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Editorial

FIVE WARS IN ONE

The Battle for Ukraine

A CLASSIC ANALYSIS OF the Second World War defines it as the outcome of five different types of conflict.¹ First, war between the top imperialist powers—Germany, Japan, the US, Britain—competing for the position of world hegemon. For this, the challenger powers had both to assert control over a key region—for Japan, China and Southeast Asia; for Germany, the western Soviet Union and Caucasus (‘our India’)—and inflict a crippling blow on any imperialist powers who tried to block them: in Japan’s case, the US, which had no intention of permitting a contender in the Pacific; in Germany’s, France and Britain, who had no wish to see Europe dominated by Berlin.

Initially this inter-imperialist war was fought in two separate theatres, Northern Europe—first Poland, then Belgium, Holland, France, Denmark and Norway falling to the Wehrmacht in 1940; Barbarossa launched the following summer—and the Pacific, where FDR’s embargo of oil supplies and intransigence in negotiations determined Tokyo in 1941 to add Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia to its conquests in China and French Indochina, and attempt to knock out the US fleet in Hawaii. The two theatres interlocked as the US came into the War and the UK, its debtor, having survived the Battle of Britain, shifted its forces to the Middle East to defend its oil fields in Iraq and Iran and the sprawling empire that stretched from Egypt and East Africa through India,

Burma, Malaya and Singapore to Hong Kong and the Pacific. This inter-imperialist war was won decisively by the US, which crushed Germany and Japan and weakened Britain and France, to emerge as the world's new hegemonic power.

The second type of warfare was the USSR's self-defence against the German invasion, protecting the gains of 1917 from Nazi counter-revolution, rebuilding the Red Army and then—while the Western Allies were pinned down by surprisingly tough German defences in northern Italy and the Rhineland–Ardennes—sweeping west in 1944–45, as the Wehrmacht retreated and Nazi-collaborationist regimes crumbled in Bucharest, Sophia, Vilnius, Tallinn, Warsaw, Budapest and Vienna. The USSR emerged from the War as the second world power, with control over Eastern Europe. Although Moscow allowed Western troops into Vienna and Berlin, once the Truman Doctrine had been put into action, Stalin pushed through military-bureaucratic ‘revolutions from above’, crushing independent left forces and bequeathing ‘an ugly political legacy’ that would mark the post-war situation.²

Distinct from this was a third type of war, fought by the Chinese people against Japanese imperialism, which would develop into a social revolution once Allied support for the Kuomintang was cut off. Fourth, and distinct again, were the wars of national liberation waged by anti-colonial forces who refused to fight for their French, British, Dutch and American masters in Indochina, Burma, Malaya, Indonesia and the Philippines, joined by the Quit India movement; these struggles again turned towards social revolution in Indonesia and Indochina. Fifth, the armed-resistance movements of Nazi-occupied Europe, which in several cases—Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece—took on the character of national uprising, revolution or civil war, while parallel processes in France and Italy saw the emergence of mass communist parties. The entry of independent social forces from below into the maelstrom of the inter-imperialist conflict through these ‘just wars’ of national resistance and liberation would play a significant role in shaping the first thirty years of the post-war order.³

¹ Ernest Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War*, London and New York 1986.

² Mandel, *Meaning of the Second World War*, p. 156.

³ Mandel, *Meaning of the Second World War*, p. 45.

Might this type of analytical perspective throw some light on the present war for Ukraine? The contrasts in scale and destructiveness between the two conflicts—80 million perished between 1939–45—hardly need to be stressed. More than that, the world-historical situation has not simply changed but been turned on its head. The rough equivalence of contending powers has given way to a world super-hegemon of a new kind, equipped with a powerful universalist ideology and wielding unprecedented military and financial might, for whom any state resistant to its economic and political penetration is by definition an adversary of some sort. Economically, the post-war boom has given way to the deindustrialization of the long downturn, lifted only by financial bubbles, monetary engineering and growing piles of debt. Socially, a US-led capitalist offensive has reversed the terms of the post-war era: in place of rising working-class militancy, industrial labour has been downgraded, outsourced and cast as a resentful loser. Impoverished revolutionary China is the second largest economy, under digitally enhanced CCP rule. The USSR dissolved itself and the US installed capitalism of a sort across the ex-Soviet Bloc. The hierarchy of powers at war in Ukraine, their economies and their classes, are in stark contrast to those of 1939–45.

Yet the 2022 war is also an international one, fought on economic and ideological as well as military fronts, dividing the world's powers and mobilizing a wide array of states as participants or supporters, if not combatants.⁴ As it enters its ninth month, it may be helpful to distinguish the different types of conflict involved—to look at their origins, as well as their immediate causes; at the belligerents' aims, strategies, internal cohesion and material and ideological resources—and to think through how these feed into the dynamics of the wider conflagration. What follows is unavoidably schematic, scanting the complex character of the actors and no doubt clouded in places by the fog of war and the limited information available on key questions. It is offered in the spirit of a first cut that will surely need nuance and correction. But first, as with every war, analysis should take account of specific regional determinants.

⁴ For an earlier discussion of the Ukraine war, on which this builds, see Watkins, 'An Avoidable War?', Volodymyr Ishchenko, 'Towards the Abyss' and Tony Wood, 'Matrix of War', *NLR* 133/134, Jan–April 2022.

The geographical and geopolitical setting of Ukraine, stretching for nearly a thousand miles across the marchlands of the Dnieper, has long left its territory prone to penetration by external powers—yet, as often as not, these outsiders have been summoned in by contending local forces. There is no need to go back to the Mongol invasions, or the imposition of aristocratic-Catholic rule under the seventeenth-century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and appeal of rebel Cossacks to the Tsar. During the First World War, Austro-Hungarian and Tsarist-Kerenskian forces raged back and forth across these lands, one of the major theatres of the Eastern Front. From 1917–22, the region became the Southern Front of the Civil War: the Central Rada in Kiev summoned help from Berlin and Vienna to fight the soviets of Kharkiv, Odessa and the Donets, as well as Makhno’s anarchists in Zaporizhzhia; Poland annexed the Lviv region, with the blessing of the Paris Peace Conference; western-backed White forces and independentist insurgents of varied stripes, from socialist to neo-fascist, battled the Red Army from Kiev to Crimea. Before the 1920s were out, Stalin’s depredations began to pave the way for the Wehrmacht’s conquest and the life-or-death struggle of World War Two. The new-born state hatched from the furtive dissolution of the Soviet Union on the night of 8 December 1991 by the Belavezha troika, Yeltsin, Shushkevich and Kuchma, would not escape this logic. In a divided country, rival forces would invite outsiders in.

3

What are the principal types of conflict in play today? Analytically, working from the small to the large, there is no avoiding the question of the civil conflict within Ukraine itself. On its own, this could not have generated an international war; yet the fighting could not have escalated without it. At its root was the overnight dissolution of the USSR, which turned the Russian plurality into a series of large minorities within the new nation-states. In Ukraine, the ruling class was itself politically divided, some oligarchs and their parties tending more to Moscow, others to Washington, Berlin and Warsaw, while the most powerful cultivated suavely cosmopolitan relations with all sides. Socially, the divisions between rustbelt and metropolis were stretched not only across borders but linguistic difference, regimes of accumulation and even modes of

production. The Bolshevik hope that, within their shared soviet republic, the industrial proletariat of the Donets Basin would be a beacon of light for conservative western Ukraine has been turned on its head. In 2014 a student in Kiev could say of the Donbas workers, ‘They’re all Sovoks over there. They can’t help it.’⁵

The 2014 Maidan (‘square’) events—the overthrow of the pro-Moscow Yanukovich government by a popular uprising in Kiev, met by counter-protests in the east, where most of its electoral majority lay—put immense strain on these relations. Opposition to the new government was broad; in late February, some 3,500 elected officials gathered at an anti-Maidan conference in Kharkiv. The following day, the Kiev parliament repealed protections for Russian as a regional language. The anti-Maidan uprisings in eastern Ukraine copied the Kiev model of occupying central squares and taking over government buildings. The security forces were also divided; in some areas the local police made no attempt to stop the anti-Maidan protesters. This was a crucial determinant of their success. In cities like Kharkiv or Odessa, Kiev’s authority prevailed. In hard-scrabble towns like Donetsk and Luhansk, popular militias made up of miners, truck drivers, security guards and the local unemployed stormed the regional-administration offices and declared people’s republics, electing as leaders local businessmen or former military commanders. In the chaos of the early days, there were few ‘Russian volunteers’ on the scene.⁶

⁵ ‘Sovok’: a contemptuous Russian term for those who still have a Soviet outlook and values, having failed to adapt to capitalist society. See Anna Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors: Proxies, Freelancers and Moscow’s Struggle for Ukraine*, London 2022, p. 19. Arutunyan, a liberal Russian journalist, former political editor of *Moscow News*, now living in London, travelled extensively in eastern and southern Ukraine in the early months of 2014 and provides a rare ethnography of the Donbas at the time of the anti-Maidan risings.

⁶ The ex-FSB killer Igor Girkin and his 50-strong militia, funded by the ultra-pious far-right Russian billionaire Konstantin Malofeyev, arrived in the Donbas on 12 April 2014, a week after the Donetsk People’s Republic had been proclaimed. It was not until mid-May that Malofeyev’s PR man, Alexander Borodai, was ‘elected’ prime minister of the DPR, to be replaced three months later by the Donetsk-born Alexander Zakharchenko, the far-right head of a local veterans’ organization. The militias themselves were largely manned by Donbas-born fighters, with ‘Russian tourists’ making up less than a third of them.

The militarization of the political divide was slow and uneven. If the symbolic first shots were those of the snipers in Kiev firing at Maidan protesters, it is still unclear whether these were regime security forces or, as analysis of the forensic evidence suggests, hard-right militants from the protesters' ranks.⁷ Certainly the new Interior Minister, Arsen Avakov, integrated the hard-right street fighters of the Pravy Sektor into the National Guard before sending it to crush the 'terrorists' in the east. In Mariupol, Interior Ministry forces apparently massacred twenty people, including local policemen who refused to put down local anti-Maidan protests. In Odessa, on the other hand, civil forces faced off against each other: some 2,000 nationalist football supporters, armed with makeshift weapons, attacked a camp of 300 pro-Russian protesters in the central square; forty of the protesters died when the nationalists torched the trade-union offices in which they had tried to barricade themselves for protection.⁸

The two sides in the civil conflict were an uneven match. The new government in Kiev not only possessed the resources of the state—by June 2014, its air force and artillery were hammering the rebel Donbas cities—but was more politically focused and socially cohesive, bound together by antipathy to Russia and the prospect of joining the West. The easterners' demands were more diffuse: federalization, regional autonomy; initially, less than a third were in favour of outright secession.⁹ They did not have a strategy as such. Ideologically, the first protests drew above all on the notion of democratic self-determination, mirroring the Maidan. To this, the milieu of veterans' clubs and martial-arts associations from which the militias were drawn added a harder Russian-nationalist layer, legitimized by the Kremlin's myth of an anti-fascist mobilization against the 'Kiev junta'.

Both sides looked to outside powers for help. The State Department had long had a large presence in Kiev and the EU states funded a host of NGOs. They had backed Yanukovich's opponent in the 2010 election, the nationalist Yulia Tymoshenko, and supported the Maidan uprising against him. Victoria Nuland, the Obama Administration's woman on the spot, was

⁷ Ivan Katchanovski, 'The Hidden Origin of the Escalating Ukraine–Russia Conflict', *Canadian Dimension*, 22 January 2022.

⁸ Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors*, pp. 14–16 (Mariupol), 68–75 (Odessa).

⁹ Polling by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology, April 2014, cited in Arutunyan, *Hybrid Warriors*, p. 123.

intensely involved in appointments to the new governing bloc in Kiev, which included pro-Western oligarchs, neoliberals, human-rights NGOs, hard-line nationalists and elements of the far right. Here Washington had swept aside an agreement between Yanukovich and the opposition, guaranteed by Germany, Poland and France, for a peaceful transition, early elections and reversion to the Constitution of 2004, and winked at the final violent assault on the Presidential Administration building. Obama's people, Vice President Biden among them, aimed for a more conclusive outcome to the east-west to-and-fro of political power in Ukraine. In response, Putin took control of majority-Russian Crimea, where Moscow already had basing rights for its fleet and for a force of 25,000—assets it saw as under threat from the new regime in Kiev. Obama declared this an outrage to international law and slapped on sanctions.

The smooth annexation of Crimea raised hopes among the rebel militias that Putin would bail them out, too. Instead, Russia sent only what was necessary to keep the people's republics going—including covert armed support, in the Northern Wind operation of August 2014—without offering official recognition. In 2015 Putin forced their unwilling representatives to sign the Minsk Accords, which curbed their expansion. Moscow's object was to block Ukraine joining NATO, not the liberation of the Donbas. At the same time, Washington was arming and training Kiev's forces, sucking oxygen from the Minsk Accords. Under Biden, the pace quickened. In 2021, Ukraine took part in extensive army and naval exercises with NATO powers and signed a new 'Strategic Partnership' agreement with the US. The upshot of the civil conflict was thus an externally armed stalemate. In a context where the majority of Ukrainians remained politically passive, the Russian and US interventions—each at the invitation of partisan forces—served to strengthen the conflictual dynamic.

4

Putin's war, the second type of conflict at stake, has an ambiguous double character, defined by its twin adversaries, NATO and Ukraine. On the one hand, Russia's mobilization began as a desperate defensive gamble against the advance of US military power. On the other, the invasion is a neo-imperialist war of conquest or partition, wavering in scope, provoked by Kiev's declared option for incorporation into the West. Analytically

the two aspects of the war are distinct in their origins, aims and ideologies. The defensive aspect—Kremlin apprehensions at the advance of US weaponry to its very doorstep—long predates any political salience for a reconstituted ‘Russian world’. Its origins lie in the constitution of NATO as an offensive military alliance under US command, targeted at Moscow from the start. Repurposed for out-of-area operations after the end of the Cold War, NATO’s exclusion of Russia pointedly serves to define an asymmetrical friend-enemy relation. However obsequious the Kremlin’s assistance for US operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere, its requests for a negotiated conclusion to NATO’s eastward advance—Munich 2007, Bucharest 2008, the repeated Russian *démarches* of 2021—have always been dismissed.

Faced with this, Moscow’s rational strategy was to balance against Washington with other outsiders, attempting to widen any fissures within the Atlantic alliance and to strengthen its own position. The acceleration of Ukraine’s western realignment from 2014 brought matters to a head, sharpened perhaps by Putin’s concern for his place in history and awareness that time was running out. His first gambit was the Minsk Accords, which would have guaranteed Ukraine as a neutral power under a confederal constitution. For that reason it was implacably opposed by Ukrainian nationalists, with tacit US support. In 2021, the Biden Administration quickened Ukraine’s integration as a NATO ‘partner’ and Kiev announced in a new military-strategy document that it had ‘military support from the world community in the geopolitical confrontation with the Russian Federation’. This led to Putin’s gamble of escalating to the level of coercive diplomacy in September 2021, backing his demands with a full-scale mobilization. But in the absence of any de-escalatory escape route, Biden’s refusal to countenance real negotiations helped to tip Russia’s defensive posture against NATO into an aggressive neo-imperialist one towards Ukraine.

Though overshadowed by blunders in the centre of the country—the failed paratrooper attack on Kiev, the 40-mile jam of gridlocked tanks, inability to take out Ukrainian air defences—Russia’s military strategy in the south and east has not been as disastrous as the Western press makes out. Russia occupies 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory, a solid block contiguous with its own. Reconstruction has started amid the ruins of Mariupol, with 30,000 building workers paid double domestic rates.¹⁰ Materially, Russia still possesses deep resources for a war

¹⁰ Volodymyr Ishchenko, ‘Russia’s Military Keynesianism’, *Al-Jazeera*, 26 October 2022.

of attrition: a substantial arms industry, backed by a manufacturing base that has been shifting to import substitution since the sanctions of 2014; manpower sufficient to rotate troops through the winter, after the September 2022 mobilization; and, despite the courageous anti-war protests and the exodus of fighting-age men, a non-negligible degree of social cohesion, drawing on the still vivid tropes of the Second World War. None will last indefinitely. Support for the war still runs at 72 per cent, according to opinion polls, down from 80 per cent in March; but those who think the ‘Special Military Operation’ is generally successful are down from 68 per cent to 53 per cent, with a common feeling that ‘it’s been going on too long’.¹¹ The faces of Putin’s *nomenklatura*, massed beneath the chandeliers of the Kremlin’s Great Hall as he announced the accession of the four new regions—Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia—to the Russian Federation in late September, were a study in uneasiness and gloom.

5

Russia’s invasion generated a third type of conflict: Ukraine’s war of national self-defence. Kiev faced stiff odds: its pre-2022 annual defence budget was \$5bn, to Russia’s \$65bn. Ukraine’s population was less than a third of Russia’s, its GDP an eighth. But universal male conscription evened the odds in ground forces and Ukraine was already well-equipped with missiles, air defences and the IT, logistics and command structures that the US had been putting in place since 2015. As millions of refugees fled to Poland, Western military hardware was trucked across the border in industrial quantities, backed by billions in aid. Zelensky’s refusal of safe haven in Poland was symbolic of the will to resist.

The trauma of the invasion has inevitably forged a new national consciousness in Ukraine. After the Maidan uprising in 2014, two-thirds of Ukrainians thought the country was ‘going in the wrong direction’, with a brief exception for the peace moves in 2019; now, over 75 per cent think it is heading in the right one. An overwhelming majority believes Ukraine will win the war, even though they think it may take a year or more. Pride in Ukraine rose from 34 per cent in August 2021 to 75 per cent a year later.¹² This has come at the price of a visceral hatred

¹¹ ‘Conflict with Ukraine: September 2022’, Levada Centre, 7 October 2022.

¹² Rating Group, ‘Seventeenth National Survey: Identity, Patriotism, Values’, Kiev, 23 August 2022.

for Russians—‘the orcs’—whose terms Zelensky shares: ‘Until they get smashed in the face, they won’t understand anything’, he told the *Wall Street Journal*.¹³ In August 2022, 81 per cent of Ukrainians reported they felt ‘cold’ or ‘very cold’ towards Russian people, and nearly half regarded the populations of the Donetsk and Luhansk people’s republics in the same hostile light. The proportion of people who think Ukrainian should be the only state language has risen from 47 to 86 per cent. A clear majority of young people think it will be impossible ever to restore friendly relations between Ukraine and Russia; another 28 per cent think it would take at least twenty or thirty years. Given the mixed genealogies and trans-border extended families in the region, this translates into innumerable strained or broken relationships; a third of Ukrainians define their predominant feeling as grief.¹⁴

Ukrainian military strategy has been based on international appeals for more aid, backed by a chorus of politicians from the Baltic states proclaiming their willingness to die for freedom. Ideologically, this has been highly successful, although the sums are not that large: measured in euros, the US has committed €27.6bn in military and €15.2bn in financial aid since January, compared to the EU’s €2.5bn military and €12.3bn financial help.¹⁵ But although Western aid has levelled the field, it hasn’t given Ukraine a knock-out advantage. By July, equipped with 200lb GPS-guided HIMARS rocket systems, air-launched HARM missiles, over 800,000 rounds of 155mm artillery shells and intensive NATO training, the Ukrainian forces managed to slow, then check, Russia’s village-by-village advance across the Donbas. Weekly Pentagon announcements of new arms shipments kept up the tempo and NATO special-ops forces set off explosions behind Russian lines. More complex operations are heavily dependent on US help. When in July Zelensky, needing a victory of some sort to prove the war wasn’t slowing to a frozen conflict and shore up Western support, proposed a southern offensive, striking at Kherson, cutting off Mariupol from the east and taking Zaporizhzhia, Pentagon officials were scathing—Russian positions there were well enforced—

¹³ Yaroslav Trofimov and Matthew Luxmoore, ‘Ukraine’s Zelensky Says a Cease-Fire with Russia, without Reclaiming Lost Lands, Will Only Prolong War’, *WSJ*, 22 July 2022. Zelensky’s approval rating was running at 30 per cent before the war; now it is over 90 per cent.

¹⁴ Rating Group, ‘Seventeenth National Survey’.

¹⁵ See ‘Ukraine Support Tracker’, IfW/Kiel Institute for the World Economy, October 2022; not all the sums committed have been disbursed.

and instead drew up plans for a small-scale sortie of fifteen tanks into the near-empty zone southeast of Kharkiv, duly hailed as a game-changing counter-offensive by the loyal Western press.¹⁶ The more significant capture of Lyman drew less attention.

6

The fourth type of conflict, then, is the one being waged by the Biden Administration. A former CIA chief describes it as a proxy war: the US exploiting Ukrainians' courage and their will to fight the Russians, as—for example—it had once armed and advised the Rojava Kurds.¹⁷ But if so, this is only one aspect of Washington's war. On the economic front, the sums involved are far larger than those flowing to Ukraine. The Biden Administration has frozen some \$400bn of Russia's foreign-currency reserves, major Russian banks have been shut out of SWIFT, Russian firms are blocked from buying crucial components and major Western companies—Shell, BP, the shipping giant Maersk—are quitting Russia. Famously, the sanctions backfired in the short-term, with rising fuel and food costs swelling Russia's export earnings. Yet the goal of Biden's sanctions was not just to put an economic chokehold on the invasion of Ukraine; their aims, the *Economist* explained, are more sweeping—'to impair Russia's productive capacity and technological sophistication' and deter China.¹⁸

The origins of Washington's adversarial treatment of post-Soviet Russia can be traced to US foreign-policy debates in the aftermath of the Cold War. The strategy's principal architect was Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Advisor. Born in 1928 near Lviv, then part of Poland, he was the son of a diplomat posted to Canada in the late 1930s, and a committed Cold Warrior. In the post-communist era, Brzezinski

¹⁶ For example, Dan Sabbagh, 'Surprise Counterattack Wrong-Foots Invaders and Shows Sophisticated Battlefield Tactics', *Guardian*, 9 September 2022; Patrick Wintour, 'Battle of Nerves: How Advances on the Field Are Helping Europe Recover Its Resolve', *Guardian*, 14 September 2022. On US planning for the operation, see Julian Barnes, Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, 'The Critical Moment Behind Ukraine's Rapid Advance', *NYT*, 13 September 2022.

¹⁷ Leon Panetta, 'It's a proxy war with Russia, whether we say so or not', Bloomberg TV, 17 March 2022.

¹⁸ 'Are Sanctions on Russia Working?', *Economist*, 25 August 2022.

argued in *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), the central strategic question for Washington was how to exert American primacy over Eurasia, the world's central landmass—which meant dealing, first and foremost, with the huge black hole that was post-Soviet Russia. Brzezinski warned that Russian elites would be resentful of their state's dismembering and especially hurt by the loss of Ukraine. To prevent any revanchism taking root in this fertile soil, American grand strategy should extend NATO to Russia's borders and build a barrier against them, encompassing Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. This *fait accompli*—and, ideally, the break-up of Russia itself into three more manageable states—should persuade the Kremlin to accept a more modest future, as a sort of footman to the EU. This was the strategy adopted by the Clinton Administration and implemented by Brzezinski's *protégée*, Madeleine Albright, as Secretary of State—against the passionate opposition of many in the US foreign-policy elite.¹⁹

Fifteen years later Brzezinski had changed his mind, explaining in *Strategic Vision* (2012) that Russia should actually be fully integrated into Western institutions and that China was the more problematic power. By then it was too late. American forces were on ex-Soviet soil in the Baltics, the White House had declared that Georgia and Ukraine would join NATO and the prospect of Western integration had already exercised a powerful pull over politicians and opinion-makers in Kiev. Within a few years, Nuland would be helping to appoint Ukraine's new Prime Minister and Russian Spetsnaz commandos would be guarding the entrances to Crimea's Supreme Council and Council of Ministers. The annexation of Crimea was by no means the worst of Putin's deeds, carried out with minimum force and a high degree of local support—the polar opposite of his war on Chechnya. But for the Obama Administration, it was an unconscionable insult to the government Washington had just helped to put in place, an act of *lèse-majesté* against America herself, which could not be allowed to stand.

American resources vastly outmatch Russia's, not least in the field of intelligence, but also in the quality of its nuclear arsenal, on which Obama lavished a trillion-dollar upgrade in the depths of the Great Recession. But even as Pentagon planners oversee the Dnieper battlefields, only

¹⁹ For a critical assessment see Perry Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers*, London and New York 2015, pp. 197–208.

a tiny splinter of US weaponry is going to Ukraine (and far less from Zelensky's fellow-Europeans). It remains to be seen whether an industrial power like Russia can be defeated by proxy forces. Ideologically, the courage of the Ukrainians and the well-publicized atrocities committed by Putin's forces on the battlefield have galvanized support for Kiev in the US and Europe far more effectively than lectures about democracy and autocracy from the grinning ghoul in the White House could have done. The official ideology depends of course on keeping up the charade that 'Ukraine will decide'. In reality, Ukraine is a supplicant on the international stage, dependent on American arms and intelligence. Zelensky has been put in his place for noisily tweeting that the US should do more—sharply warned by Biden that he shouldn't appear ungrateful for all the American help he is getting.²⁰ Zelensky duly tempered his tweets. His demand for accelerated accession to NATO in September—met with squeals of joy from Riga, Tallinn and plucky little Ottawa—was coldly slapped down by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Zelensky publicly scolded by a former US ambassador to Kiev.

The character of the Biden Administration's conflict with Russia is unambiguously 'imperialist', in the sense that it aims at regime change and the assertion of American hegemony over the Eurasian continent. But it is not clear that Biden has a path for following this through. His Administration didn't plan for a war on this scale: it is an unlooked-for gift, like Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990; yet regime change in Iraq took nearly thirteen years, with results that are plain to see. In many respects the Russian invasion has been a boon for Biden, even if the domestic fillip hasn't shown up in his approval ratings, and a big gain in soldering Europe to Washington. In another sense, the Ukraine war is a massive distraction from the Democrats' real priority: domestic revival to ensure American primacy in the strategic rivalry with China, where the US also hopes to see another type of regime installed in due course. Here the spectre of a fifth type of conflict intervenes, over-determining Washington's reactions to Ukraine: the coming battle with Beijing. The parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan were drawn incessantly in the winter of 2021 and early months of 2022 as reasons not to negotiate with Putin. Biden officials used the 'China will be watching' argument as grounds for a tough US response: any 'off-ramps' for Putin would

²⁰ Yasmeeen Abutaleb and John Hudson, 'Biden Scrambles to Avert Cracks in Pro-Ukraine Coalition', *Washington Post*, 11 October 2022.

be taken by Beijing to mean that American power was eroding. One of Biden's chief concerns has been to limit costs, in White House attention as well as US casualties, while he proceeds with this existing domestic and foreign-policy agenda. The prospect of a Sino-American conflict, the real focus of the last three administrations in Washington, is the final lock determining the Ukraine war's dynamic.

7

The interaction between these different types of conflict—civil, defensive-revanchist, national-resistance, imperial-primacy, Sino-American—has driven a relentless escalatory dynamic. After the militarization of the civil conflict in 2014, Washington and Moscow fuelled the forces on each side of the Contact Line. Putin's invasion, the decisive escalation, was then met by the military and economic mobilization of a far larger bloc, orchestrated from the far side of the Atlantic, with one eye on the Pacific conflict to come. Egged on by the warmongers of thirty non-combatant states, this dynamic may be impossible to reverse.

The slippery character of the combatants' war aims is a product of this escalation. In March, Kiev's position at the Istanbul peace talks was for (hyper-guaranteed) neutrality and the retreat of Moscow's forces to pre-invasion lines. In April, the US pulled the rug out from under the Russian-Ukrainian talks, delivering the message that, for the West, Putin would not be a negotiating partner.²¹ Today, Kiev demands the full Ukrainianization of Crimea. Moscow wanted a treaty with NATO and has ended up in an all-consuming war. Washington aimed for the painless extension of its hegemony across Eastern Europe and instead has had to grapple with inflationary fuel prices, as key congressional elections loom. Looking at the abstentions and no-votes on Ukraine at the UN this October, Brzezinski could have pointed out that Washington is precisely losing support in Eurasia—India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as well as the Central Asian republics, China, Iran, Vietnam and Laos—and two-thirds of Africa, from Algeria, the Sudans and Ethiopia to the DCR, Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and South Africa. The US was left with the NATO and ASEAN states, plus (most of) Latin America.

²¹ Roman Romaniuk, 'From Zelensky's "Surrender" to Putin's Surrender: How the Negotiations with Russia Are Going', *Ukrainska Pravda*, 5 May 2022.

The result of the escalatory dynamic has been, firstly, a disastrous deepening of the Ukrainian civil conflict. The social developments unleashed there have been profoundly regressive, the opposite of World War Two. Zelensky's major pre-war legislation was a land-privatization act, deeply unpopular. Now, amid a mounting economic crisis, in which over a million workers have been dismissed and 7 per cent of the housing stock destroyed—and with unemployment running at 35 per cent, even though millions more of working age have left the country—right-wingers in the Zelensky government, a majority, have seized the chance to push through a bill excluding up to 70 per cent of the work-force from existing labour protections, a measure blocked by trade-union opposition before the war. The civil conflict continues in the recaptured zones, amid death and desolation, as 'collaborators' with the Russian occupation are rounded up for punishment.

Moscow's self-defence against NATO and attempts to force a deal with Washington have been decisively defeated. Whatever the formal status of the country, NATO will be implanted in Ukraine for the foreseeable future. With Sweden and Finland's accession, Russia will have a new 800-mile border with the bloc and the Baltic will be a NATO lake, with Kaliningrad an isolated anomaly. Unless there are dramatic new developments before the winter, Russia's war of territorial conquest seems set to freeze into one of defensive attrition that will eventually take a high economic toll. At the same time, unless the US radically changes its game, Ukraine does not appear to have a military strategy to recover the lost fifth of its territory. If, as Zelensky now claims, its aim is the reconquest of Crimea, Kiev's war will take on a neo-imperial character too, subduing rebel regions. So far, the Biden Administration's only tactic for achieving regime change in Russia is to drag out the war. Meanwhile, NATO's truly chilling 2022 'Strategic Concept' document brigades its thirty-odd member states behind Washington in the stand-off against Beijing.

In theory, the major European states could have balanced with Russia against the US after the end of the Cold War, insisting on a more accommodating, globally multiculturalist framework that would have made room for rising powers, as some American strategists were suggesting. Blocking that outcome was not just the conviction of the US foreign-policy elite that the alternative to its rule was global chaos. After fifty years of sapped sovereignty, European states lack the material and imaginative resources for a counter-hegemonic project. Germany in particular has

been further shackled to Atlanticism with each new crisis: Yugoslavia, the financial crash, Ukraine. 'Sleepwalkers' was the indelible term coined by Christopher Clark for the descent of the great powers into World War One. In the 2020s, the Europeans are wide awake, smiling and cheering, exulting in their 'strategic autonomy' as they are frog-marched towards the next global conflict for US primacy.