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## Putin, Not NATO, Is to Blame

*Винен В. Путін, а не НАТО*

*. На думку головного редактора "National Review" Р. Лоурі, В. Путін настільки боїться НАТО, що у нього немає іншого вибору, окрім як загрозувати сусіднім країнам і час від часу погрожувати їм, зокрема в контексті України. Р. Лоурі називає першопричиною цього конфлікту не НАТО, а В. Путіна., аже ніхто щиро не вірить, навіть Кремль, що НАТО збирається вести загарбницьку війну проти Росії.*

<https://www.nationalreview.com/2022/02/putin-not-nato-is-to-blame/#slide-1>

Bad ideas never truly go away. So it is that an old left-wing trope from the Cold War has currency again, both on the populist right and among progressives.

The argument is that Vladimir Putin is so afraid of NATO that he has no choice but to menace neighboring countries and occasionally invade them, as he is threatening to do once again in Ukraine.

The root cause of this conflict isn't NATO, though; it's Putin. He's the aggressor. He is the one who has created an international emergency from out of nowhere by moving 130,000 troops to the border of a country that represents no conceivable physical threat to Russia. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a defensive alliance. No one sincerely believes, not even the Kremlin, that it is going to wage a war of aggression against Russia. Think about it. Since when does Russia have more to fear from, say, Estonia or Poland — countries on the eastern flank of NATO — than they have to fear from Russia? If Germany won't even provide Ukraine with weapons to resist a potential invasion by Moscow, how is it going to sign up to roll into the heartland of Russia? And who's going to provide all the requisite troops and tanks? The U.S. has a lot of them, but no one else does. In this respect, Putin could be justified in dismissing the collective forces of the most important European countries — the U.K., France, and Germany — with a version of Otto von Bismarck's supposed quip, "If Lord Palmerston sends the British army to Germany, I shall have the police arrest them." Surely, what worries Putin most isn't any military threat, but the Western model of free, accountable government that puts his kleptocratic authoritarianism in a particularly bad light, especially the closer it gets to Mother Russia.

Even if NATO completely collapsed and Putin swept to control of all of continental Europe, it's not clear that his head would rest easy on his pillow at night, knowing that his government lacks democratic legitimacy and is being outstripped by countries reaping the benefits of self-government, the rule of law, independent judiciaries, and constitutional rights.

The Soviet Union occupied half of Europe and didn't feel secure for similar reasons — it wasn't a normal country. Nor is Putin's Russia.

NATO isn't as vital as it was during the Cold War — institutions inevitably change over time — but it still matters. Maintaining the alliance and the current European order are clearly in the

national-security interests of the United States. It's an enormous strategic benefit to us to have a vast zone in Europe of allied countries that are prosperous, free, and at peace, and that look to us for leadership. It speaks to the alliance's continued deterrent effect that Putin is, notably, not threatening a NATO country. The alliance has provided military support in Afghanistan and for post-9/11 counterterrorism missions. It is a force-multiplier for us to train with and to be interoperable with European forces. Finally, NATO provides a political cohesion that is going to be increasingly useful in resisting Chinese efforts to exploit divisions in Europe. If Russia resorts to naked aggression in Ukraine and gets away with it, it will be a blow to the post-Cold War order in Europe. And if the U.S. ever gives up on NATO, it will undermine all our other commitments around the world and pave the way for China to supplant the U.S. as the world's predominant power. All this counsels being firm and clear-eyed with Russia before we get anywhere close to that point. This needn't preclude an eventual diplomatic deal, perhaps involving an agreement for Ukrainian neutrality on the model of Austria or Finland during the Cold War. But we shouldn't negotiate with a gun to our head and shouldn't have any illusions about the man whose cynicism and power hunger are driving this crisis.