

# Review of: "Rebuilding a 'Greater Russia' and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine"

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Professor Roger Kanet's article, "Rebuilding a 'Greater Russia' and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," provides a trenchant description and analysis of Russia as an "expanding political system." Even so, it leaves out four important aspects of the story of Russia since the collapse of communism and Russia's prospects.

First, as Professor Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University has emphasized, the United States and its European allies decided against providing financial and other help to Russia after 1990, assistance along the lines that the US and the EU readily provided to Poland shortly before, with excellent results that aided Poland in re-entering the mainstream of European life. The US wanted Poland to be strong and Russia to be weak – a colossal mistake, the argument goes. Mistake or not, one cannot help wondering with Professor Sachs how Russia might have developed as a liberal democracy if the US and EU had decided to offer generous, yet conditional assistance to the Yeltsin government in the first decade of the new post-communist regime. Had Russia received similar help and encouragement as Germany, Italy, and Japan received after WWII, could Russia have made enough progress to join the EU by, say, 2014? – making Ukraine safe from Russian aggression. Perhaps. We will never know. The answer to this hypothetical question depends, among other things, on how the challenge of keeping the control of Russia's natural resources in the right hands would have been met without creating a new, destructive class of kleptocrats, Russian or foreign. It is easy to see why the Yeltsin government would have wanted to keep US interests at a safe distance from Russian oil fields and mines.

Second, Russia's long history of relentless expansion, eastward as well as southward and westward, reminds us that Vladivostok used to be a Chinese city until 1860, which probably feels like yesterday to President Xi Jinping. Now that President Putin has shown the world that he feels entitled to absorb Ukraine into the Russian Federation, based on a deeply flawed concept of Ukrainian history as Timothy Snyder of Yale University has stressed among others, perhaps the Chinese will find it opportune to reconsider their current attitude toward the territories they ceded to Russia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many Russians worry about this now. Perhaps the best way for Russia to retain those territories is to give up its claim to Ukraine without delay and order its forces to return home rather than face, or risk, military defeat and subsequent possible loss of territory in the Far East.

Third, in an ideal world, Russia would change course, respect the right of its neighbors to join those alliances they wish to join, but would also reserve the right to try to convince them that perhaps Austrian-style neutrality could be mutually agreeable and beneficial. But this is more difficult to accomplish now that Finland and Sweden have turned their backs on such neutrality; after all, unlike Austria, Finland shares a long border with Russia. Perhaps an agreement along such lines

could have been negotiated before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 or before 2014, perhaps not. If it was achievable as some observers maintain, it would be helpful to know why such an agreement failed to materialize and who bears the responsibility for that outcome.

Fourth, several observers have pointed out that US officials promised their Russian counterparts after 1990 that NATO would not be expanded eastward. But this was not a promise for US officials to make or for Russian officials to accept at face value without the people of post-communist Eastern Europe being asked how they wanted to organize their defenses and alliances. Perhaps an agreement could have been reached in the early 1990s to the effect that the Austrian model would suit the former Warsaw Pact countries as well as the Baltic states, but that was not to be. Perhaps we will never know.

Professor Kanet could bring his impressive expertise to bear on these important matters as well.