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## FIONA HILL ON RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE: PUTIN'S ATTEMPT TO RE-ESTABLISH "RUSSIAN IMPERIUM"

Posted on 21 March 2022 (<https://asiaexpertsforum.org/fiona-hill-russias-invasion-ukraine-putins-attempt-re-establish-russian-imperium/>) by [asiaexpertsforum](https://asiaexpertsforum.org/author/asiaexpertsforum/) (<https://asiaexpertsforum.org/author/asiaexpertsforum/>)





**Fiona Hill** is a senior fellow in the Center on the United States and Europe in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. She recently served as deputy assistant to the president and senior director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Council from 2017 to 2019. From 2006 to 2009, she served as national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at The National Intelligence Council. She is author of “There Is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the 21st Century” and co-author of “Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin” (Brookings Institution Press, 2015). Prior to joining Brookings, Hill was director of strategic planning at The Eurasia Foundation in Washington, D.C. From 1991 to 1999, she held a number of positions directing technical assistance and research projects at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, including associate director of the Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, director of the Project on Ethnic Conflict in the Former Soviet Union, and coordinator of the Trilateral Study on Japanese-Russian-U.S. Relations. Hill has researched and published extensively on issues related to Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, regional conflicts, energy, and strategic issues.

Carley Barnhart CMC '22 interviewed Dr. Fiona Hill on March 9, 2022.  
Photograph and biography courtesy of Dr. Fiona Hill.

**In a recent interview, you trace President Putin’s plan to bring Ukraine back under Russian control to “at least to 2007 when he alerted the world Moscow would not accept the further expansion of NATO (<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/11/world/europe/11munich.html>).” You also state that NATO “didn’t do its due diligence and fully consider all the possible contingencies.” What due diligence could the US/NATO have done to ensure the security and stability of the North Atlantic without continuing to anger Russia? Is it inevitable that NATO enlargement would be a major flashpoint for Putin and for Russia?**

It was not inevitable NATO enlargement would have been a flashpoint, had it been managed differently. The decision on Ukraine and Georgia in 2008 became that flashpoint, because there wasn’t full consideration of how Russia would react, despite plenty of assessments in the intelligence community suggesting a very negative reaction. There even could have been Russian preemptive military action if Russia had expected Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO. In fact, there was, with the Russian invasion of Georgia in August of 2008.

What we needed to do was to find ways of engaging with Russia on a very regular basis to try to defuse all the tensions. The whole process of NATO enlargement has been pretty fraught from the perspective of US-Russia relations.

Before 2007, the turning point was when Putin put Europe on notice at the Munich Security Conference that he didn’t like the way that European security was taking shape after another round of enlargement of NATO in 2004. But the real critical, pivotal point is 1999, which was the beginning of the first wave of NATO enlargement to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. That was also the period that the United States and NATO intervened in the Balkans, when Serbia was carrying out all these atrocities against the Kosovar Albanians, and in Bosnia Herzegovina.

Prior to all of this, the United States and Europe had been very reluctant to intervene in the Balkan Wars. There was the collapse of Yugoslavia. And after more and more atrocities, there was a push to get involved. It was a NATO operation that ended up with the bombing of Belgrade to get Serbia to back down in 1999.

I happened to be in St. Petersburg at that juncture at a conference. Every Russian regardless of their political background or their prior opinion towards NATO, the West, Europe or the United States or Europe, was completely shocked by that action. We had been telling them up until then that NATO was not a military alliance, it was defensive. There would be no deployment of NATO unless a NATO member state was attacked. In their view, as this was a NATO operation, NATO was showing

itself to be an offensive military alliance. Serbia had not attacked any NATO member country. And, if NATO could consider bombing Belgrade, then maybe it might bomb Moscow, or some other Russian city in response to some atrocity. Keep in mind the throes of the conflict in Chechnya in the North Caucasus.

The U.S. should have been very attentive right from the very beginning of the period of NATO enlargement to the fact that Russia was starting to see NATO as something hostile. Moscow wasn't fully buying into the idea that NATO was a defensive alliance, which of course, it always was during the Cold War. In these successive enlargements, Russia looked back to the bombing of Belgrade in 1999.

The point that I was trying to make in the *Politico* interview was that we should have been fully attentive to this at all points; making sure that we had fully engaged with the Russians, trying to deal head on with any of the issues that they were raising. In April 2008, when the decision was made at the Bucharest Summit to give Ukraine and Georgia the open door, that was also a first for NATO. It was the very first time that NATO had ever said a country or two countries *should* be members, even jumping ahead of the Membership Action Plan. They didn't say when they would be members or what the process would be, but it was basically saying that they would be members at some point. For Russia, that was a major change. Putin and the people around him in the Kremlin started to see NATO as an entity that is expanding on its own. Russia knew that there was a lot of resistance by other NATO members to bringing them in and giving them a membership action plan, and the United States had pushed through all of that resistance to get this solution. Russians started to see NATO then as something that was just really a cover for the United States and their view—trying to encroach closer and closer to Russian borders.

It was incumbent upon us to fully appreciate what the Russian perspective was, even if we decided to go forward. We should have been taking some kind of measures to try to counter these views and engage with them. It wouldn't have been easy, and I'm not suggesting here that we shouldn't have expanded NATO. But from the perspective of dealing with Russia, NATO expansion was always going to be potentially explosive. We should have kept stressing that NATO was a defensive alliance based on the desire of the countries to join, not that NATO itself was going out selecting countries to join.

**The *Politico* interview touches on how the invasion of Ukraine is likely tied to Putin's upcoming 2024 election. Just how favorable is the invasion of Ukraine with the Russian population? Does Russian public opinion matter?**

Public opinion matters a lot to Putin because it is one of the ways he can legitimate himself as President. We know that the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was very popular, in fact universally popular in Russia. Putin's ratings as a result in public opinion polls went into the high 80s, as a genuine response to that. Now it is harder to know what the attitude towards war in Ukraine is. First of all, it is not being called a war but a military technical operation. In fact, it is illegal to call it a war. Public opinion is highly manipulated. There is a lot of propaganda, especially through Russian television. A lot of the polling shows support for the military technical operation, which is proportional to the number of people that watch television. But it's hard to parse this out because people don't know exactly what's going on in Ukraine. They have bought the line from the Kremlin that this is countering the aggressive expansion of NATO, countering Western aggression, and trying to liberate Ukraine from basically a neo-Nazi fascist government that has been somehow preying on the Ukrainian people. They assert that they are trying to remove a government that is hostile in every way to its own population. They also emphasize the risks that the Ukrainian government poses to the safety and security of Russian speakers and people in the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

There is a kind of witch's brew—a concoction of propaganda. It's really hard to say what people know, what people think, and what their attitudes are towards this. I think it would be a universal shock if people actually saw what the Russian government was doing on the ground in Ukraine.

**One of Putin's obsessions seems to be this Russian Imperium. So many of the past conflicts referenced in the article—the World Wars, the Syrian War, can ultimately be traced back to the fall of empire. For how long will we be picking up the pieces of lost empires?**

We have been picking them up for an extraordinarily long time already. Some of my professors always said that a lot of the roots of contemporary problems go back to the 17th century, when there were major reconfigurations after long wars and of various successions within empires. We have seen the rise and fall of so many empires: the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Swedish Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, and the French Empire.

Putin has brought us all back to the end of the Russian Empire, with the Bolshevik Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union by Lenin. He blames them for the construction of an artificial, as he puts it, Ukraine. There is actually a little bit of an element of historical veracity to this, insofar as Lenin was worried about the rise of Russian nationalism in opposition to the socialist project that he was trying to put forward. He was worried that Russian nationalism would be like a hand grenade within the Soviet Union. This is actually very interesting, because that was what happened in 1991 when the Soviet Union was picked apart by Boris Yeltsin the President of the Russian Federation, in a power struggle with Mikhail Gorbachev, as the head of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin agreed with the two leaders of Belarus and Ukraine to dissolve the Soviet Union and replace it with a commonwealth of independent states. Lenin obviously didn't create Ukraine, but he did emphasize a distinct Ukraine during the early periods of the Soviet Union, building up the Ukrainian language and an emphasis on Ukraine as a separate entity.

However, there was always a separate history. Basically, Putin is now taking us back to all of these periods. In fact, he is tracing a lot of the issues that we are dealing with now to the various dissolutions of empires, and using all of this as a justification for the actions that he has taken. All of this history for him is useful history. He is obviously getting away from the complexity and the nuance, and is going to a reductionist version of this as a justification for the kind of actions that he is now taking.

**The *Politico* article ends with the question, "So just as the world didn't see Hitler coming, we failed to see Putin coming?" Now that we are seeing Putin for what he is, and now that we can clearly draw the parallels, what should the U.S. response be? Is the current sanctions approach enough?**

We should not only focus on what the government announced in terms of sanctions in conjunction with the European Union and with other partners. We should look at what ordinary people have done. Both big and small corporations and all kinds of private networks decided not to do business with Russia.

But people are seeing the same parallels. When you think back to the story of World War II, and specifically the invasions launched by Hitler and Nazi Germany, they initially were made in the name of gathering in the lands populated by German speakers. Now Putin is also acting on the premise that there are large numbers of Russian speakers in Belarus and Ukraine. But of course, the Belarusian and Ukrainian languages are somewhat different from Russian; they are from the same language group, but they are not all the same.

Putin is positing that identity flows on language and also on historical control, which is what Hitler was also doing. We did promise to ourselves in very formal ways that we would never let this happen again. In Russia, Putin has actually tried to circumscribe and dictate how the history of World War II is taught. It was the Great Fatherland War, and he wants to toss in a certain way that then lends itself to being used to justify his actions in Ukraine. He launched the invasion under the guise of trying to de-Nazify Ukraine, which is speaking directly to ideas that people may have about World War II. We are seeing this use and abuse of history on multiple fronts.

**What gives Putin the confidence to likely go head-to-head in armed conflict with NATO in pursuit of this Russia Imperium? Is it the possession of nuclear weapons? Is it isolation from his advisors that's given him this false confidence?**

All of these things. There is one thing to bear in mind: if you've been in power for 22 years, everything has been unchecked. Over time, people have stopped telling you things that you don't want to hear. You think you are infallible, and then nothing can really stop you.

Putin has a particular view of history and of human nature, and they are pretty dark. He has the view that might makes right; if you have the power, you should wield it, which is why he throws around ideas of using nuclear weapons. He believes that if you've got an instrument, it is there to be used. He also believes that people can be coerced into doing things.

In his view, the United States has abused its power. Certainly, the U.S. has made a lot of mistakes: the invasion of Iraq is high up there. If the United States can do these things, then it's not so exceptional. He asks why can't Russia do the same thing.

Also, over time, the circle of people whom he listened to has shrunk; and with COVID, the circle shrank even further. Also, Putin became cut off from regular interactions with people that might have given him information. There is a very narrow vertical of power leading up to Putin in Russia. He doesn't have a horizontal network. He's not interacting with people on a regular basis. He doesn't get out much, so he doesn't really have a feel anymore for the way the dynamics are running inside of Russia itself. Instead, he only gets whatever information filters up to him.

Putin knows people and the dark sides of human nature, so he feels he can influence individuals. He looks at their weaknesses and vulnerabilities and tries to go after them or push their buttons politically, as he did with the interference in our elections in 2016. But he also doesn't understand how horizontally networked, and very dynamic, other societies work. In his view, it's all about the leaders at the top. What he wants to do in Ukraine, for example, is remove Zelensky and the people around him, and put someone else in place. He figures that from there on, he will be able to exert control.

Putin is now seeing that this is not the case. Or he may not be seeing it. That is part of our problem, right? We're not really sure quite how he's assessing things because he has a different worldview, and a different set of information from us. That's exactly why he can lead himself down these paths. He thinks he has the right to do this and that he has the wherewithal to do it. He has this particular set of goals, and he is not getting any information that would lead him to take a different set of decisions.

He has doubled down and he will double down again. Putin will try to see if there are other ways to reach the goals that he has. In particular, he wants to make sure that Ukraine not only stays out of NATO, but that Ukraine never has anywhere else to go outside of Russia's orbit. He is trying to push back Europe and the United States; he wants us to capitulate. He's going to try to push for that as much as possible, which is what makes it so difficult for us. It will be a massive challenge. We have to try; there are all kinds of diplomatic ways. People are signaling their displeasure as individuals and at the government level. It is going to be hard work, and we are just going to have to keep this up.

**What are different ways in which we can respond?**

When you are sitting here at universities, you have a lot of power in networks. There are all kinds of ways in which you can organize to try to find ways of assisting Ukraine. There are ways of getting messages to people and to networks in Russia, about what's happening in Ukraine. You can also be writing to members of Congress and to businesses. During the Cold War, all of these things had an impact. It's just hard for us to feel them. But this is a moment when everyone should mobilize and think about things that they can do.

**Carley Barnhart CMC '22**  
Student Journalist

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