

Great Power Competition in Ukraine Amidst the Emerging US-China Rivalry

Written by Oliver Villar

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OLIVER VILLAR, MAR 9 2022

The unfolding crisis in the former Soviet Republic of Ukraine is troubling, but not simply for the reasons given by Western governments and the media. The crisis is the latest expression of a growing rivalry between the US and China, and the West's refocus on Russia is a strategy to contain Beijing. This strategy appears to be failing, though, in that it is pushing China and Russia closer together. Will this ultimately serve to divide the world between two camps in a second Cold War, this time between the US and China?

The conflict in Ukraine is not an aberration, but rather one of many inevitable conflicts that are playing out as a result of growing great power rivalries. In 1916, Russian revolutionary Vladimir Ilych Lenin wrote a pamphlet titled 'Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism'. In haste and while in exile in Zurich, he argued that imperialism is a global system of domination between major capitalist rivals who need to compete for markets and territory on a global scale. This means that conflict between those major capitalist rivals is inevitable.

Though Lenin was thinking of and writing about global capitalism during the First World War, this is just as applicable to the present day. China, Germany, Britain, France, and Russia, based on their economic power, finance capital, political influence, and military spending are in competition with one another. But the US-China rivalry is the main rivalry. Indeed, China, as a rising global power, is inevitably competing with the existing and sole superpower, the US, over markets and territory. This rivalry threatens to explode, as it exposes itself for the logic it represents- the nature of the system of capitalism and the inevitability of war between the contending powers. Consider tensions in Taiwan, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Africa and in a part of the world that doesn't get much attention- the Western Hemisphere.

According to a RAND study in 2016 which focused on strategising a war with China, a NATO build-up in Eastern Europe would be crucial in preventing Russia from going to the aid of China, leaving China more vulnerable in the event of an attack. The West's actions in encircling and isolating Russia with its NATO build-up can be viewed as part of a broader strategy to contain and, potentially, attack China. To contain China, the US has also tried a 'pivot' to Asia under Obama (a military build-up) and sanctions against China under Trump.

During the Cold War in the 20th century, the role of NATO, according to its first Secretary General Lionel Ismay, Lord Hastings was to 'keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans *down*.' Today, the role of NATO remains the same: to maintain the US as the leading global power in Eurasia, and to ensure that no other power becomes strong enough to undertake an independent course. Interestingly, NATO is divided on how to handle the Ukraine crisis, with the EU less keen to follow the US's lead. Could this be because the EU obtains 40% (and Germany 50%) of its natural gas from Russia, and it therefore has little interest in an unnecessary conflict with a nuclear power?

NATO members do agree on one thing - no one wants to join the fight with Ukraine against Russia. This has implications for the US-China rivalry as it implies that there are cracks appearing in the Atlantic military alliance that China may be able to exploit.

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Russia is cast as the villain in the piece, as it attempts to pursue a policy independent of the US. In this imperialist context, only the US has the 'right' to invade countries, whether it is in Iraq or in its own 'backyard.' But the Iraq War is not comparable for the reason that the Russian invasion has not had the same human consequences as the US's invasion, and the threat of Iraq's 'WMDs' was false. For its part, Beijing views Russia's drive to push back against NATO as a parallel to its own efforts to prevent the United States from building up alliances and partnerships in Asia.

The current conflict shouldn't come as a surprise. Former US National Security Advisors, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger, even George Kennan, architect of Cold War containment, warned that to expand NATO would result in "a new Cold War, probably ending in a hot one".

Underpinning Brzezinski, Kissinger and Kennan's analysis is the fact that Russia considers Eastern Europe to be its sphere of influence, whether because many of the countries in Eastern Europe were part of the Russian Empire, and then the Soviet Union, or were members of the Warsaw Pact. Russia also has a clear security interest in controlling or de-politicising a corridor that has, historically, been used to attack it. Encircling Russia has led to the predictable outcome that we see on the news throughout the day. Putin is more like the social-imperialist Leonid Brezhnev than Hitler, except that he has been much more accommodating to the West than Brezhnev was. Russia does not want to be encircled by NATO and has decided to neutralise what it perceives to be a real threat to its national interests.

China has aimed to establish an international system that is multipolar and independent from the US led financial system. Its One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR) effectively sliced through Obama's 'pivot' efforts and survived Trump's trade war. Following Obama's failed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), China applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) salvaged by China's historical rival Japan.

As a US rival, China has struggled to obtain appropriate voting power within the World Bank, which led to the formation of their own New Development Bank in 2014 backed by BRICS nations. This bank has been eclipsed by China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank which has 75 members covering all corners of the globe, though not the United States. Development loans to developing countries from the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China have been challenging loans provided by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

The aim to create a multipolar world is supported by many 'BRICS' (an abbreviation for rising economies such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries who benefit from China's OBOR with investment and infrastructure projects. The NATO encirclement of Russia and the US's actions around China in Asia are only likely to bring Russia and China closer together to achieve this goal.

The point of this article, however, is that much of the media commentary and 'expert analysis' we are hearing explains little. It hides the fact that, in a great power confrontation, Ukraine is just a pawn for the West. Before we make 'heroes' and villains in the next Cold War, let us remember that Kiev is driven by an exclusivist nationalism that is incapable of reuniting Ukraine. It passed a law in 2017 that makes Ukrainian the sole language of instruction post-primary school, ignoring sizable minorities that speak other languages. Russia claims that the Ukrainian government has not implemented the Minsk II Protocol that it signed to end the fighting in the breakaway areas in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2015 (under which they would receive a more autonomous "special status" in a united Ukraine), and Ukraine has written the goal of becoming a NATO member into the country's constitution. Ukraine seems to have, foolishly, relied on the US and Western Europe to protect it to continue policies that aim to exclude Russian-speaking Ukrainians and antagonise Russia.

In 2022, it appears that Western policies have pushed Russia and China closer together. Will the West push Russia and China to continue to create an alternative financial system that woos developing (and perhaps developed) countries into its orbit? Will it embolden China to retake Taiwan? The circumstances today may have changed since Lenin's time, but the stubborn dynamics of the system of world affairs have not.

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