

Q&A: Navigating the Left's Ukraine Debate

Tuesday 22 November 2022, by [FLETCHER Bill Jr.](#), [LEARY Elly](#) (Date first published: 15 November 2022).

“Sovereignty and self-determination are important concepts to keep at the heart of Left analysis”—and can help orient us in the confusion and misinformation surrounding Russia’s war on Ukraine.

1. Why is the principle of self-determination so important to understanding the conflict in Ukraine?

There are three aspects to the question of national self-determination. One, a recognition that “nations” of peoples have a right to assert their own identity and form a political unit separate from or included within a larger geo-political grouping. Two, that a recognized nation-state has the internationally recognized right to national sovereignty. Specifically, regarding national sovereignty, no outside power has the right to intervene in the internal affairs of another country (unless under terms agreed upon by the United Nations). And third, self-determination is a basic element of freedom that has tremendous power to forge unity as it resonates amongst a people.

In the case of Ukraine, the international borders of an independent Ukraine were recognized in 1991 in the context of the collapse of the USSR. Ukraine, however, did have a national-territorial status as a recognized nation after the formation of the USSR and, further, in the context of the formation of the United Nations. The internationally recognized borders of Ukraine were affirmed in 1994, with the signing of the [Budapest Accords](#) whereby Ukraine turned over nuclear weapons on the condition that Russia pledged to never invade Ukraine and to always respect Ukrainian sovereignty.

Russia violated this agreement in 2014 with the invasion and annexation of Crimea, on the pretext of an alleged coup in Kyiv. Even if one agreed that a coup took place—and we do not—that would not justify a foreign intervention.

Sovereignty and self-determination are important concepts to keep at the heart of left analysis.

The US and others have a long and sordid history of meddling in the internal affairs of countries. The entire 1950s US regime of Allan and John Foster Dulles (State Department and CIA) was based on this principle. Ukraine has been the subject of much external plotting and conniving, certainly [by the US](#).

Even with outside meddling from numerous forces, what took place in 2014 was a matter internal to the Ukraine—the result of its own internal contradictions. The political outcome was not favorable to Russia, but was in no way an attack on Russia. As such, it should not have justified any sort of intervention. Consider the US invasion of Panama in 1989. It was based on the pretext that Manuel Noriega was a criminal and that the US had to bring him to justice. While Noriega certainly was a criminal—and one who had regularly worked in cooperation with the USA—he was also the president of a sovereign nation. As with Ukraine, there was no internationally legal justification for a US invasion (of Panama).

National self-determination for Ukraine is of further importance given the semi-colonial relationship

the country has historically had with Russia, despite the close linguistic and cultural ties. Asserting that Russia has no need to recognize Ukrainian sovereignty due to historic ties would be the equivalent of suggesting that the US has no need to recognize Canadian sovereignty given the close linguistic and cultural ties that go back at least two hundred years.

2. Is this a proxy war between the US/NATO and Russia?

It has become almost fashionable, among some segments of the Left, to call the Russo-Ukrainian War a “proxy war” between Russia and NATO: that is a war in which the principal contradiction is the instigation of war by foreign powers, and in which internal contradictions are secondary.

An excellent example of a “proxy war” would be the conflicts within the Democratic Republic of the Congo post-1997 wherein the domestic forces were largely eclipsed by or dominated by foreign actors, e.g., Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Angola, multi-national corporations. While there was certainly an internal conflict, various militias were doing the bidding of foreign actors.

The Russo-Ukrainian War is no more a “proxy war” than was the Vietnam War. Yet it is important to remember that many liberals and right-wingers described the Vietnam War as a proxy war between the US, on the one hand, and the USSR and China on the other. They ignored the national question—the fact that the Vietnam War was about US aggression against the people of Vietnam (and, later, the people of Laos and Cambodia). A proxy war is taking place when there are bad actors on both sides, not when one side is fighting for their independence—even if the side fighting for independence seeks help from other nations.

The Russo-Ukrainian War is the direct result of Russia violating the sovereignty of Ukraine. About this there is little debate. The question is whether their violation was justified by acts of NATO. Since there was no evidence that NATO has armed Ukraine with nuclear weapons and since there is ample evidence that several NATO member-states were actively opposed to the inclusion of Ukraine within NATO, the argument falls flat.

Putin’s stated objective is to end the national sovereignty of Ukraine. Any mention of the role of NATO is a red herring that hides the real aim of Russia to expand its sphere of influence.

3. What has been the role of NATO? Is it the aggressor in this current conflict?

Let’s be clear: the fall of the Berlin Wall offered a unique opportunity to reconfigure international relations worldwide. Leftists and progressives argued vigorously for the disbanding of NATO and for a new framework to be drawn based on mutual respect, democracy and security. That did not happen. Despite sufficient evidence that the US agreed or implied that NATO would not expand, without this being codified in writing all bets were off once the USSR collapsed.

The irony is that the invasion ended any hope for a new framework beyond NATO; in fact, it accomplished the opposite. There appear to have been major conflicts within the NATO community regarding what should unfold. What did happen, however, is that NATO expanded eastward towards the Russian border when countries that had been formerly in the Soviet bloc indicated that they needed protection against a potential Russian expansionist/hegemonist threat. NATO was not pushed on these countries, though NATO could have and should have stopped the expansion. The expansion largely stopped in 2004.

What changed was the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. Remember that that the Budapest Accords of 1994 did not have any sort of “exception” clause that would ever justify a Russian invasion. When the 2014 crisis unfolded, the so-called Maidan uprisings, a pro-Russian administration was chased out of the country by a broad coalition within which there were hard, rightwing forces. It is around this time

that Ukrainian chauvinists began pushing anti-ethnic Russian politics, especially regarding usages of the language. The Putin regime utilized the internal Ukrainian conflict as a pretext for an intervention. This included seizing Crimea and supporting separatist regimes in the Donbas region.

It was in the context of the Russian intervention in the *internal affairs of Ukraine* that the matter of NATO arose. Prior to 2014 there was [little interest](#) in Ukraine joining NATO. As a result of Russian interference in Ukraine, including but not limited to the seizing of Crimea, interest in NATO emerged.

In the lead-up to the February 2022 invasion, the Ukrainian government conveyed to Putin that it would not join NATO. This did not stop the invasion, largely because the invasion had little to do with NATO. Putin made the objectives very clear on the day of the invasion where he declared that Ukraine was “national fiction.” Thus, for Putin, the invasion was not about an alleged NATO threat and more about the destiny of Ukraine as a country.

4. Is it right to call for a world that is divided into spheres of influence so that peace can be maintained? Is this in the interest of the working classes?

There have been many sincere progressives and leftists who have argued that big countries, e.g., Russia, have a legitimate interest in a sphere of influence. Some on the Left specifically propose the notion of “multi-polarity” that says there needs to be several major poles—powers—to counter the hegemonism of the USA. This is a different definition from another one other leftists have used where multi-polarity means the upholding of sovereignty and independence of all nations. It is the former with which we take issue.

While most of the world, including some leftists and progressives, talks about spheres of influence, we believe the principle of self-determination must be our starting point. We have historically protested the US invoking the so-called Monroe Doctrine to justify endless violations of the national sovereignty of countries in the Western Hemisphere. Sphere of influence arguments have always been used by big powers to suppress national self-determination. US antipathy towards Cuba (since 1959) and Nicaragua (1980s) are both related to claims of spheres of influence. The Soviet invasions of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) were justified based on spheres of influence.

The argument regarding multi-polarity can sound, in a first hearing, to be a progressive demand to restrain US imperialism. But that is not always the case. The pre-1914 world was multi-polar as was the pre-1939 world. That did not make them progressive in the least. Certainly, the current expansion of rightwing authoritarian regimes across the planet leaves little doubt multi-polarity could easily result in a profoundly reactionary world.

Progressives support national self-determination and not spheres of influence. Our demand needs to be for national self-determination and a world guided by principles of international law.

5. Isn't the USA being hypocritical in its stand? Doesn't this explain why many countries in the global South have been reluctant to speak up?

The US has a history of profound hypocrisy. In the current war there is little question but that the stand of the US is hypocritical. In condemning Russian aggression, it ignores Israeli aggression against the Palestinians and Moroccan aggression against the Sahrawis, and our own illegal invasion of Iraq. And, yes, this is a reason that many governments in the global South have equivocated—at least until recently—in full condemnations of the Russian aggression. And there is the issue of food: Russia and Ukraine are the bread baskets of Africa. It is not too impolite to label this food blackmail.

That said, it is important to note that many governments in the global South are also influenced by trade and financial arrangements that they have with Russia as well as the West, leading them to be cautious in response.

It is important to add that US hypocrisy has not stopped progressives around the world from speaking out on other outrages. For example, the Indonesian atrocities against East Timor were called out by people of good will internationally and forced the US to back away from its traditional alliance with the reactionary Indonesian regime. Violations of international law and human rights were denounced because they were wrong.

In this sense, the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine by genuine internationalists is entirely consistent with approaches from the past. US supporters of Irish liberation did not remain silent about British imperialism just because the US was an imperialist power. And supporters of African liberation did not remain silent about European colonialism just because the US was also a colonial oppressor, e.g., against the Philippines.

6. Even if we oppose the invasion, is it correct to support weapons to Ukraine or doesn't that just prolong the fighting and bring us closer to global war?

If one opposes the Russian invasion and supports Ukrainian sovereignty, the logical question is really this: how are the Ukrainians supposed to resist Russian aggression? With simply harsh language? An appeal to the United Nations?

Those who say that weapons should not go to the Ukrainians are insincere. They are, in essence, calling upon the Ukrainians to surrender. They may believe that the Ukrainians can carry out passive resistance against the Russians along the lines of the Danish resistance to Nazi Germany. The only problem is that the Danish were not resisting the Nazis in a vacuum. There was a world war underway.

When the Vietnamese were resisting the US, there were those who called upon the Vietnamese to make concessions and to hold off on their struggles. In fact, in 1954 both the USSR and China appealed to the Vietminh to accept the "temporary" division of Vietnam into two regions as a means of ending the conflict. We see where that ended.

The oppressed are regularly told that they should hold off on their demands and tone down their efforts. Such arguments were made to the US Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, arguments to which Dr. King responded, condemning white moderates who wanted the Black Freedom Movement to restrain itself. If we ask Ukraine to tone down their efforts, we are in essence telling them to submit to the demands of the aggressor, Putin's Russia.

Is there a danger of global war? Absolutely. As long as there are imperialist powers such a danger exists. Yet that should not mean that the oppressed, and those victimized by aggression should restrain their resistance.

7. Why has it been impossible to achieve a negotiated settlement to this conflict?

Simply put, the Putin regime sees no reason to negotiate. As one is seeing now (October 2022), the Putin regime intends to implement the approach that it took toward the suppression of the Chechnyans, i.e., total suppression through massive, indiscriminate use of violence. This was also replicated in the Russian-backed assault on the Syrian revolutionary movement, e.g., barrel bombs, attacking hospitals.

Ultimately the Russian government will need to decide what is their bottom line. They may decide on

a “Korean solution,” i.e., an armistice without a treaty and with a “cold war” continuing between Russia and Ukraine. This may not be acceptable for the Ukrainians. Moreover, the Ukrainian experience with Russia in negotiations has been very problematic—starting with the Budapest Accords in 1994 which guaranteed Ukrainian sovereignty in exchange for the return of nuclear weapons to Russia and continuing with the [Minsk Accords](#).

We should acknowledge that there has been a great deal of organized [misinformation](#) propagated by the Putin regime and their allies. These forces have suggested, from the beginning, that the US and the Ukrainian government have lacked an interest in a negotiated settlement. This is false.

There is an additional matter relative to negotiations. Those who argue that the matter of the Russo-Ukrainian War needs to be settled between the US/NATO and Russia treat Ukraine as a secondary player. They are acting, against all evidence, as if this is a struggle that is not about the national existence of Ukraine but is a battle between two imperialist powers. Any settlement not negotiated with the Ukrainians at the head of the table would be a settlement imposed on the people. This is a position which the global Left has never accepted.

8. Whereas other liberation struggles, such as the Palestinian, Kurdish, or American First Nations’ have tended to unite most of the Left, why has the debate over Ukrainian liberation seemed to have divided it?

There are several reasons:

- Russian propaganda skillfully identified the 2014 events as a fascist/US-led coup.
- A version of the “enemy of my enemy is my friend,” in this case meaning that insofar as the US supports the Ukrainian government this must mean, for some sections of the Left, that the Ukrainians are on the wrong side of history.
- An inaccurate analysis of the Putin regime, including a tendency towards nostalgia by some regarding the old USSR. This can be seen in the fascination by some leftists that the flag of the former USSR has been used at different points by the Russian forces. Thus, a denial of the [semi-fascist nature of the Putin regime](#), including but not limited to its active support for far Right forces globally.
- As we have seen in a number of struggles, it is relatively easy for segments of the Western Left and progressive movements to become destabilized if a particular government waves the “red flag” and proclaims itself to be anti-imperialist. Rather than doing a concrete analysis, many of us are taken in by the rhetoric and tend to belittle charges against such governments as having been manufactured by the CIA and other nefarious players.

9. What do we know about the anti-war movement in Russia and anti-war sentiment more broadly? Is there any way we can support anti-war/pro-democracy forces in Russia without putting them in danger?

One of the first things Putin did after the invasion was to outlaw independent journalism and crack down on protests. Since then, things have only intensified. [Anti-war actions](#) have spread throughout Russia, sometimes appearing on mainstream news outlets, while in other cases, street actions or various forms of civil disobedience.

The question of supporting anti-war forces in Russia is complicated by the nature of the authoritarian Putin regime. What seems to be in order is calling attention to repression by the Russian government and giving support to Russian refugees who are leaving the country to avoid military service. Additional assistance can be rendered through support for legitimate trade unionists in Russia who are standing in opposition to the war. That said, the trade union movement

is divided on the question.

10. Can the US government play a positive role that doesn't undermine Ukrainian sovereignty? How can we best express solidarity with Ukraine? Are there social movement forces we can reach out to?

Let's be clear. The US cannot negotiate on behalf of Ukraine. Ukraine is not acting as an agent of the US. The US can encourage both parties to negotiate and pledge that it would support any steps to guarantee security for both parties on the condition that there are no further acts of aggression. The US could cease arms delivery beginning when there is a legitimate **Russian** ceasefire and could stop them altogether upon the removal of all Russian forces. The US could also pledge to respect the neutrality of Ukraine and not support their entry into NATO.

The Left can be most helpful to the Ukrainians by insisting that the right of self-determination of the Ukrainian people is the principal contradiction here. Even as forces around the world suggest frameworks and conciliatory peace plans to stop the carnage, at the end of the day it is in the hands of the Ukrainian people to decide what to accept.

As once part of the USSR, "communist" parties have existed for decades inside the Ukraine. Pro-Russian forces, inside and outside the Ukraine including the contested oblasts in the East (Donbas, Crimea, Kherson), have effectively used the "banning of communist parties" and Russian language as examples of the anti-democratic (or even fascist) nature of the Ukraine regime. While these laws were passed prior to Zelensky's election victory, and there has been some attempt to soften the language issues, ultimately this is an internal problem for the Ukrainian people to resolve. We can be in solidarity with those in Ukraine who oppose internal repression and neoliberal initiatives. But this should not confuse anyone, i.e., the main challenge facing Ukraine is the Russian invasion.

There are also small but vital anti-capitalist, egalitarian formations inside Ukraine, [Sotsyalnyi Rukh](#) for example. We, on the left, are obliged to listen to their [voices](#). There is also an on-line journal, [Commons](#) that overlaps with SR.

These are tremendous resources, and we should look to them for information and guidance.

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a longtime trade unionist, writer and speaker. He was also a president of TransAfrica Forum, chairperson of the board of directors of Advocates for Minor Leaguers, and co-coordinator of the Campaign to End the Moroccan Occupation of Western Sahara. A sequel to his murder mystery novel, *The Man Who Fell From the Sky*, will be published later in 2022.

Elly Leary is a retired GM autoworker who was active in New Directions and served as a chief contract negotiator. She has participated in popular education workshops with workers all over the world, often with Transnational Information Exchange. She is a member of the Liberation Road's International Work Team.

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

P.S.

Convergence

<https://convergencemag.com/articles/qa-navigating-the-lefts-ukraine-debate/>