[**Ukraine crisis**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1677138/ukraine-crisis)

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THERE is absolutely nothing that can justify Russia’s attack on Ukraine on Feb 24. History is relevant always but history certainly does not justify this wrong.

One can only hope that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is over soon. The consequences of a conflict that does not end soon will be calamitous.

The roots of the crisis lie in the mistakes of February 1990 at the time of the talks on the reunification of Germany. Russia’s leader at the time, Mikhail Gorbachev, was determined to end the decades-long Cold War. But the American president, George H.W. Bush, misread this as a weakness. As Henry Kissinger said, US leaders thought “we had won the Cold War”.

President Bush felt that the United States, as the leader of the Western powers, had triumphed. He deceived Gorbachev, who apparently had been assured that Nato would not expand eastwards.

The present crisis has its roots in that perfidy. This is not to deny the wrong done by Russia’s attack on Ukraine. Its effects and consequences will be felt for long.

Prof Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson of Texas A&M University wrote, after closely examining the diplomatic record of the talks in 1990 between Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush: “A fuller reading of the diplomatic record shows that the Soviet Union repeatedly received assurances against Nato expansion into Eastern Europe.

“These promises were a central feature of US-Soviet negotiations throughout 1990, as diplomatic bargaining evolved from a US and West German effort to engage the Soviet Union on German reunification to shaping the substance of the deal and ultimately the formal terms that the Soviet leadership accepted in September 1990.

The mistakes of 1990 are to be blamed for the present disaster.

“That said, there is also strong evidence showing that the United States misled the Soviet Union in the 1990 talks. US policymakers suggested limits on Nato’s post-Cold War presence to the Soviet Union, while privately planning for an American-dominated post-Cold War system and taking steps that would attain this objective.”

“US policymakers in 1990 offered the Soviet Union assurances that Nato would not be enlarged. These included promises that the Soviet Union would not be strategically isolated in post-Cold War Europe, that Nato would not exploit Soviet weaknesses, and that Europe’s post-Cold War security architecture would be increasingly inclusive. The resulting bargaining thereby used discussions over the future of European security to underscore the non-expansion deal by implying limits on Nato’s post-Cold War role and the United States’ post-Cold War dominance.”

On Feb 9, 1990, the US secretary of state, James Baker had outlined to Gorbachev the American approach to the situation.

He pointed out that (a) the process of drawing closer together of East Germany and West Germany was unfolding much faster than it could be expected; the forces that insisted on the speediest possible unification of the German states would win the Volkskammer elections; the German-German talks on the realisation of this aim would begin immediately after that;

(b) “the mechanism of dealing with the problems related to the external aspects of unification” would be set up only when the German states had started discussing its internal aspects; it should be a “two-plus four” mechanism (the two German states would discuss all issues between themselves while the four victor nations would join in when necessary);

(c) the United States supported by the West objected to the neutral status of Germany — the US did not want to leave Europe which me­­ant that its troops should remain on German territory;

(d) if united Germany remai­n­­ed in Nato, “there will be no extension of Nato’s jur­isdiction for forces of Nato one inch to the east”.

Baker added to this the following passage: “We believe that the consultations and discussions within the framework of the ‘two plus four’ mechanism should guarantee that the unification of Germany would not cause Nato’s eastward expansion.”

Bush’s successor President Bill Clinton embarked on Nato’s expansion. Richard N. Haass told this writer that the decision was not preceded by much discussion. George F. Kennan denounced it. It was a great folly of lasting consequences.

President Vladimir Putin’s current course of action has its roots in the mass protests in Ukraine in 2014 that led to the ouster of pro-Russia leader Viktor Yanukovych and Kyiv’s subsequent proximity to the European Union and Nato. It does not and cannot justify Russia’s attack.

The crisis has aggravated and seriously threatens peace in the world. It will not be easy to resolve. But resolved it must be and soon. It does not get easier to resolve with the passage of time.

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