

The Russian invasion of Ukraine marks an important turning point in global politics

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Nearly 40 years after the Cold War, Europe is once again tense and divided. While the United States and the European Union has sided with Ukraine, China has been overtly and covertly backing Russia. A lot of commentators are tempted to speak about the spectres of World War III. While we might debate about the feasibility of such far-fetched conclusions it is undeniable that this aggression is reminiscent of the days of the Cold War crisis: the Korean War (1950-53), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) or the US and Soviet missile races in the 1980s, writes Sushovan Dhar.

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine marks an important turning point in global politics. Some observers feel that Putin's latest military action has to do little with geopolitics, but is primarily aimed at shifting focus from the deep crisis that the Russian society and economy is undergoing. This crisis, far from being isolated, is the result of the failure of the neo-liberal model in Russia which has also been exhausted internationally. The anti-war protests best reflect this internal crisis.

It is normal for anti-war protests to gain momentum when the war continues for a while and people start understanding its consequences. This is also the time when masses begin to realise that victory is not anywhere close and it's not probably going to be achieved at all. The protests by a large number of ordinary Russians against Putin since the first days of the invasion is quite an exception and therefore, assumes greater significance. Moreover, even in the face of brutal repressions, people came out in the streets with huge motivations defying the authorities. Instead of mass hysteria and popular support for the regime, as we witnessed during Putin's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, this time, the mood is different. The lack of enthusiasm for the war is being observed in Moscow, St Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Yekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod... or for that matter all over Russia.

Russia is in the doldrums since the rouble collapsed in mid-December 2014, losing one-third of its value in three weeks. [1] Russia's economy, heavily dependent on commodity exports, especially oil and gas, to fund government programs was hit hard as prices of oil and gas plummeted in 2014. 30% of Russia's GDP and 60% of its exports depend on oil. Moreover, the conflict with Ukraine over the Crimean peninsula worsened the situation for Russia with sanctions affecting investments as well as

access to capital by Russian businesses, in the longer term. [2] The economy made some recoveries quickly since 2017 but have been unable to regain the required dynamism. Consequently, it had its impacts on social policies which are nothing but a crude mix of neo-liberal policies. A large number of Russians are extremely unhappy about the Kremlin's policies and especially about the pension reforms. Russia inherited from the Soviet Union a much lower retirement age (55 for women and 60 for men). Using the FIFA 2018 World Cup as a cover, authorities raised the retirement ages (63 for women and 65 for men). This was unpopular with 90% of the population and the Kremlin never recovered the trust of the majority. Consequently, Russian elections in recent times have been marred by a very high degree of election fraud.

It was not surprising that Putin would utilise the crisis with Ukraine to boost his popularity back home. However, Russia's external political objectives are also evident. The lengthy military preparations and the scale of the operations make it clear that Russia's objectives are not limited to the two "breakaway republics" of Donetsk and Lugansk. One can get a clue from Putin's February 21 speech, in which he ruled out Ukraine's sovereignty. Vladimir Putin's Greater Russian chauvinism is evident in his attempt to reconstruct history. According to him:

"Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was the case before the 17th century, when a portion of this territory rejoined the Russian state, and after."

And,

"I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia - by separating, severing what is historically Russian land. Nobody asked the millions of people living there what they thought. Then, both before and after the Great Patriotic War, Stalin incorporated in the USSR and transferred to Ukraine some lands that previously belonged to Poland, Romania and Hungary. In the process, he gave Poland part of what was traditionally German land as compensation, and in 1954, Khrushchev took Crimea away from Russia for some reason and also gave it to Ukraine. In effect, this is how the territory of modern Ukraine was formed."

It is obvious that Putin wants to bring a regime change by military invasion and he is aiming at total domination. One can compare this with the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Background

Nearly 40 years after the Cold War, Europe is once again tense and divided. While the United States and the European Union have sided with Ukraine, China has been overtly and covertly backing Russia. A lot of commentators are tempted to speak about the spectres of World War III. While we might debate about the feasibility of such far-fetched conclusions, it is undeniable that this aggression is reminiscent of the days of the Cold War crisis: the Korean War (1950-53), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) or the US and Soviet missile races in the 1980s.

As millions of Ukrainians continue to suffer one has to look at the past to get a better sense of the current complications. Two separate contradictions are at play and have thrust this horrific war upon ordinary Ukrainians. The Russian-American conflict and the Russian-Ukrainian discord. Tensions between these two post-Soviet states are not new and they can be traced back to the

dramatic end of the Cold War. Russia is still to digest the political defeat suffered at the hands of US imperialism during the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, of course, gave rise to a compromise between the two powers. The United States and Germany promised the then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not extend towards Russia's borders.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the bureaucratic regimes of Eastern Europe also raised debates around the future of NATO, originally promoted as a military alliance to "defend" against the "communist threat". There were opinions in favour of dismantling and replacing it by a common security architecture in Europe that included Russia as well. Instead, the US under Bill Clinton, in 1993, decided not only to keep NATO intact but to expand it eastwards.

Rebirth of Russian imperialism

Since then, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic have joined the military alliance and the subsequent US efforts to establish an anti-missile shield in Eastern Europe alarmed Russian authorities. Furthermore, the western endorsement of the transformation of Georgia (Rose Revolution in 2003) and, most importantly, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine the following year installed regimes hostile to Russia. The latter retaliated by intervening in the internal affairs of the two countries. The climax of the intervention was the 2008 recognition of Georgia's two breakaway regions — Abkhazia and South Ossetia. And of course, in 2014, the occupation of Crimea. This peninsula, south of Ukraine, is strategically important to Russia in addition to access to the Black Sea. Russia also supports "pro-independent" forces in the border regions of the two countries. The current military aggression is, of course, the latest offensive, directly or indirectly aimed at expanding the sphere of influence between Russia and the United States. A tussle continuing for almost 30 years.

It is important to recall that fighting between Ukrainian troops and Russian rebels in 2014 forced many Russian-speaking people (approximately 900,000) to flee eastern Ukraine to Russia. The tragedy of ordinary masses has been deftly used by Putin and his acolytes and expansionist policies have been spelt out under the pretext of defending minority Russians in the neighbouring states. Unfortunately, many leftists side with Putin by citing attacks on the latter, a position which is not only misleading but also dangerous.

The major actors of the crisis

The three main actors of the current crisis are the US, Russia and Ukraine. The US-led NATO bloc has been directly or indirectly responsible for almost all aggression, war and war crimes, globally, since 1945. NATO is, undoubtedly, the most powerful and most aggressive imperialist bloc in the world, waging three major devastating wars in the last two decades: Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011). It is the self-appointed defender of international law when it takes on Russian and Chinese imperialist competition, but consistently violates every code and convention wherever it is an obstacle to its quest for power. The recent past is littered with instances of such repeated violations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and many other places. These defenders of Ukrainian sovereignty have never hesitated to use drones to kill thousands of civilians in Pakistan. Erdogan's invasion of northern Syria and the occupation of all territories in violation of international law is overlooked since Turkey, a NATO member, is one of the main pillars of the Western bloc. Saudi Arabia, the bastion of Islamic theocracy, an authoritarian monarchy is a close military ally of NATO. Therefore, the Saudi royal family was able to carry out a brutal attack on Yemen as the US turned a blind eye towards the violation of Yemen's democracy or sovereignty.

NATO, too eager to curb Putin's expansionist ambitions has engulfed Eastern Europe since 1991 and has spared no efforts to turn Ukraine into a base against Russia. By provoking the Ukrainian government, the NATO bloc has deliberately fuelled years of conflict with Russia to weaken Putin's position in Eastern Europe.

Russia today

Putin's Bonapartist oligarchic regime is ruled by a gang of mafia-like billionaires that after the collapse of the Soviet system, enriched themselves unimaginably by destroying and plundering the old planned economy while the mass of the Russian population slid into the worst civilisational collapse, unprecedented since the World War II. Today, this Russian billionaire regime represented by Putin is one of the most socially unequal societies on the planet, with a terrible income and wealth disparity between the elite and the common masses. A larger percentage of Russians are behind the bars than in any other country; it has one of the highest suicide rates and one of the highest murder rates in the world. While several hundred thousand children are homeless, dwelling in the streets of Russia, Putin - one of the richest people globally - resides in one marble and gold-clad new palace costing more than a billion Euros. The state ideology of this billionaire dictatorship is a mixture of ultranationalism, piety and reverence for the Orthodox Church and reactionary social anti-modernism with a virulent hatred of women and gays. Putin has a fan following among the socially conservative right-wing populists of Western Europe who see him as the representative of authoritarian, patriarchal and patriotic values against a morally depraved, left-green-homo-feminist liberal West. He compares the Bolsheviks as satanic characters and pays obeisance to new memorial churches for the last tsar, martyrs of eternal holy Russia murdered by the godless communists. In the early 1990s, Putin was still raving about Pinochet's right-wing regime and pontificating that political violence to impose capitalism was good and right, while political violence to sabotage capitalism was bad and sinful.

Since Russia is a much weaker force than NATO it has lagged far behind in this imperialist competition resulting in the shrinking of the Russian sphere of influence since 1991. It needs some limited and small successes to regain its former glory, such as the occupation of Chechnya, collaborators in Georgia, influence over Ukraine and its hold on at least one outpost in the Middle East by supporting Assad. In the crisis, Putin sought to weaken Ukraine's ties with the NATO bloc, possibly with the threat of war. When that failed miserably and the Americans refused to give Russia even the slightest symbolic concessions, Putin recklessly resorted to the use of naked military force to occupy Ukraine. As discussed earlier, one of the main aims of this ultra nationalist aggression is to increase the popularity and stability of his Bonapartist regime at home. Why does it decide to attack Ukraine now? Because Russia feels self-assured after its massive military reforms since 2008, its "successful" military campaigns in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, Libya and elsewhere, but also because Russia with its 1 million-strong army has preponderant military might in the European theatre. [3]

Ukraine's predicament

Ukraine is keen to join the NATO bloc since 2014 and has sought to provoke a Western backlash against Russia. The neo-Nazis are active in this new Ukraine, where the fascist battalions of the army openly march with swastika flags. The Nazi-admirer Stepan Bandera, whose anti-communist militias were involved in the Holocaust, is virtually a state saint in Kyiv. However, these do not make Ukraine a fascist state. The Ukrainian government prefers to be at the feet of Washington and Brussels instead of returning to the influence of the relatively weak and failed Russian imperialist

looters. Despite being at loggerheads, the internal structure of Ukraine mirrors the Russian one. The country is home to dozens of oligarch clans who thrive on the planned plunder of the Soviet economy. The per capita GDP of this once prosperous region is equal to that of Angola in Africa. Ukraine's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell 6.8% in 2014. In 2015, per capita GDP was close to Sudan's, at about 2 100 dollars. In 2014, more than half of the country's foreign currency reserves melted away (-63 %), sinking below the 10 billion dollar threshold for the first time in ten years. Presently Ukraine's foreign debt stands at \$125 billion. The debt servicing expenditure for 2022 is expected to be circa \$6.2 billion. That is approximately 12% of all state budgetary expenditure. [4] Ukraine's social conditions are miserable and the debt burden has cast a shadow on its economy. According to reports, these loans were issued under conditions of social spending cuts, and their repayment forced them to economise on vital needs and apply austerity to foundational economy sectors. Due to the lack of funds, Ukraine's hospitals are poorly equipped, medical worker jobs of all ranks are cut and those with remaining jobs are underpaid as are teachers and other public sector workers. For example, many in the mining industry are not paid at all, wages are in arrears. [5]

Both the Western and Russian media are keen to label the internal conflicts of the Ukrainian ruling class as pro-Western versus pro-Russian. These are the outcomes of the conflicts between Ukrainian oligarchs; a section believes that their business interests are secured with the Russian connection while others prefer the EU and US for similar ends.

A new Cold War?

Are we going back to the Cold War era? While there are countless similarities between the diplomatic and military manoeuvres, one of the fundamental elements of the Cold War - the ideological differences - no longer exists today. Worse still, the fact that Russia has eagerly joined globalised and deregulated capitalism has led it into the contradictions inherent in this system, namely the need to find new outlets and access to new resources outside the national territory. This expansion can only take place at the expense of other powers caught up in the same dilemma. At the moment, we see Russia on the same path that the US has pursued for more than a century - directly interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. In addition to Ukraine and Georgia, Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria is naturally reminiscent of the various US-backed and established dictatorships over the past decades - Iran, Chile, Brazil, Nicaragua, Haiti, Congo, Iraq...

The Sino-Russian axis

Needless to say, this conflict will benefit a section of bystanders. With the redefinition of global geopolitics, Russia will lean more towards China which has long sought to break the dollar's monopoly on world trade. The Ukraine invasion gives them a golden opportunity. Russia's aggression in Ukraine is an important economic turning point with many long-term consequences. One of them is the transformation towards a bipolar global financial system - one based on the dollar, the other on the Renminbi. The process of economic estrangement between Russia and the West has certainly been going on for some time. Since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Western banks have reduced their exposure to Russian financial institutions by 60 per cent and halved the value of their investments in the Russian private sector. The new and more aggressive sanctions announced by the United States will further accelerate this process. This will make Russia more dependent on China, and the Chinese will try to buy the remaining Russian oil and gas cheaply. While China will not break the US or European sanctions to support Russia, it will certainly allow Russian banks and financial institutions more access to China's financial markets and institutions. Just a few weeks ago, the two countries declared "unlimited friendship" and as the Western avenue for the Russian economy narrows, it will lean towards China. Russia and China have already signed

an agreement in 2019 to trade in their respective currencies instead of dollars. The war in Ukraine will accelerate that. In recent days, China has lifted import bans on Russian wheat, and China Gas has signed a new long-term agreement with Gazprom. This is in line with China's long-term goal of building a post-dollar world. However, the process of developing the Renminbi into international currency is tricky. The Chinese want to get out of the dollar's grips, but they also want complete control of their financial system. That's a difficult riddle to solve. One of the reasons that the dollar is the world's reserve currency is that, in contrast, the US markets are so open and liquid. Nevertheless, China is trying to increase its share of the Renminbi in global foreign exchange transactions and reserves. Trade and petroleum politics are big tools for them. China expects the Renminbi's share to rise from 2 per cent to 6 per cent in the next three to four years. Of course, it is nothing compared to the dollar. The US dollar still holds 59 per cent. [6]

A barbaric attack

Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine is a barbaric crime that has serious consequences not only for the people of Ukraine and Russia but also for the working class and the left in the whole of Europe. Thousands of innocent people will be killed in this war. The destruction of the Chechen city of Grozny by Russia in 1994-95 at the behest of Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin demonstrated the inhumane nature of the Russian military-capitalist elite. We can see how often these atrocities have increased under Putin during the Russian airstrikes on Syria in 2015-16. About one and a half thousand innocent civilians were killed in the attack.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine will greatly strengthen militarism and reactionary powers in Europe and beyond. Most of the Western powers will increase their own arms budgets. Russian workers will suffer severely as a result of Western sanctions. Disruption of gas supplies from Russia will hurt ordinary people in Europe and elsewhere due to rising fuel prices.

On the other hand, we have seen how ineffective and dangerous NATO expansion to the east and sanctions against Russia are. There is no military solution to the conflict with Ukraine, but it could ignite the region, something unprecedented since the end of World War II. A nuclear conflict can't be ruled out, the effects and consequences of which will be far-reaching. The only victims of this ruthless war are not only the people of Ukraine, Russia or Europe but the whole of humanity.

Therefore, Putin's military aggression against Ukraine must be condemned. It is unreasonable and dangerous to take sides in this fight. At the same time, we must speak out against the policy of maintaining and expanding NATO. Similar to the rhetoric of regaining the lost Russian empire, the existence of NATO is indicative of the imperialist ambitions of the United States and its allies against humanity.

From a comedian to the president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy is a symbol of the right-wing in Ukraine. Apart from other right-wing political crimes after coming to power, he aimed to hand over state property to the Ukrainian oligarchy. His regime faced popular protests but Putin's unilateral attacks quickly transformed him into a hero for Ukrainians and others in the Western world. We need to support social and political forces, such as the Ukrainian Socialists, who are fighting against Putin for the right to self-determination, against the undemocratic government of their own country, and the looting mafia oligarchy.

Campism and its opponents

Unfortunately, many on the left are trying to look at Putin as an anti-imperialist crusader. This is not only deceptive but also spurious. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation is virtually behind Putin. Many communist parties and leftists around the world, including the two major Communist parties in India, are charmed by Putin's anti-imperialist moves.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has evoked a problematic political stand, commonly known as campism. This sort of geopolitical assessment of any global (and even local) conflict tells us that the world is divided into camps and we have to choose between one of them. As for the population in the "sacrificial zone", their interests can be easily forgotten for a "larger anti-imperialist cause". Internationalist solidarity is replaced with a vision that abominates entire populations for the sake of a supposed (and often fanciful) geopolitical balance to the detriment of US imperialism. Similar things happened in the past when Russian tanks rolled into Hungary, in 1956; during the Prague Spring of 1969 and in a number of other occasions. But if in the Cold War, campism responded to the defence of a supposed alternative system to capitalism (let us now leave aside the debate on real socialism), currently it only serves to defend autocrats such as Assad or Putin. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation which supports the invasion of Ukraine is today a force that mixes Soviet nostalgia with national Bolshevism.

Secondly, for campists, all imperialist forces outside the US are invisible. A large part of the left is least inclined to analyse any regionalised imperialism. It is obvious that for any country within the Russian periphery, "imperialism" is Russia. And it is obvious, that Ukrainians will be keen to join NATO after the invasion. NATO expansion is certainly a recipe for disaster but the invasion of Ukraine is not just a defensive reflex. There is no need to dig too deep, Putin himself said so, justifying the invasion with Great Russian imperial logic.

The left is often too lazy to probe Putin's "de-nazification" logic. Of course, there are neo-Nazi militias in Ukraine but there is also a Jewish president. We need to deeply analyse how much weight and influence do they have on local politics. According to Bohdan Ben, a political scientist and journalist from Ukraine:

"Azov [7] is really small, not more than 1000 members. It was established in 2014 after Russia invaded Donbass and Crimea and the Ukrainian army was overwhelmed. The government gave a call for volunteers to join, irrespective of ideology, and Azov was one of the groups that responded. Azov has some far-right members, but it is part of the national guard (*ed note: and therefore presumably under the Military's command and control structure*). We have far-right nationalists like any other nation, but it is not a widespread phenomenon and they don't have the support of the government." [8]

Fortunately, many leftist parties and political activists have opposed Putin's aggression and strongly condemned the role of NATO, including the United States. They pledged to stand by the people of Ukraine and say that this war is Putin's own, in no way protecting the interests of the Russian working class.

It is a sigh of relief that a large number of people have taken to the streets in various Russian cities to protest the war, despite state sanctions and fears of arrest. Ukrainians have close ties with many Russians, such as family ties across the border. Since President Vladimir Putin ordered a land, air and sea invasion of Ukraine on February 24, OVD-Info has reported more than 14,000 arrests in connection with anti-war actions. Of these, more than 170 people have been remanded in custody. [9] Authorities opposed the protest with all available police forces, special services and the army. Fortunately, there is not much air of patriotism in Russia at the moment like in 2014. A large

section of society is visibly opposed to the war with Ukraine and a majority believes that the war will end soon and peace will be restored. The people protesting against the war on the streets are representing all our hopes and aspirations. Strong condemnation of the imperialist powers, opposition to the invasion of Ukraine as well as sympathy for these people are very important today.

Sushovan Dhar

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P.S.

Groundxero

<https://www.groundxero.in/2022/03/20/the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-a-clash-of-imperialisms/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://web.archive.org/web/20220313170227/https://geohistory.today/2014-crisis-russia-economy/>

[2] <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2015/05/18/the-ruble-currency-storm-is-over-but-is-the-russian-economy-ready-for-the-next-one/>

[3] <https://www.agos.com.tr/en/article/26791/the-coming-long-winter-russia-invades-ukraine>

[4] <https://www.cadtm.org/People-around-the-world-demand-IMF-to-cancel-Ukraine-s-unjust-debt>

[5] Ibid.

[6] <https://www.ft.com/content/e5735375-75df-4859-bbf0-ae22e4fe2ff6>

[7] Azov batallion, a far right, neo-Nazi militia in Ukraine

[8] Unpublished interview with Tushar Dhara

[9] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/13/russia-ukraine-war-protesters-arrested>