

Critical Thinking and the 2008 Georgian War

Caveat

Because the information provided in this handout emphasizes a perspective that is overlooked by most Americans, it may give the impression that the Georgians are mostly to blame for the 2008 war whereas, as usual, the situation is more complex. Russian actions, such as giving South Ossetians and Abkhazians Russian passports, reinforced Georgia's growing fear that it had to act soon or lose its breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia forever. Further, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili interpreted a February 2008 conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying that Russia was preparing for war,¹ in which case striking first may have made more sense. While I think it was a secondary factor, Russia's desire to overcome the humiliation of the Soviet breakup via a decisive military victory also probably played a role.

Differing Russian and American perspectives

The Georgian war of August 2008 carried significant risk of creating a Russian-American crisis comparable to 1962's Cuban Missile Crisis, and ongoing tensions continue to do so. To understand why, we need to examine the vastly different American and Russian perspectives.

An [article](#) that appeared in *Newsweek* (usually thought of as a liberal American publication) a few days after the war started compared the Russian invasion of Georgia to Nazi Germany taking over Czechoslovakia,² one of the precursors to World War II. It was subtitled "The historical reasons why the West should intervene in Georgia," indicating its support for Western (mostly American) military action to counter the Russians:

Is that "appeasement" we see sidling shyly out of the closet of history? ... As those of a certain age will recall, "appeasement" encapsulated the determination of British governments of the 1930s to avoid war in Europe, even if it mean capitulating to the ever-increasing demands of Adolf Hitler. ... It is impossible to view the Russian onslaught against Georgia without these bloodstained memories rising to mind. ...

The United States [has the capability] ... to guarantee Georgia's sovereignty and independence. ... Washington has every right to send "peace-keeping" troops into Georgia if Saakashvili requests it. The 82nd Airborne, its brigades newly returned from Iraq, could be mustered as a guarantor force. ...

And if the West does not react forcefully to protect Georgia? Russia, and all the nations on its periphery, will draw the obvious lessons. Will Putin follow history and demand

¹ Ronald Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West* Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, page 144. See pages 105-108 for the conversation referenced.

² Technically speaking, Chamberlain's 1938 appeasement of Hitler only resulted in Nazi Germany annexing the Sudeten region of Czechoslovakia, but this led to Hitler's complete takeover of Czechoslovakia the next year.

next a Russian right to move troops into Estonia, a NATO member, to “protect” its Russian population?

There are few lessons safely drawn from history – except that of George Santayana: “Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.”

In contrast, an [article](#) by conservative columnist Patrick Buchanan is surprisingly close to the Russian perspective, laying blame for the war on Georgia’s president Saakashvili:

Mikheil Saakashvili’s decision to use the opening of the Olympic Games to cover Georgia’s invasion of its breakaway province of South Ossetia must rank in stupidity with Gamal Abdel-Nasser’s decision to close the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships [an action which helped precipitate 1967’s “Six Day War.”] ... American charges of Russian aggression ring hollow. Georgia started this fight – Russia finished it. People who start wars don’t get to decide how and when they end.

While an [article](#) in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* and the much longer [report](#) on which it is based find blame on both sides, it agrees with Buchanan that Georgia fired the first shots:

... a majority of members [of the EU investigative commission on the causes of the war] tend to arrive at the assessment that Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili started the war by attacking South Ossetia on August 7, 2008. The facts assembled on [commission chairwoman Heidi] Tagliavini’s desk refute Saakashvili’s claim that his country became the innocent victim of “Russian aggression” on that day.

The danger of a Russian-American confrontation over Georgia is exacerbated because most Americans share the perspective of the *Newsweek* article, that Russia’s invasion of Georgia was totally unprovoked, naked aggression. Here are some samples of media coverage:

- [The Washington Post on August 9, 2008](#): Russian strategic bombers and jet fighter planes pounded targets in many parts of Georgia on Saturday, hitting apartment buildings and economic installations, as well as military targets in an escalating war that is killing more and more civilians and confounding international efforts to secure a cease-fire. Russia continued to pour troops and tanks into South Ossetia, the breakaway region of Georgia that triggered the conflict, to confront Georgian forces that are attempting to reclaim the region.
- [The New York Times on August 11, 2008](#): [Republican Presidential candidate] Senator John McCain issued a detailed and forceful denunciation of Russia on Monday, saying that it seemed intent on toppling the Georgian government and that Moscow needed to understand that this would have “severe, long-term negative consequences” for its relations with the West. ... [Democratic Presidential candidate Barack Obama’s comments] have been more guarded and shorn of the blunt threats McCain made of long-term damage to relations with Russia. “I condemn Russia’s aggressive actions and reiterate my call for an immediate cease-fire,” he said Saturday, adding: “Russia must stop its

bombing campaign, cease flights of Russian aircraft in Georgian airspace and withdraw its ground forces from Georgia.”

- [Fox News on August 12, 2008](#): Russia has wrought on Georgia a “full-scale military aggression” on a par with Soviet invasions or Nazi Germany’s occupation of Poland and Czechoslovakia, Georgia’s ambassador to the United States told FOX News on Tuesday. ... “It’s exactly like Hungary, 1956. It’s exactly like Czechoslovakia, 1968. It is like Afghanistan invasion. It is like Nazi Germany invasion of Czechoslovakia and Poland. So this is the full-scale Russian military intervention, military aggression on its neighbor,” [Georgia’s ambassador Vasil] Sikharulidze said.

Reflecting that perspective, on September 11, 2008, Sarah Palin had the following exchange in an [interview with Charlie Gibson](#), in which she considers threatening war with Russia if it invades Georgia again:

PALIN: ... For Russia to have exerted such pressure in terms of invading a smaller democratic country, unprovoked, is unacceptable and we have to keep...

GIBSON: You believe unprovoked.

PALIN: I do believe unprovoked and we have got to keep our eyes on Russia, under the leadership there. ...

GIBSON: Would you favor putting Georgia and Ukraine in NATO?

PALIN: Ukraine, definitely, yes. Yes, and Georgia. ...

GIBSON: And under the NATO treaty, wouldn’t we then have to go to war if Russia went into Georgia?

PALIN: Perhaps so. I mean, that is the agreement when you are a NATO ally, is if another country is attacked, you’re going to be expected to be called upon and help.

While Georgia no longer occupies much mind share in this country, the situation that Palin says would force her to consider going to war with Russia could well occur. This can be seen from [another article](#) by Patrick Buchanan:

In August [2009], the Georgian navy seized a Turkish tanker carrying fuel to Abkhazia, Georgia’s former province ... Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili – who launched and lost a war for South Ossetia in 48 hours in August 2008 – has declared the blockade of Abkhazia, which he claims as Georgian national territory, will remain in force. ... We have here the makings of a naval clash that Georgia, given Russian air, naval and land forces in the eastern Black Sea, will lose. ...

What is Saakashvili up to? He seems intent on provoking a new crisis to force NATO to stand with him and bring the United States in on his side – against Russia. Ultimate goal: Return the issue of his lost provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia back onto the world’s front burner. While such a crisis may be in the interests of Saakashvili and his

Russophobic U.S. neoconservative retainers, it is the furthest thing from U.S. national interests.³

Other, later events with the potential to reignite the Georgian conflict include:

- In September 2009, there were rumors that the [U.S. would establish military bases](#) in Georgia. Adding weight to those reports, in February 2011, a group of Republican senators [urged](#) that the proposed location of an American radar be moved from Turkey to Georgia. This radar is part of the planned American missile defense system, which is another major point of contention in Russian-American relations.
- In March 2010, Radio Free Europe reported that a realistic-sounding, but [fake news broadcast](#) by a Georgian TV station (Imedi TV) had many Georgians believing that Russia had invaded the country again. The report noted panic: “Cell-phone signals were overloaded as nervous residents attempted to reach family, and emergency services reported a rise in heart attacks.” War could have reignited if, for example, a frontline Georgian unit had mistakenly believed the broadcast and attacked in response.
- An [August 2010 Russian report](#) notes that Russia is building up its naval presence in Abkhazia (one of the two breakaway regions involved in the 2008 war) to deter Georgia’s navy from operating in those jointly claimed waters.
- A Russian-American naval confrontation is also possible since a [June 2011 Russian report](#) states, “Russia is outraged at the maneuvers of American USS Monterey cruiser carrying the AEGIS air defense system near the Georgian coast on the Black Sea.”
- A February 2011, [US Naval Institute article](#) sees things very differently, but also indicates the possibility for conflict between US and Russian naval forces: “If unchecked by Western powers, the Kremlin’s actions [in beefing up its Black Sea fleet] could increase the possibility of conflict between Russia and those Black Sea states still seeking greater integration with the West, such as Georgia.”

In summary, the 2008 Georgian war created a very dangerous situation that persists to this day. A risk-based approach to nuclear deterrence can provide early warning signs before a catastrophic failure of nuclear deterrence occurs, but American society is currently ignoring those indications.

³ The October 2012 Georgian parliamentary elections gave a majority to Saakashvili’s opposition, which is in favor of a less confrontational approach to Russia. This reduces the risk of a second round, at least for the next few years. When considering long-term survival, one must consider not only the current situation, but also likely changes during the time horizon of interest.

Background on current Russian-American relations

This section provides background to help you better understand why post-Cold War Russian American relations are not as rosy as many people assume. On page x of the Introduction to his book, *War Scare*, former CIA analyst Peter Vincent Pry writes about the Russian Constitutional Crisis of 1993: ⁴

What were you doing on October 4, 1993? I was making a desperate phone call from the headquarters of North American Air Defense and Space Command in Colorado Springs, to my wife in Washington, D. C. I told her to take our kids out of school and head for the hills, because the Russians might launch a nuclear attack.

This was no joke. On that day, a half-dozen other intelligence and strategic warning officers from the Central intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and Defense Intelligence Agency made similar phone calls to their families.

I remember October 4, 1993 with the same crystalline clarity that I recall October 22, 1962 [when Kennedy gave his speech announcing the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba].

Most Americans were blissfully unaware of any danger, so what caused Pry's concern? While it would be best to read his section on that event, here are some relevant excerpts:

Pry, *War Scare*, Page 117: The Ukrainian crisis [of 1991-92] and other recent events had put Moscow in a frame of mind to expect the worst as the Armenia-Azerbaijan war threatened to bring in Turkey, a NATO member. In February 1992, three months before the May crisis, a classified U.S. Defense Department study was leaked to the press, revealing that U.S. military planners were thinking about how to prosecute a war with Russia in the event that Moscow invaded the Baltic states [which were newly independent of the Soviet Union]. The Russian government and military widely condemned the U.S. research as, in the words of an *Izvestia* article, preparing for the 'start of a large-scale war against Russia by the United States and NATO.' ... The next month, March 1992, saw a spate of accusations by the Russian navy that U.S. nuclear submarines were invading Russian territorial waters [a quite possible scenario, something we had routinely done during the Cold War, and possibly beyond] ... A senior Russian Navy officer proposed to a reporter that Russia should attack the U.S. submarines... On February 11, 1992, the U.S. nuclear attack submarine *Baton Rouge* collided with a Russian submarine in the Barents Sea near the naval base at Murmansk. Moscow exploded with denunciations from the military, claiming proof positive of the United States' immediate hostile intentions. [Yet] in

⁴ Bruce Blair sees Pry as [overly concerned](#), but concludes his review of the book as follows: "Pry's provocative book nonetheless contains a rewarding amount of new information and insight into Russia's nuclear netherworld. It is a disturbing work that, for all its overblown conjecture, hits upon real and critical issues, not least the paramount need to understand better Russia's point of view. Pry seriously attempts to put himself into the shoes of Russian nuclear planners to understand their mindset, and the reader gains a degree of understanding and even sympathy for their security dilemmas as a result. That effort is both rare and admirable."

the United States, on January 2, 1992, CIA director Robert M. Gates testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Russian threat of conventional or nuclear attack on the United States or its allies “has all but disappeared for the foreseeable future.”

Pry, War Scare, Pages 133-136: Another example of Russian governmental failure occurred in 1993, involving General Aleksandr Lebed. As the controversial commander of Russia’s 14th Army, based in Moldova, Lebed appeared determined to remain in permanent occupation of that independent nation – in open defiance of Moscow. ... Russian society was sliding toward anarchy. ... Homelessness among about 180,000 Russian military officers had driven many to desperate measures to care for their families, including selling weapons and illegally serving as mercenaries in local border conflicts. ... Russia’s burgeoning internal crisis could threaten the West directly if it led to irresponsible or criminal behavior among soldiers entrusted with weapons of mass destruction.... Deputy Defense Minister Andrey Kokoshin, in a July 1994 interview, admitted that “A real threat arose somewhere at the beginning of 1992 of losing controllability of the armed forces”... Kokoshin acknowledged that the internal problems with the Russian armed forces threaten global security... Sergey Rogov, a prominent civilian defense expert and Deputy Director of the Institute of the USA and Canada made Andrey Kokoshin seem like an optimist. In Rogov’s view, given in a November 1993 interview, the Russian military was already out of control. ... In 1993 the Russian military appeared – and it still does today – to be pursuing a number of military programs autonomously, without the knowledge or approval of Russia’s President or other civilian leaders. ... An uncontrolled Russian military could disobey its political masters and destroy the West. Ever since the collapse of the USSR, Russia’s political leaders and General Staff spokesmen have repeatedly told Western audiences that a war between former Soviet states, or a civil war within Russia, would somehow likely mushroom into a world nuclear holocaust.... It’s not clear whether this was a scare tactic to solicit help from the West, a friendly warning – or a threat.... Consider the views of the “Black Colonel,” Viktor Alksnis, expressed in December 1991, after the disintegration of the USSR: “It is impossible to predict the future of our nuclear weapons today. I talked to a commander of a submarine equipped with nuclear arms. He told me that he would immediately carry out the maximum strike possible if anyone should try to put our nuclear weapons under international control. He will not wait for an order from Moscow, he said... A civil war in the [former] USSR would lead to a Third World War ... If our state truly collapses, it will take the whole world with it into the grave.”

Pry, War Scare, Page 146: Arbatov [a dove] spoke, reluctantly and even painfully... “in the future, Russia will frankly acknowledge its nuclear first strike policy.... Russia may acknowledge the possible preemptive use of nuclear weapons at an early stage of conventional war.” Stunned silence. ... “The first use option is not directed at all against the West or the US, but rather obviously against China. But should NATO extend itself eastward and move directly up to Russia’s border, then Russia would feel threatened and the first use option would apply against NATO as well.” [This was said on June 11, 1993. Since then NATO has expanded right up to the Russian borders, and most Americans, unaware of the risk involved, seem to support further expanding NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine.]

Pry, War Scare, Page 178: Nothing less than planetary survival was at stake during the failed coup of September-October 1993. As during the coup of August 1991, the Russian General Staff again feared that the West might see the disruption among Russia's armed forces and populous as an opportunity for launching a surprise [nuclear] attack. As noted earlier, Russian preparations for war were manifold.... Russia's war preparations were scarcely noticed in the Western press and, when noted, were misconstrued as being focused inwardly against the coup, not against the United States.

Not One Inch Eastward

The West and Russia have very different perspectives on the eastward expansion of NATO. The Western view is that joining NATO is solely a decision of the country involved and the other members of NATO. Any objections by Russia constitute unwarranted meddling in other nations' affairs. While that point of view has validity, in what follows we look solely at the Russian perspective, not because it is the "right" one, but because it is the one that we have not yet integrated into our world view. Given that Russia still has over 10,000 nuclear weapons and can destroy us in under an hour, we neglect that perspective at our peril.

Many of Russia's objections to NATO's expansion date back to negotiations that took place on February 9, 1990, between America's Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Only three months earlier, Gorbachev had allowed the Berlin Wall to be breached. The German dream of a reunified nation, which had been on hold throughout the Cold War, suddenly became possible. But, many in the Soviet Union feared that Germany's dream might become their nightmare: Nazi Germany's invasion had resulted in the deaths of 20 million Soviet citizens. To put that in perspective, the United States lost well under half a million people in World War II. Soviet losses were roughly 50 times greater than ours. Russia understandably had concerns about a unified Germany within a hostile NATO alliance.



Germany's dream of reunification vs. the Soviet nightmare

Understanding those Soviet fears, Baker asked Gorbachev: "Would you prefer to see a united Germany outside of NATO and with no U.S. forces, perhaps with its own nuclear weapons? Or would you prefer a unified Germany to be tied to NATO, with assurances that NATO's jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position?"

Gorbachev considered that argument and replied, “Certainly any extension of the territory of NATO would be unacceptable.”

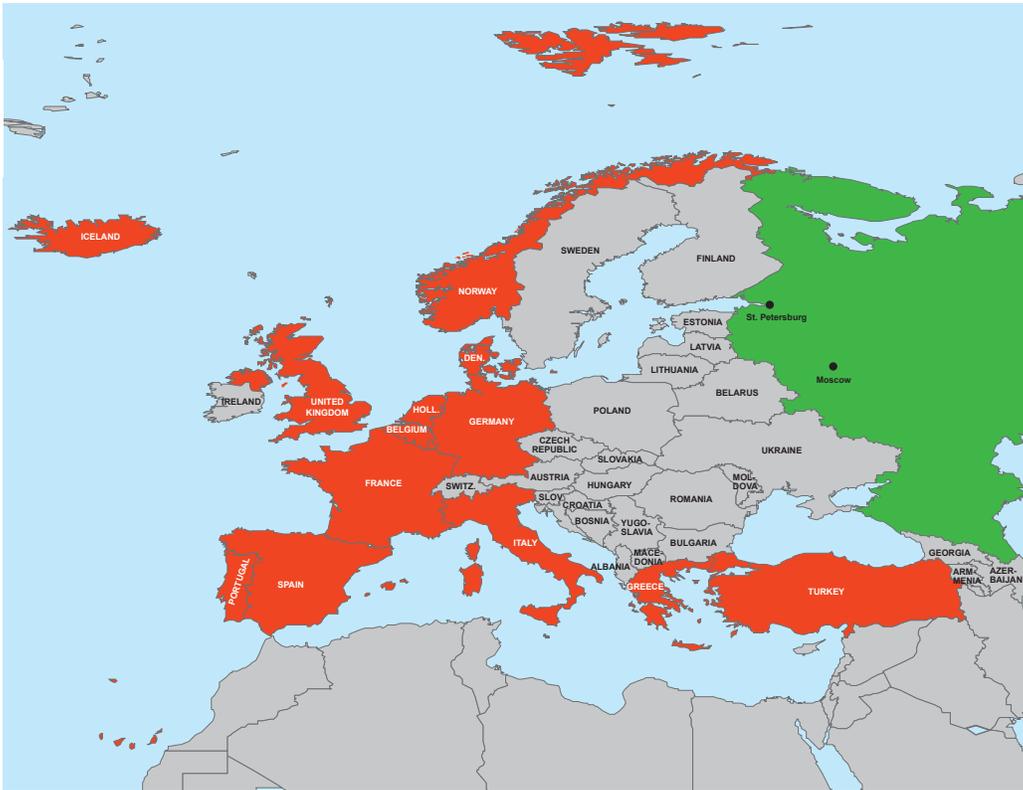
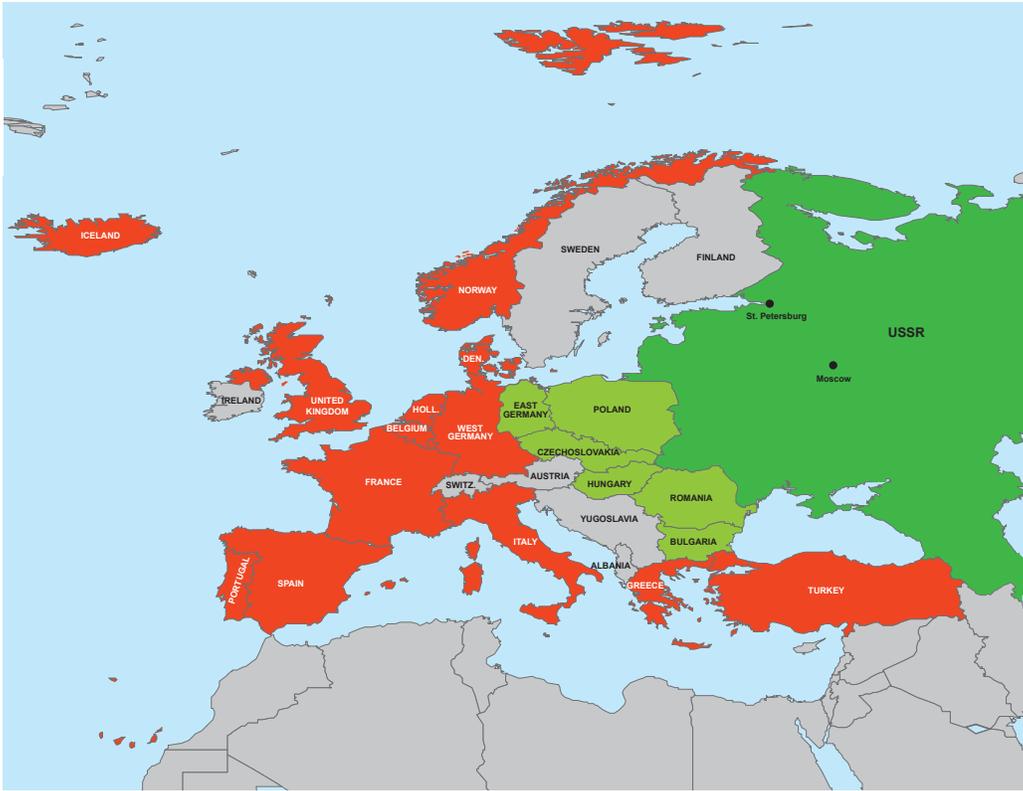
Both Baker’s and Gorbachev’s notes from the meeting agree on this exchange. Where they disagree is on its meaning. Gorbachev interpreted Baker’s statement to mean there would be *no* eastward expansion of NATO, period. This view is shared widely within Russia, as well as within some quarters of NATO, as we’ll see in a moment. However, Baker and most Americans (if they are aware of this issue), interpret his statement to apply only within East Germany. Further, Baker has noted that these were preliminary discussions and, as always, only the final, written agreement would be binding. (Gorbachev did not get this assurance in writing.)

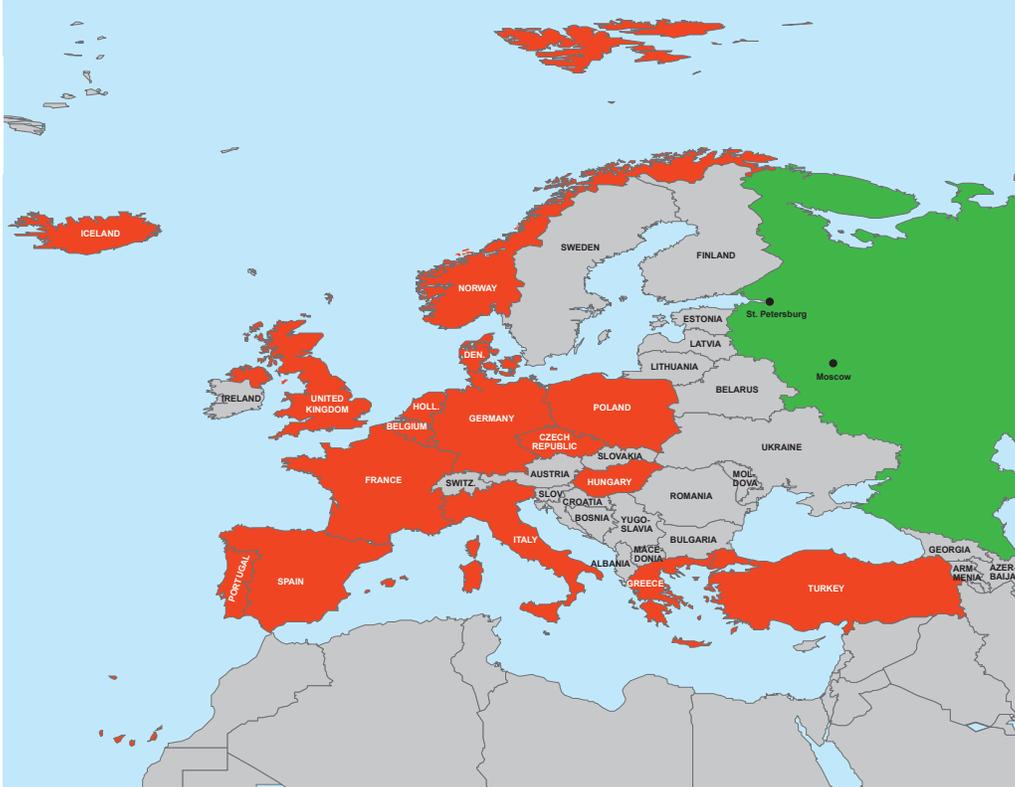
To get an idea of why Russia feels increasingly encircled by NATO, consider the following sequence of maps which show Europe from a Russian perspective. NATO nations are colored red because they are seen as potentially dangerous. The Soviet Union is colored deep green because it is safest from the Russian perspective, and the Warsaw Pact nations are light green – theoretically aligned with the Soviets, but also with significant fractions of their populations chafing under that rule. Gray denotes a neutral country.

The first map below shows Europe as it was in 1990, when Baker and Gorbachev discussed how to deal with German reunification and NATO. There is a large buffer zone between Moscow and Leningrad (shown on the map as St. Petersburg for consistency with later maps) and potentially hostile NATO forces. Both Moscow and Leningrad were devastated by the Nazis during World War II. Note that even at this point, Russia had NATO forces right on its border, in Turkey. This helps put our Turkish Jupiter missiles, that figured so prominently in the 1962 Cuban crisis in some perspective. Cuba is 90 miles off our shore.

The second map below shows how Europe looked to Russia after Germany was reunified, the Warsaw Pact broke up, and the Soviet Union dissolved. Moscow and St. Petersburg have become much more exposed, and ethnic warfare has broken out both within Russia and within a number of nations right on its border. The 2008 Georgian war, for example, has its roots in ethnic conflict, as noted by former State Department and Pentagon official [E. Wayne Merry](#):

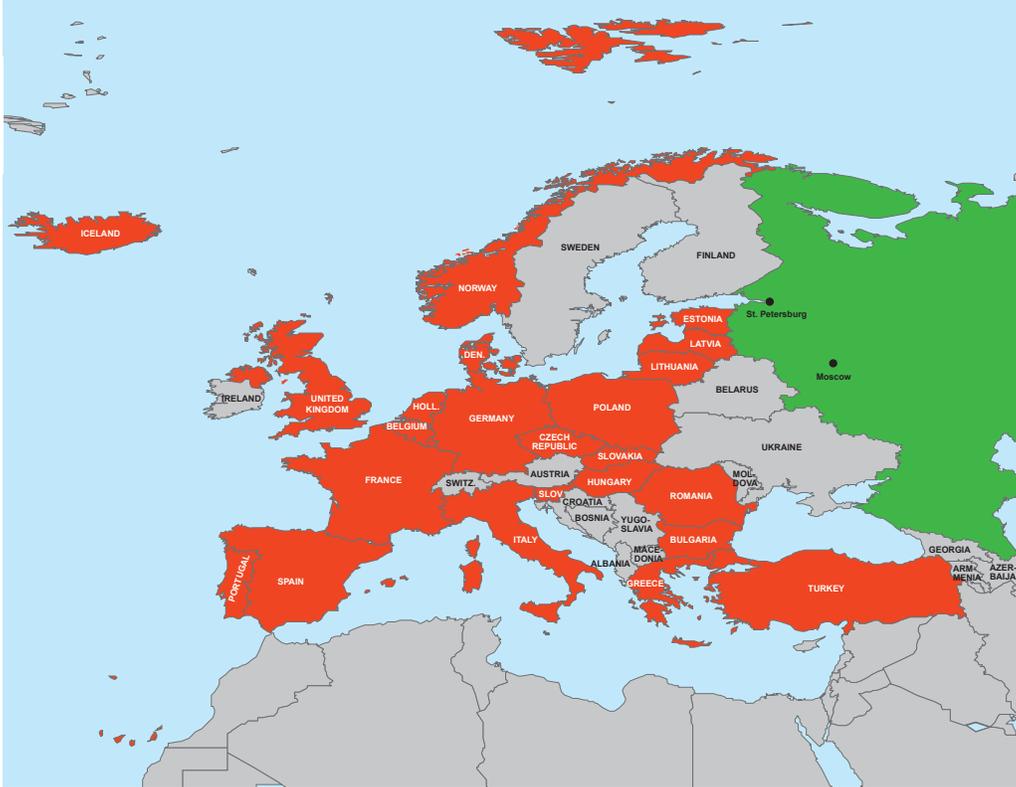
Although ignored in the West, the first instances of what later was called “ethnic cleansing” did not take place in Yugoslavia, but in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and were perpetrated by radical Georgian nationalists under the slogan “Georgia for the Georgians.”



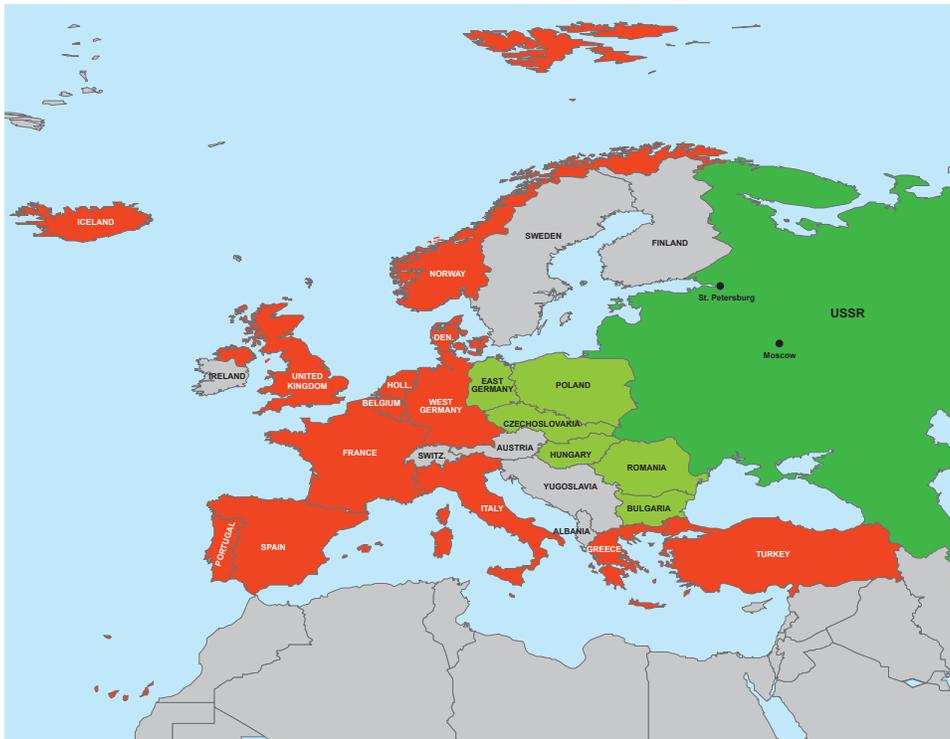
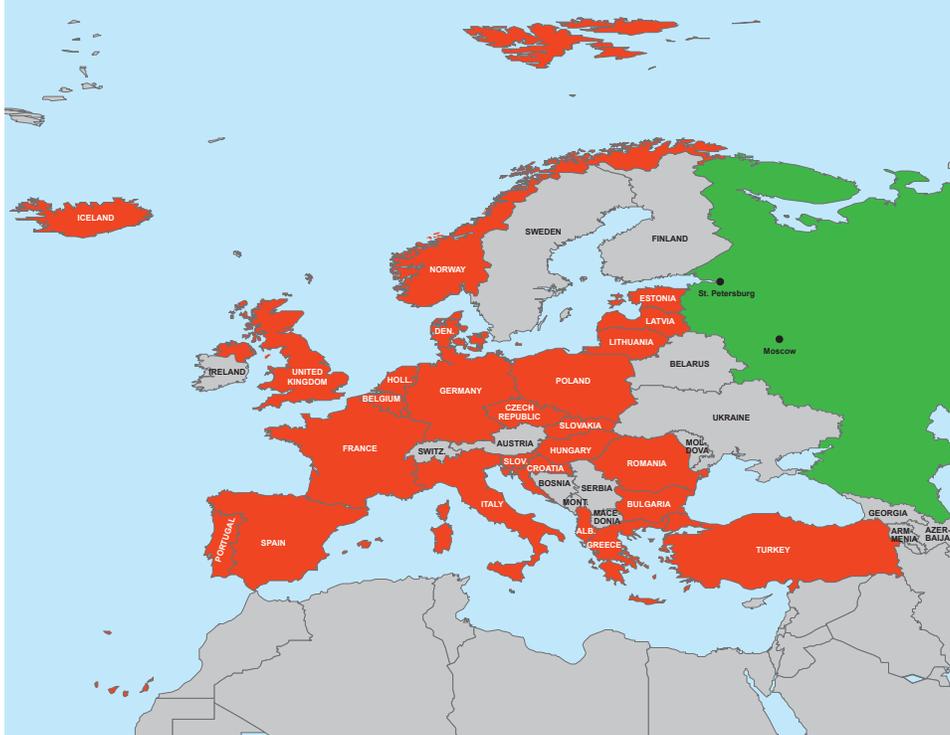


The third map (above) shows how things looked in 1999, after Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were admitted to NATO. Note that this first expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe occurred under President Clinton. This expansion added risk because, according to [an article](#) by Vice Admiral Ulrich Weisser (Ret.), who was head of the policy and planning staff in the German Ministry of Defense from 1992 to 1998, “Moscow also feels provoked by the behavior of a number of newer NATO member states in central and Eastern Europe. Poland and the Baltic states use every opportunity to make provocative digs at Russia; they feel themselves protected by NATO and backed by the U.S.” While the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) are not yet members of NATO in this map, they will be in the next.

The fourth map, on the next page, shows how things looked in 2004, after Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria were admitted to NATO.



The fifth and sixth maps, on the next page, contrast the current state of affairs with that prevailing in 1990, when Baker gave Gorbachev his “not one inch eastward” assurance. That fifth map came into being in 2009, when Albania and Croatia became NATO members, and that sixth map is the same as the first one in this series. Moscow and St. Petersburg, which were protected by a large buffer zone in 1990, are now dangerously close (from the Russian perspective) to NATO’s borders.



Russia's feeling of encirclement: NATO today (top) versus 1990 (bottom)

Other Views on “Not One Inch Eastward”

This section pulls together some quotes on the dispute over what Baker meant by his “not one inch eastward” assurance to Gorbachev.

On October 29, 1997, Senate testimony by James Baker [encouraged enlarging NATO](#) to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Those three nations were admitted on March 12, 1999. Contrast the following excerpts from Baker’s 1997 testimony with his February 9, 1990, meeting with Gorbachev when he gave his “not one inch eastward” assurance:

Let me begin with three short propositions:

- (1) Enlarging NATO is good for Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic;
- (2) It is good for our allies in Western Europe;
- (3) And, most importantly, it is good for the United States.

From the point of view of the Poland [*sic*], Hungary and the Czech Republic, NATO membership confers important advantages. Most obviously, it ***protects them from foreign aggression***. True, these countries today do not confront any direct external threat. But such a threat, ***notably from a resurgent Russia***, may arise in the future. [emphasis added]

[The Atlantic Alliance and European Security in the 1990s](#), an address by NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner, Brussels 17 May 1990:

[NATO’s] strategy and our Alliance are exclusively defensive. They threaten no-one, neither today nor tomorrow. ... This will also be true of a united Germany in NATO. The very fact that we are ready not to deploy NATO troops beyond the territory of the Federal Republic gives the Soviet Union firm security guarantees. ... This will meet Soviet concerns about not changing the overall East-West strategic balance. Soviet politicians are wrong to claim that German membership of NATO will lead to instability.” ... We have left behind us the old friend/foe mind-set and the confrontational outlook. We do not need enemies nor threat perceptions. We do not look upon the Soviet Union as the enemy.

[A 1998 letter](#) from Jack Matlock (Reagan’s Ambassador to Moscow) to Strobe Talbott, then Deputy Secretary of State:

I do not share your optimism that we can manage our relations with Russia in the context of a relentlessly expanding NATO. ... The feeling of rejection and inferiority breeds irresponsible Slavophilism, and the suspicion that the United States is extending its influence at Russia’s expense undermines our ability to secure cooperation even when it is in Russia’s interest. ... The idea that you can build cooperation with Russia and encourage its democratic forces in the context of an expanding NATO is – to put it as mildly as I can – wishful thinking. ... It [the division of Europe] ended bloodlessly because we convinced the Soviet leaders it would be in their interest to go quietly and we would not take advantage of their departure. If you have any doubts on that point, I would suggest you ask your staff to show you the memorandum reporting Secretary Baker’s conversation with Gorbachev in early February 1990. I am not suggesting that there was

anything legally binding in that conversation, but Gorbachev says in his memoirs that Baker's argument, which included the statement that the jurisdiction of NATO would not move eastward, convinced him to agree that a united Germany could stay in NATO. Gorbachev is no longer in power and Russia is not the Soviet Union, but since the Soviet collapse there is even less justification than there was in 1990 and 1991 to move NATO to the east.

[A second letter](#) from Matlock to Talbott⁵:

As I mentioned in my previous letter, in 1989 and 1990 we encouraged the Soviets to leave Eastern Europe, to allow Germany to be unified, and to allow a unified Germany to stay in NATO, with a clear understanding (though not a legal obligation) that NATO's jurisdiction would not be moved further eastward. (Gorbachev said at one point, "If you do that, you'll have to take us too!") These were the conditions under which the division of Europe was ended and the Iron Curtain disappeared. It is really disingenuous to claim that moving NATO eastward erases a line when the line in question no longer exists. When I saw Gorbachev a few months ago, his first words were, "What are they doing? They are tearing down everything we built!" What we built, in his view and mine, was the potential for a united Europe. The [Clinton] administration is betraying that hope and not, as you suggest, fulfilling it, for the hope was not just to make Western Europe larger but to keep the continent whole and free.

[An article](#) written in 2007 by Vice Admiral Ulrich Weisser (Ret.), who was head of the policy and planning staff in the German Ministry of Defense from 1992 to 1998. In addition to dealing with NATO expansion, it also notes that Poland sees the American missile defense system as directed against Russia, not Iran as America maintains. Be sure to note the accusation in the last paragraph of this excerpt about provocative behavior on the part of Poland and the Baltics:

Particularly irritating to Russia is the American intention to not limit their anti-ballistic missile defense system to their own territory but to place them in central and Eastern Europe. Ten anti-missile defense system installations are likely to be placed in Poland, their associated long-range radar stations to be stationed on Czech soil.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates explained in Munich that these facilities were directed against possible developments "in Iran and elsewhere," and not against Russia, but this statement is not necessarily conclusive. ...

The missile defense system the U.S. wants to station in Poland may therefore in truth and in fact more likely be directed against Russia. A further irritation in this context is that statements coming from Polish government circles quite bluntly draw attention to the new Russian TOPOL-M missiles, not to a potential threat coming from the south. ...

Putin most certainly had in mind the assurances given to the Soviet Union before the first round of NATO's eastward expansion. In that context, he quoted directly from [a speech](#)

⁵ Two letters from Talbott to Matlock are also accessible near the top of the page for either of Matlock's letters.

by NATO's former General Secretary Manfred Wörner, given in Brussels on May 17, 1990: "The very fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee." "Where are these guarantees now," the Russian president asked.

Prior to admitting Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, NATO had indeed stated to Russia that there was no need, no plan, and no intention to undertake such stationing. The alliance has not held this promise. On the contrary, the U.S. has even secured rights in Romania to establish forward bases for its air force.

Moscow also feels provoked by the behavior of a number of newer NATO member states in central and Eastern Europe. Poland and the Baltic states use every opportunity to make provocative digs at Russia; they feel themselves protected by NATO and backed by the U.S.

A March 2010 [open letter](#) from German defense experts Volker Rühle, Klaus Naumann, Frank Elbe and Ulrich Weisser (Weisser wrote the 2007 article listed above), suggesting that Russia be included in NATO (although it is questionable whether it would accept such an invitation):

NATO, in its current form, is not up to these tasks. In the future, the alliance should see itself as a strategic framework for the three centers of power: North America, Europe and Russia. This trio has common interests that are threatened by the same challenges, and which require the same responses. If the alliance intends to be the primary forum for addressing all crises – because it is the only forum where North America, Europe and Russia sit at the same table – then it must now establish the requisite institutional framework for that to happen. The door to NATO membership should be opened for Russia. Russia, in turn, must be prepared to accept the rights and obligations of a NATO member, of an equal among equals. ...

There is no consensus over how to appraise and handle Russia, a fundamental question over which the members of the alliance and the EU are deeply divided. One of the key bones of contention is that, for historical reasons, the new members of NATO define their security as being directed against Russia, while the imperative for Western Europe is that security in and for Europe can only be achieved with and not against Russia.

Russia has repeatedly made it clear that it feels sidelined by the expansion of NATO and the shift in the alliance's borders by 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) to the east. It has also objected to countries that were once part of the Soviet Union becoming NATO members. But NATO insists that every country in Europe has the right to join the alliance of its choosing. Should the two sides come to a deadlock over this controversy, it holds the potential to trigger serious conflict. A Russian membership of NATO would make it easier to integrate Georgia and Ukraine into European structures – the mere willingness to become a member presupposes recognition of the territorial integrity of European countries.

An [Open Letter To The Obama Administration](#) from political leaders in Eastern Europe (July 16, 2009) shows how former Soviet bloc nations continue to view NATO as a bulwark against Russia. Given their previous subjugation, that perspective may be understandable – but also may not be.⁶ In any event, it conflicts with American statements that Russia has nothing to fear from of NATO expansion:

We have written this letter because, as Central and Eastern European (CEE) intellectuals and former policymakers, we care deeply about the future of the transatlantic relationship. ... storm clouds are starting to gather on the foreign policy horizon. Like you, we await the results of the EU Commission's investigation on the origins of the Russo-Georgian war. But the political impact of that war on the region has already been felt. Many countries were deeply disturbed to see the Atlantic alliance stand by as Russia violated the core principles of the Helsinki Final Act, the Charter of Paris, and the territorial integrity of a country that was a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace and the Euroatlantic Partnership Council – all in the name of defending a sphere of influence on its borders⁷. ... It was a mistake not to commence with proper Article 5 defense planning for new members after NATO was enlarged. NATO needs to make the Alliance's commitments credible and provide strategic reassurance to all members. This should include contingency planning, prepositioning of forces, equipment, and supplies for reinforcement in our region in case of crisis as originally envisioned in the NATO-Russia Founding Act.

The reference to NATO's Article 5 is particularly provocative because it says that an attack on one NATO member shall be considered an attack on all. This is often translated as saying that, if Russia were to attack a NATO member, then the United States would have to treat it as if the attack had been on our home soil and unleash the full fury of our armed forces on Russia. Such language is particularly dangerous given that Georgia bears much of the responsibility for its 2008 war with Russia.

Russia feels double crossed

Russia would be concerned about NATO expansion even without Baker's "not one inch eastward" statement, but it adds an extra dose of risk since it leaves Russia feeling double crossed. This is of particular concern because similar feelings of betrayal played a role in starting World War II. When Germany signed the Armistice in November 1918, it did so in the belief that Woodrow Wilson's high-minded [Fourteen Points](#) would form the basis of the eventual peace treaty. Earlier, in January 1917, Wilson referred to this as [peace without victory](#):

⁶ The situation is [more complex](#) because these nations were subjugated by the Soviet Union, not Russia, and a number of key Soviet leaders were not Russian. Stalin was Georgian, as was his brutal secret police chief, Lavrentiy Beria. Latvian troops played a key role in the Bolshevik revolution. The first head of the Soviet political police or Cheka was a Pole, while the second and third were Latvians.

⁷ See the discussion of the Georgian war in this handout for another perspective.

... it must be a peace without victory. ... Victory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor's terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently but only as upon quicksand. Only a peace between equals can last.

However, once Germany disarmed, Wilson was overruled by others, most notably France, which had suffered the brunt of the devastation during the war, and which had been forced to pay five billion gold francs in reparations to Germany after losing the Franco-Prussian war in 1871. In addition to imposing even more onerous war reparations on Germany, the Treaty had a "war guilt clause" (Article 231) stating:

... Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.

The harsh Treaty of Versailles not only humiliated Germany, but also – in the context of Wilson's promise of "peace without victory" – led to the same feelings of humiliation and being double crossed under which Russia now labors. Other factors also helped transform the highly civilized pre-war Germany into a Nazi monstrosity, but these feelings played a role, so we neglect them at our peril.