

## II. United States

# History Will Condemn NATO for the Ukraine Conflict

*The following is an edited transcript of the address by Ambassador Jack Matlock to Panel One of the May 24-25 [Schiller Institute international conference](#), “A Beautiful Vision for Humanity in Times of Great Turbulence!” Amb. Matlock is a scholar of Russian history and culture. One of the most respected retired diplomats in the U.S. Foreign Service, he was first posted to Moscow in 1961. In 1987 he was appointed by President Ronald Reagan as U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, where he served until 1991. Panel One was titled, “Strategic Challenges and the Emerging New Order.” Subheads have been added.*

It’s a pleasure to address this group. So many things have been discussed that I would simply like to address some of the causes for the attitudes and the situation we find ourselves and the world in today.

One thing I think we should recognize is that we can always say that we should have a better or a different government. But at the present time, we must operate with those governments that we have; that’s the first thing. Second, I don’t think it is a good idea to blame all the problems on, you might say, one side. I think that loses the full complexity of what has happened.

### Mistakes Since Ending the Cold War

Now, what I would like to address is my own experience in ending the Cold War, and to indicate some of the mistakes that I thought have been made since then. When we ended the Cold War, we did it not by a victory over the Soviet Union; we ended by negotiation. During the Cold War there were regional conflicts throughout, most of which started not by the two sides, but started locally. That’s one thing we need to recognize. Much of the conflict has arisen from local circumstances; it has been exacerbated by the interference of others, but let’s not forget that it was not the United States or the Soviet Union or China that created these problems to begin with—those of the Cold War.



The Schiller Institute

*Ambassador Jack Matlock addressing the Schiller Institute conference.*

But the problem is, our people tended to look at the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union as the same thing. It was not. The Cold War ended well before the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union broke up not because of external pressure, but because of internal problems.

I think that when NATO was formed, it was formed in order to protect Europe from what was considered to be the possibility of military interference from the Soviet Union–dominated Eastern Europe. Let’s make no mistake: the Soviet Union did dominate Eastern Europe and forced upon them very undemocratic regimes that theoretically were socialist, but in fact were not. This is one of the problems we have when we simply “slang speak” in these general terms—socialism is good, capitalism is bad, or something like that. None of us have a system which is purely one or the other. Politics is much more complicated and advanced.

So, what should we have done when the Soviet Union broke up? It seems to me that during the Cold War, although it was thought throughout the world, because at that time the Soviet Union and China were both communist countries—although they tended to split on a number of issues, even to the point of military conflict. So, one idea that we had then was that the Soviet Union thought that it was its duty to defend the system—what they call socialism. Actually, they only respected countries that they dominated, and it really wasn't a case of socialism whatsoever.

But I think what happened at the end of the Cold War was that instead of the United States leading European countries to bury their differences of the past—just as we had done after World War II, when we insisted that France and Germany bury the hatchet and start cooperating; that was a condition for our support in Europe. But instead, by the end of the 1990s, the United States was, at the instigation of Eastern Europe, beginning to expand NATO.

Now, I think it should be understood that this was *not* basically a case of the United States trying to dominate the world. Yes, we thought we had a role there, but that was a response to requests from Eastern Europe, who felt that since they had been dominated by Russia in the past, they might have a problem in the future. The problem with that was that when we started expanding NATO, what had been a defensive alliance suddenly became a potentially offensive alliance.

A second point I want to make is that it was not so much the expansion of NATO and the protection of Article V—which, by the way, does not say that the United States will go to war to protect another country. What it says is, if there is an attack on a member, we will consider it an attack on all, and we'll consider how we deal with it. It could be dealt with in ways other than by going to war, but that's much misunderstood.

What was really sensitive, was putting foreign military bases in these countries. That began with bases in Romania and Poland. These were missiles that supposedly would be defensive, but they were systems that could easily be converted to offensive systems at the same time. So, Russia was left out of the security structure in Europe, even though the leader of Russia had been the person who was responsible for breaking up the Soviet Union—Boris Yeltsin. When people say, “Well, Russia is always a problem. Russia is always im-

perialistic,” this is just nonsense. I think it is wrong to characterize an entire country and its people in superficial ways.

The United States has not always been imperialistic; in fact, we've usually argued against it. But our current policy—like that of most other countries—is full of many different tendencies. Sometimes it will be cooperative, and sometimes it will not. But it is driven—as in every other country—by domestic politics; let's not forget that.

## Where Are We Now

So, where are we now? We are, as every other speaker has mentioned, in a very difficult position. It is one in which the United States is going through, I'd say, its greatest constitutional crisis since its Civil War in the 19th Century. We are largely preoccupied with our own domestic problems today. We have a President who, I believe, is determined to see that we don't interfere militarily in the world as much as we used to. He's using often very crude methods to bring that about, and we still don't know what the difference is going to be. But, in my own experience, international relations can take sudden turns, and I do think each of us needs to think about the problems within our own countries and what brings these things about. I do believe that the United States probably is going to gradually use less military force. But at the same time, I think we have a President who clearly is much more, you might say, authoritarian in his techniques. We still do not know what our Supreme Court and our political system is going to do in that regard.

Let me finally say this about two things. I think that the genocide in Gaza is one of the great moral defects of our generation, and the failure of my own government and that of most West European governments, I think, is a great moral failure.

Second, let me say that the war in Ukraine is a tragedy; it is a tragedy for Ukraine, it is a tragedy for Russia, it is a tragedy for Europe. And it did not have to happen. I don't think that Russia has served its own interests in going to war, but certainly my government and the West European governments had warning not to move NATO and its bases into the border—and particularly not to Ukraine and Georgia. And yet, after the [Minsk] agreements, when supposedly the war was to stop in the Donbas, all NATO countries began to actually put arms surreptitiously to support Ukraine in its effort to free

the Donbas—which had rebelled because the Ukrainian government had taken away the rights of Russian-speaking citizens. That’s an area that is predominantly Russian-speaking.

Now, let us hope that that war will end soon, but it can only end, and you can only have stability, if the situation that ends the war brings about a certain amount of stability. That cannot be brought about by restoring the borders of Ukraine that were created by Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. Let us not forget that western Ukraine, which is the seat of much of the anti-Russian feeling and which has split the country—you will not have stability in that area of Europe until you have a Ukrainian government willing to live in peace with Russia and without foreign bases that could threaten it; and one that either gives its Russian speakers full citizenship, or lets them become part of Russia. That’s there.

As I look at these various problems, it seems to me that many of the current policies of the West are going to fail. I believe that, for example, this attempt

to somehow keep China from growing is, of course, going to fail. When we start prohibiting the export of certain technology, they’ll develop their own. We’re going to see that. So, I think some of these policies that we have followed are very quickly going to correct themselves.

Let me conclude by saying that yes, we are in a very dangerous stage, but let us hope that changes will come. They probably will not come about that suddenly, but so many of the policies today are not really going to work in the long run. Let’s try to keep clear heads, and stop simply blaming one side or the other for everything. We all need to think about how China would be much stronger if it had allowed a certain autonomy to Hong Kong. It also would have made a peaceful unification of Taiwan easier without the threat of military action, which the military attempt to take Taiwan is going to be a huge—China may succeed, but at what cost? So, why do all of our sides keep thinking about who can solve these problems with military force? You can’t.