

Interview – Hilary Appel

Written by E-International Relations

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Hilary Appel is the Podlich Family Professor of Government and George R. Roberts Fellow at Claremont McKenna College, where she teaches Russian and East European politics, comparative politics, and international political economy. She holds a bachelor's degree from Williams College, a master's degree from Stanford University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include Russian politics and economic reforms in post-Communist countries. She is the author of the award winning book *From Triumph to Crisis: Neoliberal Economic Reform in Post-Communist Countries* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Why is Ukraine so important to Russia?

One reason Ukraine is important to Russia is because of its geographical location. There is a long border between the two countries, so Russia would like Ukraine to serve as a buffer state. In terms of Russia's opposition to Ukraine joining NATO, President Putin has asserted that Ukraine is not a distinct nation from Russia because of shared cultural, historical, and linguistic ties. Putin does not want Ukraine to be part of the West's orbit because of his antiquated and outdated idea that the world is divided into spheres of influence. Even though this idea was prominent during the Cold War period, it no longer is seen as legitimate today. However, to Putin, Ukraine squarely belongs to Russia's sphere of influence. For the same reason, Russia does not want Georgia to join NATO so that Georgia also remains part of its sphere of influence.

Prior to Russia's invasion, is it possible that Ukraine would have joined NATO any time soon?

NATO did not give Ukraine a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to join NATO because several European member states opposed it. They didn't want to antagonize Russia given their dependence on Russia for oil and gas. Since 2008, NATO leaders have made it very clear that Ukraine would not be receiving a timetable for joining NATO. Besides the opposition to Ukrainian membership from powerful countries like Germany and France, there were also plenty of reasons on the Ukrainian side why it was not going to become a member of NATO any time soon. First, it was not a country that could contribute to security in Europe but instead would become more of a security liability—partly because of its proximity and relationship to Russia, but also because its military was not sufficiently developed. Poverty, corruption, and concerns about the rule of law were also major obstacles for Ukraine. Finally, Ukraine was not eligible to join NATO because it did not fully control its own territory and borders. Unless Ukraine recognized Crimea as part of the Russian Federation, which it was not willing to do, it could not become a member of NATO.

If it is unlikely for Ukraine to join NATO, why can't the U.S. and other European countries make this more explicit? Do you think some clarification could have prevented Russia's invasion?

The U.S. refused to offer Russia a written guarantee that NATO would never accept Ukraine as a member and preferred to keep it somewhat ambiguous. In retrospect, if all of this bloodshed could have been avoided, it would have been worth it in my mind. After all, now that Ukraine is under attack, the Zelensky government has revealed some willingness to discuss the possibility of Ukraine's neutrality status. Everything has changed in the last week. That said, because Ukraine's NATO membership was not imminent, it could not have been the only or even the main thing Moscow was trying to achieve with its invasion. If Russia only wanted to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, this goal would have already been assured given Russia's occupation of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine,

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specifically Luhansk and Donetsk, which all are formally still a part of Ukraine's territory. Therefore, Ukraine's NATO membership was not really the main motivation. Besides blocking NATO membership for Ukraine, Russia also wanted written guarantees about the stationing of troops. NATO was certainly unwilling to pull its troops from the existing member states in Eastern Europe, where they were stationed in rotation.

How do we situate Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the long history of Russia's anti-NATO enlargement efforts?

In the early years of NATO expansion, including 1999 and 2004, Russia was too weak, impoverished, and distracted to block NATO enlargement. It had internal challenges that were much more significant. Despite occasional statements by Russian leaders expressing opposition to enlargement, it could not do much to stop it. Over the course of Putin's first two terms as president, Russia's economy recovered substantially. By 2008, Russia was more willing to assert its opposition to NATO enlargement and ready to assume a more significant role on the world stage. In August, it went to war with Georgia. As a result of the continued occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia also does not fully control its territory and thus is ineligible to become a candidate for NATO membership. In 2015, Russia shifted its identification of NATO as a point of concern to a threat. Nevertheless, despite Russia's growing strength and explicit anti-NATO enlargement stance, it has not been successful in thwarting enlargement. NATO increased in size by adding two new members: Montenegro and North Macedonia in 2017 and 2020. They joined after the 2014 war in Ukraine began. Hence, despite Russia's opposition, it was unable to block NATO enlargement.

Would you characterize Russia's anti-NATO enlargement efforts as futile?

I would describe them as unsuccessful. Besides new NATO member states, leaders in other European countries like Finland and Sweden started discussing the appeal of joining NATO or at least increasing their country's cooperation with NATO, well before the current invasion. That was a result of Russia becoming more assertive and bellicose. While they are not candidates to join, this is becoming a mainstream idea in these countries. There was no will to be closer with NATO before Russia's annexation of Crimea. Instead of deterring countries from joining NATO, Russia's aggression encouraged more countries to want to join NATO, especially ordinary people in Ukraine who before 2014 were ambivalent.

How may economic sanctions and lethal aid provided by the U.S., Japan, and European countries affect Russia? Will Russia's counter-sanctions impact the aforementioned countries?

The economic sanctions and lethal aid will severely impact Russia. Mostly likely, President Putin did not expect such a strong, unified response from Europe. Over time, one hopes that the damage to the economy may be significant enough that the Russian leadership may reconsider its demands and return to the negotiating table. Because of the sanctions, Russia will not have access to its foreign exchange reserves that are denominated in dollars, euros, and yen. This is a big deal because traditionally Russia's foreign policy is very much dependent upon the scale of its reserves. More immediately, Russia needs these resources to defend its currency and prevent the collapse of the economy. The penalties and economic sanctions are very significant. Another major response was banning seven Russian banks from SWIFT.

Finally, lethal aid is now pouring in. Now, countries like Germany and Italy are now much more willing to push back on Russia by arming Ukraine. Before this, aid was mostly limited to defensive military equipment. There have been important responses in terms of economic measures and lethal aid that will be very damaging to the Russian ruble, stock market, economy, and war effort in the immediate term and longer. The most significant impact Russia's counter-sanctions can have on the West relates to the Europe's dependency on Russian oil and gas. The Europeans and Americans have strategic reserves, though, which may help them weather this.

How do we assess China's role in the midst of this crisis?

China's support is extremely important for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Certainly, as the West cuts Russia off from its capital markets, Russia will turn to China as an alternative source of capital, payment mechanisms, and so forth.

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In fact, since 2015, the Russia-China relationship has been important for Russia's ability to assert itself in the world. China is responding to the military action carefully. On the one hand, Beijing wants to show its support for Russia as a strategic partner, but on the other hand, China also does not want to be impacted directly for breaking the sanctions. Its own interests are at stake too. China abstained from the UN Security Council Resolution condemning Russia's invasion. Also, Xi expressed that China respects the territorial integrity of all sovereign countries, but also recognizes Russia's legitimate security concerns. This situation may be difficult for China to navigate.

What is the most important advice you could give to early practitioners and scholars of international relations?

I strongly recommend that those interested in research on the region and the current debate over the war in Ukraine to consult <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/>. Many perspectives are offered there and the contributors to this site are from all over the world, including Russia and Ukraine. You can find short answers to pressing questions, a useful blog, as well as insightful longer policy memos. My advice to new practitioners and students of the region is to get their information from a range of sources and to be sensitive to the tendency to seek out information from sources that use algorithms, which reinforce preexisting beliefs.