

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7563>



War in Ukraine

NATO, imperialism and the war

- Debate - 2022 - Ukraine -

Publication date: Tuesday 15 March 2022

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Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine seems to have caused some disorientation on the Left. For example, a left-wing website supported by some key leaders of the Stop the War Coalition complains about socialists who concentrate all their fire on Russia. But it is not really difficult to see why anti-war activists might do so at the present time. Russia brazenly breaches the so-called 'Fourth Convention [1]' of the Geneva Convention, which forbids the targeting or collective punishment of civilians. And the outrageous and utterly sad consequences of Russia importing into Ukraine the tactics it used in Syria against civilians (little reported in Britain) are becoming clear. Small wonder, then, that most of the Left concentrate on condemning Russia? It's no use complaining about what the West did in Iraq and Afghanistan, or indeed what it is doing today in Yemen. None of that in the least justifies Russian brutality in Ukraine.

At the other extreme, some left-wingers seem to regard the Ukraine crisis merely as a national liberation war, in which Ukraine is fighting a just war against Russia, and the role of NATO is simply to provide large amounts of weaponry to the Ukrainian people. As we discuss below, this is naïve. NATO is clearly trying to use the war to advance its own objectives, particularly those of American imperialism.

One socialist website opposes any end to the war in which Ukraine makes concessions. [2] This is the wrong way to pose it. The crucial thing now from the viewpoint of the Ukrainian people is to have a ceasefire and to stop the war. It is up to the Ukrainian people themselves to decide on any concessions—temporary or long-term—to Russia, however much they may rankle. There is a long history of schematic sectarians opposing necessary concessions to end wars—starting with the opposition in the Bolshevik party, led by Bukharin and Radek, to the signing of the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in which multiple concessions were made by Russia to Germany in order to end the war between them. The charge of 'capitulation' was also made against North Vietnam when it engaged in negotiations that led to the withdrawal of American troops in 1973. The Ukrainian government has indicated that it supports a ceasefire and negotiations, and we should back that.

So what is the real role of NATO? There are two aspects to this. The first is the danger of a clash between NATO and Russian forces which could lead to a central European war, something that would be disastrous. A no-fly zone, even one policed by planes provided by NATO member Poland, could lead to a direct conflict between Russia and NATO. A wider war against Russia in Europe would collapse the world economy and could lead to the use of nuclear weapons. Anti-war activists should be absolutely opposed to any involvement of NATO forces in the fighting.

Washington's negative response to Poland's offer of 28 reconditioned MiG29 planes to operate a no-fly zone indicates that, for the moment, the United States doesn't want to risk a wider war with Russia. But Biden's government is weak and the pressure from the political right — in Britain and well as the US — is very strong. At a future stage, popular outrage at Russian atrocities could lead to calls for NATO intervention that would be difficult to resist.

But the second aspect to the role of NATO, and a key one, is as a political-military alliance dominated by the United States and its loyal British followers, using the war to reshape the relationship between the most powerful imperialist states in the world today—Russia, China and the United States itself. This is the inter-imperialist conflict which is increasingly interwoven with the war in Ukraine itself.

Such a complex configuration should come as no surprise, especially to Marxists, who have long pointed out how particular wars can become entwined with more over-arching conflicts. Ernest Mandel in his brilliant book, [The](#)

[Meaning of the Second World War](#), explains how, in countries such as Greece, Italy, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, China, France and many others, Allied governments like those of Britain and the United States intervened directly or through local reactionary forces to defeat Germany and Japan, but at the same time to defeat progressive or revolutionary local movements. Inter-imperialist conflicts became entwined with wars of national liberation and revolutionary advance.

Today, the US economic war against Russia, designed to collapse the Russian economy and hobble Russia's economic and political clout in the long-term, is becoming interwoven with the war in Ukraine. By his brutal and utterly ruthless unleashing of Russian military power against Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has handed a series of massive victories to the United States in its battle against Russia, a battle waged in preparation for the more decisive battle to come, the United States against China.

Putin's war will have savage costs for both middle-class and working-class Russians but much less so for the oligarchs, who always find ways to hide their wealth. Car factories are already closing in Russia, as Western companies pull out and Russian firms can't find essential components. The blockade on computer chips will mean dozens of hi-tech firms won't find the necessary components to continue unless China can step in and provide them, something unlikely given the already existing world shortage of silicon chips.

Dozens of retail brands are pulling out and that means thousands of lost jobs. Apple, Samsung and Microsoft are pulling out together with scores of other hi-tech companies. H&M, Levis and Zara are leaving, as is Nike, Puma and Adidas. This is not just a matter of fashion-conscious young urbanites being unable to get their favourite brands, it is a matter of many thousands of lost jobs. Even Russian Vodka, fish products and diamonds are to be sanctioned. It is estimated that Russian GDP will decline by 20% in the next year, a level which goes beyond recession and slump to onrushing economic collapse. The result will be mass unemployment and mass poverty in Russia as a consequence, not of the actions of the Russian workers, but as a result of the actions of Putin and his fellow oligarchs and criminals in power. This is another example of punishing the civilian population. No socialist or democrat should support this kind of imperialist economic warfare.

Russia will also suffer from sanctions on exports, not just energy exports but also exports of wheat. Russia and Ukraine together produce 30% of the world's wheat, and its elimination will skyrocket the price of bread in the region, and worldwide. Preventing the export of Russian energy will also hit the working class worldwide as the price of just about everything which at some stage needs oil and gas increases in price, giving another twist to the worldwide inflationary cycle. The stage is being set for a massive world slump in which the effects of the Covid pandemic combine with the effects of the war and sanctions.

A key US target is the relationship between Russia and Europe. The United States has long campaigned against Europe's reliance on Russian energy and even before the Ukraine crisis blew up, was urging Germany to stop importing huge amounts of Russian gas and oil. The United States pointed out that the shortfall of such a transition could be made up by imports from...the United States itself! America has long campaigned against any improvement of political and diplomatic relations with Russia. It has tried at every stage to characterise Russia as a terrorist state, an effort greatly aided by the behaviour of Putin's state apparatus, especially the assassination of exiled Russian opponents living in the UK.

The United States is opposed to the European Union establishing its own international political and military presence just about anywhere. That, thinks Washington, would encroach on NATO's role. So for example the AUKUS military alliance in the Pacific —composed of the US and its loyal allies Britain and Australia— was announced on the very day that the EU had planned to unveil its Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. [3] The EU document represented an attempt to get Europe to speak with one voice on the region, and chart an independent course, especially in relation to China, away from the hostile US position. AUKUS was a precisely aimed torpedo that badly

holed the EU strategy.

NATO from its beginning has been designed to tie European states to American diplomatic, military and political leadership. It has had the effect in Britain itself of building up a strong 'Atlanticism' political trend, represented especially by the mainstream of the Conservative Party. But economic links between Europe and Russia inevitably reconfigured political relations.

Disrupting economic and diplomatic relations between Russia and Germany has been an enormous victory for the United States. American commentators have been complaining for years that Germany's economic and political model is based on getting its energy from Russia, its security from the United States and its cheap consumer goods from China. It might be added that China is the place where a big proportion of Germany's manufacturers, raw materials and chemical products go. Now the United States wants Germany and other European states to stop their energy imports from Russia and look elsewhere, particularly to the United States itself.

Western sanctions against Russia are enormous and at a level you might expect if NATO was at war with Russia. The seizure of most of Russia's foreign exchange reserves —more than \$600 billion worth—is designed to hobble the Russian economy. There is no guarantee that this will be a short term measure designed to stop the war in Ukraine.

Now the rightwing Western media and foreign policy establishment is turning the attack against China. This combines a number of levels. First, Western rightwing politicians say that China, by failing to condemn the Russian invasion, is acting in a way that gives economic and political cover to Russia. Second, China itself could organise its own 'Ukraine' by invading Taiwan, and this eventuality is being prepared for by the export of ever-larger amounts of military aid to Taiwan, despite Xi Jinping's repeated statements that China seeks reunification only by peaceful means, and that Beijing's economic relations with Taipei are extremely profitable for both sides. For Western analysts, China's seizure of reefs and small islands in the South China Sea is proof of its militarist expansionism.

However, there is no doubt that the militarisation of the South China Sea is primarily the work of the United States and its allies, whose military doctrine is preparing for a possible war aimed at Chinese coastal cities and military bases.

Obviously, the United States is using its massive military power to influence the outcome of the fighting in Ukraine, and the resistance in that country is massively armed with powerful US anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles. According to the New York Times, the United States sent 17,000 anti-tank missiles to Ukraine in one week. But those who support the Ukrainian right to resist invasion cannot complain about where the weapons of the Ukrainian military and civilian resistance come from. However, if a no-fly zone were to be implemented, even if it involved Polish planes flown by Ukrainian pilots, it is highly likely that they would be co-ordinated by American or British AWACS planes, (literally early warning and control radar platforms) with the ability to 'see' what the Polish planes themselves cannot. This could be done by AWACS planes flying from outside Ukraine, but the temptation for advanced Russian fighter planes to shoot them down would be enormous. A no-fly zone cannot be engineered without the danger of a direct clash between NATO and Russia.

Both in relation to Russia and China, the United States has adopted the position of the 1997 Project for the Next American Century, which projected American military dominance as the road to political and economic dominance. It also argued for rearmament to a level where the United States could simultaneously fight two major wars, obviously against Russia and China. The profligate use of military power has led to catastrophes in Iraq and Afghanistan and could lead to a much worse catastrophe in a nuclear exchange with Russia.

Raising the slogans of 'No to NATO Expansion' and 'No to Nuclear War' is clearly correct for the anti-war movement, but cannot be the central demands, which remain Russian troops out and stop the war. Nonetheless, NATO's role in Eastern Europe since the final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has been pernicious. American President George Bush Snr, absolutely refused to respond to the demise of its military enemies in Russia and Eastern Europe by disbanding NATO or responding to Mikhail Gorbachev's project of a 'Common European Homeland' of states outside military pacts. Disbanding NATO would have disrupted the key instrument of American military, and hence political, control. Moreover, the United States has insisted on expanding the boundaries of NATO right up to the borders of Russia in every case. This of course is something that the United States—the inclusion of Mexico or Canada in a hostile military alliance on US borders—would never accept.

The iron grip of NATO is designed to ensure American dominance, and hence loyalty in inter-imperialist conflicts of European states to the United States. It is no wonder then that the question of NATO has become a key line of a divide as far as the Keir Starmer leadership in the Labour Party is concerned. Starmer and his parliamentary whips threatened to exclude 12 Labour MPs from the Parliamentary Labour Party if they spoke at a rally with an anti-NATO message. Starmer has repeatedly stated Labour's complete loyalty to NATO, a message to the British capitalist class that under him Labour can be trusted. Technically any member of CND could be excluded from the Labour Party because of the campaign's anti-NATO position, although for the moment this is unlikely to be implemented. In the context of Starmer's prostration before NATO and British capitalism, it is strange to find a left-wing website attacking Jeremy Corbyn for making 'an anti-NATO speech. [4]

In the context of the present war, it is utterly cynical for Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov to excuse atrocities committed by Russian forces by reference to what the West did in Iraq and Afghanistan. 'If you can commit anti-civilian atrocities, then so can we' is unlikely to be a convincing argument as far as world public opinion is concerned. Even worse, Russian commentators on Channel 4 News merely say 'war is hell, this is war'. The death, pain, suffering and misery imposed on the Ukrainian people cannot be justified by any reference to the crimes of the West, whether the leading Western states were wearing their NATO hats or not. The central slogans of the Left and all progressive forces have to be against the Russian war, for a ceasefire and a withdrawal of all Russian troops.

In Britain, there is an enormous mobilisation of ordinary people and even whole communities to give material aid to refugees from Ukraine. Polish centres up and down the country, as well as Ukrainian community centres, are awash with donations of money, clothes, sleeping bags and other necessities that refugees might need for their onward journeys. Of course, this outburst of social solidarity is promoted by the awful scenes of carnage and destruction in Ukraine. It's true that the incredible brutality of the Western-backed and organised bombing campaign by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen has not produced such an outpouring of solidarity, because it has been barely covered in the mass media, and because Ukrainians are 'people like us.'

Nonetheless, people who collect support for Ukrainian refugees, and millions more, are rightly horrified by the Russian attacks and their dreadful consequences. The anti-war movement cannot turn its face away from these people but should participate, to the best of our ability, in such actions. We must get people giving material aid and demand refugees be admitted to Britain.

Because of the ongoing inter-imperialist conflict, there are competing narratives about what is happening on a world scale. The overwhelming narrative in the Western media is about the defence of democracy against Russian and Chinese dictatorship and aggression. But in reality, there is a huge and developing inter-imperialist conflict, in which the United States is a major source of militarisation and aggression.

Regrettably, there are a lot of people on the Left internationally who do not clearly condemn the Russian invasion and champion the right of the Ukrainian people to self-defence. [5] It is easier, as they see it, just to take sides with one imperialist camp or another. This we should refuse to do. Our understanding of the role of NATO and the United

States cannot lead us to downplay or in any way excuse the Russian attack. On the morning of February 24, within minutes of hearing the news of the invasion, I posted on Facebook condemning the attack as an act of criminal brutality and irresponsibility; I said thousands would die in the initial fighting. It is this attack that must remain the target of left-wing mobilisation and protest, despite our understanding of the developing global inter-imperialist conflict.

PS:

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Geneva_Convention

[2] <https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2022-03-08/support-ukraines-war-self-defence-russian-troops-out-now>

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709

[4] Workers Liberty *ibid.*

[5] <https://www.socialistaction.net/2022/03/11/how-world-progressive-forces-have-reacted-to-war-in-ukraine/>