

Letter

Letter: Learning the lessons of Versailles is the key to Europe's security

From Robert Hunter, Former US Ambassador to Nato Negotiator of Nato-Ukraine Charter, Washington, DC,
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Russian President Boris Yeltsin, left, shakes hands with his US counterpart Bill Clinton before their bilateral talks © Joyce Naltchayan/AFP/Getty Images

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Professor Timothy Snyder ([Lunch with the FT](#), July 29) correctly argues for remembering history and links Vladimir Putin's aggression against Ukraine to the Munich crisis of 1938.

But relevant history actually began in 1919, with the Germany war guilt clause (clause 231) in the Versailles Treaty. It was used by Hitler in his rise to power and helped produce the second world war. This also helped explain why the George HW Bush and Clinton administrations decided not to punish the defeated Soviet Union (Russia) but tried instead to include it in Europe's security arrangements.

Notable was the 1997 Nato-Russia Founding Act, with 19 co-operative projects. Key Nato leaders also recognised that Ukraine would be western in politics and economics, but could not be in Nato, just as the west could not accede to Ukraine being part of a Russian sphere of influence. This led to the 1997 Nato-Ukraine Charter (which as US ambassador to Nato I negotiated with Ukraine).

But in 2008, the George W Bush administration committed a historic error, convincing Nato partners to declare that "Ukraine and Georgia will become Nato members".

Ironically, it's doubtful that Ukraine and Georgia could join Nato, which requires consensus of all alliance members, now 31. Several will never commit to go to war against Russia on behalf of Ukraine or Georgia, under the Nato Treaty's Article 5. Unilaterally, however, the US and other allies should continue providing robust support for Ukraine's security.

Whatever happens in the war, at some point Russia will again become a great power. Thus any hope of lasting stability in Europe, rather than decades-long, heavily-armed confrontation, requires that Russia is not denied a role in Europe's security architecture. Of course, Moscow would need to start by abiding by the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which pledged US-UK-Russia non-aggression against Ukraine.

This is basic geopolitics: ignored in 1919 and 2008 — and violated by Russia in 2014 and 2022. It must be respected if a new cold war is to be forestalled — or, worse, open US/Nato-Russia conflict.

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