

Robert Wade: Rethinking the Ukraine Crisis



Professor Robert Wade

The prevailing interpretation of the Ukraine crisis in the West says that Russia – specifically president Putin – started it and controls most of the military forces fighting the Ukrainian army. Martin Wolf of The Financial Times, for example, claims that Russia started it because its leaders fear having a stable, prosperous and West-leaning democracy on their doorstep, and saw this as a distinct possibility after their ally, president Yanukovich, was ousted in a coup d'état in February 2014. They will keep destabilizing Ukraine to prevent such a democracy until stopped by western force or sanctions (“Help Ukraine seize this chance”, Financial Times, Feb 11 2015).

The Financial Times editorialized:

“The Minsk II agreement will only succeed if Mr Putin has decided to tone down his confrontation with Ukraine and the west. But there is no sign he is willing to do so.... The Kremlin leader’s ambitions stretch beyond Ukraine and ... he strives to reassert a Russian sphere of influence in eastern Europe.... [T]he west should be contemplating a range of responses – including extending sanctions on Moscow and providing defensive military assistance to Kiev – in anticipation of Mr Putin’s next act of aggression” (“A tactical pause in Putin’s assault on Ukraine”, editorial, Financial Times, 13 February 2015).

The New York Times agreed: “What remains incontrovertible is that Ukraine is Mr. Putin’s war” (“Making the Ukraine cease-fire stick”, editorial, International New York Times, 14-15 February 2015).

It is true that Putin said in 2005 “The breakup of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century”. But one cannot then infer that righting this so-called catastrophe is an operational objective of Russian foreign policy. Nor can one infer that what drives Russia’s policy is fear of a stable and prosperous democracy in Ukraine, for the Russian leaders have not said anything like this.

What they have said repeatedly since the breakup of the Soviet Union is that they will resist allowing a rival great power to incorporate a state on their doorstep into a military alliance. They are in effect applying the US’s Monroe Doctrine to their own “near-abroad”. The US would not tolerate Mexico or Canada making a military alliance with China or Russia. Russia’s resistance to Ukraine joining NATO follows the same logic.

Beyond the general reason why Russia’s leaders draw a red line at a foreign military alliance on their borders, there is a more specific reason. The Russian nightmare is that Ukraine and Georgia both join NATO, with the result that almost the whole of the Black Sea is encircled by a hostile military alliance. Russia has fought several wars in the past two centuries to protect ready access to the Black Sea, its only sea route to the south. Its leaders regard this as a vital security interest, not just one of many.

Russia’s leaders also dispute the prevailing western interpretation that the core rationale of the NATO alliance was to protect weak western European countries against Russian aggression. They see NATO needing to invoke an external enemy in order to provide glue for cooperation between its often fractious member states under US leadership. To justify US leadership, to present a unitary front, NATO must present Russia as potentially overwhelming. The recent talk of “Russia



threatens Europe”, “Russia threatens the world”, is helpful for strengthening the western state order.

The key point was made by Georgi Arbatov. He was a political scientist and advisor to Gorbachev (and other secretaries of the Communist Party); and founder and director of the Institute for US and Canada at the Russian Academy of Science. He said to a group of senior American officials in 1987, “We are going to do a terrible thing to you — we are going to deprive you of an enemy”.

In fact, the Russian threat has always been exaggerated, as became clear at the end of the Cold War when it was acknowledged that the CIA had consistently overestimated Soviet military capabilities. Not just the Soviet threat but the whole “Communist Threat”, as in the “domino theory” prevalent from the 1950s to the 1980s, which led the US into such trouble in Vietnam.

The distinguished Washington Post columnist Walter Pincus has recently explained why it is so dangerous – to us in the West – to keep framing security issues in the Cold War framework, as though Russia and China constitute our major threats (“National security: war, hot or cold?”, [Washington Post 12 Jan 2015](#)).

He starts with the US Navy’s current claim that it must spend hundreds of billions of dollars in order to keep ahead of Russia and China’s rapid upgrading of blue-water naval capabilities. Then he shows how far behind the US are Russia and China, using the examples of nuclear-powered supercarriers and advanced submarines. He goes on to observe that “These days, terrorists are the first threat, and not a single one will be deterred by a nuclear warhead”.

So why does “US vs. Russia”, “US vs. China” frame continue to dominate the security agenda and security budget? His short answer is that the defence firms earn vast profits from no-competition capital-intensive projects to build armaments against Russia and China; but much less from labour-intensive projects to build capabilities against terrorists.

Once the US (West) vs. Russia or China frame dominates, distinctions between Russia-Putin’s wishes, intentions, and capabilities blur away, and we can be more readily persuaded that Putin’s wishes translate into Russia’s actions.

The interpretation of the Ukraine conflict as controlled by Russia brings to mind the following. My neighbour in Washington DC in the 1980s was in charge of assembling the intelligence from the various intelligence agencies to go to president Reagan each day. He had been Russia editor of Forbes magazine. He came to the attention of William Casey (then head of the CIA, who had power to make the appointment) because he wrote a book arguing that US environmentalists constituted a fifth column for communists, and hand-delivered it to Casey’s home. Casey was impressed, contacted him, and the intelligence appointment followed. In one conversation I told him that Vice President Bush had just said that five sixths of all the wars and civil wars going on in the world were “nickel and dimed” by the Soviet Union. I asked him what he made of that statement. He replied confidently, “He underestimated by one sixth”.

The Ukrainian specifics

The tortured history of the present conflict begins before the overthrow of president Yanukovich. Putin put him under fierce pressure to reject the agreement on accession to the EU, and he did. Many Ukrainians responded with protests, the Yanukovich regime responded by killing many. His regime lost legitimacy and power.

It is understandable that the response to these events was a profound mistrust among western-oriented Ukrainians of the Russian-oriented ones, who had voted for Yanukovich and wanted to pull the country outside the European orbit in which the former wanted to live.



To this point there is general agreement. The differences come next. The standard story in the West is that the tipping point came on 27 February 2014, when Russian soldiers (described as invaders) took over public buildings in Crimea. In doing so, Russia was the unprovoked aggressor towards Ukraine and Ukrainians. This interpretation is helped by the fact that throughout Putin blamed Yanukovich's ouster on "fascists", and has stuck to this lie.

In fact, the tipping point came earlier, on 23 February, the day after Yanukovich fled, when the first act of the Ukrainian parliament was to revoke the legal status of Russian as a national language; more broadly, to prevent regions from allowing the use of any other language than Ukrainian. The government set about blocking access to Russian news, TV channels and radio.

These were blatantly belligerent acts towards a very large minority. In Crimea the majority of the population is of Russian culture, and in Ukraine as a whole 40 percent of the population identifies as of Russian culture — of whom the great majority also see themselves as Ukrainians and proud of it, or at least did so until the Kiev government moved against them. All through this period the Kiev government and the broadcast media and large sections of the population chanted the motto, One Nation, One Language, One People. It is easy to understand why the many millions of Russian speakers felt under siege.

The fact that language legislation was then not put into force did not suddenly "make everything right again". The damage had been done: the message had been sent that the new regime was instinctively hostile to Russian speakers. It was this that provoked the wave of resistance in the eastern provinces, which was aided by military supplies and some regular and irregular Russian soldiers. (In Crimea, most of the Russian soldiers who took over public buildings were legitimately stationed in Crimea.)

Putin may well have given consent to the supply of some supplies and troops. But did this amount to a Russian invasion? A group of eight retired US intelligence analysts wrote to Chancellor Merkel on August 30, 2014, alarmed at the anti-Russian hysteria sweeping Official Washington and the spectre of a new Cold War. They reported the contents of a (leaked) February 1, 2008 cable from the U.S. embassy in Moscow to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The cable said that U.S. Ambassador William Burns was called in by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who explained Russia's strong opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine. The analysts' letter to Merkel continues,

"Burns gave his cable the unusual title, 'NYET MEANS NYET: RUSSIA'S NATO ENLARGEMENT RED LINES', and sent it off to Washington with IMMEDIATE precedence. *Two months later, at their summit in Bucharest NATO leaders issued a formal declaration that 'Georgia and Ukraine will be in NATO'.* In our view, [president] Poroshenko and [prime minister] Yatsenyuk need to be told flat-out that membership in NATO is not in the cards". (Ex-NSA and intelligence veterans warn Merkel on U.S. lies concerning 'Russian invasion' of Ukraine..., emphasis added)

The US intelligence analysts sent their letter to Merkel shortly before the NATO summit on September 4-5 2014. They warned her to be very cautious about accepting the intelligence about Russia's role provided by U.S. leaders.

"The accusations of a major Russian 'invasion' of Ukraine appear not to be supported by reliable intelligence. Rather, the 'intelligence' seems to be of the same dubious, politically 'fixed' kind used 12 years ago to 'justify' the U.S.-led attack on Iraq.

We saw no credible evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq then; we see no credible evidence of a Russian invasion now."

There is no social or cultural border between the eastern provinces of Ukraine and western Russia; there is no language (not even accent) difference, and lots of intermarriage. Many Russian men and women with close kinship ties to Ukrainians on the other side thought it “a natural obligation” to go and defend their relatives against what they saw as an attempt by Kiev and western Ukrainians to subordinate or expel them. These Russians cannot be construed as “Russian invasion force”, as though sent by Moscow. It is an open question how much control Putin has over men and women fighting against the Ukrainian army.

That is why it is so misleading to present the conflict as Ukraine versus Russia. It is a civil war within Ukraine; Ukraine is not united against Russia. The great bulk of people resisting the Kiev government forces are local volunteers, not Russians. The civil war is fuelled by the wish by many millions of Ukrainians to avoid being cast as second-class citizens or worse in the country they regard as home. It is being presented in the West as a Russia against Ukraine war because the US-NATO bloc has seized the opportunity to persuade western publics that Russia under Putin is the “unprovoked aggressor towards peace-loving democracies”, and thereby shore up the western alliance under US leadership and curb the ongoing cuts in the defence spending of NATO members.

We know the necessary conditions for peace: (1) international guarantees that Ukraine and Georgia will not join NATO; (2) substantial political and fiscal autonomy for eastern provinces, but not independence or political integration with Russia; (3) removal of heavy weaponry from the eastern provinces. Then all the parties should agree on Ukraine as a neutral country in a free trade arrangement with both the EU and Russia. Russia should accept that it does not own Ukraine and that — within this constraint of Austrian-type neutrality — Ukraine is free to choose its own path. The Ukrainian government should accept equal status for Russian-speaking Ukrainians as for Ukrainian speakers, and remove the grounds for Russian speakers fearing that the Kiev government is using the civil war to get the West to bolster the ascendancy of Ukrainian speakers over them.

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