



Aaron Mate on how NATO provoked Russia in Ukraine and undermined peace

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Aaron Mate (AM): Thank you to the organizers, Hekmat Aboukhater, Civil Young Voices for putting this together, and thank you to everyone who's here in person and watching this at home. In addressing the question before us, it's important to make a distinction between provoked and justified. To argue that Russia's invasion is justified, one has to meet a very high burden that I believe Russia has not met. But when it comes to the issue at hand, whether Russia was provoked, I think there's an overwhelming case that the answer is yes. And this is the question I think should most concern those of us in NATO states because our governments, I will argue, are behind the provocation and, accordingly, a major geopolitical disaster that needs to come to an end. The provocation of Russia, in my view, has four main elements, expanding the NATO military lines to Russia's borders, tearing up vital arms control treaties, installing military assets that threaten Russia's security, and finally and most faithfully, meddling in countries on Russia's doorstep, primarily Ukraine.

Let's start with the most uncontroversial issue, which is NATO expansion. It's now widely accepted that in the talks to end the Cold War, the Soviet Union was promised that NATO, in the words of Secretary of State James Baker, would expand not one inch eastward. Now one could argue, well too bad, this pledge was never made in writing. And it's true. There was no formal treaty. Then the question becomes, why violate this verbal pledge to not expand NATO, and was it worth it? Well, on the question of why, we know the answer from the US architects of NATO expansion. In October 1994, a Clinton National Security Council memo formally endorsed NATO expansion into Ukraine and other former Soviet countries. The memo argued for expansion on the basis of what it called a quote, "insurance policy", strategic hedge rationale, i.e. neo-containment of Russia. But this goal will be kept in the background only, rarely articulated. In other words, we'll tell the public that NATO expansion is about freedom, self-defense, democracy, and keep our real goal, the neo-containment of Russia, in the background. Now, not everybody was on board. Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, argued that pursuing a, quote, "strategy of preemptive containment would be a catastrophic mistake. Our policy would become a self-fulfilling prophecy". This is mainly

because Talbott said, quote, "The prospect of NATO expansion provokes some of the most basic Russian reflexes to twitch. Their fear is rooted in geography and history of encirclement and exclusion". Bill Clinton ignored this warning and as he further enlarged NATO many other prominent diplomats including George Kennan, one of the most authoritative diplomats in US history issued similar pleas that went ignored. Expanding NATO, Kennan wrote, would be the most fateful era of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era. Now, when it comes to Ukraine in particular, why would this be such a fateful error? Well, Ukraine is integral to Russia's history and identity. Kyiv is known as the mother of Russian cities. Ukraine and other former Soviet states contain sizable ethnic Russian-speaking minorities. This issue was laid out by George W. Bush's ambassador to Russia, William Burns, most recently director of the CIA in a very important 2008 cable. He relayed fears from inside Russia that NATO expansion into Ukraine, quote, "could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even some claimed civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene". "Given that possibility", Burns predicted, "inviting Ukraine into NATO will create fertile soil for Russian meddling in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine". Well, just as Bill Clinton did, George W. Bush ignored this high-level and prescient warning at the 2008 NATO Summit in Romania. The Bush administration pushed through a pledge that Ukraine and Georgia will one day join NATO.

It's important to stress here that Bush was not just ignoring the advice of veteran diplomats and some of his own advisors like Fiona Hill, but crucially, Ukrainian public opinion. Roderick Lyon, who was the UK's former ambassador to Russia, said this: "It was stupid on every level at that time. If you want to start a war with Russia, that's the best way of doing it. Moreover, any poll in Ukraine showed that two-thirds of the Ukrainian public did not want NATO membership", unquote. That long-time Ukrainian public position reflected Ukraine's founding declaration of state sovereignty, which affirmed Ukraine's, quote, "intention of becoming a permanently neutral state that does not participate in military blocs", unquote. While that pesky problem of Ukraine's founding constitution and Ukrainian public opinion was overcome in 2014 with the ouster of Ukraine's democratically elected president, Viktor Yanukovich, in the Maidan coup.

Now here, the standard narrative is that Yanukovich was a Russian puppet ousted by a massive popular movement known as the Maidan, because Yanukovich turned away from the European Union and NATO to align closer with Russia. In reality, Yanukovich wanted to maintain ties to both Russia and the West, for this reason, he ruled out Ukraine's entry into NATO, while still holding talks about joining the EU in an economic deal. The problem with the EU deal is not that Yanukovich was ordered by Russia to ignore it, but Yanukovich actually read the fine print. And what did it say? That he'd have to embrace harsh austerity measures and curtail ties to Russia, which would have been a disaster in particular for Yanukovich's base in East and Southeastern Ukraine. Now, meanwhile, the Maidan coup that overthrew Yanukovich was led by not by peaceful protesters who went out to Maidan, but by powerful and small in number, but large in force, Ukrainian ultra-nationalists, including some neo-Nazis, who lack the support of a majority of Ukrainians as polls from that time affirm. As two specialists with prominent Western think tanks wrote in Foreign Policy Magazine,

one month after Yanukovych was overthrown: "The uncomfortable truth is that a sizable portion of Kyiv's current government and the protesters who brought it to power are indeed fascists. Leading the fascist contingent in the Maidan was Oleh Tyahnybok of the Svoboda party. Now one year earlier The European Parliament had condemned what it called Svoboda's racist anti-semitic and xenophobic views and urged Ukrainian political parties not to associate with, endorse or form coalitions with this party.

Well one very important party ignored the European Parliament's advice and that was the US government. Victoria Nuland of the State Department, Senators John McCain and Chris Murphy were among those to fly to the Maidan and cavort around with Tyahnybok and other fascist leaders around the Maidan. McCain and Murphy openly talked about bringing about a transition. And when that transition was finally achieved with Yanukovych's ouster, Murphy took credit. He said that it was our role in part that helped lead to this change in regime. What was that role? Well, we know from the infamous intercepted phone call between Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt that the US was helping to pick which leaders from the Maidan should join the new government. This reflected the key influence that the US had won by spending millions of dollars via USAID, the NED, and US friendly billionaires.

Accordingly, when the fascist elements of the Maidan sabotaged a power-sharing agreement that had been negotiated by fellow Maidan members that would have left Yanukovych briefly in power, the Obama administration forgot that it had supported the power-sharing agreement. and immediately recognized the new coup government that overthrew Yanukovych. What happened after that? The new coup government turned its focus on Ukraine's ethnic Russian population, effectively trying to ban the Russian language and tolerating deadly assaults on ethnic Russians, including in Odessa. In response, Eastern Ukrainians launched an armed rebellion with Moscow support. The Kremlin meanwhile seized Crimea, which hosted its most important naval base. How did the US respond to this? By encouraging more violence. April 2014, John Brennan goes to Kyiv, tells the Ukrainian government, hey, you should launch an operation against the Donbas, we'll back you up. That's exactly what Ukraine did one day later. Russia then ramped up its support for the rebels, finally militarily intervening directly in August 2014. This fighting leads to the Minsk Accords, which was premised on Ukraine agreeing to recognize limited autonomy for the Donbas, and the rebels would disarm.

Well, again, two powerful constituencies ignored this. Ukraine's ultra-nationalists, who implemented what the Ukrainian-American journalist Lev Golinkin calls a policy of veto through violence. Every time the Ukrainian government took steps to implement Minsk, the Ukrainian fascists held violent protests. And they were joined in their opposition by powerful US officials; Victoria Nuland privately schemed to undermine Minsk. William Taylor, the top US diplomat in Ukraine at the time, told Volodymyr Zelensky, who had been elected on a platform of peace, that implementing Minsk is, quote, "a terrible idea". When Biden took power, Zelensky was encouraged to be more belligerent, culminating in the days before Russia's invasion when Zelensky's government was openly saying: Forget Minsk, we're never going to implement it.

Now, when Russia invaded, that forced Zelensky into his rejection of Minsk and you had peace talks, culminating in the Istanbul Accords of April 2022. We know that there was a deal almost reached. That's because Ukrainians told us that. Oleksandr Chalyi, a senior member of the Ukrainian delegation, said this: "We managed to find a very real compromise". Well, what happened to the compromise? Boris Johnson came over to Kiev on behalf of the US and told Zelensky that he would not be backed up if he made a peace deal with Russia. Now, on top of sabotaging peace opportunities like the Minsk Accords and the Istanbul Accords and also expanding NATO to Russia's borders, these dangers have been compounded by the US systematically dismantling arms control treaties, most significantly the ABM treaty and the INF treaty. No longer constrained by such agreements, the US has placed advanced weapons systems closer to Russian territory, all while ramping up military exercises, naval activity. Russia tried to address these issues in its December 2021 proposal to the US and NATO, which was effectively rejected. So, in conclusion, by expanding NATO, ignoring the warnings of high-level Western officials, dismantling arms control, meddling in Ukraine's government, building up CIA bases inside of Ukraine, and finally, blocking a diplomatic settlement multiple times, the US and NATO have absolutely provoked Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It's finally time to put an end to this carnage and embrace the peaceful alternatives that have long been undermined. Thank you.

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