Robert H. Wade   January 30th, 2023

How will the Russia-Ukraine war end?

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As the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine approaches, there is little sign of an end to the hostilities. **Robert H. Wade** *explains how the competing ideologies of Russia and the US took us to this point, and how the interests of each side might be brought together through a compromise that can end the war.*

The Ukraine crisis expresses the clash of two mega forces shaping the world order. One is the US's long-standing assertion of 'primacy' or 'hegemony' vis-à-vis all other states. Presidents Putin and Xi talk often and pleasurably of the decline of the US and the fracturing of the West, especially since the 2008 financial crisis. Yet what is striking about the US and the West's response to Russia's invasion is how forcefully the US has rallied other western states – and western multinational corporations – to isolate a prominent G20 state and former G8 member. This is US 'hegemony' in action.

The second long-standing mega force comes from Russia. The tendency of observers to focus on the actions of Putin misses Russia's long-standing aim to make itself the centre of the Eurasian polity, culture, and economy. This focus on

Putin, coupled to the hope of regime change towards democracy, also misses the larger point that Russia has for centuries operated as a 'patrimonial' state, the personal domain of the tsar, a structure widely accepted by the Russian population as 'normal'. The nobility held status and property at the tsar's discretion. Today's oligarchs are in the same position, meaning that, as in China, there is no private sector in the western sense; rather, a state and a non-state sector.

Eurasianism in Russia

Ever since the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, a line of Russian thinkers has developed an ideology of Eurasianism. It was suppressed during the Soviet period but burst forth during perestroika in the late 1980s. The ideology posits not just America but the whole Atlantic world as Russia's 'clash of civilisations' opponent, with Russian Orthodoxy harnessed as the glue in the geopolitical war to come. Under Putin, the themes of imperial glory and western victimisation have been elevated to centre stage across the country.

Ukraine figured in Eurasian ideology as *an obstacle* from the start. Eurasian ideologists in the 1920s were already talking of 'the Ukraine problem', presenting Ukraine as excessively 'individualistic' and insufficiently Orthodox. Prominent ideologists of the 1990s identified Ukrainian sovereignty as, in the words of one, a 'huge danger to all of Eurasia'. Russia's Eurasia project, he said, required, as an 'absolute imperative', total control of the whole north coast of the Black Sea (not least to keep the Black Sea as western Russia's only ice-free access to the sea). Ukraine had to become 'a purely administrative sector of the Russian centralised state'.

This is the ideology that motivates Putin, which led him to declare Ukraine as 'a [western] colony with a puppet regime' on the eve of the invasion on 24 February 2022. This is the ideology which inspires and justifies the brutal war in his eyes.

The US and Nato strategy

The broad US foreign policy towards Russia and China aims to ensure that neither becomes a 'regional hegemon', let alone one of sufficient reach to challenge US hegemony. This larger strategy for containing Russia is the context to understand expansion of Nato members all along Russia's borders, from the Baltics to Bulgaria, and 30,000 Nato-designated troops; and to understand why the Kremlin does not see Nato as a *defensive* alliance, despite Nato protestations that it is only that.

It is no surprise that Moscow has long read US and Nato actions as deeply hostile, intended to produce 'regime change' in the Kremlin and install a ruler accepting of US hegemony, so that the US can block a China-Russia bloc and focus more fully on containing China.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the country has been on the receiving end of the harshest sanctions the US and Europe have ever imposed on any nation. As noted, even to those sceptical of claims of 'the end of the American empire', it is astonishing how effectively the US has mobilised western nations around the project to isolate one of the world's biggest economies, one of the top two nuclear powers, and the biggest energy supplier to Europe, as though it was North Korea.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian explained that the aim is *'asphyxiating Russia's economy',* even if the West is damaged in the process. Damage to the West is a price worth paying for regime change in Moscow with new leaders respectful of US primacy.

Meanwhile, China is watching and probably recalculating its confidence in the decline of the West. That recalculation has also prompted Beijing to forge closer ties with Moscow – but Beijing also wants to make sure that it does not help Russia to the point where China becomes subject to even more western sanctions and to the point where Russia could win enough in Ukraine to challenge China's strategy to dominate the Eurasian landmass, which is well underway in the form of the infrastructure alliances created by the giant Belt and Road Initiative.

How does the war end?

In countries that have suffered under Russian imperial rule in the not-distant past, including Poland, the Baltics, and Ukraine, the most popular view says: it can only end with the dissolution of the Russian Federation. Ukraine and the West have to keep the Russian army bogged down and the sanctions in place until distress in Russia is sufficient to build enough support – with western help – for separatist movements to split the federation.

Others, including Ukrainian President Zelensky, say the war can end only with the return to Ukraine of all territories annexed by Russia including Crimea, and of course the removal of Putin. This goes with Nato enlargement to include Ukraine and other states along Russia's western and southern borders.

The third broad position says that the West and the Ukrainian government have to accept an outcome in which Russia does not win, Ukraine does not lose, the war

does not broaden beyond Ukraine, both sides agree on something like the Minsk agreement, and there need be no regime change in Moscow. This 'realist' scenario is the most likely, especially because the US and the other countries of Nato are themselves under acute economic pressure, quite apart from the financial, military hardware, and personnel demands on them of the war in Ukraine.

The effects of the economic rupture with Russia have been felt acutely in Europe, in the form of rising prices, energy shortages, food shortages, lost jobs, the absorption of many millions of Ukrainian refugees, and absorption of still more refugees from food-starved countries that previously relied on Ukrainian and Russian grain and fertiliser. The costs are significant even in the US, where inflation is high and President Biden's approval ratings fragile.

At some point the US and other western nations will have to abandon any aspirations they may hold for regime change. They will have to push for compromise: Moscow to give up its intention to annex a major part of eastern Ukraine, and Kyiv to settle for less than all its land. Negotiations starting soon in 2023 may avoid more casualties (already in the hundreds of thousands) and more of Ukraine reduced to rubble. The West will have to learn from the past and not treat Russia as a blank canvas on which to engrave western-style capitalism and democracy, as it tried to do after the collapse of the Soviet Union and later in Iraq.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: European Union

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