Russia, Ukraine & the U.S. - The background they're not telling you

By Phil Wilayto

In the winter of 2022, the news is dominated by growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Reports that Russia has amassed some 100,000 troops on its border with neighboring Ukraine have brought charges from the United States and NATO that Russia is planning to invade its neighbor, with whom it has had increasingly tense relations.

Will Russia invade Ukraine? And if it does, how will the United States and NATO react? Already, the U.S. and its allies are threatening new sanctions against Russia, sending massive amounts of military equipment to Ukraine and beefing up their military presence in bordering countries.

How close are we to war in the region? And how would the U.S. be involved?

BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT CRISIS

It's impossible to understand anything about present Russian-Ukrainian relations without going back at least to late 2013, when mass demonstrations broke out against then-Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych.

Ukraine was trying to decide if it wanted closer economic relations with Russia, its traditional major trading partner, or with the wealthier European Union. The country's parliament, or Rada, was pro-EU, while Yanukovych favored Russia. At the time - as now - many of the country's politicians were corrupt, including Yanukovych, so there already was popular resentment against him. When he decided to oppose the Rada over trade agreements, mass protests took place in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in the capital city of Kiev. But what began as peaceful, even celebratory gatherings were quickly taken over by right-wing paramilitary organizations modeled after WWII-era Ukrainian militias allied with the Nazi occupiers. Violence followed and Yanukovych fled the country. He was replaced by acting president Oleksandr Turchynov, and then the pro-U.S., pro-EU, pro-NATO Petro Poroshenko.

The movement that came to be known as Maidan was an illegal, unconstitutional, violent coup - and it was backed to the hilt by the U.S. government and many countries in the European Union.

Then-Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland, who personally cheered on the Maidan protesters in Independence Square, later bragged about the role the U.S. had played in laying the groundwork for 2014. This is how she described that effort in a December 2013 speech to the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation, a non-gov ernmental organization:

"Since Ukraine's independence in 1991, the United States has supported Ukrainians as they build democratic skills and institutions, as they promote civic participation and good governance, all of which are preconditions for Ukraine to achieve its European aspirations. We've invested over $5 billion to assist Ukraine in these and other goals that will ensure a secure and prosperous and democratic Ukraine."

Translation: The U.S. spent $5 billion intervening in the internal affairs of Ukraine to help steer it away from Russia and toward an alliance with the West, an alliance that would financially benefit the West, while further isolating Russia.

Neo-liberal George Soros' Open Society Foundation also played a major role, as it explains on its website:

"The International Renaissance Foundation, part of the Open Society family of foundations, has supported civil society in Ukraine since 1990.

For 25 years, the International Renaissance Foundation has worked with civil society organizations … helping to facilitate Ukraine's European integration. The International Renaissance Foundation played an important role supporting civil society during the Euromaidan protests."

AFTERMATH OF THE COUP

The coup split the country along the lines of ethnicity and politics and had devastating consequences for Ukraine, a fragile nation that has only been an independent country since 1991. Before that it was part of the Soviet Union, and before that it was long a contested region dominated by a series of other forces: Vikings, Mongols, Lithuanians, Russians, Poles, Austrians and more. The name Ukraine itself means "borderland."

Today 17.3 percent of Ukraine's population is made up of ethnic Russians, who live mainly in the eastern part of the country, which borders Russia. Many more speak Russian as their primary language. And they tend to identify with the Soviet victory over the Nazi occupation of Ukraine.

During Soviet times, both Russian and Ukrainian were official state languages. One of the first acts of the new coup government was to declare that the only official language would be Ukrainian. It also quickly went about banning symbols of the Soviet era, replacing them with me morials to Nazi collaborators. Meanwhile, the neo-Nazi organizations active in the Maidan coup grew in membership and aggressiveness.

Shortly after the coup, fears of domination by an anti-Russian, pro fascist central government led the people of Crimea to hold a referendum in which the majority voted to reunite with Russia. (Crimea had been part of Soviet Russia until 1954, when it was administratively transferred to Soviet Ukraine.) Russia agreed, and annexed the region. This was the "invasion" denounced by Kiev and the West. Curiously, no one died in that "invasion."

Meanwhile, fighting broke out in Donbass, a heavily industrialized and largely ethnic Russian region of southeastern Ukraine that borders Russia, with local leftists declaring independence from Ukraine. This sparked a fierce Ukrainian opposition and fighting that to date has cost some 14,000 lives.

And in the historically Russian-oriented city of Odessa, a movement emerged that demanded a federal system in which local governors would be locally elected, not appointed by the central government as they are now. On May 2, 2014, at least 42 activists promoting this view were massacred at the House of Trade Unions when a fascist-led mob set it on fire. (See www.odessasolidaritycampaign.org)

All this would make the national situation difficult enough, but these crises took place within the international context of rising tensions between the U.S.-led West and Russia.

WHAT DOES RUSSIA WANT?

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, has been recruiting the former Soviet republics into its anti-Russian alliance.

Ukraine is not yet a NATO member, but it operates as such in all but name. The U.S. and other Western countries train and supply its soldiers, help build its bases and conduct regular massive land, sea and air military exercises with Ukraine, which has a 1,200-mile land border with Russia and with which it shares the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. From Russia's point of view, it's NATO that is the aggressor. President

Vladimir Putin has demanded a guarantee that NATO will not recruit Ukraine into its military alliance; an end to deploying NATO weapons near Russian borders; and an end to U.S.-NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe; all of which Russia views as serious threats to its security.

Let's look at the history: When NATO was founded on April 4, 1949, it had 12 members: the U.S., Canada and 10 Western European countries. By then the wartime cooperation with the Soviet Union was long over and NATO was essentially an anti-Soviet military/political alliance.

Six years later, as a counterbalance, the Soviet Union formed the nine-member Warsaw Pact, formally the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. That alliance was dismantled in 1991, 10 months before the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union. By then the U.S. had assured the Soviets that NATO would not be expanding eastward.

U.S. officials now deny that, but this is from the Los Angeles Times of May 30, 2016:

"In early February 1990, U.S. leaders made the Soviets an offer. According to transcripts of meetings in Moscow on Feb. 9. then-Secretary of State James Baker suggested that in exchange for cooperation on Germany, [the] U.S. could make 'iron-clad guarantees' that NATO would not expand 'one inch eastward.' Less than a week later, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev agreed to begin reunification talks. No formal deal was struck, but from all the evidence, the quid pro quo was clear: Gorbachev acceded to Germany's western alignment and the U.S. would limit NATO's expansion."

But far from limiting NATO's expansion, the U.S. vigorously promoted it.

In 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were admitted into NATO. In 2004, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia all became NATO members, followed in 2009 by Albania, Croatia and Montenegro, and then North Macedonia in March 2020.

So today NATO has expanded to 30 member countries, with 14 - nearly half - either former members of the Soviet bloc or part of the former socialist state of Yugoslavia.

All new members admitted into NATO since the collapse of the Soviet Union are in Central or Eastern Europe. From a North American and Western European alliance, it has become a North American and European force that has moved steadily eastward right up to Russia's borders.

In NATO, the United States, United Kingdom and France together possess a total of 7,315 nuclear weapons. Russia is believed to have about 7,000. But in terms of overall military power, Russia's military budget in 2016 was just over 8 percent of the combined total of all NATO countries, and just over 11 percent of the U.S. alone.

This is important, because one of NATO's founding principles is that an attack on any one member country is to be considered an attack on all NATO members.

Today Russia is faced with a massive military and political alliance that includes Estonia and Latvia, two of the six countries on its western and southern borders.

In the present crisis, the U.S. and NATO are accusing Russia of planning to invade Ukraine, pointing to Russia's mobilization of what it says are 100,000 troops on its border with Ukraine. Meanwhile, the U.S. and its allies are sending massive amounts of military aid to Ukraine and are preparing to send their own troops to neighboring countries, to "support" Ukraine.

And ominously, Russia has accused Ukraine of deploying 125,000 troops to Donbass, raising fears that the government may be planning to try and retake the break-away region, in effect daring Russia to militarily intervene.

But as for a Russian invasion? Some key figures are expressing doubt. This is from a Jan. 26 report by the Associated Press:

"[Ukrainian] National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov sounded a similar note, arguing that the wave of Russian troops amassed at Ukraine's border 'is not news.' 'As of today, we don't see any grounds for statements about a full-scale offensive on our country,' Danilov added on Monday, according to the AP."

And this is from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), on Jan. 23:

"The head of the German navy has resigned over controversial comments he made over Ukraine. Kay-Achim Schönbach said the idea that Russia wanted to invade Ukraine was nonsense. He added that all President Vladimir Putin wanted was respect. Mr Schönbach said on Saturday that he had resigned from his role 'with immediate effect' in order to 'avert further damage'.

WHAT WASHINGTON WANTS

Is war with Russia a real possibility? Yes. It could come to that, most likely as a result of miscalculations by one side or the other operating in a high-tension, high-risk military situation.

But Washington's real goal is not to destroy Russia, but to dominate it - to turn it into another neo-colony whose role would be to supply the Empire with raw materials, cheap labor and a captive consumer market, just as it has done to Eastern European countries like Poland and Hungary and for much longer in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Increasingly, Ukraine is becoming a central battleground in this global campaign for U.S. hegemony.

And what's the strategy? In the late 1990s, the U.S. basically spent the Soviet Union under the table by forcing it to spend its limited resources on matching the U.S. in what was called the Arms Race. The result was growing demoralization among the Soviet people, who ultimately did not mount any mass resistance to the collapse of their country and economic system. The present increasing Western military threat and economic sanctions against Russia seems to be coming from the same playbook.

Further threatening the goal of U.S. world hegemony is the growing alliance between Russia, with its 7,000 nuclear weapons, and China, another nuclear power and the world's largest economy, after the United States. Breaking up that alliance by bringing Russia to heel is likely another central goal of the propaganda campaign against Russia.

There's also the matter of the $11 billion Nord Stream 2 gas pipe line, which, if implemented, would double the amount of gas flowing directly from Russia to Germany, bypassing the traditional route through Ukraine, depriving it of billions in transit fees. The pipeline is most likely one reason Germany has so far refused to send military equipment to Ukraine.

However the present crisis is resolved, we must remember that working and oppressed people in the West have nothing to gain from this dangerous situation, and everything to lose if war against Russia were actually to break out.

The antiwar movement and its allies must speak out forcefully against U.S. and NATO aggression. We must demand that the massive amounts of tax dollars being spent on war and war preparations instead be used for the good of the people here at home and reparations for the crimes Washington and NATO have committed abroad.

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