

# The war in Ukraine: four reductions we must avoid

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**Rafael Bernabe is a Puerto Rican historian and sociologist who is currently an elected member of the Puerto Rico Senate representing the left-wing Citizens' Victory Movement (Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana, or MVC). The following is a translation of his article [La guerra en Ucrania: cuatro reducciones que debemos evitar](#). First published a year ago, it is all the more relevant today in light of the issues debated in the international Left since then. - Richard Fidler**

"Reductionism" is an error that has been widely discussed in the history of Marxism. It is the mistake of reducing a complex process or phenomenon to one of its elements. It is a form of oversimplification or one-sidedness. The political and practical consequences of such one-sidedness can be considerable. In this sense, it seems to us that there are four reductions that we must avoid when analyzing and reacting to the armed conflict unleashed by the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

**First reduction.** We must not reduce the war to a conflict between democracy and authoritarianism (or despotism, dictatorship, etc.). There should be no doubt about the authoritarian and anti-democratic nature of Vladimir Putin's government, but that does not mean that we should see NATO or its members as a democratic force. Some of those members (Turkey) are far from being democratic governments, even by the most undemanding criteria. Some of its allies and favored governments are downright undemocratic (Saudi Arabia). On more than one occasion they have supported the overthrow of democratically elected governments and protected those who overthrew them (Greece). NATO is one of the weaponized arms of Western imperialism and, some argue, of US imperialism within the Western imperialist bloc (tensions exist and have existed within that bloc).

The idea that NATO would dissolve after the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact was based on the idea that its *raison d'être* was the Cold War against the Soviet Union and its allies. but that was part of its objective: the broader objective is the defense of Western imperialist (and capitalist) rule on a global level, against any threat. In recent decades this has included the imposition of the neoliberal order across the planet. This is why the demise of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, far from leading to the demise of NATO, was followed by its eastward expansion. And the frictions caused by this expansion led, as was foreseen since the mid-1990s, to the aggravation of tensions, which is undoubtedly one of the causes of the present conflict between NATO and the Russian Federation. Those who denounce the role of NATO expansion in the preparation of the conflict are right. That is undoubtedly an aspect of the war that we cannot lose sight of. Against this expansionism of NATO and against Western imperialist policy in general, how does the left respond? The general line of this response is well known: building a defense of the living standards and immediate interests of the majority of the population, linking them to an anti-armament, anti-interventionist and internationalist policy, a movement to which it must fight to give an increasingly frankly anti-capitalist meaning.

**Second reduction.** We must not reduce imperialism to Western imperialism or US imperialism. The transformations in Russia and China during the last decades have created two great capitalist powers interested in consolidating their own zones of influence and political, economic and military control and the projection of their interests beyond their borders. The fact that these imperialist projects are weaker than Western imperialism does not change their content or their nature. We are, as Lenin described in his classic study, faced with a world of growing inter-imperialist conflicts. NATO's eastward expansion clashes with the Russian Federation's attempt to create its own zone of influence in territories of the former Soviet Union. The preponderance of the United States and its allies in Asia and the Pacific clashes with China's objective of carving out its sphere of influence in that vast region. Those who argue that Putin or China are reacting to Western imperialism are right: Western imperialism is a dominant and aggressive force. But it must be underlined that the Russian and Chinese governments respond, not as anti-imperialist forces, but with their own plans for control and dominance over the disputed areas. Given this, the left must respond with the position already formulated by Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and the internationalist current a century ago: we refuse to take sides in favor of one imperialism against another.

It should be stressed that, as all imperialisms are aggressive and predatory, when they denounce each other in many cases the complaints are true. During the First World War, German imperialism denounced the despotic character of Tsarism and French imperialism denounced German militarism. After the war, German imperialism denounced the abuses of the Versailles peace and Japanese imperialism denounced the excesses of Western imperialism in Asia. They were all true accusations. But none of them justified supporting German, Russian, or French imperialism during the war, or German rearmament after the war, or Japanese imperialism against Western imperialism, let alone supporting the Japanese invasion of Indochina, Indonesia, or the Philippines. Similarly, our rejection of NATO and Western imperialism cannot lead us to support or tolerate or fail to denounce the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

We have heard speeches refusing to reject the invasion of Ukraine, bringing up Saudi Arabia's aggression against Yemen, or Israel's occupation of Palestine. But the crimes of Western imperialism cannot be used to justify Putin's aggression. In any case, it is necessary to denounce all the aggressions and occupations indicated. It is the only consistent anti-imperialist position.

In short, we have to reject NATO imperialism, but not to support the expansionism of the Russian Federation headed by Putin or the ambitions of Xi Jinping's government. We do not reject one imperialism to support another. Neither NATO to support Putin nor Putin to support NATO. We reject both. Therefore, while we do not stop denouncing Western imperialism, we unequivocally reject the invasion and occupation of areas of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and demand the immediate withdrawal of Russian military forces.

**Third reduction.** We must not reduce the war between Ukraine and Russia to an inter-imperialist (by proxy) war or conflict between NATO and the Russian Federation. The interest of Western imperialism in dealing a defeat to its Russian rival does not nullify the fact that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a violation of its right to self-determination (a right explicitly rejected by Putin in his polemic against Lenin in his speech justifying the invasion [\[1\]](#) and that the Ukrainian resistance is a just war against an imperialist aggression that we must support. For the same reason, we must recognize their right to obtain the necessary weapons to resist, wherever they can find them. Nothing prevents us from rejecting the increase in NATO's arms spending, from demanding the dissolution of NATO and, at the same time, from recognizing the right of the Ukrainian people to obtain arms. To reject or denounce the Russian invasion, but to deny Ukraine's right to arms (in the name of peace, for example), is to leave it literally defenseless against the invasion we are denouncing.

But here, our consistent anti-imperialist position obliges us to warn the people of Ukraine that their resistance agenda and that of Western imperialism are not identical, but divergent. While receiving weapons, they should have no illusions about this: NATO has an interest in handing Russia a defeat, and it does not and will not hesitate to subordinate the well-being of the Ukrainian people to that goal. We cannot dictate to Ukraine how or for how long to develop resistance, but we can warn Ukraine that letting NATO dictate such terms is not in the interests of its people.

**Fourth reduction.** This reduction is a variant and usually accompanies the first one we discussed above. We must not reduce the conflict between the Zelensky and Putin governments to a clash between democracy and despotism. As we indicated, there is no doubt about the authoritarian and undemocratic character of Putin's government. But this does not make Zelensky's a paragon of democracy. On the contrary, he has perpetuated or initiated frankly anti-democratic, repressive, nationalist and discriminatory, anti-worker and neoliberal measures and tolerated or encouraged the presence and action of frankly neo-fascist groups. Solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance against the Russian invasion does not extend to political support for or confidence in the Zelensky government. Putin has said that Ukraine must be "denazified". One can partly agree with this idea, but in any case, the change of government in Ukraine is a task that will have to be carried out by the people of Ukraine, not an excuse that justifies the Russian invasion. Similarly, spokesmen for Western imperialism affirm that Russia must be freed from Putin's despotism, which is true: but that is a task for the Russian people, not for NATO.

Let us recall again the precedent of Japanese imperialism. During the 1930s, the international left supported China in the face of Japanese aggression. China was supported, despite the fact that its government was controlled by the repressive and corrupt Guomindang apparatus, headed by Chiang Kai-Shek (fiercely anti-communist and perpetrator of the 1927 massacre) and that government was supported by western imperialism. Despite all that, the Chinese resistance was a just fight against Japanese imperialism. For the same reason, supporting this resistance, even with weapons provided by Western imperialism, should not imply support for the Guomindang government. Today we must support the Ukrainian resistance, despite its government and the support it receives from an imperialist camp.

Imperialisms, while denouncing each other, help to justify themselves before their peoples. Russian aggression against Ukraine helps legitimize NATO as a shield against Russian aggression. It has facilitated and accelerated its expansion and made it more difficult to build a broad anti-NATO and anti-imperialist movement in Europe. NATO aggressions help legitimize Putin as a defender of Russian sovereignty and make it more difficult to build a movement against his government. All of this makes the work of the anti-imperialists more difficult, but it remains equally urgent. To be effective, you must avoid all four reductions we have indicated.

The first reduction has been assumed by some progressive voices, including that of Paul Mason, in England. This position, in order to reject the Russian invasion, becomes an apology for NATO and Western imperialism. This position will be rightly rejected by all opponents of Western imperialism around the world, for example, in Latin America.

The second reduction is very common in Latin America. This position, in order to reject North American and Western imperialism, sides with or (at best) ignores the aggressions of the Russian Federation and the capitalist and repressive nature of Putin's government. This position will be rightly rejected by all who suffer the consequences of Putin's rule in Russia and outside of Russia, to begin with in the Ukraine.

The third reduction is a mistake on the part of the internationalist and anti-imperialist left, which rightly rejects both NATO and Putin. This position, in order to oppose NATO's imperialist agenda or

a prolongation of the war, leaves the Ukrainian resistance in the hands of the Russian invasion. It is a position that will be logically rejected by those in Ukraine resisting Russian aggression and those elsewhere who understand the justice of such resistance.

The fourth reduction often accompanies the first and becomes an apology for evading the reactionary policies of the Zelensky government.

We need a consistent, multilateral, non-reductionist position that can unite progressive forces in the West, in Russia, in Ukraine and throughout the world.

Let's summarize our alternative:

- Rejection of the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and demand for the withdrawal of Russian forces.
- Recognition of Ukraine's right to arm itself in order to defend itself against invasion.
- Rejection of the expansion and imperialist agenda of NATO and the increase in military spending.
- No political support, and rejection of the regressive policies, of the Ukrainian government.
- Support for initiatives and movements against the war in Russia

This is the only position that allows us to unite progressive forces from the West, Russia and Ukraine and beyond Europe under a common anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist orientation.

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**Rafael Bernabe**

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**P.S.**

Life on the Left

<https://lifeonleft.blogspot.com/2023/08/the-war-in-ukraine-four-reductions-we.html>

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## Footnotes

[1] "Text of Vladimir Putin's Speech,"

<https://theprint.in/world/modern-ukraine-entirely-created-by-russia-read-full-text-of-vladimir-putin-s-speech/843801/>.