

Learning for Life Lecture Series, Northwestern University

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“Europe, Russia, and Ukraine, Before and After February 24”

Speakers

Ambassador Ian Kelly is Ambassador (ret.) in Residence at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. He is a retired senior foreign service officer who last served as the United States Ambassador to Georgia, from 2015 to 2018. He previously served as the U.S. Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) from 2010 to 2013. Prior to his ambassadorships, Kelly held a variety of high-level roles at the U.S. State Department, including serving as the Department spokesman under Secretary Hillary Clinton and as Director of the Office of Russian Affairs. Before joining the State Department, he earned a PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Columbia University.



Ambassador Ivo Daalder is President of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and host of the weekly series [World Review with Ivo Daalder](#). He served as the US ambassador to NATO from 2009 to 2013, appointed by President Obama. Prior to NATO, Daalder was a senior fellow in foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution. Before joining Brookings in 1998, he was on the faculty at the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy and director of research at its Center for International and Security Studies. He was also director for European affairs on President Bill Clinton’s National Security Council staff from 1995 to 1997. Ambassador Daalder is a much published author - his latest book is titled [The Empty Throne: America's Abdication of Global Leadership](#). Ambassador Daalder received his PhD in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



Moderator

Lisa Dhar is the Interim Executive Director of the Querrey InQbation Lab, Northwestern’s new incubator for research-based entrepreneurship and a faculty member with the Farley Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. She was co-founder and vice president of InPhase Technologies, a company spun out of Bell Laboratories, Lucent Technologies. Prior to joining Northwestern, she was the Senior Associate Director of the Office of Technology Management at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Lisa has served on the National Academies’ Assessment Panel on Materials Science and Engineering at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and on the Advisory Board for University of Colorado’s Women in Engineering. Lisa holds a PhD in Physical Chemistry from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a BS in Chemistry from the University of Chicago.



Today's class opened with an introduction from Shirley Ryan, the founder of the Learning for Life series. We are in the 47th year of this wonderful series. Over 180 people have registered for this class, illustrating the remarkable reach and value of the program.

The discussion with Ambassadors Kelly and Daalder is summarized below.

Question 1: February 24th 2022 marks the date of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine and has been followed by a grinding series of offensive and counter-offensive operations. Before we dive into what has happened in the past eight months, it would be useful to establish historical context. **Ambassador Kelly**, could you set the stage, starting with the collapse of the Soviet Union and help us understand the post-Cold War era?

Ambassador Kelly described the following:

- Historical context is important as what we are seeing today is Putin's attempt to re-litigate the agreements from December 1991 which marked the collapse of the Soviet Union, creating 15 independent states.
- With the collapse, President Boris Yeltsin attempted to establish a Moscow-centric but non-communist union of states which would include Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, countries with the largest populations of people who identified as Russians. Although leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan agreed, Ukraine was adamantly not willing, and all that was possible was a very loose confederation. Yeltsin accepted an independent Ukraine with Crimea and the Donbas region, which were historically Russian lands, within Ukraine's borders.
- However, a significant contingent within his government, primarily the army and KGB, did not accept the idea of an independent Ukraine. Yeltsin's perhaps biggest mistake was not to purge this communist/nationalist faction, a failure of lustration.
- Putin views the collapse of the Soviet Union and immediate consequences as the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century as it left millions of people who identified as Russians outside of Russia. Today is really the legacy of this failure of lustration. Putin comes from KGB, his inner circle comes from KGB.
- Putin's renewed the attempt to create a Moscow-centric union – the Eurasian Union. Belarus and Kazakhstan joined in 2014 but Ukraine once again refused, setting the stage for what we see today.

Question 2: Should we dig in deeper into the last decade in Ukraine? **Ambassador Daalder**, could you lay out some of the implications of events such as the Maidan Protests in Ukraine, what happened in Crimea, the Donbas region, and then the buildup along the Ukraine borders immediately before February 24?

Ambassador Daalder described the following:

- Ukraine never wanted to join a Moscow-dominated union despite many internal debates and geographical differences with the eastern side tilting towards Moscow and the western part of the country leaning towards the West.
- First public protests emerged in 2004, when a national election appeared to be stolen by Moscow-aligned element. Known as the Orange Revolution, the protests precipitated a new election, viewed to be free & fair.
- President Yanukovich, viewed to be Moscow-leaning, was in power in 2013 but was negotiating with the European Union (EU) to receive preferential treatment and perhaps to join the EU. This potential Kyiv-Brussels alignment worried Putin who offered \$20B worth of aid to Ukraine to not to sign such an agreement. Yanukovich decided not to follow through with agreements which led to the Maidan Protests in late 2013-early 2014. The protests grew in popular support with a sense of the West supporting these protests. The protests precipitated widespread violence with the Ukrainian government shooting many of its citizens.
- Yanukovich left office and new elections were held resulting in a new West-leaning Ukrainian government. Russia characterized this as a CIA-led coup, decried the legitimacy everything that followed, and invaded Ukraine, focusing on Crimea. Russia already had a military presence there with a military fleet in the Black Sea port, so control was easy taken in 2014. Russia held a fake referendum and annexed the Crimea region. At the same time, along the eastern side, in the Donbas region, there was also an effort to create an independent region aligned with Russia leading to a real war that has killed 30,000 people killed between 2014-2022. With this war, however, Putin was not achieving what he wanted.
- During 2020-2021, likely isolated during COVID isolation, Putin convinced himself that the future of Russia depended on Ukraine rejoining Russia and sent 175,000 troops to the border of Ukraine, hoping to gain control in a quick and decisive manner.

Question 3: This all circles around Putin's justification for this war, his motivations, his mindset, his goals. **Ambassador Kelly**, could you give us your thoughts here?

Ambassador Kelly described the following:

- Putin published a telling essay in July 2021 titled “*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*” where he set out his reasons why an independent Ukraine is a clear and present danger to Russia. He states there is a natural affinity between the Eastern, Slavic nations who should be together again, and that NATO is pushing Ukraine to be the anti-Russia. In his view, this is forcing a change of cultural identity leading to cultural weapons of mass destruction. He described how Ukraine was becoming an “aircraft carrier” for NATO – falsely accusing that NATO was setting up air bases to attack Russia and that the U.S. was helping President Zelensky develop nuclear weapons.
- Putin also believes there is a lack of commitment to international engagement by U.S. and additionally highlighted the precipitous disengagement from Afghanistan.
- He is also seeing that the West was not consistent with sanctions imposed during past Russian actions in Georgia and Crimea and thinking that new sanctions will not have staying power.
- Most Russians likely believe this war is a miscalculation, but Putin is hoping with winter, the cutoff of gas, and rising inflation, that Europe’s resolve will waver.

Ambassador Daalder added on the following:

- Putin made three calculations - -
 - After 15-20 years of modernization of Russian military (used effectively in Syria and some parts of Ukraine), that Russian forces were unassailable except if it had to fight NATO/US.
 - Ukrainians did not have capacity or desire to fight Russia.
 - The West was divided, declining, decadent. In an interview with the *Financial Times* in 2019, Putin declared that liberalism was dead. Putin thought the West could not marshal appropriate response.
But he was wrong on all three fronts.
- Russia’s experiences with fighting in Syria, where there was no real defense, and in Crimea, where Russia already dominated, were different situations than in Ukraine. The fighting in the Donbas region over the past eight years where no ground was gained or yielded demonstrate that the fifteen-year investment in the Russian military did not gain anything.

- Ukrainian forces have been trained by the West over the last eight years to deal with large military maneuvers with irregular forces. The Ukrainian population united to defend its country led by President Zelensky.
- Russia fundamentally miscalculated the West. The Biden administration is well positioned to think about and deal with this situation – Biden is dedicated to NATO and strong allies.

Question 4:

Let's focus on Europe. The impact of the war there and their response. **Ambassador Daalder**, what is your assessment?

Ambassador Daalder described the following:

- The invasion was a shock to Europe. There is a well-known story of Secretary of State Blinken calling a European foreign minister warning of the invasion only to be told no such thing would happen. (The minister apologized on February 24th.)
- This shock has led to a complete reassessment by Europe about how to think about Russia, its defense, and countries with political systems not aligned with the West.
- The Europeans then undertook eight rounds of sanctions and moved to cut off all dependence on Russian fossil fuels. Germany has completely stopped all gas imports from Russia.
- Germans and others have increased military budgets to improve their defenses
- This psychological change in attitude will be permanent. No one believes that we will go back to a Russia we can deal with.

Question 5:

How would you characterize the possible global realignment we see with China and India's responses and now what is happening in the Middle East?

Ambassador Kelly described the following:

- Countries oriented towards democratic forms of government are aligning with the sanctions and companies from the "global south" are hedging their bets.
- But the condemnation, as seen in the UN General Assembly's vote on the proclamation to denounce the invasion, has been relatively universal
- Eventually, the G7/European sanctions will kick in economically and militarily. For example, high-tech components are sourced from these countries impacting Russia's avionics and other industries.

Question 6: Can we talk about the United States' role? **Ambassador Kelly**, what can the U.S. do, what should we do?

Ambassador Kelly described the following:

Things the U.S. has done well –

- Uniting the West, given that previous U.S. President had insulted European counterparts and NATO
- Making clear to Russia that there will be catastrophic consequences to any use of nuclear weapons. (These threats to use nuclear weapons may be saber-rattling more than anything else.) But given the US has no visibility into the decision-making process in Russia, the very clear statement is important.

Things the US should do –

- Make available to Ukraine, long-range weapons, more high-end armor, more high-tech anti-air capabilities.
- The likely Republican majorities that will result in the November elections should be considered. Congressman Kevin McCarthy who may be the next Speaker has stated that the new majority will not be able to vote for another tranche of funding of support.
- President Biden should get in front of the country and lay out why we need to stop Putin now.

Question 7: What will be the resolution, endgame, exit strategy?

Ambassador Daalder described the following:

- Russia is losing the war and Ukraine is winning despite what we see about the day-to-day damages. The Russian army is so depleted that they are picking up individuals from the street who are not trained. The Ukrainians are trained and most importantly have morale.
- We will see advances in the next months. Kherson will be liberated, and Ukraine will gain control of the critical dam over the Niger River and the power station at Zaporizhzhia. Russia will then have no strategic advantage with Ukraine controlling the water supply to Crimea and power for the nation.
- How does the fighting stop? It will be a wait and see. We may see a tacit/mediated conversation about disengaging forces through the winter followed by an effort to push Russia out of the country.
- As long as Putin is in power, the sanctions will stay in place. Ukraine will continue to get stronger.
- Next year, we will see an acceleration of efforts of Ukraine to become part of the EU and NATO.
- We must keep in mind Ukraine is not only defending its country, but also defending us.

Ambassador Kelly described the following:

- Agree with the above.
- The Ukrainians will not agree to any negotiated end to the fighting with a locked-down protection of their security. The Ukrainians will not agree to what took place in Georgia in 2008 where a cease-fire left the Russians in control of 20% of Georgia.
- An end must include withdrawal of troops, NATO membership, and perhaps NATO providing some legally binding security guarantee against a future Russian invasion.

Q&As from audience

- Why was Ukraine not originally part of NATO? There was an internal debate within the country, but Ukraine did apply in 2008. NATO was divided whether to bring Ukraine in – many countries were not sure if they wanted to defend Ukraine. The compromise was to not bring Ukraine in but that one day they would be able to join – a “worst” of two worlds. This nether world has contributed to the instability of the situation. Mixed signals are dangerous – the absence of NATO caused of the war.
- What were the essences of the conversations with Xie and Modi? Both are increasingly concerned about the global consequences (energy & food shortages, inflation). Xie and Putin had declared a “partnership without limits” – one that is severely tested by this war. Xie and China want this war to end. But neither Xie nor Modi are doing anything to put pressure on Putin. Another reason the U.S. is pulling out all stops to support Ukraine is to set an example for China with its aims for Taiwan. Under Xie, the saber-rattling with respect to Taiwan has been raised to an alarming level. But China’s priority is economic growth which would be undermined by an invasion of Taiwan.
- Who will fund the rebuilding of Taiwan? The bulk must come from the Europeans. The U.S. should be part of this rebuilding – the destruction has been extraordinary. We have learned through the Marshall Plan that it is to our benefit to support countries who will grow into economic strength. Seizing assets from Russian oligarchs may not be advisable as it can lead to dangerous resentment.
- Will Ukraine joining NATO help or hinder other countries joining? Countries like Georgia will likely want to piggyback on Ukraine’s joining. We will need unanimous agreement among members of NATO which may be difficult. Finland and Sweden, both relying on neutrality, have both applied to join NATO, prompted by Russia’s invasion.

- How current is Russia's nuclear arsenal, what is its size? Russia has the most nuclear weapons of any country. Nuclear weapons are a 1930/1940s technology so do not necessarily have to be current. We have made clear what the consequences will be if nuclear weapons are used. Biden is balancing arming Ukraine with the risk of a nuclear exchange.