

The Mystery of the Nord Stream Pipeline Explosions

Ramesh Thakur

Owen Matthews asked recently in the *Spectator*: [‘Who really blew up the Kerch Bridge’](#) linking Crimea and Russia by land? His question was prompted by a suggestion from a senior Ukrainian adviser to President Volodymyr Zelensky that the Russians had done it themselves, although he didn’t explain why. If the Ukrainians carried out this sophisticated attack that led to much fist-pumping celebrations there and across the Western world, why wouldn’t they claim responsibility? Because, says Matthews, the suicide bombing was ‘an act of state-sponsored terrorism’ and ‘cold blooded murder unbecoming of a country whose main strength is its moral superiority’.

Let’s set aside the ‘moral superiority’ of a country that before Russia’s invasion was generally known to Westerners for its deep level of corruption (Russia is worse) and the denial of human rights to its substantial Russian-speaking population. One can admire President Zelensky’s unexpected demonstration of heroic leadership in resisting Russian aggression, without ignoring the ugliness of Ukraine.

In April 2018, [BBC Newsnight](#) broadcast a programme called ‘Ukraine: On patrol with the far-right National Militia’. In May 2018, the Washington-based [Freedom House](#) published a Brief on ‘Far-right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy’. In 2019, the *Daily Beast* attached the ‘neo-Nazi’ label to Ukraine’s Azov Battalion that was [incorporated](#) into the pro-US President Petro Poroshenko’s military and security apparatus after the 2014 coup which overthrew the elected pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. It has remained there under Zelensky, with a name change from the Azov Battalion to Azov Regiment. On 7

January 2021, [Time magazine](#) did a story on how a White-Supremacist Ukrainian militia uses Facebook to radicalise and train new members. Zelensky himself has seized the opportunity of the war to 'suspend' 11 opposition parties, including the biggest, Opposition Platform for Life, with 44 MPs in the 450-seat Parliament, and [nationalise several media outlets](#) in order to implement a 'unified information policy'. In Transparency International's [2021 corruption index](#) published on 25 January, [Ukraine](#)'s score was 32/100 with a rank of 122/180 countries, making it Europe's most corrupt country bar none. Russia was even worse with a score of 29 and rank 136. The [EU](#) average score was 66/100. In this year's [annual report from Freedom House](#), Ukraine's score of 61/100 put it in the same 'partly free' category as Hungary, Sierra Leone, Colombia, Serbia, Liberia, El Salvador, Fiji and the Philippines.

The 1,220-1,230 km long Nord Stream 1 (NS1) and 2 (NS2) gas pipelines run 60 metres under the Baltic Sea from Vyborg and Ust-Luga near St Petersburg to Greifswald in northeast Germany. They cost around €15bn to build and have a combined capacity to transport around 1,100 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas per year. NS1 was inaugurated in 2011 but has been turned off since August. NS2 alongside it was completed in 2021 and was scheduled to commence operation this year but Germany paused the project in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

On 26 September, both NS1 and NS2 were badly damaged with underwater explosions in a deliberate act of sabotage that released huge amounts of methane gas. Almost all the Western media (the public has been more openly sceptical) has pointed the finger at Russia but Moscow blames actors hostile to it. Because Western media dominates global news coverage and commentary and Westerners are rarely exposed to voices from outside the local and global mainstream media, only a few realise the extent to which coverage of Ukraine in the West is out of line with international perceptions. For, as [Michael Gfoeller and David Rundell](#) noted in *Newsweek* last month, 'Nearly 90 per cent of the world isn't following us on Ukraine'.

There are four plausible suspects: Russia, the US, Poland and Ukraine. Given the actors involved, the issues at stake and the impotence of the UN system caught in the crossfire of great power rivalry, an impartial independent investigation is extremely unlikely. In classic thrillers style, it's worth looking at means, opportunity and, most revealingly, motive.

Means and Opportunity

Regarding means, the operation was sophisticated enough, likely involving a well-trained and equipped navy, special forces, technical planning and specialist logistical support, that it had to involve one or more state actors. All four potential suspects fit the bill. As for opportunity, any country with the means would have plenty of opportunity but, considering the location in waters around Poland, Denmark and Sweden, it would be more challenging for Russia than for the others to escape complete detection – but not impossible.

Motive

In discussing motive, it's worth asking a favourite question in crime thrillers: *cui bono*? In teleological explanation, effects are inferred as having been the intended consequences and therefore the motive.

Historical Examples of False Flag Operations and Provocations to Trigger Incidents

History is full of examples where the more powerful country has conducted a false flag operation, provoked a military incident or issued an impossible ultimatum as the trigger to attack and invasion. On 18 September 1931, in the 'Far East' as it used to be called once upon a time, there was an explosion in Mukden along the South Manchurian Railway that was under Japanese control as part of special rights ceded to Japan. The Japanese imperial presence there was under simultaneous threat from the Russians to the north and the unification movement in China. The Japanese army, having earlier assassinated the Manchurian warlord Marshal Zhang Zuolin in 1928 by bombing his train, blamed Chinese soldiers. [John Swift](#) writes for *Encyclopedia Britannica*: 'Most observers believe the incident was contrived by the Japanese army, without authorisation of the Japanese government, to justify the Japanese invasion and occupation that followed'. Japanese troops seized the Manchurian city of Mukden (now called Shenyang in Liaoning province), invaded Manchuria and established the puppet state of Manchukuo (Manzhouguo).

On 27 February 1933, in the very heart of Europe, Germany's parliament building in Berlin, the *Reichstag*, went up in flames in an arson attack: a powerful historical metaphor for the end of the short-lived Weimar Republic. Hitler exploited that to play on popular fears to emasculate the parliament, expel and imprison its communist members, and consolidate power as Chancellor under a declaration of emergency on 28 February that remained in force until Germany's defeat in May 1945. But [did the Nazis set fire to it](#) in the first place to create an atmosphere of terror in order to exploit it to consolidate their hold on political power? In the infamous Munich Pact on 30 September 1938, Britain and France to their eternal shame delayed war by a year by capitulating to Hitler's demands on Czechoslovakia's territory.

On 5 August 1964, the US alleged that two of its destroyers (*USS Maddox* and *Turner Joy*) had come under unprovoked fire from North Vietnamese torpedo boats off the coast of Vietnam. Congress passed the [Tonkin Gulf resolution](#) that allowed President Lyndon B. Johnson to steadily escalate the Vietnam War. It subsequently emerged that the US was engaged in reconnaissance in the area and was overseeing South Vietnamese attacks on radar stations and bridges along North Vietnam's coast. In other words, it was hardly unprovoked.

NATO went to war against Serbia in 1999 because President Slobodan Milošević rejected the Rambouillet ultimatum on Kosovo. The lawfulness of the unilateral ultimatum was questionable. No regional organisation, and in fact not even the UN, has the right to impose the terms of political settlement between the central and provincial governments of sovereign countries – which was the trigger to the NATO attacks on Serbia after the Rambouillet ultimatum was rejected.

After the defeat of Saddam Hussein in the UN-authorized 1991 Gulf War, [Security Council Resolution 687](#) (3 April 1991) called for an internationally supervised dismantlement, destruction and removal of all Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD), all WMD-related materials and facilities and also their means of delivery. The UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) was entrusted with the task and given tough inspection powers but its personnel were ejected in 1998 and Iraq ended all cooperation with it because of well-founded suspicions that Western intelligence services had infiltrated it. A year later it was replaced by the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) which lasted until 2007 ([Security Council Resolution 1284](#), 17 December 1999). Led by veteran Swedish diplomat Hans Blix, it was tasked with identifying and resolving 'key remaining disarmament issues'.

In 2003, the Bush-Blair strategy was to try to provoke Iraqi defiance similar to Serbia's in 1999 as a pretext for invasion and regime change. This is indicated in the now-infamous [Downing Street Memorandum](#). It refers to a memorandum written by British foreign policy aide Matthew Rycroft on 23 July 2002 summarising a briefing by Richard Dearlove, head of MI6 (Britain's overseas intelligence agency). The memorandum makes clear that the US administration was determined to go to war and military action was thus seen as inevitable. However, British officials did not believe there was sufficient legal justification since (i) there was no recent evidence of Iraqi complicity with international terrorism, (ii) President Saddam Hussein's WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran, and (iii) he was not a threat to his neighbours. Because it was necessary to create the conditions that would make an invasion legal, however, 'the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy'. The US 'had already begun "spikes of activity" to put pressure on the regime', and an ultimatum for the return of UN weapons inspectors to Iraq might help to create the conditions necessary to justify military action.

The strategy failed because, to the surprise of the UK and the US, Saddam Hussein acquiesced to the UN demand and permitted UN inspectors to return to Iraq and resume their work, thereby thwarting the search for a pretext to justify the invasion. On 13 November 2002, Iraq agreed to comply with UN [Security Council Resolution 1441](#) 'without conditions', even though it imposed the toughest and most intrusive inspections ever on a sovereign state under the enforcement chapter 7 of the UN Charter. One of the major reasons why the world remained sceptical of the war was the justified belief that the UN inspectors were not allowed by US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to complete their work.

A decade later, similar tensions and controversies arose to the west of Iraq with respect to another category of WMD. Chemical weapons—indiscriminate, inhumane, immoral and illegal—were used six times in Syria between 2013 and 2017, but by government and/or rebel forces? On 21 August 2013, Syria's President Bashar al Assad was alleged to have used chemical weapons to attack civilians in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. Hundreds were killed and thousands injured by unspecified nerve agents. China and Russia called for calm until facts could be ascertained and culpability established, and warned against any unilateral military action before an impartial international investigation. The UN demanded prompt access to the sites by its team to sift through the evidence, establish facts and apportion culpability. The team was to establish the chain of custody from manufacture and

storage to deployment, decision to use, and use. Only then could those responsible be held criminally accountable.

US President Barack Obama had drawn a red line regarding the use of chemical weapons that had been crossed. Assad was winning the war against the rebels using brutal scorched earth tactics without chemical weapons. Using them with a UN inspection team in the country would be sheer stupidity. The red line was meant to have sent a warning to the Assad regime. But it sent a signal to the rebels that they could manoeuvre the US into joining the fray on their side by provoking the regime into using such weapons, or else launch a false flag operation and then manipulate the evidence to suggest this had been done by Assad's forces. Those already pushing for US involvement exploited the use of sarin as a selling point in the internal Washington debate and vociferous demands were made to punish Assad with missile strikes.

Obama held firm against strikes and the Washington policy establishment with its militarised playbook for any foreign policy challenge neither forgot nor forgave. When chemical weapons were used again in an attack on Khan Sheikhun on 4 April 2017, Assad's main international patron President Vladimir Putin claimed that chemical weapons stored on a rebel-held base were released by rebels after a Syrian strike on the base. President Donald Trump blamed the Syrian air force and hit Syria with 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles. To America's numerous admirers and supporters, the strikes were swift, decisive, proportionate, precisely targeted and justified. They put all rogue regimes on notice that a new sheriff was patrolling the global beat. To critics, they were impetuous, unilateral, yet another in a long line of acts of aggression, and added to the growing list of threats to world peace. Western governments mostly backed the US strikes.

Cui bono? For the regime, the risks of provoking US intervention by using chemical weapons in an inconsequential battle far outweighed any possible military gains. For rebels, the risk-reward calculus was reversed in provoking US intervention. Such cynicism is usually a better guide than naïve credulity to understanding Middle Eastern politics. Former UN chief weapons inspector in Iraq [Richard Butler](#) noted that absent evidence, 'there are abundant reasons, from past experience, and a good deal of logic' to be sceptical about 'the US claim that Syria bombed Khan Sheikhun with chemical weapons'.

Suspect 1: Russia

Russia has the least to gain and the most to lose from the act of Nord Stream sabotage that destroyed its main source of leverage over Europe. [James Crisp](#), Europe editor of the *Telegraph* (UK), argues that blowing up the pipelines was 'a page ripped straight from Vladimir Putin's playbook of panic, escalation and misdirection'. It will raise already soaring gas prices and exacerbate the cost-of-living crisis in Europe, he writes. But Russia could simply have turned off the valves without destroying a very expensive asset. In yet another example of esoteric logic, Crisp explains the timing by noting that another 10bcm pipeline from Norway to Poland via Denmark was inaugurated on 27 September close to NS2. The 'underwater explosions could be a warning of what Russia could do to pipelines from Norway'. *Telegraph* readers, despite being decidedly anti-Russian conservatives, were not overly impressed. Many dismissed the article as 'a one-sided narrative' of 'utter rubbish',

with the 'balance of evidence' indicating it wasn't Russia (Jo Robertson, Mike Knights, Kelvin Casing). In the best tradition of Sir Humphrey Appleby in *Yes Minister*, David Anderson 'clarified' Crisp's tortured explanation thus: 'Putin may or may not have done something which doesn't appear to make any difference, but perhaps he's doing it because he may or may not be planning to do something in the future'.

Suspect 2: United States

If not Russia, then how about the United States? It's worth referencing an earlier analysis from the RAND Corporation that has always had close links to the US defence establishment. In *Extending Russia* (2019, pp. 59, 62–63, 67–68), the [study](#) noted that in 2015, 39 per cent of Russian gas to Europe flowed through Ukraine, 30 per cent to Germany through NS1, and 29 per cent through Belarus. The US had a 'variety of options ... for diversifying European gas supplies and extending Russia economically', including 'stopping Nord Stream 2'. In 2015, the EU imported 410.6bcm of natural gas, of which 121.7bcm came from Russia. NS2 at full capacity would account for 14 per cent of total EU imports. Without NS2, Europe would still need to import Russian gas, but it would have to be routed through other countries like Ukraine, which would earn up to \$2bn in annual transit fees. Among the risks of the US stopping NS2 construction were that Russia's dependence on Western markets provides 'an element of deterrence' that would be lost. There was also the risk of antagonising Europe. When the US Senate approved tougher sanctions on Russia in June 2017, Germany's foreign minister and Austria's chancellor argued that Europe's energy supply was a matter for Europe, not the US, to decide.

Fast forward to this year. Victoria Nuland, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs in the US State Department who attained eternal notoriety for her ['Fuck the EU'](#) comment during Ukraine's political upheavals in 2014, insisted on 27 January: 'If Russia invades Ukraine, one way or another, [Nord Stream 2 will not move forward](#)'. Her words were echoed on 7 February by President Joe Biden. At a joint press conference at the White House with Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, [Biden warned](#) that if Russia invaded Ukraine, 'there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2'. When pressed to explain how, since the pipeline is under German control, Biden doubled down: 'We will – I promise you – we will be able to do it'. After the attack, Poland's former defence minister (and husband of the Polish-American *Atlantic* columnist Anne Applebaum, a fierce Russia hawk) Radek Sikorski tweeted (since deleted): ['Thank you, USA'](#), which of course [Russia immediately noted](#). Speaking at a press conference on 30 September after the pipeline explosions, Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) said: 'It's a tremendous opportunity to once and for all remove the dependence on Russian energy and thus to take away from Vladimir Putin the weaponisation of energy as a means of advancing his imperial designs', thereby confirming that Nuland's and Biden's remarks in January-February reflected a deliberate strategy.

US TV host [Tucker Carlson](#), public intellectual [Jeffrey Sachs](#) and popular podcast host [Joe Rogan](#) are among the few with the stature and courage to discuss the possibility that the US may itself have been behind the blasts. Jonathan Cook suggests that if Europe turns a blind eye to evidence of a US role in the explosions, it would denote an ['acceptance of vassal status'](#). But would the US really attack a joint Germany-Russia infrastructure that is critical to Europe coping with an anticipated harsh winter in which people fear having to choose

between heating and eating? I cede to no one in the willingness to criticise the US, but seriously? It's far more likely that the US approved the attack and helped with support and planning, but without direct participation.

Suspect 3: Poland

Poland has both commercial and historical reasons (longstanding animosity towards Russia) for it; Russo-German collaboration must be especially painful, reopening scars from history. The Nord Stream pipelines would reduce lucrative transit fees for gas shipments through the Yamal pipeline from Norway to western Europe through Poland. The Polish government has been at the forefront of efforts to help Ukraine with all possible means and uncompromising in opposing any concessions to Moscow for a face-saving peace deal. During a visit to Kyiv in August, [President Andrzej Duda](#) said the suspension of NS2 wasn't sufficient punishment for the invasion of Ukraine. Instead, he called for 'the liquidation, the complete dismantling of the pipeline'. That said, the notion that Poland would risk a grave rupture of relations with Germany seems implausibly far-fetched.

Suspect 4: Ukraine

Which brings us finally to Ukraine. On 20 August, Darya Dugina, daughter of a close Putin ally, was killed by a car bomb near Moscow. Russia blamed Ukraine but this was dismissed as 'disinformation' and a 'conspiracy theory', the charges of choice in recent years for delegitimising any scepticism of the dominant narrative. Kyiv denied any involvement and others wondered if it had been a false flag operation by Russia itself to discredit Ukraine. But on 5 October, the *New York Times* quoted US intelligence as saying [parts of the Ukrainian government were involved](#) with no US intelligence, assistance or prior knowledge.

Ukraine had the least to lose and the most to gain from the Nord Stream explosions, as explained by [Noah Carl](#). It represents a tit-for-tat response to Russian attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure. The victim of Russian aggression, already at war and determined to recapture lost territory on the battlefield and/or regain them through economic pressure, Ukraine is the least concerned with escalation that will draw in NATO and the US directly. Commercially, Nord Stream enables the supply of Russian gas without having to pass through Ukraine, a significant revenue loss and a diminution of influence in Europe. Geopolitically, blowing up Nord Stream deprives Russia of a critical lever with which to blackmail Europe while also demonstrating Ukraine's own importance to Washington as an asset against Russia. Assuming the act required close partnership with US intelligence and military in training, supplies, logistical support and crucial information, it will also enhance Ukraine's credibility as a potential NATO ally. But meanwhile Ukraine is not a NATO member and therefore Russia has still not been directly attacked by NATO: an important firebreak against uncontrolled escalation all the way through the nuclear threshold. The converse also holds: the pipeline is part-owned by Germany and Russia has been careful to avoid targeting a NATO country directly.

[Thomas Fazi](#) asks in *Unherd* if the damage to Germany is collateral or could it itself 'have been a target of economic warfare'? A doubling of Russian gas supply to Germany would have strengthened bilateral relations between Berlin and Moscow, expanded trade and

cultural exchanges and could possibly have led to the creation of a new security architecture that weakened US hegemony over European affairs. Fazi points out that German newspapers have been [openly discussing](#) how the US was opposed to Nord Stream because it hoped to replace Russian gas with the sale of its own liquified natural gas to Europe. Europe's import of US LNG has jumped from 28 to 45 per cent over the past year. The well-known US geostrategist George Friedman said back in 2015 that Russia and Germany acting together is 'the only force that could threaten us [in Europe]. And we [need to make sure that doesn't happen](#)'.

The very fact that ordinarily non-conspiracists are asking such questions is in itself a telling indicator of the extent to which trust in the MSM, already low in the rest of the world since the Iraq war, has collapsed in Western societies as well. Economic warfare between 'frenemy' states is not altogether uncommon. In another example of commercial interests undercutting strategic calculations, [Turkey](#) and [India](#) have faced the threat of US sanctions, under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act ([CAATSA](#), 2017), for their purchase of Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile systems. It's also worth remembering the strenuous, albeit ultimately futile, US efforts to stop Europe helping the Soviet Union build its Siberian gas pipeline in the 1980s. As it happens, Blinken wrote a [book](#) about that episode in Cold War history: *Ally versus Ally: America, Europe, and the Siberian Pipeline Crisis* (Praeger, 1987). Not surprisingly, the book has seen a resurgence in sales this year.

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