

USA: No war in Ukraine! - Ukraine as a test for the Left - A movement to oppose imperialism must be built

Thursday 3 February 2022, by [Tempest](#) (Date first published: 2 February 2022).

A Tempest editorial argues that building a movement that can challenge the main enemy at home, to defeat imperialism globally, must be based on solidarity from below, and unwavering opposition to all ruling class adventurism and imperial war-mongering internationally.

Contents

- [Ukraine as a test for the Left](#)
 - [Historical complexities, \(...\)](#)
 - [Putin and Biden...and the \(...\)](#)
 - [Rebuild a principled anti-impe](#)
-

Ukraine as a test for the Left

Russia and the U.S. (and its supporters in the EU and NATO) have begun amassing troops in the region and are threatening to go to war. The media frenzy surrounding these moves, the ongoing negotiations, arms deals, and political standoffs between the parties are dizzying and terrifying. And while there are certainly complexities involved in the history and politics, the basic principles of international solidarity remain unchanged: imperialist aggression by major powers is only in the interests of the capitalist elites and must be opposed by the Left in every possible arena.

Unfortunately, the Left in the U.S. has often been either flatfooted or completely mistaken in its approach to the problem. In many ways, the opposition to imperialism was easier to organize when it looked like it did in the last twenty years: when the largest military force in the world (the U.S.) invaded, occupied, and decimated much smaller countries. But in this current moment, imperialism looks very different. A much weakened and chastened U.S. faces emerging rivals with substantial international power, especially China and Russia. In these circumstances, imperial conflicts can be protracted, messy, and yet still very dangerous. Any anti-war movement must grasp these complexities to build a power that can effectively challenge the destructive momentum and force of imperialist war, at home and abroad.

Ever since the decline of the anti-war movement that opposed the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), there has not been a coherent and cohesive force to resist U.S. imperialism from the inside; once the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan began—and in a context of the cynical,

bipartisan, and brutal “war on terror”— the anti-war movement in the U.S. began to disappear and its organizations crumbled largely because it looked to the Democratic Party. But that party backed the Bush administration’s wars and, under the Obama administration, took responsibility for continuing to prosecute them and escalated conflict with China and Russia.

The result has been a Left that is disconnected from international resistance to empire. While some have fallen in line with the U.S. in the hopes of it playing a “progressive role” in the world, others have sided with Washington’s opponents under the illusion that they are an alternative to Western imperialism. Both of these tendencies have to be challenged if a coherent anti-imperial politics is to emerge.

Historical complexities, political realities, and the acute crisis

The crisis in Ukraine builds on old imperialist rivalries and grievances that have not disappeared since the Cold War. The U.S. set the stage for this conflict back in the 1990s when it attempted to rebrand NATO—after the fall of the Soviet Union when the rationale for NATO evaporated—into an organization that would expand Washington’s sphere of political and military influence to the Russian border and indeed throughout the world. And despite the rhetoric of human rights and democracy, NATO’s expansion accomplished neither, and the trail of bodies from the former Yugoslavia, to Afghanistan, to Iraq are proof. The intent to include Belarus and Ukraine in NATO (despite the protestations that these are years off) was designed to signal to Russia that U.S. power was being projected past the Dnieper River.

Similarly, the Putin regime has designs on pushing its military and political power farther towards central Europe. Despite having been tipped off its superpower pedestal at the end of the Cold War, Russia still has imperial ambitions, and Greater Russian nationalism is still a powerful force inside Russia and the eastern parts of Ukraine (the Donbas region, where Russian speakers are the majority). Its claims to resist U.S. aggression are just as hollow as U.S. claims of humanitarianism. Russian imperialist designs have been on display in Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Moldova, while Russian military and financial aid has flowed freely to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Russia senses both its invigorated musculature from petro-capitalist steroids as well as the United States’ weakened position since the debacles in Afghanistan and Iraq.

When Ukraine declared its independence from the USSR, it set out a politics of neutrality (that it would side neither with Washington/Europe nor with Moscow) in its founding documents. But Ukraine was economically ruined soon after independence and the IMF structural adjustment program only made matters worse for ordinary Ukrainians. As Richard Seymour [has noted](#), “while the neoliberal reforms implemented after 1990 produced many rich oligarchs...it didn’t produce a coherent capitalist class or a single faction capable of dominating.” As a result, [the rulers in Ukraine](#) have vacillated wildly between a Euro-American wing and a Russian wing as power has shifted from corrupt former Communist Leonid Kravchuk, to the neoliberal, IMF-backed Leonid Kuchma, to the openly pro-Russian Viktor Yankovich, to the Euro-friendly and even robustly pro-European leaders Viktor Yushenko, Yulia Tymoshenko, and Petro Poroshenko, and now to the “ideology-less” and autocratic Volodymyr Zelensky. All of them have happily made bedfellows with different kinds of far-right forces—neo-Nazi, antisemitic, anti-communist, rabidly nationalist.

Russian imperialist designs have been on display in Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Moldova,

while Russian military and financial aid has flowed freely to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Russia senses both its invigorated musculature from petro-capitalist steroids as well as the United States' weakened position.

There has been a forceful popular movement in Ukraine (both in the Orange Revolution and then in the [Maidan protests](#)) but these lacked clear leadership and structures and made them [vulnerable to political influences](#) and internal conflicts, making it, too, subject to the influence of U.S. and Russian imperialism. It bears underlining that ordinary people in Ukraine (as in Russia) have suffered from economic ruin in the 1990s and military conflicts in the 2000s and 2010s, while a tiny minority has grown massively wealthy.

European interests (whether measured by the EU or by individual states) are torn between their dependence on Russian oil and gas and their reliance on the United States military power. Germany, for instance, wants to make sure that the Nord Stream II pipeline, which will provide much-needed natural gas from Russia, is completed, even as it worries about a growing Russian military presence. Neither of those interests has much to do with what is best for the people of Ukraine or for the prospects of peace.

Nor are the people of Ukraine one monolith. Ethnic and regional divisions are real and have created massive power imbalances with xenophobic resentments and new eruptions of violent antisemitism. Certainly, Ukraine should have the right to self-determination, but this right (including language and other democratic rights) should extend to the country's national minorities (including ethnic Russians and Jews).

Neither of the major powers cares very deeply about national self-determination, it bears repeating. Russia has not called for independence in Crimea, Donetsk, or Luhansk, preferring to use the Russian majorities there to create permanent political conflict inside Ukraine. And the U.S. has not uttered a word against the right-wing forces in Ukraine that have been unleashed against ethnic Russians and Jews by the Ukrainian state. If the conflict between the major powers drags Ukraine deeper into war, it will only bolster the nationalist right on both sides of the country.

While the current situation is likely to produce a protracted stalemate—because both the U.S. and Russia have much to lose should conflict erupt—everything is setting the stage for this to be the uneasiest of peace. Troop deployments are being ratcheted up, there is increasingly hawkish rhetoric, and people are being whipped into a nationalist furor. And this is the point: the logic of imperialism in both the U.S. and Russia means that neither side can back down. The U.S. will not relinquish its beachhead into Russian “spheres of influence” nor can Russia tolerate an unanswered challenge in the form of a NATO expansion. This is a situation in which even a slight miscalculation could spell disaster. A Russian invasion would bring about a Chechnya-style civil war, while U.S. support for the regime in Kyiv indelibly corrupts domestic politics including bolstering the far-right within the Ukrainian armed forces. Any serious defense of Ukraine's right to self-determination requires that both imperial powers exit the country.

Putin and Biden...and the interests of Ukraine

Each regime has domestic and imperial interests in ratcheting up hostilities. In Russia, Putin's regime has [restored its economic vitality](#) recently with the dramatic increase in the cost of oil and

natural gas. It also wants to neutralize the widespread opposition to his regime's corruption, enrichment of the Russian ruling class, and repression of political resistance. It hopes a groundswell of great power nationalism against the U.S. and NATO will reconstitute his flagging domestic support. Putin also sees the West as deeply divided and rudderless with weak leadership all around. So, the timing for his belligerence is opportune.

Abroad, Biden made clear that his main presidential aim was restoring U.S. imperial dominion in the world system by gathering U.S. allies together to confront China and Russia. A show of weakness over Ukraine would compromise that agenda.

The Biden administration also has domestic and imperial reasons for intensifying the standoff even at the risk of war. At home, Biden is overseeing a failed domestic agenda and a nation reeling in multiple crises. He confronts a hawkish opposition in the GOP that has skewered him for his weakness as an imperial president, most recently and dramatically displayed by his shambolic conclusion to Washington's brutal war and occupation of Afghanistan. Abroad, Biden made clear that his main presidential aim was restoring U.S. imperial dominion in the world system by gathering U.S. allies together to confront China and Russia. A show of weakness over Ukraine would compromise that agenda, while a show of strength would enable him to neutralize his domestic opposition, which shares his hawkish impulses, and rally his flagging popularity in a burst of nationalist war fervor. That could tend toward conflict.

Tellingly, the people of Ukraine have been left almost entirely out of the conversations. [As Volodymyr Ischenko](#) has [powerfully argued](#),

“Recognizing Ukraine’s diversity and shifting the discussion to the interests of Ukrainians is particularly imperative not only for immediate de-escalation of the conflict but for any sustainable solution for Ukraine and the peace in Europe.”

Nonetheless, the various bilateral discussions between the U.S. and Russia have excluded Ukrainian representatives. And the fact that the majority of Ukrainians don't appear to support NATO membership has not been a major part of the discussion. The Zelensky government has even [repeatedly said](#) that it does not believe that a Russian invasion is imminent, preferring to use this crisis to negotiate better terms of aid instead of raising the temperature.



Delegates to the Zimmerwald Conference, July 1915.

Rebuild a principled anti-imperialist movement

The only solution here is the creation of a new generation of anti-war activists and anti-imperialist forces. In the U.S. the best traditions of the 1960s anti-war protests and the most recent anti-war demonstrations against the War on Terror have to be rebuilt to march alongside the growing anti-war voices in Russia (who bravely protested the wars in Crimea and Georgia) as well as the movements for social justice in Eastern Europe and Ukraine. That kind of internationalism can actually train a new generation in understanding its role as opposing their own war-crazed, profit-hungry rulers.

But there are dangers here. On the one hand, in the U.S. there are [voices on the Left](#) (and ironically [the Right](#)) that have [taken up a pro-Russian position](#) or [leave unaddressed](#) the question of Russian imperial ambitions, interest and agency. On the other hand, there are some progressives and [leaders within the Democratic Party](#) that paint United States involvement in Ukraine with humanitarian or democratic coloring. These positions reflect the state of the Left in the U.S. today, small and still lacking political independence from domestic and international ruling classes. But this need not be a permanent state of affairs—an anti-war movement with clear principles can be the basis for a renewed opposition to militarism, war, and profiteering globally. But it must be built.

A global, internationalist Left has to prepare now to build a clear pole of attraction. This has to be based on an understanding of the competing (if asymmetrical) imperial and ruling class interests driving these conflicts, like those between the U.S. and other great powers like Russia and even more importantly China. Such rivalries can only be effectively opposed by a Left that fights for international solidarity from below, the recognition of the right of self-determination, and the democratic rights of national minorities. No other perspective will provide the basis for both challenging the main enemy at home, and undermining the insidious destructive power of imperialism internationally.

Tempest

P.S.

- TEMPEST. POSTED FEBRUARY 2, 2022:
<https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/02/no-war-in-ukraine/>