discussion. We know that later that year, that same year in 1990, the National Security Council was already meeting and discussing NATO expansion and saying we should tell the former Soviet republics that we're going to be open to NATO expansion in the future. They didn't say that publicly, of course, but they were giving the message. And if you look at even Yeltsin, rollover sycophant Yeltsin, who was giving up anything that the United States wanted, strongly was opposing

NATO expansion and making clear of that. Look at the documents that were released by the National Security Archives about 1994 and Yeltsin's position there. And then in 1997, we've got about 50 top US diplomats and foreign policy experts pressing Clinton not to expand NATO, saying this is a terrible decision. You've got George Kennan. You've got people who are hawks like Paul Nitze, all recognising that at a time when Russia was trying to be America's friend and ally, why expand an anti-Russian military alliance to Russia's doorstep? So they expand beginning in 1999 and then in 2004, they expand seven more countries, including the Baltic states to Russia's borders. But what happened before that?! In 2001, after the US gets attacked on 9/11, the first foreign leader to lend support to the US with the contact George W. Bush was Vladimir Putin. Putin had been even talking about Russia joining NATO, as crazy that idea might be. He wanted friendly relations. Then, in 2002, the US pulls out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. 2003 the US invaded Iraq over the opposition not only of Germany and France, but Russia and much of the rest of the world on false pretences. 2004 expands NATO, so we see this develop. In 2007 he gives that talk at the Munich Security Conference and says, Stop this crazy aggression, military aggression and NATO expansion. And then 2008 George W. Bush kicks him in the teeth and says at the NATO meeting that Putin actually was attending for the first time, then George W. Bush announces that we want to expand NATO to include Ukraine and Georgia. It is followed up by the Russian intervention into Georgia. And then there was a period of relative calm, at least a brief period of relative calm, but in 2008, that's when the current CIA director, William Burns, sends that memo back to Washington, Nyet means nyet, it's titled, Don't Cross Russia's red lines when it comes to Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO. It's interesting that Burns, current head of the CIA, wrote a memoir two years ago called The Back Channel, in which he repeats this and says it was a terrible mistake to try to talk and expand NATO. NATO expansion initially was a mistake, and he also says that all Russians are united against NATO expansion and even stronger against Ukraine becoming part of NATO. So what happened most recently is Zelensky started again beating the drums for NATO, NATO incorporation of Ukraine, Ukraine joining NATO. He made a big deal about this the last year or so, but I think in some ways the final straw was Zelensky's speech on Saturday. Zelensky had been a voice of relative calm and moderation. He had criticised the United States. Putin sees him as a puppet of the United States, but he's created a lot of distance between the American position and Ukraine's position. And he said all this war talk coming out of Washington and other European countries, especially Britain, all this war talk about the imminence of a Russian invasion was wrong, it was unfounded on the evidence, and it was also very, very destructive, very dangerous. And that was his line until Saturday. Then he makes a very alarmist speech again, calls for immediate sanctions, not to delay the sanctions, to impose them immediately. And he says that this is the last straw for the Bucharest memorandum. The Bucharest memorandum goes back to 1994, and that's the agreement which the Russians, you can argue, have also broken, that Ukraine's sovereignty will be recognised and supported in exchange for Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons that it had under the Soviet period. Ukraine does give up those nuclear weapons, but implicitly what Zelensky was saying on Saturday was that now this is all off, Ukraine can again pursue

developing its own nuclear weapons. We know there's a lot of infrastructure there. We know there's a lot of scientific and technological expertise there. Putin heard that. Putin talked about that in his speech last night. It's interesting. I started getting frantic calls from the Russian media Saturday evening. I was going over to a friend's house for dinner. One Russian TV station actually sent a cameraman to my friend's apartment to interview me. But I did four interviews over that night and the next morning about the threat of nuclear weapons. I scoured the Western press. There was not a single mention in the Western press of what the implications of what Zelensky said were in terms of Ukraine developing nuclear weapons. But I knew we were in for it at that point. I knew that that was going to be the last straw and that that was going to in some ways precipitate stronger Russian reaction. So I wasn't surprised, but I was deeply disappointed. It was the wrong thing to do at the wrong time and it's not ease the tensions, it's heightened the tensions.

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