

Truth and Exaggeration in Russian Narrative of “NATO Expansion Threat”

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YAMAZOE Hiroshi (Regional Studies Department)

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A newer history of Russia can be like this:

“Vladimir Putin started a wrong war against Ukraine in February 2022. Ukraine resisted it and the world retaliated by inflicting enormous economic and diplomatic damage on Russia. Putin then realized what the real Russian national interest was. He talked to Ukraine, the U.S. and China in late March, and obtained the real security conditions of the nation-state Russia, much smaller than that of a Russian empire. He soon left the office. Ukraine recovered, and then Russia did.”

If you could replace Putin with someone who can immediately rule the Russian political elite and settle the most important geopolitical issue, that could be better. However, to the author that probability looks very low, if not zero. A wrong successor could not manage turmoil of the collapse of Putin’s ruling elite.

In early March we see much more pessimistic prospects than the above, given the trends of Russian increasing destruction of Ukraine without any motivation to halt the assault. Nevertheless, we need to consider and reconsider how Russia can stop. To look for a clue, this paper examines the reality of the Russian narrative that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been expanding and increasing threat to Russia.

What Is The National Security of The Nation-State Russia?

Russia is the nation-state of the Russian Federation citizens. When Putin started to convert it into a quasi-Russian empire, its scope of national (imperial) interest was extended, and security threat against it was indefinitely increased. Then born was the false narrative of “NATO expansion threat.”

Russian actions under the “NATO expansion threat” narrative provoked neighbors and increased threat to the Russian national border. Instead, if the U.S. and Russia rearrange each force posture alignment and agree on a document, that would be achievement of Russian national security. Putin could claim he gained the national security interest, and retreat all forces from Ukraine. Until then international sanctions would continue to erode his legitimacy while Russia would keep destroying Ukraine. A Russia assured with appropriate national security arrangement would be a better partner of Ukraine and neighbors.

The False Narrative of “NATO Expansion Threat”

In the narrative of “NATO expansion threat”, there is a core of truth. If NATO offensive posture is very close to Russia’s border, that should be dangerous and provoke Russia. Realists were right to point it. But the scope of “NATO expansion threat” was later extended and now has very limited proportion of truth.

This extension might have been intentional or emotional. An important effect of the extended scope of “NATO expansion threat” has been domestic. It increased sense of national emergency among the Russian citizens, and legitimacy of Putin’s regime enhancing state power and military capabilities at the expense of social development.

Another important effect is confusion of public opinion outside Russia. Since it has a core of truth, many observers insist that Russia’s concern against NATO expansion was legitimate. That for a long time has been one of the reasons of incoherent and fluctuating policies of the West against Russia’s assertiveness. However, this argument ignores the extent and scope of “NATO expansion”. In reality, the narrative was far more extended than the real national security of Russia.

The Reality of NATO-Russia Relations

In 2004, when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined NATO. President Putin complained, but did not regard it as an existential threat to his home Saint Petersburg and other territories of the Russian Federation.

Then came Putin’s denouncement of NATO expansion at Munich Security Conference in February 2007. In August 2008, Russia used military intervention into Georgia, and the joining process of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO were effectively suspended.

In February 2014, Russia forcefully intervened into Crimea to make it independent through the local political movement. Then began the Donbass conflict. Ukraine’s path to strengthen NATO cooperation was forced by these Russian deeds. Later, Ukraine wrote into its constitution a statement of a future NATO membership.

Russia started military provocation outside Ukraine, for example dangerous flight by Russian military aircraft and suspicious movement of unknown submarines in the Baltic Sea. NATO responded with force relocation in the eastern member states. Poland created an army base for the first time in the eastern half of its territory. As a result, Russia invited NATO forces closer to Russia’s border, which had been predictable. Avoiding NATO force eastward movement was not the most important agenda for Putin.

In April 2019 Volodymyr Zelensky advocated for a better relation with Russia and won the election to be the President. But Putin failed to keep Zelensky active for dialogue with Russia through negotiations or compromise. Then in 2021 Zelensky hardened his stance in face of the Ukrainian public opinion. Ukraine enhanced defense cooperation with NATO, not pursuing an immediate membership of it. But Putin found it intolerable.

Putin started military buildup. He never talked to Zelensky sincerely. When U.S. was willing to talk about arms control and confidence-building measures, Russia rejected all saying the NATO expansion issue was not separable from other security issues. Then in February 2022 Russia started a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The purpose was to subjugate Ukraine, not to ease security concerns about NATO. Again NATO had to enhance its force presence in the eastern member states. Most people in Finland and Sweden now want NATO membership.

Conclusion

In February 2022 Putin rejected addressing NATO issues in favor of his imperial ambition to subjugate Ukraine. It can be because of his loss of rational calculation, because of too emotional love of Russia-Ukraine unity, or because of the lack of the real contents of “NATO expansion threat” narrative. In any case, we now cannot accept what Russia has been saying about “NATO expansion threat” as a motivation of the Russian aggression. We need to reject the false content of the “NATO expansion threat” narrative, reassess the real Russian national interest, and think of how a solution can be found.

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プロフィール

profile

YAMAZOE Hiroshi
Regional Studies Department

Fields of expertise:
 Russian Security and Military
 International Relations History

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Planning and Coordination Office
 National Institute for Defense Studies
 Telephone (direct): 03-3260-3011
 Telephone (general): 03-3268-3111 (ext. 29177)
 FAX: 03-3260-3034

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