

Fog of War

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Accounting for the descent of the European state system into the barbarism of war – for the first time since the collapse of Yugoslavia and NATO’s 1999 bombing of Belgrade – needs more than lay psychiatry. What made Russia and ‘the West’ engage in an unrelenting wrestling match on the edge of the abyss, with both sides eventually falling off the cliff? As we live through these monstrous weeks, we understand better than ever what Gramsci must have meant by an interregnum: a situation ‘in which the old is dying and the new cannot be born’, one in which ‘a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’, like powerful countries turning their future over to the uncertainties of a battlefield clouded in the fog of war.

Nobody knows at the time of writing how the war over Ukraine will end, and after what amount of bloodshed. What we can try to speculate about at this point is what the reasons may have been – and human actors have reasons, however crankish they may seem to others – for the uncompromising brinkmanship on the part of both the US and Russia. What a scene: escalating confrontation, rapidly dwindling possibilities for either side to save face short of total victory, ending with Russia’s murderous assault on a neighbouring country with which it once shared a common state.

Here we find remarkable parallels, as well as the obvious asymmetries, since both Russia and the United States have long

been facing the creeping decay of their national social order and international position, apparently making them feel that they must halt it now or else it will continue forever. In the Russian case, what one sees is a regime both statist and oligarchic, confronting growing unrest among its citizens, rich in oil and corruption, unable to improve the lives of its ordinary people while its oligarchs are getting immeasurably rich, a regime increasingly turning towards the use of a heavy dictatorial hand against any organized protests. To sit more comfortably than one can on bayonets requires stability derived from economic prosperity and social progress, in turn dependent on global demand for the oil and gas Russia has to sell. For this, however, it needs access to financial markets and advanced technology, which the US had for some time denied it.

Similarly with external security, where the US and NATO have for nearly two decades now penetrated politically and militarily into what Russia, only too familiar with foreign incursions, claims as its *cordon sanitaire*. Moscow's attempts to negotiate on this have led to post-Soviet Russia being treated by Washington in the same way as its predecessor, the Soviet Union, with the ultimate aim of regime change. All attempts to end the encroachment have led to nothing; NATO has moved closer and closer, recently stationing intermediate-range missiles in Poland and Romania, while the United States has increasingly treated Ukraine as a territory it owns – viz., Victoria Nuland's vice-regal proclamations on who should lead the government in Kyiv.

At some point, the Russian regime apparently concluded that this creeping erosion, domestic as well as external, would continue unabated unless dramatic action was taken to stop the rot. What followed was the military build-up around Ukraine from Spring 2021, accompanied by the demand for a formal commitment from Washington to henceforth respect Russian security interests – seeking an open conflict instead of a hidden one, perhaps in the hope of mobilizing the spirit of Russian patriotism that had once defeated the Germans.

Turning to the American side, one finds a grudge going back to the early 2000s, after Boris Yeltsin, America's post-Soviet placeman, turned over the farm to Vladimir Putin in the wake of the economic and social disaster caused by American-advised 'shock therapy'. Putin's initial quest to join NATO under the auspices of the New World Order was rejected, despite all his efforts to help Washington in its invasion of Afghanistan. Russian objections to the 2004 enlargement of NATO – now threatening its northwestern border – were met by Bush and Blair's declaration of the 'open-door' policy for Georgia and Ukraine at the 2008 Bucharest summit.

The American political establishment, led by the Hillary Clinton wing of the Democratic Party, began to treat Russia as a rogue state, much like that other country that had extricated itself from American control, Iran. Where in the past there had been a Red under every American bed, now the self-invited guest was a Russian – a distinction that many Americans had never really learned to make in the first place. Even Trump's election in 2016 was attributed by the losing party to covert Russian machinations, which politically killed Trump's initial attempts to seek some sort of accommodation with Russia. (Remember his innocent question about why NATO still existed, three decades after the end of Communism?) By the end of his term, in order to mend fences with the American deep state and the voters, he had returned to the tried-and-tested anti-Russian stance.

For Trump's successor Biden, as for Obama–Clinton, Russia offered itself as a convenient arch enemy, domestically and internationally: small economically, but easy to portray as big on account of its nuclear arms. After the media debacle of Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan, showing strength *vis-à-vis* Russia seemed a safe way to display American muscle, forcing the Republicans during the run-up to critical midterm elections to unite behind Biden as the leader of a resurrected 'Free World'. Washington duly turned to megaphone diplomacy and categorically refused any negotiation on NATO expansion. For Putin, having gone as far as he had, the choice was starkly posed

between escalation and capitulation. It was at this point that method turned into madness, and the murderous, strategically disastrous Russian land invasion of Ukraine began.

For the US, refusing Russian demands for security guarantees was a convenient way to shore up the unconditional allegiance of European countries to NATO, an alliance that had become shaky in recent years. This concerned especially France, whose president had not long ago diagnosed NATO to be 'brain-dead', but also Germany with its new government whose leading party, the SPD, was considered too Russian-friendly. There was also unfinished business regarding a gas pipeline, Nord Stream 2. Merkel, in tandem with Schröder, had invited Russia to build it, hoping to fill the gap in German energy supply expected to result from Germany's *Sonderweg* exiting coal and nuclear power at the same time. The US opposed the project, as did many others in Europe, including the German Greens. Among the reasons were fears that the pipeline would make Western Europe more dependent on Russia, and that it would make it impossible for Ukraine and Poland to interrupt Russian gas deliveries should Moscow be found to misbehave.

The confrontation over Ukraine, by restoring European allegiance to American leadership, solved this problem in no time. Following the lead of declassified CIA announcements, Western Europe's so-called 'quality press', not to mention the public-broadcasting systems, presented the rapidly deteriorating situation as a Manichaeian struggle between good and evil, the US under Biden versus Russia under Putin. In Merkel's final weeks, the Biden administration had talked the US Senate out of harsh sanctions on Germany and the operators of Nord Stream 2; in return Germany agreed to include the pipeline in a possible future package of sanctions. After the Russian recognition of the two break-away East Ukrainian provinces, Berlin formally postponed regulatory certification of the pipeline – which was, however, not enough. With the new German Chancellor standing next to him at a Washington press conference, Biden announced that if necessary, the pipeline would definitely be included in

sanctions, Scholz remaining silent. A few days later, Biden endorsed the Senate plan that he had earlier opposed. Then, on 24 February, the Russian invasion propelled Berlin to do on its own what would otherwise have been done by Washington on Germany's and the West's behalf: shelve the pipeline once and for all.

Thus Western unity was back, greeted by the jubilant applause of the local commentariats, grateful for the return of the transatlantic certainties of the Cold War. The prospect of entering battle in alliance with the most formidable military in world history instantly wiped out memories of a few months before, when the US abandoned with little warning not just Afghanistan but also the auxiliary troops provided by its NATO allies in support of that once-favoured American activity, 'nation-building'. No matter also Biden's appropriation of the bulk of the reserves of the Afghan central bank, to the tune of \$7.5 billion, for distribution to those affected by 9/11 (and their lawyers), while Afghanistan is suffering a nationwide famine. Forgotten too is the wreckage left behind by recent American interventions in Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Libya – the utter destruction, followed by hasty abandonment, of entire countries and regions.

Now it is 'the West' again, Middle Earth fighting the Land of Mordor to defend a brave small country that only wants 'to be like us' and for the purpose desires no more than being allowed to walk through the open doors of NATO and the EU. Western European governments dutifully suppressed all remaining memories of the deeply rooted recklessness of American foreign policy, induced by the sheer size of the United States and its location on a continental-sized island where nobody can get to them, regardless of the mess they make when their military adventures go wrong – and, astonishingly, gave the United States, a far-away non-European declining empire with different interests and a host of problems of its own, full power of attorney in dealing with Russia over nothing less than the future of the European state system.

What about the EU? In short, as Western Europe is returned to 'the West', the EU is reduced to a geo-economic utility for NATO, aka the United States. The events around Ukraine are making it clearer than ever that for the US, the EU is essentially a source of economic and political regulation for states needed to help 'the West' encircle Russia on its Western flank. Keeping pro-American governments in power in the former Soviet satellite states, which may be costly, makes for an attractive burden-sharing under which 'Europe' pays for the bread while the US provides the firepower – or the imagination of such. This makes the EU in effect an economic auxiliary to NATO. Meanwhile, Eastern European governments are happier to trust Washington with their defence than Paris and Berlin, given the former's proven trigger happiness and its invulnerable home base. In return for US protection through NATO, and Washington's patronage in their relation to the EU, countries like Poland and Romania host US missiles allegedly defending Europe against Iran, while unfortunately having to pass over Russia on their way.

The implication for von der Leyen and her crowd is to confirm their subordinate status. EU extension to Ukraine and the West Balkans, even to Georgia and Armenia, is considered by the US as ultimately for Washington to decide. France in particular may still object to further enlargement, but how long it can hold out, especially if Germany can be made to pick up the bill, is anybody's guess. (Though formal EU accession procedures for Ukraine are not yet underway, von der Leyen has announced: 'We want them in.')

Moreover, Poland being strictly anti-Russian and pro-NATO, it will now be hard to punish it by cuts in EU economic support for what the European Court sees as deficiencies in its 'rule of law'. The same holds for Hungary, whose wayward leader, Orbán, has turned increasingly anti-Russian. With the American return, the power to discipline EU member states has migrated from Brussels to Washington D.C.

One thing EU-Europeans, especially those of the Green kind, are currently learning is that if you allow the US to protect you, geopolitics trumps all other politics, and that geopolitics is

defined by Washington alone. This is how an empire works. Ukraine, a house divided between an astounding collection of oligarchs, will soon begin to receive enhanced financial support from 'Europe'. This will, however, be no more than a fraction of what Ukrainian oligarchs are regularly depositing in Swiss or British or, one assumes, American banks. Indications are that, compared to Ukraine, Poland and even Hungary are, to use an American simile, as clean as a hound's tooth. (Who could forget the salary Hunter Biden enjoyed as non-executive director of a Ukrainian gas company whose principal owner was then facing a money-laundering investigation?)

What remains a mystery, obviously not the only one in this context, is why the United States and their allies were for the most part happy to discount the possibility of Russia responding to continuing pressures for regime change – in the form of 'Western' denial of a security zone – by deepening an alliance with China. It is true that historically, Russia always wanted to be part of Europe, and something like Asiaphobia is deeply anchored in its national identity. Moscow is for Russians the Third Rome, not the Second Beijing. As late as 1969, Russia and China, both Communist then, clashed over their mutual border on the Ussuri River. Now, with Russia cut off from the West for an indefinite future, China, short of raw materials, may step in and provide Russia with modern technology of its own. As NATO is dividing the Eurasian continent into 'Europe', including Ukraine, against Russia, as a non-European enemy of Europe, Russian nationalism may, against its historical grain, feel forced to ally with China, as foreshadowed by that strange picture of Xi and Putin standing side by side at the opening of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

Would an alliance between China and Russia be an unintended result of American incompetence, or on the contrary, an intended result of American global strategy? If Moscow were to team up with Beijing, there would be no prospect anymore for a Russian-European settlement *à la française*. Western Europe, in whatever political form, would more than ever function as the transatlantic

wing of the United States in a new cold or, perhaps, hot war between the two global power blocs, the one declining, hoping to reverse the tide, the other hoping to rise.

Only a Europe at peace with Russia, one that respects Russian security needs, could hope to free itself from the American embrace, so effectively renewed during the Ukrainian crisis. This, one presumes, is the reason why Macron insisted for so long on Russia being a part of Europe, and on the need for 'Europe', as represented of course by himself and France, to provide peace on its Eastern flank. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has for a long time, if not forever, put an end to this project. But then, it was never very promising to begin with, given Germany's felt dependence on American nuclear protection, combined with German doubts about all-too-fanciful French global ambitions, re-defined as European ambitions to be funded by German economic power. And Russia may with some justification have questioned if, under these conditions, France would be able to push the US out of the European driver's seat.

So the winner is... the United States? The longer the war drags on, due to the successful resistance of Ukrainian citizens and their army, the more it will be noticed that the leader of 'the West', who spoke for 'Europe' as the war built up, is not intervening militarily on behalf of Ukraine. In case there was war, the US has given itself a special leave of absence, as Biden made clear from the start. Looking at its record, this is nothing new: when their mission gets out of hand, they withdraw to their distant island. Nevertheless, as Germans look on, wondering where the US is, they may start to feel some doubt about the American commitment to come to their nuclear defence. That commitment, after all, underlies German membership in NATO, German adherence to the nuclear nonproliferation treaty, and the housing of 30,000 or so American troops on German soil.

In this context the special budget of €100 billion, announced a few days into the war by the Scholz government and devoted to fulfilling the promise, going back to 2002, to spend 2 percent of

Germany's GDP on arms, looks like a ritual sacrifice to appease an angry God who one fears might abandon his less-than-true believers. Nobody thinks that had Germany actually lived up to the 2 percent NATO demand, Russia would have been deterred from invading Ukraine, or that Germany would have been able and willing to come to its aid. It will also take years for the new hardware, of course the latest on offer, to be made available to the troops. And it will be hardware of exactly the sort that the US, France and the UK already have in abundance.

And not to be forgotten, the entire German military is under the command of NATO, meaning the Pentagon, so the new arms will add to NATO's, not Germany's firepower. Technologically, they will be designed for deployment around the globe, on 'missions' like Afghanistan – or, most likely, in the environs of China, to assist the US in its emerging confrontation in the South China Sea. There was no debate at all in the Bundestag on exactly what new 'capabilities' would be needed, or what they will be used for. As in the past, under Merkel, this was left to 'the allies' to determine. One item could be the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), beloved by the French, which combines fighter bombers, drones and satellites for worldwide operations. There is scant hope that there will at some point be a strategic debate in Germany on what it means to defend your own territory, rather than attack the territory of others. Can the Ukrainian experience help start this discussion? Unlikely.