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Ukraine

Peering through the fog of war

- Debate - 2022 - Ukraine -

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Two weeks ago I wrote in this blog that Putin will not back off, that his strategy is to place an army in Eastern Ukraine rather than build an insurgency, that he may well send thousands of Russian soldiers over the border. This is happening as I write. 27 August 2014 will go down in history as the day even the most inveterate apologists for the Kremlin's secret war in Eastern Ukraine can no longer deny this aggression.

And this invasion comes just the day after Putin devoted his entire address to the Minsk meeting of European Union, Ukrainian and Eurasian Economic Union leaders to the question of trade, refusing to speak directly to an issue he insisted is an internal affair of Ukraine's, the resolution of which his government can "only facilitate", but not directly take part in. He has shown once again that one can never take the language of diplomacy literally. Putin was saying "its all about trade and economics" while in reality it is all about the boots on the ground.

If on the one side we heard the apologists of the Kremlin insisting all this is just a Ukrainian civil war without Russian state intervention, from the other side we have had yet another kind of illusory and hopeful thinking: that the Ukrainian government can win the war in the east militarily, that with just a little more firepower the separatists can be defeated. And Russia would have to accept that fact and back off. The illusion in this line of thinking is twofold: first, that for Russia the goals of the war are limited to the subordination of Ukraine; and second, that the outcome of this war will be decided by the balance of brute force on the front.

I see the current situation somewhat differently. Putin has chosen what he sees as a favourable historical conjuncture both in Ukraine and internationally to assert Russia's claim to great power status. The successful incorporation of Ukraine into Russia's sphere economically, diplomatically and militarily would give serious credibility to that claim not only by demonstrating Russian capacity, but also the incapacity in the camp of its Western rivals. For Putin the USA is in long term decline; the European Union is a clearing house for its member states, not a state capable of adopting and implementing a common position on war on its eastern periphery; and Russia's time has come as a Eurasian hegemon to hold the balance of power in the centre of this continent. In Ukraine the favourable opening was provided by a crisis of the Ukrainian state elite created by the Maidan which drove out Yanukovich but proved unable to democratise the state institutions and drive out the remaining bulk of the oligarch-serving opposition parties.

The other illusion is that the war in the east will be won – or lost – by military means alone. Here we must confront some uncomfortable facts. First, Russia has overwhelming military capacity and has shown it will match and surpass every escalation in the technology and numbers of arms advanced by the Ukrainian army. Some have argued that Russia can go on fighting indefinitely, but that it cannot win outright. This may indeed be the case, but the factors working against the Russian war effort will be political: more casualties, more public concern, more protest against the war in Russian society. Political opposition in Russia to the war is muted, but slowly emerging. In the long run, I believe that the only force that can get the Russian military out of Ukraine will be a mass anti-war movement in Russia. It is imperative that all defenders of Ukraine's right to national self determination lend their support and solidarity to the Russian antiwar protesters who are trying to launch that movement and who are being picked off and imprisoned by Putin's regime.

The second uncomfortable fact is that the Western powers will not mount sanctions against the Russian economy that are damaging enough to cripple the Russian war effort. The European and American members of the Western alliance are variously integrated with the Russian economy through investment and trade. They cannot agree to a single set or level of sanctions. There is a limit to the level of sanctions some countries will agree to, beyond which their own big business interests will tolerate. For the same reasons and by force of various historical perceptions of Russia as neighbour, friend and enemy, the member states of NATO together will not confront Russia militarily over

Ukraine. They may be all persuaded to strengthen NATO forward bases in Central Europe for the defense of their own alliance members, but military aid to Ukraine is another question altogether.

On this issue: War is not the answer, neither at its present level or an increased level. I believe a NATO military land intervention in the war would be a disaster for Ukraine because it would lead to the partition of the country into two camps, each under martial law. NATO aid may rise with the provision of more lethal equipment to the Ukrainian armed forces, increased intelligence provision, joint strategic planning. But, as many other wars where the NATO or Western "coalitions of the willing" have got involved, their involvement has increased to the point of troops entering on the ground and the emasculation of the national government whose sovereignty they claimed to be defending. Can you think of one war where Western involvement has had a beneficial impact on the outcome?

The Kyiv government is calling for military support from NATO because it cannot match Russian military power AND because it believes that the war can be won militarily if it gets more and better hardware. I disagree with the second part of this reasoning. The Ukrainian state is on the verge of insolvency. A couple of weeks ago it revised the annual state budget to impose a war levy on all wages and salaries and made a half-hearted effort to increase taxes on the lease of publicly owned natural resources by oil, gas, iron and steel producers and exporters. Ukrainian big business has responded by accelerating the removal of its capital assets abroad and increasing reliance on transfer pricing to low tax havens in order to keep their profits from being taxed. Capital flight has cancelled out whatever gains would have gone to the state budget as a result of the parliament's revision of tax levies. Business profits from exports (60% of GDP) go up and the real income of workers comes down as a result of devaluation of the hryvnia and inflation. So much for the commitment of Ukraine's capitalists to the war effort.

Corruption in high state office carries on as before. It goes on in the highest echelons of the armed forces. The president blames treason in the highest echelons for setbacks in the war. The children of the rich are sent abroad while working class men and women go the front. Concerns about the inadequate provision of soldiers on the front with protective clothing and munitions continue to be voiced and often go unanswered. So much for the government's chances to forge a national solidarity of all the classes behind the war effort.

There is a difference between fighting for Ukraine's national self determination and fighting for the present Ukrainian state. I am not prepared to support any effort that will weaken the Ukrainian state against Russia or the West. But I do believe that Ukraine's national self determination needs a more effective defense than the one being mounted by the present state leadership. What kind of stake do Ukrainian workers, the unemployed, students, farmers and pensioners hold in that state if they see they are giving their livelihoods and their lives for a return to the status quo ante, albeit without Russian overlordship?

The elections on 26 October offer one avenue for them to alter the leadership of their state. However, the signs they will be given the chance to make a real choice between truly alternative paths for their country's development are not auspicious: the parliament is not about to change the electoral system to provide for fully proportional representation, for open party lists and for lowering the threshold for entry of new parties into parliament and government. And that old electoral system, as I wrote two weeks ago, gave Ukraine in 2012 the dirtiest, money driven, oligarch directed election campaign in its history, a government of the rich and a cabal of parties that made Yanuovych a near-dictator.

The Russian regime will not win the war. It will face years of Ukrainian resistance and the ongoing loss of its own soldiers' lives. It will inflame national hatreds among peoples who for decades lived together under Stalinist dictatorship and post-communist misery without tearing each other's throats out. Russia's current leaders will be brought down by its citizens, the first of whom are already before Russian courts or in prison for opposing this war.

As for Ukraine this war will usher in a new Maidan unless there is a radical, democratic renewal of its state leadership. And this time the soldiers will be in the thick of it.

