**[Open-ended conflict](https://www.dawn.com/news/1779235/open-ended-conflict)**

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EARLY last month, Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg offered an extraordinary revelation at a meeting with European parliamentary committees. “The background,” he said, “was that President Putin declared in the autumn of 2021, and actually sent a draft treaty that they wanted Nato to sign, to promise no more Nato enlargement.

“That was what he sent us. And [it] was a precondition for not [invading] Ukraine. Of course, we didn’t sign that.”

Until then, any Western politician who hinted at any kind of provocation behind Russia’s military overreach risked being labelled an apologist for Vladimir Putin. The unreasonably hawkish Stoltenberg obviously does not fall in that category, and he went on to remind his audience about how Moscow’s venture had backfired, with Nato spreading its wings to Finland and, potentially, Sweden, apart from fast-tracking eventual Ukrainian membership.

Western diplomats, including the more enlightened minds at the US State Depart­ment, have been aware since at least the 1990s that Nato’s eastward expansion was a red line for Moscow. Mikhail Gorbachev was verbally promised it wouldn’t occur, and regretted not insisting on a written assurance. Even Boris Yeltsin, effectively a US puppet, bristled at Nato’s ambitions. By the time Putin replaced him in 1999-2000, key Eastern European states had already switched their satellite status from ex-Soviet to American via Nato membership, and the Baltic republics followed.

Even Pakistan has a cameo in the European war theatre.

Putin seemed willing to accept this as a fait accompli, but Nato’s membership offers to Georgia and Ukraine seemed like overkill. From Moscow’s vantage point this wasn’t all that different to how Washington would feel - or react - if any future Sino-Russian military alliance sought to woo Canada or Mexico.

In his discourse, Stoltenberg proudly framed Nato’s rejection of Putin’s overture as a suitable riposte to a belligerent dictator. The idea of a more diplomatic response that might have averted a bloody war appe­ars not to have troubled his conscience.

None of this detracts from the fact that Russia was the aggressor in February 2022, and Ukraine the victim. The provocation that Stoltenberg has belatedly acknowledged by no means adds up to any justification for Putin’s “special military oppression”, which has consumed tens of thousands of lives and heaped untold misery on Ukrainians in the regions bordering Russia. Nor should anyone ignore Putin’s contentious and often ridiculous excuses for pretending that the mediaeval origins of the Russian empire in the Kyiv region somehow sanctify his ambitions.

However, it’s not altogether absurd to perceive Ukraine as simultaneously a victim of Nato’s unreconstructed preoccupations. Once its raison d’être disappeared with the demise of the Soviet Union and its hegemonic arena of influence, a new enemy had to be found. Al Qaeda and its offshoots offered a convenient distraction for a few years, but once that petered out, Russia and a changing China under Xi Jinping conveniently resurfaced as the leading adversaries.

Pakistan played a co-starring role in the so-called war on terror (arguably as a sidekick to both the hero and the villain), and it is even said to have had a cameo in the latest conflict. It has lately been claimed (though denied by the FO) that it has been supplying weapons to Ukraine since last year, and that this was crucial for its access to the latest tranche of IMF funds, apart from the usual ‘structural adjustment’.

That is by no means implausible, given Pakistan’s pre-existing defence trade ties with Ukraine — it has even been suggested that many of the weapons sent back originated from Ukraine. What sounds dodgier is the claim that the notorious ‘cipher’ was part of a US plan to oust Imran Khan just so that Pakistani shells and missiles could be delivered to Ukraine. The diplomatic missive was received well after the no-confidence motion was in train.

The dethronement was manipulated as much as the enthronement, but most probably not at Uncle Sam’s behest. It was just another failed military experiment, and the future is unwritten. The only potential solution — a decisive army exit from politics — is unlikely to be on the cards anytime soon.

Anyhow, the Western alliance is likely to be more bothered about the emerging signs from Poland, which has pulled back from its crucial support for Ukraine’s war effort over a spat about grain imports, and Slovakia, where a pro-Russian politician is in pole position to form the next government. Add to that the US congressional fiasco whereby aid for Ukraine was stripped of the deal that averted a government shutdown.

Facilitating some kind of peace rather than egging on the dogs of war would be the best bet for all concerned parties, but don’t expect Stoltenberg to acknowledge that until it’s too late.

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