

Ukraine Crisis in Imperial Context

Thursday 23 December 2021, by [FINKEL David](#) (Date first published: 19 December 2021).

The following notes were initially intended as part of a followup to the article [Biden's Foreign Policy](#) by Dianne Feeley [1].



M1A1 Main Battle Tanks during a NATO Training. Russia can't allow NATO bases in Ukraine. (Photo: Chad McMeen, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)

I'd like to develop an overview of layers of imperialist actions with their differing relations to "interests of state," whether merely tactical or fundamental. At one end of the spectrum are the cynical and vicious U.S. sanctions imposed on Cuba, Venezuela and now Nicaragua, which produce enormous suffering but serve practically no substantive interest beyond pandering to rightwing votes in some key electoral states, notably Florida and New Jersey.

At the other end is the fundamental, potentially existential U.S.-China competition, which is emerging as a massive struggle for control of the Pacific and much of the world economy. (An article on this "entangled rivalry," by Peter Solenberger, appears in the new issue of *Against the Current*, January-February 2022, now at the printer.)

At present, of course, attention is focused on the confrontation over Ukraine between Russia and the United States along with its European allies, so that's what I'll concentrate on here and leave other discussions for another time.

While trying to figure out how to fit this into the broader picture, I happened to catch part of a segment on CNN of Don Lemon conversing with Fareed Zakaria (chalk it up to masochism, I guess). The two mutually admiring liberal pundits were mocking Tucker Carlson, Fox News' leading house white nationalist, for proclaiming that Vladimir Putin only "wants to secure his border with Ukraine," not attack Western Europe.

While I haven't actually watched Carlson (masochism has certain limits), in this instance the hideous "white replacement" guru had stumbled upon a piece of the truth. Alarmingly, many pretentious commentators don't get the point: *No Russian government of any stripe can tolerate NATO expanding to Ukraine. It means war.*

The fact that president-for-life Putin runs a gangster regime — which he does, including murderous operations at home and abroad — is not the issue here. The most liberal, democratic imaginable Russian regime couldn't allow a traditionally hostile Western military alliance setting up shop on a

border about 300 miles of largely flat plain from Moscow.

At the same time, the West will not accept a Putin *anschluss* in Ukraine (the term refers to Hitler's takeover of Austria, you can look it up). That would shatter the mutual confidence and commitments that make the Western alliance possible in the first place.

Of course, we on the revolutionary socialist left look toward the smashing of imperialism in totality, but that's regrettably not imminent. The immediate question is whether each side recognizes the other's red line and the consequences of crossing it. My guess is that they probably do. At least we should hope so.

U.S. administration officials are saying that "Ukraine is an independent country that has a right to join NATO if it chooses." Well, you could say similarly that at the height of the Cold War in 1962 the independent country of Cuba — which had been targeted by the CIA-organized Bay of Pigs invasion the previous year — had a right to host Soviet missiles.

But when Khrushchev and Kennedy realized that exercising that "right" was a road to World War III, they made the deal that pulled Soviet missiles out of Cuba and U.S. missiles out of Turkey, and to monitor future crises installed the famous telephone "hot line" between Moscow and Washington.

This agreement defused probably the Cold War's most dangerous single moment. (Even during the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars, for example, the U.S.-USSR rivalry didn't come to the point of threatening nuclear war.)

It wasn't a question of good-versus-bad guys. The point is that for both superpowers there was lot more to lose than to gain, and also a way out of the crisis, although the Cuban government wasn't properly consulted.

There's also more to be lost than gained today, even without the unthinkable prospect of all-out war. The immediate Western response to a Russian military incursion in Ukraine would be what U.S. officials call "drastic and sweeping" economic retaliation including, it's been made pretty explicit, cutting Russia out of the SWIFT network of global banking.

That could send much of Russia's economy over a cliff — to which I imagine the Kremlin's most likely response would be cutting off natural gas shipments to Western Europe as winter sets in. (Note: During these recent years of bloody Russia-Ukraine confrontation, Russia with few interruptions has continued natural gas shipments to Ukraine, which has continued to pay for them.)

There's also, I would suspect, the likelihood of serious cyberwarfare that should scare the hell out of the elites on all sides — and the rest of us ordinary folks.

Assuming that neither side wants to risk this level of mutual ruin, there is an available "off ramp" provided by the 2015 Minsk agreements, which could be supplemented by semi-secret commitments that NATO won't incorporate Ukraine, that sanctions on Russia over the annexation of Crimea will remain but won't be escalated — accepting the takeover as an accomplished fact — while Russia backs off from escalating its intervention-by-proxy in eastern Ukraine.

This kind of semi-solution doesn't ensure longterm stability, leaves an unresolved frozen conflict, and is far from what most of the Ukraine population probably wants, but it reduces the danger of provocations and counter-provocations blowing up beyond what any side might have intended.

It's also just barely possible that ruling elites on all sides might even notice that temperatures exceeding 100 degrees F (!) in Arctic Siberia represent a bigger survival threat than their quarrel

over the Russia-Ukraine border — although that may be too much to hope.

We do need to remember the 1990s origins of this crisis in the U.S.-led NATO expansion into eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the years when Russia was flat on its butt and couldn't resist. That imperial hubris has come home to roost now that Russia's military has regained its footing, even if its society is slowly rotting from within.

For his part, Vladimir Putin makes no secret of his belief that the USSR's dissolution wiped out "a thousand years" of Russian greatness. Indeed, several years ago Putin viscerally denounced V.I. Lenin himself — because Lenin, when the Soviet Union formed in 1922, had included in its statutes the right of the constituent nations to secede. It's as if Lenin, who always despised "great-Russian chauvinism," anticipated what Putin represents.

In short, in my rough hierarchy of imperialist behaviors, the fight over Ukraine ranks somewhere in the middle, where real "interests of state" are at stake but most probably, if luck and sanity prevail, not a high likelihood of exploding into all-out war.

My own guess is that the danger from the imminent collapse of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) from U.S. and Israeli ultimatums is actually greater — but I really don't want to find out. That will have to be for another discussion.

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P.S.

- Solidarity. December 19, 2021:
<https://solidarity-us.org/ukraine-crisis-in-imperial-context/>
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Footnotes

- [1] See, on ESSF (article 60218), [United States: The Biden Administration's Foreign Policy](#).