

From Ukraine to Gaza: imperialism, resistance and solidarity

Monday 17 June 2024, by [CANNELL Pete](#) (Date first published: 28 February 2024).

Two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Pete Cannell discusses the shifting ground of economic and geopolitical rivalry and the need for international solidarity in building resistance to imperialism and militarism.

It's two years now since Russia invaded Ukraine. Ukrainian and Russian workers have paid the price. It's estimated that half a million have been seriously injured or killed. And in the same time the five biggest oil companies in the world have made a [combined profit of \\$281 billion](#).

Putin expected an easy victory and at first Russian troops gained significant territory. Much of this was reclaimed as Ukraine fought back. The picture since then has been one of bloody stalemate with heavy casualties on both sides. Away from the battlefield, however, the geopolitical context has changed significantly, and continues to change, posing real problems for the USA, which while still militarily pre-eminent is increasingly challenged politically and economically by China.

It is common on the left to analyse Ukraine (and now Palestine) from a perspective which assumes that the United States is *the* imperial power, largely unchallenged by others. The truth is that we don't live in a unipolar world. China projects its economic power on a global scale. Russia has a much smaller economy but uses its military strength to project power well beyond its borders. Clustering around the major imperialisms are regional blocks which have their own interests that don't always coincide with the dominant powers.

There are two main approaches to Ukraine on the left. One argues for self-determination for Ukraine and effectively sides with western imperialism as a necessary evil for stopping an out-of-control Putin. Understanding the US as the predominant power, the other approach sees Russia, however regrettably, as responding to western (US and NATO) provocation. Those who take this view centre their campaigning on stopping the war. Necessarily this downplays or denies Ukraine's right to self-determination and some of its proponents justify this by highlighting the right-wing neoliberal politics of the regime and the role of small far right organisations. However, ignoring the class differentiation in Ukrainian society and denying the possibility of national self-determination cuts off any possibility of solidarity with Ukrainian workers.

In rs21 we have taken a different position. Arguing that to understand the contradictions of Ukraine requires both serious analysis of the [current dynamics of imperialist competition](#) and 'a [more nuanced understanding](#), which sees both the struggle for national liberation and rivalry between imperialist powers as driving the war'. We have been keen to develop an approach that foregrounds the class dynamics of Ukrainian and Russian societies. While President Zelensky sides with the US in supporting Israel others in Ukraine [stand in solidarity](#) with the Palestinians. Oleksandr Kyselov [writing in 2024](#) reminds us of

The farmers from Kherson who till the mine-laden soil. The train drivers from Kyiv who

deliver vital supplies on run-down trains. The underpaid nurses from Lviv who attend to the sick and the wounded. The Russian-speaking miners from Kryvyi Rih who fight to protect their hometown. The construction workers from Mykolaiv who clear dangerous rubble to build anew, but struggle to feed their families. Support them, the invisible majority, whose voice is rarely heard but who have nowhere else to go.

After two years, an end to the war seems as far away as ever. Putin – shortly to be ‘re-elected’ – has staked everything on success. There have been moments when his grip on power has seemed shaky. In 2022 the [Russian economy slumped](#) into a major recession. But there was a rapid recovery. Western sanctions have had little effect on revenue from oil and gas sales. Exports have been rerouted to China and India. In 2023 [gas supplies to China](#) were up 50 percent in a year and are expected to increase again in 2024. The [Russian economy grew faster](#) than any other G7 country in 2023 and the IMF has forecast that this also will be the case in 2024. Dependent on income from oil and gas the Russian state has now become a highly mobilised war economy and is spending close to 40 percent of its budget on the military.

Both Russia and Ukraine have had major problems in resourcing arms and ammunition. Russia has been able to get significant supplies of munitions from North Korea but has also managed to expand production from a host of factories which had been operating at well below capacity. To make this happen employment in the arms sector has grown, the working day has been lengthened and pay for workers in the arms sector has increased, albeit under tight regulation, severe penalties for failure and a harsh crackdown on dissent. Ukraine has a much smaller economy and has been much more reliant on supplies of arms from NATO, principally from the US. Shortages are now having a major effect and US support is increasingly delayed and uncertain because of opposition from Trump and his supporters in the House of Representatives.

It seems unlikely that the bloody stalemate that exists at present will end soon. Despite the weariness inflicted by two years of war the idea of a ceasefire is deeply unattractive to Ukraine since it would most likely be used by Putin to gather strength for a further attempt to capture territory. Defeat is unthinkable for Putin, as [David McNally puts very well](#):

Right now, Putin cannot afford to back down on Ukraine. That’s a simple reality. Defeat in Ukraine is the end of the line for Putin and his section of the ruling class. They remember what happened when Russia lost a war with Japan in 1905 and how it cracked open Czarism and opened up the floodgates of the 1905 revolution. They remember the lessons of the First World War: all the losing belligerents were shaken by working-class upheavals involving soldiers and sailors on a very large scale.

For nearly two decades now, US strategists have argued for a pivot towards China. But events in Ukraine from 2014, and now Israel’s genocidal attack on Gaza, have pulled their attention to the west. The limits of US power were apparent in Syria where attempts to influence the course of events through financing proxy forces failed miserably. Local powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and Russian military supplies and direct interventions, played more significant roles. US interventions were more marginal, mainly through bombing and drone attacks. Which they and Israel have continued across the region.

For decades the US funded and gave political support to Israel as the local, and highly armed, agent of western imperialism in the Middle East. It stood by as Israeli settlements encroached more and more on Palestinian land and as repeated IDF operations killed thousands in Gaza. Now it finds

Israel pursuing its own agenda, intensifying and speeding up its onslaught on the Palestinians in pursuit of a Greater Israel, and the US finds its options are very limited. The political economy of the region is in flux. Regional powers are more assertive. The oil economy has changed. The US is now the world's biggest producer, but in the medium to long term oil, and thus the strategic importance of the Middle East, in decline. China's power and influence looms larger. So, a return to the bloody balance that prevailed in the decades before October 2023 is highly unlikely. Domestic politics in the US is deeply split between the traditional approaches to US global power and the more isolationist and authoritarian politics of Trump. All of this plays into how the US acts in relation to Ukraine.

In Britain both the Tory and Labour Parties have responded to the increasingly unstable international situation by aligning closely with the US and encouraging the growth of a hard-line militarism. Both Tory and Labour support the NATO military alliance and support even more state subsidies and support for arms manufacturers. There is now talk of conscription. All of this is quite explicitly linked to attempts to defuse resistance to austerity and shift mainstream politics to the right. In this situation, while support for Ukraine's right to self-determination means that they have the right to source arms from wherever they can, socialists in Britain must be uncompromising critics of NATO and campaign for an end to the arms trade.

The mobilisations over Gaza provide a tremendous platform for pushing back against militarism and building the campaign against arms production. More people must have picketed and blockaded British arms factories in the last six months than in the previous fifty years. And it's having an effect. There is a real possibility of winning workers to bans on production for Israel, but it requires a deepening and widening of the movement to achieve this. Workers in the arms industry won't be won to this position just by leafleting - although that's important. The leaflets will be more effective when arms workers' children, families and friends are clear that the genocide and the Britain's complicity must end. Palestine is the cutting edge in developing anti-militarism. It opens up arguments about divestment, alternative production and workers' power. It's a tough but necessary fight and success would resonate internationally, give inspiration to workers around the world and change the context in which we discuss Ukraine.

The dynamic of global economic competition and the rise of right wing popularism is deeply intertwined with the potential end of fossil capital, resource wars and breakdown of established patterns of living and subsistence. In ['Fight the Fire'](#) Jonathan Neale argues that "when the moment of runaway climate change comes for you, where you live, it will not come in the form of a few wandering hairy bikers. It will come with the tanks on the streets and the military or the fascists taking power." In this world, more than ever, clarity about the role of imperialism as a global system requires international working-class solidarity.

So, even though opportunities are limited, socialists should take every opportunity to develop solidarity with the Ukrainian left and be absolutely clear that in a world on fire our solidarity is always with the workers and never with the imperialist powers. And while taking every opportunity to build solidarity with Palestine, rather than putting Ukraine and Palestine in separate silos, it's important to develop an overall analysis of the way that both conflicts are driven by a global system of competing imperialisms.

Pete Cannell

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

rs21

<https://www.rs21.org.uk/2024/02/28/from-ukraine-to-gaza-imperialism-resistance-and-solidarity/>