

Palestine and Ukraine: how the 21st century empires wage war

Tuesday 7 November 2023, by [PIRANI Simon](#) (Date first published: 30 October 2023).

Here I will, first, comment on the wars in Palestine and Ukraine, and what I think they tell us about 21st century empires. Second, I will offer a view about the causes of these and other wars, and the causes of climate change, all of which can be understood as manifestations of the crisis of capital. Third, I will talk about the relationship of war and social struggles in Russia and Ukraine.

1. Palestine and Ukraine

The initial impetus for the new war in Gaza was the brutal Hamas incursion into Israel that resulted in a shocking number of civilian casualties. But the context is a long history of Israeli settler colonialism: the illegal occupation of Gaza from 1967; the blockade of Gaza since Hamas took control in the elections of 2007; the very high numbers of civilian casualties resulting from this blockade and subsequent Israeli military assaults.

None of this justifies Hamas's attacks on civilians, but it forms the background to the Israeli military operation, which amounts to collective punishment of the civilian population. The deliberate severing of water and electricity supplies, the order to evacuate northern Gaza, and the heavy bombing of civilian targets are all war crimes.

This murderous onslaught on civilians, justified by nationalist rhetoric, is something that Israel's war on the Palestinians and Russia's war on Ukraine have in common. This is what empires do in the 21st century: the western empire that supports Israel, and the weaker Russian empire that the Kremlin is trying to revive.

As the Ukrainian researcher Daria Saburova [wrote](#):

The evil that has killed both Israeli and Palestinian civilians in recent days is rooted in the continued occupation and colonisation by Israel of the Palestinian territories. In this sense, the oppression of the Ukrainian and Palestinian peoples has similarities: it is about the occupation of our lands by states with nuclear weapons and overwhelming military force, which mock the resolutions of the UN and international law, putting their causes above any diplomatic dialogue.

Here in the UK, what jumps out at us is the mind-bending cynicism and hypocrisy of the British political class, many of whom condemn Russian war crimes, but specifically refuse to condemn Israeli war crimes that are horrifically similar.

Over the last three weeks we have also seen a new wave of public frenzy - in the media, in the government and the big political parties - against the Palestinian struggle and anyone who supports it.

Central to this frenzy is the instrumentalisation of national identity and of history in the service of militarism: I mean (1) the false claims by senior Israeli politicians that Israeli policy represents all Jews and that criticism of it is tantamount to antisemitism, and (2) the reference to the holocaust as a justification of Israel's actions. This twisting of history disrespects Jewish victims of the holocaust, the often helpless targets of an overpowering military machine, by identifying them with the Israeli state.

These western appeals to national and racial division, and misuse of historical memory, recall the propaganda with which the Russian state defends its assault on Ukrainians.

President Putin and other leading Russian politicians have long denied the legitimacy of Ukraine's nationhood, language and culture and dismissed Ukraine's very existence as a historical accident that Russia will now seek to reverse.

The Kremlin's narrative also appeals to the historical memory of the second world war, falsely identifying Ukrainians with fascism - that is, Ukrainians, millions of whose forefathers died fighting fascism in the 1940s.

There is also a comparison between the concerted drive in Europe and the US to silence pro-Palestinian voices, including pro-Palestinian Jewish voices, on the false grounds that they are antisemitic, and the Russian state's efforts to silence pro-Ukrainian or even simply anti-war voices, on the grounds that they are supporters of terrorism.

The level of state repression and domestic terror is far, far lower in Europe than in Russia, but the logic of the propaganda is similar.

When we are surrounded by this gigantic mobilisation of lies on all sides, it becomes more important than ever not to limit ourselves to responding to these lies, but to develop our own understanding of the frightening events through which we are living.

This brings me to the two general points that I will make.

First, despite the very different immediate causes of the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, viewed in the context of the crisis of capitalism - of the social system with capital at its centre, in which states and governments serve the interests of capital - fundamentally, their causes are related.

So the short term causes of the war in Gaza include the Netanyahu government's intensification of apartheid-like measures against the Palestinians, and support for essentially fascist groups of Zionist settlers in sabotaging progress towards peace or Palestinian statehood, all of which has on the Palestinian side strengthened Hamas. But underneath this are longer-term dynamics: the use of Israel by the western powers, over decades, as a bulwark for their interests in seeking to control people and resources in the Middle East.

In Russia's case, the short-term causes of war included the resurgence of xenophobic nationalism in Russian government and its fear of losing control of Ukraine. But there are underlying causes, to do with how the Russian state has evolved in the post-Soviet period and its relationship with international capital.

Seen in this context, the Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion has much in common with movements in the global south that resist imperialism, whether that imperialism takes the form of military action or of economic subjugation.

My second main point is that the causes of these wars and the causes of dangerous climate change

are fundamentally related. Both the western and Russian empires are state guardians of the world economic system that by its nature needs to expand constantly. Capital accumulates, exploits labour, and extracts resources.

On one hand, this endless expansion throws up rivalries that international governance can not control. It leads to wars. On the other, this expansion is increasing endlessly the material throughput of the economy and producing a range of ecological crises, of which the threat of global warming due to greenhouse gas emissions is the most serious.

2. The twin dangers of war and climate change

To substantiate these arguments, I will look more closely at the war in Ukraine. To understand its causes, I suggest looking back over the three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the way that the relationship of Russian and the western powers changed over that time, and the parallel failure of climate policy.

In the early 1990s, Russia, Ukraine and other former Soviet states were rapidly integrated in to world markets. They experienced a devastating economic slump. Russia's importance to the western powers was not only as the centre of a collapsing empire, but as a leading exporter of oil, gas and metals to the world market. Western capital sought to reinforce Russia in that role.

During the 1990s the western powers had feared that the Russian state might collapse. When Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin as president in 2000, those powers welcomed him as someone who could make the state function effectively again. From the start, Putin and his colleagues envisaged some sort of revival of the Russian empire, which was established in the 18th and 19th centuries and aspects of which had been reproduced in the Soviet Union in the 20th century.

Putin's first act was to crush the separatist movement in the southern republic of Chechnya. The Chechen separatists had defeated the Russian army in 1996; in the second Chechen war in 1999, Putin responded with scorched earth tactics against the civilian population, that are now used in Ukraine.

The western powers fully supported this action, as part of the so-called "war on terror" that they were themselves waging in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Putin also strengthened and centralised the state. He began the assault on democratic rights and independent media that continues today. He turned on the so-called "oligarchs", the politically-powerful businessmen who had taken control of oil, gas and metals companies and compelled them to pay some taxes. Some assets were taken back into state ownership, and control of them handed to Putin's former colleagues from the security services.

During Putin's first two terms in office, from 2000 to 2008, oil prices rose constantly and the Russian economy boomed. The fall in people's living standards in the 1990s was reversed.

Russian capital flourished, not because it developed industrial or technological capacities, but thanks to the huge windfall it received from exports of oil, gas and metals. The revenues from these exports was mostly not invested in Russia but re-exported, to the London property market, for example, or to be held as cash in offshore zones. It was and is a parasitic, rather than developmental, form of capitalism.

In the early 2000s, the western powers saw Putin as a gendarme, to protect capital's interests in the former Soviet space. Russia was welcomed in to the so-called "G7 plus one" of the world's strongest capitalist powers.

It was at this time that NATO expanded in to eastern Europe: seven eastern European countries were admitted in 2004. There were even discussions at that time about Russia joining NATO, although these came to nothing.

In 2007, at the height of the oil boom, in a speech in Munich, Putin denounced the “unipolar world” dominated by the US. Some people saw this as an indication that Russia, along with the other BRICS countries, could be a counterweight to imperialism. But it was nothing of the sort. On the contrary, the western powers remained happy for Putin to wield imperial power in the former Soviet space as he saw fit. They turned a blind eye to his invasion of Georgia in 2008.

The world financial and economic crisis of 2008-09 was an important turning point. Russian capital was shaken. Living standards across the former Soviet space stagnated and started to fall again. There were big protest movements in Russia in 2011-12, which Putin’s regime struggled to control.

This social instability culminated in the so-called Maidan uprising in Ukraine in 2013-14, the overthrow of president Yanukovich, and Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine.

At this point, the western powers did intervene, to discipline their gendarme. They were concerned less about Russia’s support for the fascist-like separatist forces in eastern Ukraine than with the annexation of Crimea, that clearly breached international law. Sanctions were imposed on Russia - but they were limited.

These measures did not dissuade the Kremlin from intervening in Syria in 2015-16, to support the Assad regime’s war on its own population. While the western powers’ propaganda pretended there were no “spheres of influence” for competing imperial armies, Syria showed how clearly these were defined. Putin’s regime and its mercenaries were given a free hand there, while the western powers made their own imperial interventions in Afghanistan and Libya.

Only in February 2022, as a result of Russia’s full scale invasion of Ukraine, did the western powers abandon their policy of limited cooperation with the Russian government. This was a significant turning point.

Even now, though, the western powers’ policy is to contain and control Russia, but to do so in a manner that ensures that its oil exports, in particular, continue to flow to global markets.

The sanctions imposed on Russian oil have not substantially damaged the government’s ability to finance its onslaught on Ukraine.

So in 2022, world oil prices rose sharply after the invasion. Russia’s earnings from oil sales soared. At the end of 2022, the western nations agreed a price cap on sales of Russian oil of \$60/barrel, but it is not effectively policed.

Russian oil is sold to China, India and other nations who refine it and sell the oil products to western nations; a fleet of “shadow” tankers are used to evade sanctions.

The result is that Russia’s total export proceeds have been far higher than average, both last year and this year, the tax take from them has increased, and the Russian treasury is budgeting to spend even more than ever on the military next year, more than \$100 billion.

While the western powers are anxious to preserve Russia’s role as a raw materials exporter, they are also happy to undermine its military power, in a way that they were not before February 2022. One result of this has been that Azerbaijan - aware that Russia is unable to intervene while its army is tied down in Ukraine - has been emboldened, with Turkey’s support, to “solve” the dispute with

Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh by ethnically cleansing the Armenian population.

Now I will argue that there is a connection between these dynamics, which led to war in Ukraine, and the dynamics that have taken us into the climate crisis.

Let us again start in the early 1990s. The international treaty on climate change was signed in Rio in 1992. Scientists had already concluded that the greenhouse effect was dangerous to humanity, and that burning fossil fuels was the main cause: 1992 marked the point at which the evidence was so strong that it was accepted by all the world's governments.

The treaty provided for action to prevent dangerous global warming, but none was taken. The US and other powers resisted the principle that nations should adopt binding targets to reduce their emissions. The myth was invented, that market mechanisms could be used to make the necessary changes, although the only such mechanism that might have had some effect, a global carbon tax, was rejected. This myth was the basis for the Kyoto protocol of 1997, which provided for so-called emissions trading.

The result was that greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel combustion have risen consistently over the three decades since the Rio treaty was signed. The rate at which greenhouse gases are poured into the atmosphere is now more than 60% higher than in 1992.

This is a disastrous failure by the world's strongest governments, and by the system of international governance set up after the second world war.

A terrible price is already being paid by people across the global south affected by extreme weather conditions, and a still greater price will yet be paid by society as a whole.

What was the political context for this failure? The Rio treaty was signed just after the Soviet Union collapsed. Capital's illusions about its own power were magnified. In the "roaring nineties", globalisation was turbo-charged by electronic technology and the expansion of offshore financial zones. Neoliberalism waged war on regulation of the economy.

Both the western-Russian relationship, and the western powers' approach to climate change, were shaped by this boom, which continued after the brief interruption of the Asian financial crisis of 1998 through the first decade of the 21st century.

In this world, Russia mattered to the western powers as a source of oil, gas and coal. In the economic chaos of the 1990s, these flows were reduced, but during the first two terms of Putin's presidency, between 2000 and 2008, these fossil fuels poured on to world markets in record quantities. Putin was a guarantor of those flows; the political tension with him was seen as a price worth paying. This calculation only changed in February 2022.

While the western powers pursued their own wars, and allowed Putin to pursue his, they were also fuelling the crisis of excessive greenhouse gas emissions.

They presided over the ineffective combination of voluntary measures and market mechanisms that were proposed to deal with global heating, while each successive report by climate scientists sounded the alarm more desperately.

They presided over the continued flow of hundreds of billions of dollars worth of subsidies to the fossil fuel industries. They presided over the distortion of the concept of "net zero", to pretend that the emissions problem could be solved in future, by fantastical techno-fixes involving sucking huge quantities of greenhouse gases out of the atmosphere with unproven technologies.

One false discourse promoted by governments is that the damage done by climate change is not yet real, that it is potential damage in the future. But over the last few years, millions of people, mainly in the global south, have fallen victim to extreme weather events that meteorologists have shown are made far more likely by climate change: those displaced by the floods and droughts in southern Africa in 2019 and 2020, the floods in Pakistan last year, and this year the extreme heat in India.

The false discourses around climate change remind me of the mountain of lies about wars. When the imperial powers' politicians turn truth on its head, and tell Palestinian victims of Israeli violence that they are trying to help them, we can hear echoes of their rhetoric about climate change that has facilitated more decades of fossil-fuelled economic expansion.

This political elite facilitates the processes of capital accumulation and constant economic expansion that characterise 21st century capitalism and underpin imperialism. Look at the reaction of the world's leading governments to the two crises that have interrupted economic expansion in the last two decades - the financial and economic crisis of 2008-09, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Both times, the growth of fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions was temporarily halted. But in both cases, hundreds of billions of dollars were rapidly mobilised to renew that expansion.

Are states and governments, and international governance structures such as the UN, unwilling, or unable, to control the monstrous chaos of capitalist expansion? No doubt there is a complicated combination. What is sure is that they do not do so.

For all these reasons, I argue that the underlying causes of wars and of the climate crisis are related.

3. Russia and Ukraine

Now I want to argue that the causes of war lie not only in the tensions between imperial powers and other nations, but also in the tensions between states and societies. What society does counts: class struggles, movements for democracy, for women's rights, around ecological issues, and so on. Ultimately, war is a means of social control. It is related to and combines with forms of state repression of social movements.

Here are three points about Russia's war in Ukraine, to support this argument.

The first is about social movements. I have already mentioned the 2008-09 economic and financial crisis, the social dislocation that it caused across the former Soviet Union, and the discontent and social movements that followed, in Russia itself and in Ukraine.

In Ukraine in 2014, these culminated in the chaotic and politically heterogenous Maidan uprising that overthrew the Yanukovich government.

The events in eastern Ukraine at this time deserve comment. The Party of Regions, of which Yanukovich was the head and which was the largest party in parliament, was formed and financed by eastern Ukraine's industrial capitalists.

This party sought to deepen the divisions between the eastern areas, where there is a high proportion of Russian speakers, and central and western Ukraine. They were helped not only by the crude nationalism of some politicians in Kyiv, but also by the Kremlin, which saw Yanukovich as an ally.

There was some social support for regional autonomy in eastern Ukraine, and the Party of Regions

amplified it. But only the right-wing armed militia, who went on to form the so-called “people’s republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014, advocated separation.

The Russian military intervention in Ukraine began in 2014, in support of these republics. The Kremlin saw these as a means to undermine the Ukrainian state that was moving out of its orbit towards the European Union.

And the effect on the local population was devastating: the economy was wrecked; many of the large coal mines, processing plants and steel works closed, and thousands of jobs were lost. The population of the area shrank by half, with millions of people being displaced either to Ukraine or Russia.

Why did this conflict not only drag on, but give way to the all-out Russian invasion last year? Again, social change across the former Soviet space has to be taken into account.

In 2020 there was a huge national revolt against the fixing of elections in Belarus, and in 2020 and 2021 an upsurge of protest in Russia itself. In January 2022 labour disputes and street disturbances shook the government of Kazakhstan.

On the political level, Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine has been attributed to his failure to push back president Zelensky on issues of Ukrainian sovereignty. Zelensky, who had been elected in 2019, with peace as a key point in his platform, refused to concede territory in order to achieve it. But this breakdown of diplomacy coincided with the social movements I mentioned, and these were key factors that forced the Kremlin’s hand.

Not only was the drive to control civil society a cause of the invasion, but action by civil society in resisting the Russian army was a key reason for its failure.

The second point is that in times of crisis, states are driven along the road of authoritarianism, and the promotion of nationalist, xenophobic and fascist ideologies. The Russian elite has provided an example of this, with open calls to annihilate Ukraine. These are political and ideological tools of social control; they are used to mobilise sections of the population behind the regime, or at least to secure the acquiescence of the population.

The third point is that the use of these ideological tools cuts across the state’s functions of economic management. In 2014, and again in 2022, Putin’s government sacrificed management of the economy for the sake of politics and ideology. In 2014 the Kremlin saw western sanctions, the resulting lack of credit for Russian companies and economic stagnation, as prices worth paying for its military intervention in Ukraine.

In 2022, this went even further. Not only did Russian business face the sanctions on oil exports and financial transactions, but also the Kremlin also decided itself to wreck the Russian gas trade with Europe that had been built up over decades by the state-owned gas company, Gazprom. The economy was sacrificed, subordinated to the requirements of military expansion.

Finally I will touch on the relationship between the Russian and Indian governments. This is far from my fields of research, but I have learned from arguments made by the Marxist feminist writer Kavita Krishnan, who last year resigned from leading bodies of the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) Liberation, stating that it had failed robustly to oppose Russian imperialism. I will highlight three points that Krishnan has made about the Russian war.

First, she says that the political relationships between Russia, India and China, while publicly presented as challenging “western elites”, are based both on common economic interests and also

on a common hostility to democracy and free speech, to women's rights and to progressive social policies.

In India, right wing politicians portray this Russia-India-China axis as "multipolarity". Krishnan argues that, to these politicians, this is actually a by-word for opposition to human rights and democratic rights. In [an interview](#) with the Ukrainian socialist journal Commons, Krishnan said:

These authoritarian and bigoted leaders are forging an ideological alliance to argue for a 'multipolar world', by which they mean that fascist and authoritarian regimes should be able to define 'democracy' as majoritarianism. So they say: 'Who are the western elites to tell us that we must count undocumented immigrants, religious or ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ+ persons as rights-bearing citizens? These ideas are anathema to our civilisation values.' This is the basis on which Putin says Ukrainians can live only if they agree to call themselves Russian; Xi says Muslims in China must be 'Chinese' in character; and Modi says Muslims in India must accept Hindu supremacy.

Second, Krishnan sees an ideological alliance between the Russian nationalist right that influences the Kremlin, and the extreme right wing of Hindu nationalism. She points to the Russian fascist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, who has theorised the idea of "multipolarity". He maintains links with extreme right-wing Indian organisations and derides liberal democracy by using the Hindu term Kali Yuga, which is anathema to the Indian right.

Third, Krishnan questions trends in left political parties who see the world principally in terms of a tension between western imperialism and the supposed anti-imperialism of Russia, India, China and other non-western powers. This she criticises as a revival of the campism that hobbled the labour movement politically when the Soviet Union still existed and denies agency to the labour movement and social movements. I agree with that criticism.

Conclusions

First, the wars of Israel against the Palestinians, and of Russia against Ukraine, both waged with murderous attacks on civilians, are not aberrations but are characteristic of 21st century imperialism. The alliance of western powers, which can be called an empire, supports Israel; it also oversees the economic subjugation of the global south. Russia, although weakened, is an empire that its elite are seeking to revive.

Second, the causes of these wars, and of climate change, are both rooted in the crisis of capital, that by its nature needs constantly to accumulate and to drive economic expansion. The capitalist states and their international institutions have presided over decades of fossil-fuelled economic expansion that have produced the crisis of excessive greenhouse gas emissions and the threats that it carries for humanity.

Third, none of these things can be understood just in terms of states, their rivalries and their relations with capital. Society matters. In the case of Ukraine, Russia's invasion was above all a response to social movements that the Kremlin feared and could not control. Ukrainian society, too, has played a central part in resisting the invasion.

Fourth and finally, in my view, ways to resist empire, to resist war and to tackle dangerous climate change must be found by society, acting independently of and against capitalist states and the political elites associated with them.

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