

Opinion – Strategic Perspectives on the Russia-Ukraine War

Written by Lev Topor

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LEV TOPOR, MAR 6 2022

The current conflict in Ukraine is a hybrid proxy war between the ex-Soviet power, Russia, and the Western allied forces which are led by the United States. It is fought with special forces, drones, and even social media campaigns of disinformation, or fake news, that only create chaos and kindle up debates among people worldwide that do not always understand the reality of the situation. Some even call this current conflict “Putin’s War”. Yet, if one seeks to understand the current situation one must understand the strategic history of the Soviet, or Russian, conflict with the West. In this short article, I task to elaborate some of the strategic logic behind the Russian attack and not discuss humanitarian aspects of warfare as these cannot be easily justified within any conflict. Russia might need to halt its forces but, simultaneously, the West must stop its economic and military pressure on Russia.

The end of the Second World War is a good starting point to understand the 2022 Ukrainian crisis. After the Allied forces won, the two major powers of the United States and the Soviet Union, both in terms of strategy and in terms of ideology, entered a new world order – the world shifted from a situation of multipolarity (prior to the First World War) to a bi-polar situation. Even if one was stronger than the other, both great powers dictated the global arena. In an attempt to prevent a situation in which one power would rise above the other, both begun strengthening themselves with allies. In April 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was founded as a precautionary measure to the rise of the Soviet Union and as a mediation mechanism to prevent further conflicts between European members. Following that strategic logic, and after Western Germany joined NATO in May 1955, the Soviet Union, in its turn, established the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO), commonly known as the Warsaw Pact.

Generally, NATO was built of Western and Central European countries, as well as the United States and Canada, and the Warsaw Pact consisted of the Soviet Union, including Eastern Europe. The whole logic behind these pacts was simple – collective security. That is, an attack on one ally would be considered an attack on all. As we know, the Soviet Union had dissolved for various reasons, including ideational and material reasons. While it dissolved, Russia remained a great power in decline. The United States and NATO understood the situation and, considering the initial rise of China a decade before, began pressuring Russia in an attempt to speed up the decline. Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia had tremendous influence on Eastern and Central European countries, an influence the West wanted to revoke. NATO had not dissolved after it was conceptually useless – If the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact lost, NATO won – why should it continue to exist, let alone enlarge itself? The Soviet Union had dissolved, but its core, Russia, did not. The rise of China did not help either.

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO had not faded away but grew stronger, a fact that signaled other world powers to prepare themselves as well. In 1949 twelve members established NATO, including the United States, the United Kingdom and France. Turkey joined in 1952. [Western] Germany joined in 1955, Poland in 1999. In 2004 seven more countries joined NATO, many of whom were in the Soviet sphere of influence. North Macedonia joined in March 2020, making NATO a thirty-state pact. Thus, Russia gradually lost its influence over extensive parts of Europe and consequently, its influence over the world. In a realistic approach, Moscow did not want to stay behind the United States and China and, as a nuclear power and the world’s largest country, begun pushing Western influence Westward, which also meant pushing Western economic and military pressure from its near borders, including sabotaging NATO’s attempt to recruit Georgia in its South-Western border, Finland and Sweden in the Baltic area

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and of course – Ukraine – which, together with Belarus, separated a long common border with a NATO member (Poland). Extending NATO to the East would provide a ground carpet on which military could move towards Russia as well as decrease Russia's response time in case of a nuclear attack.

Ukraine became an independent country in August 1991 but has been under the Russian sphere of influence ever since. Both in the Orange Revolution (2004-2005) and in the Maidan Revolution (2013-2014) Ukrainian Politics were the battle ground – the West pushed for one candidate and Russia pushed for another. Ukrainian Politics and ground became the proxy upon which powers conflicted each other. In 2008 NATO begun officially discussing about Ukraine's membership but was pushed back by Russia. As pro-Western candidates were favored since 2014, Ukraine also attempted to join the European Union, an economic pact which Russia perceived as no less dangerous for its global position than NATO itself. In an attempt to push back Western pressure and influence over Ukraine, Russia had annexed the area of Crimea in early 2014. Additionally, the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, referred to as the Donbass region, declared their separation from Ukraine as most of the population were pro-Russian and as Russia had pushed pro-Russian administration in the Donbass.

As a powerful hegemon in a bi or tri-polar global system, Russia should not be considered as the sole aggressor, even though its attempt to create a European dependence on energy is significant (i.e., Nord Stream). In the current Ukrainian matter, strategically speaking, Russia is not an agent but a reagent. One could also assume that if the West had not pushed over Ukraine, attempting to recruit it to NATO or to the European Union, Russia would not have invaded Ukraine in 2022 nor in 2014. Indeed, Liberalism and Democracy are important concepts and Ukrainians' voices must be heard; and voices are many, of liberals, conservatives, and people in between. Yet, Liberalism and Democracy do not always align with strategic goals, especially not when one great power is struggling with the other. Moreover, while Russia attempts to preserve or boost its global influence, it is the United States that also attempts to preserve its global hegemony in light of the fact that this hegemony is also being questioned by China. Russia must stop its intervention in Ukraine. Yet, in the current state of affairs, it is the United States and the West who must guarantee that Ukraine will be a neutral buffer zone just as it was the United States that demanded from the Soviet Union to withdraw its nuclear missiles from its backyard, Cuba, in October 1962.

The current conflict in Ukraine is a gamble for both sides. First, the decision to invade and attack Ukraine and Ukrainians is a dangerous one for Russian President Vladimir Putin. As both nations perceive themselves as brothers, or as nations with similar values at the very least, Moscow risks that not only citizens but also government officials, military commanders and soldiers will refuse fighting in Ukraine as many Russians have Ukrainian relatives. One can assume that the decision to deploy Chechen fighters in Ukraine was made to address this risk as the white Christian majority in Russia will care less about the death toll of who it perceives as foreign fighters, or not Russian. Non-Russians, non-Slavs, will also have less struggle to fight Slavs, a fact which will lower the probability of soldiers and commanders refusing to fight. This may also serve as Moscow's indicator of the loyalty of the Chechen Republic as Russia also seeks to avoid future conflicts in the Chechen Republic.

Second, the Western refusal to publicly deny Ukraine's possible future membership in NATO or in the European Union is a dangerous one as it is too premature and can lead to an escalation between European and NATO members and Russia, an escalation that will invoke article five – that an attack on one ally is an attack on all. This situation can lead to the largest military conflict since the Second World War and even to nuclear warfare. Thus, one must only hope that both sides will halt their vigorous intervention in Ukraine. One must also hope that, in case the conflict escalates, NATO and article 5 will dissolve in light of the danger for the future of humanity, just as both powers decided to cease provocation in October 1962.

Finally, a more probable outcome, which will only put greater threats to the West, is that Russia might decide to create a titan-alliance with China while it temporarily gives up Ukraine to de-escalate the situation. As with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, ideational and material aspects must change with time and with generations both in Russia and in Ukraine to ensure a peaceful estrangement from Soviet times. Furthermore, considering the current fragile situation of the European Union, one must also wonder why Ukraine seeks to join an alliance no longer in its prime. This question, however, is outside the scope of this article.

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About the author:

Dr. Lev Topor is an ISGAP visiting scholar at the Woolf Institute at the University of Cambridge and a senior research fellow at the Center for Cyber Law and Policy at the University of Haifa in Israel. He is the co-author (w/ J. Fox) of *'Why Do People Discriminate Against Jews?'* Published by Oxford University Press in 2021 and the co-author of "Russian Cyber Information Warfare" (w/ A. Tabachnick) published in the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* in 2021. Lev publishes scholarly works and practical reports on the topic of cyber warfare and IR, antisemitism and racism.