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The Ukraine crisis is not what it seems

By Robert H Wade

In the West, the prevailing interpretation of the Ukraine crisis is that Russia – specifically President Putin – started it and controls most of the military forces fighting the Ukrainian army, often described in the media as “Russian separatists”. Martin Wolf of *The Financial Times* (11 February 2015) claims that Russia started it because its leaders fear having a stable, prosperous and West-leaning democracy on their doorstep; they saw this as a distinct possibility after their ally, President Yanukovich, was ousted in a coup in February 2014. By one means or other, Russia’s leaders will keep destabilizing Ukraine to prevent such a democracy until stopped by western force or sanctions.

The *Financial Times* wrote in an editorial on 13 February: “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.” The *New York Times* agreed (14-15 February): “What remains incontrovertible is that Ukraine is Mr. Putin’s war.”

Russia, Nato and Ukraine

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 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. The strategic imperative of Black Sea access makes the Ukraine situation quite different, in Russian eyes, from other territories with Russian-speaking minorities – a point missed by those who posit

a domino effect, whereby success in Ukraine emboldens Putin to grab territory elsewhere in ostensible defence of Russian minorities.

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, and present a unitary front, Nato must present Russia as the common enemy. The recent talk of "Russia threatens Europe" or "Russia threatens the world" helps to strengthen the western state order.

The key point was made by Georgi Arbatov, 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 US 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 explained on 12 January 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. 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 Russia and China are, using the examples of nuclear-powered supercarriers and advanced submarines. He goes on to observe: "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" and "US vs. China" continue to dominate the security agenda and security budget? Pincus' 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) versus Russia or China frame dominates, distinctions between Putin's and Russia's wishes, intentions and capabilities blur, and we can be more readily persuaded that Putin's wishes translate into Russia's revanchism.

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".

Ukrainian specifics

The tortured history of the present conflict began 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 they wanted to live.

On 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. This interpretation is helped by the fact that Putin blamed Yanukovich's ouster on "fascists", and has stuck to this lie.

In reality, 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% of the population identifies as of Russian culture – the great majority of whom also see themselves as Ukrainians and proud of it, or 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; and why they felt emboldened and relieved that the powerful state on their doorstep was supportive.

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. Putin said he agreed to supply ~~of~~ some armaments and troops. Did this constitute a Russian invasion? Russia's annexation of Crimea did constitute an invasion, and deserves condemnation – subject to the qualifications that Crimea had been part of Russia until handed over to Ukraine in 1954; it has a majority Russian-speaking population; it is key to what Russia sees as its vital security interest in Black Sea access, and the new Ukrainian government gave every indication of abrogating the treaty giving the Russian navy access to Crimean ports.

Whether Russia invaded the eastern provinces is ~~even~~ less clear. A group of eight retired US intelligence analysts wrote to Chancellor Merkel on 30 August 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) 1 February 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 Washing 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" (1).

The US intelligence analysts sent their letter to Merkel shortly before the Nato summit on 4-5 September 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."

The US intelligence analysts ~~wrote about the situation as of sent their letter to Merkel in~~ late August 2014. Seven months later, in early March 2015, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* printed an equally damning article about US exaggeration of Russia's role, based on sources in the German chancellor's office and the German Federal Intelligence Service. The article quoted US General Philip Breedlove, Nato's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, declaring that Russia-backed rebels have prepared "over a thousand combat vehicles [and] sophisticated air defence, battalions of artillery" in the southeast of Ukraine. "What is clear is that right now it is not getting better, it is getting worse every day," Breedlove concluded (2).

Der Spiegel reported that the Federal Intelligence Service had tried to verify Breedlove's claims, only to conclude that his claimed invasion force amounted to "just a few armoured vehicles". A German intelligence agent told *Der Spiegel*: "It

remains a riddle until today” how he reached such conclusions. *Der Spiegel* also said: “False claims and exaggerated accounts, warned a top German official during a recent meeting on Ukraine, have put NATO – and by extension, the entire West – in danger of losing its credibility.” The article further reported that German leaders see the head of European affairs at the US State Department, Victoria Nuland, as working together with Breedlove to erect “hindrances in their search for a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine conflict. [The two are] “doing what they can to pave the way for weapons deliveries.” Nuland is the US official who famously exclaimed “F—k the Europeans” in a leaked phone call in which she discussed the future composition of the Ukrainian government.

On the same day as the *Der Spiegel* article, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, the security-oriented intergovernmental organization whose membership covers most of the northern hemisphere) reported that progress was being made in the February ceasefire, as seen in the fall in ceasefire violations and withdrawal of heavy weaponry by both sides.

Overlooked in the standard narrative is the point that there is no social or cultural border between the eastern provinces of Ukraine and western Russia; no language (nor 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 duty” 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 a “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 along a longstanding cultural and geographical split; Ukraine is not united against Russia. The great bulk of people resisting the Kiev government forces are local volunteers, not Russian military. The civil war – now better described as an “internationalized civil war” with foreign parties bolstering both sides – 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 “Russia versus Ukraine” 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 durable peace: international guarantees that Ukraine and Georgia will not join Nato (reversing the organisation’s declaration in 2008 that “Georgia and Ukraine will be in Nato”); substantial political and fiscal autonomy for eastern provinces, but not independence or political integration with Russia; and 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 (just as French speakers in Canada have equal status), and remove the grounds for Russian speakers to fear that the Kiev government is using the civil war to get the West to bolster the ascendancy of Ukrainian speakers.

(1) “Ex-NSA and intelligence veterans warn Merkel on U.S. lies concerning 'Russian invasion' of Ukraine.” <http://www.sott.net/article/284924-Ex-NSA-and-intelligence-veterans-warn-Merkel-on-US-lies-concerning-Russian-invasion-of-Ukraine>

(2) “Ukraine-Krise: Nato-Obserbefehlshaber verargert Allierte”, Spiegel Online, 7 March 2015.