

More than one Culprit? Notes on the Ukraine Conflict. History, US and NATO's push against the "East" drives Ukraine War

Ian Liebenberg

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0351-9476>

University of Namibia (UNAM)

jankalahari@gmail.com

The famous Milan Kundera once ventured that “soon everyone will shout so loud to let their own voices hear, that (eventually) no one would be able to hear each other.” (Kundera quoted in Liebenberg 2022). He also ventured that there are times when “we should laugh at kitsch.” Quite true—even prophetic. People dying in war is not a laughing matter, but sometimes the wild, less informed stereotypes and generalised ideological opinions are to be laughed at—even with a tear in the eye. In the fog and dust of war, the truth is always the first causality. In the current Ukraine conflict, through blind-sided jaundiced eyes, more so, it is apparent. There are more ways to look at the renewed conflict in Ukraine. One looming view is that there is only one piggy, a real crook, in the story. Those that hark back to the recognition of the integrity of sovereignty of a specified territory, as later recognised by the United Nations (UN), are especially prominent in current political discourse on the issue. The roots of this can be found as far back as the Treaty or Peace of Westphalia (1648), when Europe was torn apart by 30 years of religious wars between Christians with murderously clashing political perspectives. This point or idea of sovereignty was later re-affirmed by the arguments posed by Woodrow Wilson during the Peace of Versailles after the First World War and the League of Nations established thereafter, and survived into the UN and contemporary international law. The other side of the argument calls for a more reasonable dialogue and a realist historical bi-focal focus on the notion of sovereignty or, rather, the right to “sovereignties” at stake here. In this case, especially when “new states” in contested territories are haphazardly constructed in the aftermath of political events such as the decline and disaggregation of, for example, the Soviet Union at the end of the so-called Cold War. Ukraine is another case in point.

The current conflict should also be seen in the context of developments since 1054 and the 1400s before the Treaty of Westphalia. This conflict or “standoff” and drawing a line in the sand by Russia was not unexpected. I am not surprised that Russia (with or without Putin as leader) drew the line looking at geopolitics and the national security

UNISA 
UNIVERSITY
of namibia
PRESS

Phronimon

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/Phronimon>

Volume 24 | 2023 | #13439 | 7 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/13439>

ISSN 2413-3086 (Online), ISSN 1516-4018 (Print)

© The Author(s) 2023



Published by Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

interests of post-Cold War Europe, Russia and the consistent eastward drive of the North Atlantic Organisation (NATO), the latter being relentlessly pushed by the USA since at least 2008, with seemingly no European power able or willing to stand up to the pressures from, and direction imposed by the USA. NATO seems to have become more important than peace in Europe, and the voice of the USA is more important than reasonable politics and the wider world. A prominent international politics theorist, Shrikant Paranjpe from India, mused whether there is a move “back to the status quo in Europe” (Paranjpe (2022)—a classical regression thus. He argued this mindful of the Cold War mentality or even earlier to the 1900s, with its two world wars or a century earlier when Europe transformed violently into nation-states and what they call democracy.

The only surprise around the intensification of the conflict is that it came to this juggernaut only now. One would have expected it in 2008 or 2014 when those populations and parts of Ukraine that wanted to go back to Russia or the Slavic *habitus* declared themselves independent, thus similarly seeking their sovereignty-in-choice as to where they want to belong (arguably a wish that then also appeals to international law to recognise the sovereignty of other Ukrainians to have a right to self-determination and sovereignty). No one seems to have the far-sighted recognition of two legitimate sides to the coin of sovereignty in the “new” Ukraine. No surprises here but a harbinger of conflict to come—a very predictable upcoming conflict, one has to add.

Due to the dominance of Western media, most people, including journalists in our immediate sphere, choose to access only Western media outlets; most are caught up in the “Forever or Eternal Northwest-bound Gaze.” White is right, the West is best, and obviously, Cowboy and Robocop movie style, the West was won (and always wins) fair and squire. The easy switch from a Cold War Mentality (CWM)—or shall we rather call it a Cold War Myopia (CWM)—to a fear, even deep-seated hate, for the East within the collective Western psyche is seemingly eternal, perhaps DNA rooted.

Soon after the Second World War, NATO was established to counter “the Eastern threat” from the Soviet Union (the origins of all evil in the eyes of the West, especially the USA) from then through to Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, Bush 1 and 2, both Clintons in various positions, Obama and Biden. Admittedly, there was also Communist China, another major “threat” from the East, and USA nuclear weapons in case of a nuclear fallout were aimed at both the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Should these Communists (Commies? Barbarians?) be naughty, doomsday was to visit them and their entire populations simultaneously. Reminder again: NATO under USA leadership was established before the establishment of the Warschau Pact, and the Warschau Pact but a reaction to NATO, the latter with its eyes steadily turned East.

The East remained the enemy throughout. The USA, as a “World Policeman,” declared itself as the global good, and many believed the seemingly omnipotent USA. Inherent conservatism and religiosity (“God Bless America”), the search for undisputable

hegemony and capitalism incorporated, played and plays its role too. Gwynne Dyer could not have been more correct when he summarised the USA's mentality and the dangerous future outcomes thereof in his book, *Future Tense*, released *circa* (Dyer 2014). Few people seem to remember that the USA was the aggressor in numerous conflicts since the early 1950s, frequently and violently ignoring the sovereignty of numerous nations on the globe. Even fewer remember what the losses were for those on the losing side, including those that fought for their sovereignty and choice of regime. Fear, greed, hate and arrogance intertwined in the USA mindset and their "Coalition of the Willing." Taking a cue from Dyer, the USA is, since 2002, gradually slipping on the spectrum of (megalomaniac) World Policeman to a dangerous international rogue and by sheer military size intimidates even its own "friends."

This has undermined long-term visionary global political foresight since the "end" of the Cold War. This nexus further led to an intellectual deficit when it comes to the analysis of international politics, and now the case of the Ukraine conflict. Lack of wider exposure, carried over from ideologically driven old-guard journalists to younger ones, plays a role two. Social media, with clashing and emotive fragments of politics and an immense amount of fake news intertwined in a toxic mix of hyper-imagination, is not bettering the situation. On the contrary, education or lack thereof and ignorance about history play a role too. Humans seem to have the innate ability to veer towards myopia rather than a wider reading of political developments. Eurocentrism and racism play a role. In the midst of the current debate, no one is talking about or against the conflict in Yemen or the Kosovo bombings by NATO instigated by the USA and the UK. Or the destruction of a stable and sovereign state, Libya, in 2011. Indeed sad ... but then these people were not white, North American or European; they were and are Slavs, Berbers, Muslims, Blacks or "Easterners." Hitler seems to be alive and well and definitely not, contrary to Western propaganda, only in the "East."

In the case of Ukraine, most of the Western leaders slavishly inject their view on their followers, seeing the Russians and Putin as the only guilty party without any broader historical understanding of world politics or, for that matter, "European" politics or the complexities of colliding sovereignties. A recent interview with Tony Blair, widely distributed, is one example. Such mentalities have led to a political conflict of magnitude. If the fear for the West lies in the East, the converse is also true after many trials and tribulations over centuries.

Under imperialism, China had (and since then has) the collective memory of how Western colonisers, with the USA as belated straggler, intervened in Chinese politics since the 1890s and afterwards. Several Chinese rebellions proved that such interventions were not then appreciated and most likely will not be tolerated now. For the moment, we shall not mention the British (Great Britain's) invasion of Afghanistan in the 1880s and how they had to withdraw tail between the legs. Nor shall we speak about the occupation of Afghanistan since 2002, where the USA and the dwindling "Coalition of the Willing" belatedly discovered that they are not welcome, in fact,

should not have been there in the first place. By the way, the Soviet Union had the same experience in Afghanistan in the 1980s. People can get touchy if you impose your concept of a new order on their right to sovereignty.

Using different lenses to view history in the current conflict may assist in paving the way for finding a solution to the conflict rather than war-drumming and feigned moral outrage. The current historical memory and collective consciousness of the Russians experienced numerous betrayals from the West over many years. These collections of socio-historical memories rest on brutal intervention/aggression from the West inflicted in history and cannot be ignored in the current loaded context with or without Putin as a leader.

- First betrayal, 1812: The French invasion of Russia and its brutal, destructive consequences.
- Second betrayal, 1914 onwards: After Russia withdrew from the First World War, having fought on the side of Britain, France, Italy, and later the USA, these very Western countries, following the October Revolution in 1917, turned against the “new Russia/Soviet Union” by supporting the destructive activities of the White partisans (or “White Russians”) that destabilised the Soviet Union for years until the Red Army halted this.
- Third betrayal, 1941: The invasion of Russia (then Soviet Union) by Adolf Hitler’s armies in 1941 (Operation Barbarossa). In this brutal war of naked aggression, the Russian people lost nearly 20 000 000 people before driving the Germans back to Berlin.

In these three cases, the danger and the aggressor came consistently and chronically from what can collectively be referred to as the West, and left a historical memory baggage with deep emotions. It is worthwhile to recall the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, whereby the Soviet Union and all its satellite states committed themselves to respect and observe basic human rights. Likewise, these protocols applied to Western states too. Implicitly this agreement still stands. The Russian argument that there are rogue Fascist or Nazi elements involved in the conflict may arguably demand obliging the Helsinki Act. However, claims of Nazi elements obfuscate matters. On a more mundane yet serious level: in this conflict, it is not only the Russians shooting and killing. The Ukrainians, their imported mercenaries from a variety of interesting countries and aligned special forces, are shooting back after years of strengthening the Ukrainian military (there are no Western-European objections to another \$ 800 000 000 in arms support and supplying surrogate forces announced by Biden). Come to think of it, killing is not a one-sided affair, as some are suggesting in these hideous times. There are collateral and human losses on both sides. No simplification can argue this away.

The next series of broken promises interpreted by the Russians (not only Medyev and Putin) from 1994 (at the latest) onwards, especially 2008 and 2014, are worth mentioning. From the Russian perspective, the Minsk 1 and 2 agreements signed in 2014

and 2015 presumably allowed a consensus on sovereign choices for Eastern Ukraine, also in favour of “Slavic belonging.” For pro-West leaders in Ukraine, it was a green light to push Eastwards. Dangerous clashing perspectives ahead ...

Henry Kissinger, US Secretary of State (1973–1977), rightly observed as far back as 2014 that “Far too often the Ukraine issue is posed as a showdown between West and East, but if the Ukraine (or two Ukraine’s—*my insertion*) ... should survive, it should serve as a bridge (between the West and the East)” (Kissinger 2014). He used several examples to make the point that from the Russian perspective, Ukraine (or at least the eastern part thereof) can never be just “a foreign country” starting as early as the times of Kievan-Rus (1054–1132) and with examples of the Battle of Poltava in 1709. Kissinger eloquently pointed out that even dissidents such as Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky insisted that Ukraine is an “integral part of Russian history and, indeed, of Russia” (Kissinger 2014). Part of the problem, he argued, was that the post-1992 Ukrainian leaders in a newly declared independent country, “not surprisingly, did not learn the art of compromise, even less of a historical perspective.” Kissinger predicted that a Ukraine joining NATO would exacerbate tensions and rising myopic military conflict. Kissinger also advised that EU states take a more pro-active stance around negotiations at the time. It did not happen. That was way back in 2014. Apparently, few lessons have been learnt and even less advice taken—a deficit in reading security interests and historical evolutions in international politics.

In the early 1990s, President Ronald Reagan of the USA announced ecstatically that “This Man (Gorbachev) has broken down the Wall” (Kissinger 2014), with reference to the crumbling Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union to become the Russian Federation. The Reagan administration promised not to expand NATO. In the meantime, the Warschau Pact, as defence against NATO aggression, was dismantled. This was but one of many broken promises—or in stronger terms—as viewed from the Russian side, a series of betrayals. NATO, strongly supported by the USA as a hegemonic partner/global policeman, was to start its creep eastward. Note that there was no more a Warschau Pact, so the question can rightly be asked: “Against which conceivable threat or enemy? Africa? Russia? The ‘terrorists and barbarians?’ The ‘Far Eastern’ countries? Iran? North Korea? (the latter hardly a threat to Europe even if it has a few nuclear bombs).”

Indeed, arguably African sovereign states, the US African Command (AFRICOM) and NATO joined in a rabid frenzy to topple Gaddafi in what was called an “Arab Spring” in 2011. A misnomer of magnitude the term was. Obviously, there was no spring, and little democratisation followed. Egypt, until today, remains a strategic partner and ally of the USA and Apartheid Israel, and Egypt (under authoritarian, more specifically military rule) ignored national democratic elections—and no one cared afterwards. Libya was an exception. Libya under Gaddafi was a non-pliant state when it came to the USA and the West. Libya was not willing to become a client state of the West. Under authoritarian rule, yes, but stable, high educational standards and assisting African states

to reduce their dependence on the IMF and the World Bank. The “Arab Spring” provided the pretext for the USA, AFRICOM, France and a host of smaller countries, including the Netherlands, part of the so-called coalition of the willing, to topple and kill Gaddafi and reduce Libya to a gutted and failed state (it was said by Western spokespeople, women and men alike, that “this man must go”). As corollary consequence, these thoughtless acts resulted in a power vacuum in what was once Libya and triggering simultaneously a refugee crisis still ongoing, and instability for years unforeseen in the region and far afield. Short-sighted to the extreme it was, as Barak Obama admitted later.

NATO and their machinations crept eastwards; a creeping self-given mandate or a creepy mission? It reminds one of the Cold War USA policy of “containment” (encirclement) of the USSR. One can indeed refer to a renewed “containment of a special type”—a hangover mentality since the Cold War and the normal knee-jerk reaction against the East—in this case, with Russia on the receiving end. No conspiracies here; only mentalities, very deep-seated mentalities.

No real other enemies were in the immediate area, and Russian aggression was nowhere to be seen. During 2008, the USA intervened in Georgia with financial and military support, including “specialist” forces—right on the borders of Russia. The Western creep continued. Poland, Romania (and others) joined NATO. If anyone was to feel increasingly beleaguered and under siege, it was Russia and the Russian people. Putin even offered to become part of NATO for reasons unknown before 2010, but was cold-shouldered—another act that proved NATO was seeing Russia as a threat (or Russians as lesser human beings) rather than a future partner. The lingering hate for the East earlier referred to and the “We are the West; We are the best” mentality ruled supreme.

War will not bring a solution. Nor will moral outrage. In the long term, a drawn-out war is destructive. Russian isolation may be broken in unforeseen developments as increasing trade with India, China and others is proving. Unrest in Europe may follow as fuel prices rise—the comprehensive Russian boycott may, in the longer run for Europe, be a “cut your nose to spite your face.” Likewise, the war will increasingly become a growing strain, worse than now, on the Russo-European economies. And the nettle remains. If sovereignty has two sides, what about Ukrainians who want to belong to the “East?” What should apply to one, should equally apply to the other if we break through this war of words. Realistically speaking, there is only one way out. Negotiations.

The situation will have to be negotiated. There is no single sovereignty in Ukraine at stake here (maybe even three). The right to choose your sovereignty should be consistently applied to a divided Ukrainian people. People, as a self-defined group, should be given the right to choose their *political habitus* and their future belonging. The wish for sovereignty has at least two sides, and this also applies to Eastern Ukraine.

During the UNGA Resolution and the massive vote against Russian actions, only two voices of reason emerged. Both implied a wider reading of the history of the historical complexities and pointed towards a rational solution. These voices were China and India, calling for a wider historical perspective and a reduction of armed conflict. Many countries (from the Global South, especially poorer ones) could not dare to vote in favour of Russia, because their earlier colonial rulers (and now new colonial beneficiaries) continued profit and exploitation of poorer states. The economy of dependency and the global development of under-development would push a throttling boot on their necks; think West Africa, think Namibia and South Africa and a host of smaller economically weak countries in the Global South, and even north of the equator, dependent on their “Core States Master’s” voice.

The rational way out is negotiations. It will be tough. It may include UN-supervised referenda (oversight by the international community, the UN) in a divided Ukraine and perhaps even a commitment from a self-imposed hegemon, the USA, to withdraw its military presence from Europe to allow an impartial solution. And such a negotiated solution under international UN supervision may require that no USA, European and Russian troops be part of the UN Peacekeeping forces deployed there to oversee the implementation of the resolution.

Author Biography

Ian Liebenberg is a Professor in Politics at the Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law, Department Public Management and Political Studies (DPMPS), University of Namibia (UNAM) and an extraordinary Professor in Politics at the Faculty of Military Science (FEMS) at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. The opinions expressed here are in his personal and private capacity and not linked to the above-mentioned tertiary institutions. This article appeared earlier in the *Mail & Guardian* (Thought Leader), 29 April–5 May 2022. Permission was kindly granted by the M&G to republish the article.

References

- Dyer, G. 2014. *Future Tense: The Coming World Order*. London: Serpent’s Tail Publishers.
- Kissinger, H. 2014. “Conflict in the Ukraine.” *Washington Post*, 6 March. Copyright Tribune Media Services.
- Liebenberg, I. 2022. “Comment and Analysis: More than one Culprit in the Ukraine Conflict.” *Confidante* (Namibia), 10-16 June: 10.
- Paranjpe, S. 2022. “Ukraine: back to the Status Quo in Europe?” *Mainstream XL* (3) (March). New Delhi. <http://mainstreamweekly.net/article12145.html>.