

Putin's conquest of southeast Ukraine

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written by Dan La Botz | May 24, 2022



As Ukraine continues to resist Russia's horrific aggression and attempt to conquer and annex the south and east of the country, the quantity of arms being supplied to Ukraine by the United States and other western countries has steadily increased. As the country and people suffering from this naked imperialist aggression, the Ukrainians have every right to receive weapons from whoever wants to send them, regardless of the aims of those countries doing so, or the extraordinary hypocrisy of these imperialist powers.

However, much leftist commentary has increasingly seen this supply of arms as evidence of the war becoming a "proxy" war in which Ukraine, rather than fighting for its very existence, is essentially just acting as cat's paw for an alleged US imperialist aim of waging "war against Russia," perhaps even aiming to "Balkanise" Russia. A quick review of some left media just the last couple of days brings up an article that labels the Russian invasion of Ukraine a "U.S. war against Russia" which "threatens world peace;" while even in *Socialist Worker*, which strongly condemns the Russian invasion and certainly cannot be accused of softness on Putinism, we can read that "today any element of a war of liberation against Russian imperialism is wholly subsumed by, and subordinated to, Nato's war on Russia."

An important part of this discourse is the claim that supplying arms goes against the importance of "negotiations," which allegedly the US and western states are vetoing, along with the assertion that the US aim is to "weaken" Russia rather than just help Ukraine. Some of this is based on a number of 'gotcha' moments when one or another representative of the US ruling class said something a little out of line. Yet a serious analysis will demonstrate that these assumptions and alleged dichotomies have no basis in reality, and the more serious US imperial analysts highlight interests and fears that not only show the 'gotcha' moments have little to do with western policy, but ultimately state very similar fears to many of these leftist analysts regarding the potential for a dangerously destabilised Russia resulting from a loss of Russian 'credibility', and therefore advocate rather similar limits to US support and stress on negotiations.

'Negotiations' versus war?

Writing in Counterpunch on April 29, Richard Rubenstein asks: "If Putin now offered a ceasefire in order to negotiate the status of the Donbass republics and to assert other Russian needs and interests, would the U.S. and Ukraine be justified in refusing to talk in order to punish or "weaken" him?" And answers: "Of course not!"

There is just so much unreality in all these discussions that begin with such statements. "Would the US and Ukraine be justified"? The US and Ukraine are two different countries. What the US does is one thing, but Ukraine is under invasion and occupation. Ukraine is fighting for its existence. If it decides it wants to fight on in order to get as much of its country back as it can and to thus have a stronger position at the bargaining table, that is up to Ukraine, not the US or western leftists. If Ukraine decides it cannot handle the superior Russian firepower any longer and is forced to sign a ceasefire with humiliating conditions, that is up to Ukraine, not up to the US or western leftists. Ukraine's decisions, in other words, should not be subject to the approval of either western imperialism or the western imperial left. Either way, we should simply demand Russia get out.

Now the first assumption in these endless articles spouting the wisdom of "ceasefire and negotiations" and of Rubenstein's question above is that Russia is dying to negotiate, and has "reasonable" concerns, or as Rubenstein puts it, "other Russian needs and interests," which apparently exist inside another sovereign state. I wonder if Rubenstein would seek to justify the ongoing US occupation of part of Cuba's sovereign territory as due to "US needs and interests." The related assumption is either that Ukraine is opposed to negotiating, or that many in Ukraine, perhaps Zelensky, would be ready to negotiate, but the US is opposed to negotiations or to any concessions to Russia, and is "banning" Ukraine from negotiating or compromising, or by pumping in arms, it is "encouraging" Ukraine to fight and not negotiate.

This scenario, however, is entirely fictional. *No-one making these endless statements has ever presented any evidence whatsoever.* They just make it up, because it fits their schema that this is a "proxy war" being waged by US imperialism, which is apparently using Ukraine and Ukrainian lives for its (the US's) "war on Russia," as opposed to the actual war of conquest being waged by Russian imperialism against its former colony that stares anyone in the face who wants to look.

It is a remarkably western-centric view, even for the always western-centric Manichean "anti-imperialist" left, to imagine that the millions of Ukrainians who have risen up at the grass-roots level in an extraordinary mobilisation to defend Ukraine's right to exist as a state and nation are not doing so in their own interests but are merely being fooled into being "proxies" for US imperialism's schemes.

Ukraine has been either negotiating, or offering to re-start negotiations, more or less continually. It should not be obliged to; Ukraine would be in its full rights to simply say Russian troops need to leave Ukraine and there is nothing to negotiate except the pace and logistics of that withdrawal. But it negotiates anyway because of the position it is in. So when western leftists demand Ukraine do something it is already doing, what they really mean is that Ukraine should surrender to Russia's "reasonable" demands.

So they should come clean - what do these wise western sages demand that Ukraine do to satisfy Russia so that it will allegedly agree to a ceasefire and negotiations? For the most part, they demand Ukraine accepts Russia's full program of Ukrainian surrender.

Even on paper, Russia's demands for Ukrainian surrender - no right to join a security alliance of its choice, demilitarisation, recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea and of Donbas - look remarkably like Israel's "reasonable" demands for Palestinian surrender, including recognition of annexation by force and the whole package. In both cases, justification for calling such maximum demands "reasonable" derives easily from the view that "there is no such thing as Palestine/Ukraine." Just as western imperialist leaders reject one and support the other, the western imperial left *do exactly the same but merely reverse them*. In contrast, the Russian and Israeli leaders of small-scale imperialist states engaged in old-style conquest-imperialism have long had a healthy respect for each other's projects.

Ukraine's negotiating proposal: No NATO, no military solutions to occupied regions

But are these "reasonable" Russian demands even what Russia is really waging this war for?

Let's take the NATO demand. It is hard to understand why anyone can *still* think that Russia launched this war due to its alleged "security concerns" about "NATO enlargement." NATO enlargement took place in 1999-2004, when 10 countries joined, including the only three "on Russia's borders," ie, the three tiny Baltic states. The four that have been allowed into NATO at different moments in the last 18 years were small Balkan states nowhere near Russia, often after long and difficult processes.

Ukraine applied to join in 2008, and the accusation that the US is pushing to "expand" into Ukraine is based on the fact that NATO did not say "no" that year, as its charter prevents it saying no to any European country. Yet 14 years later, Ukraine has still not even been given a Membership Action Plan (MAP), to allow it to begin attempting to meet the conditions of membership. No serious observer thinks Ukraine has any chance of being admitted for many years or decades.

But in any case, *Zelensky made the major concession on NATO in negotiations just a few weeks into the war*. It's full elaboration as a written proposal was on March 30. The first few points of the 10-point plan are as follows:

Proposal 1: *Ukraine proclaims itself a neutral state, promising to remain nonaligned with any blocs and refrain from developing nuclear weapons — in exchange for international legal guarantees. Possible guarantor states include Russia, Great Britain, China, the United States, France, Turkey, Germany, Canada, Italy, Poland, and Israel, and other states would also be welcome to join the treaty.*

Proposal 2: *These international security guarantees for Ukraine would not extend to Crimea, Sevastopol, or certain areas of the Donbas [ie, the areas currently controlled by Kremlin stooges]. The parties to the agreement would need to define the boundaries of these regions or agree that each party understands these boundaries differently.*

Proposal 3: *Ukraine vows not to join any military coalitions or host any foreign military bases or troop contingents. Any international military exercises would be possible only with the consent of the guarantor-states. For their part, these guarantors confirm their intention to promote Ukraine's membership in the European Union.*

Note the second point also touches on Russia's other surrender conditions. One of them, the Crimea issue, is further elaborated on in point 8:

Proposal 8: *The parties' desire to resolve issues related to Crimea and Sevastopol shall be committed to bilateral negotiations between Ukraine and Russia for a period of 15 years. Ukraine and Russia also pledge not to resolve these issues by military means and to continue diplomatic resolution efforts.*

If anybody can find any evidence of US "rejection" of Ukraine's plan, any attempt to "ban" Ukraine from making these concessions, please provide sources. Such evidence will not be forthcoming. In late April, during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, far-right Republican Senator Rand Paul accused the Biden administration of provoking the war by "beating the drums to admit Ukraine to NATO." In his response, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the White House would be open to an agreement that resulted in Ukraine becoming "an unaligned, neutral nation." "We, Senator, are not going to be more Ukrainian than the Ukrainians. These are decisions

for them to make," Blinken told Paul. "Our purpose is to make sure that they have within their hands the ability to repel the Russian aggression and indeed to strengthen their hand at an eventual negotiating table," he added. While he saw no sign Putin was ready to negotiate, he said "If he is and if the Ukrainians engage, we'll support that."

That is not because Biden or Blinken are great peaceniks or not imperialists. It is simply that the "no negotiations" position imputed to them by many excitable leftists is simply not a position that interests the main body of US imperialism (the odd talking head or armchair warrior notwithstanding).

As opposed to the imaginary and evidence-free view that Ukraine may want to negotiate but the West will not allow it to, others claim (just as wrongly) that Ukraine refuses to negotiate, but the US and the West must negotiate anyway. This is a rather odd demand – since Russia is not invading the US or western Europe, and they are not invading Russia, what exactly is the US supposed to negotiate about?

The point being, of course, that these "anti-imperialists" here reveal themselves as super-imperialists: they are demanding that the US and the West negotiate "on behalf of" Ukraine! So presumably, if the US or France "negotiates" with Putin for Ukraine to cede Crimea and Donbas to Russia, Ukraine should happily accept being divided up by imperialist powers, and this Kissingerian chessboard 'realist' geopolitics is now supposedly the essence of an emancipatory leftist position!

Is there a new US aim to "weaken Russia"?

On a related track, the statement by US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin on April 25 that the US aims to "see Russia weakened *to the degree that it can't do these kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine*" created great excitement. This is supposedly a declaration either of real, or new, US aims in this war. Now, even if interpreted this way, this would prove nothing about the war of resistance waged by the Ukrainian people against imperial Russia's attempt to wipe them off the map. Obviously, US imperialism has its own reasons for aiding this resistance (indeed, providing large numbers of the very weapons that it not only did not provide to the anti-Assad Syrian rebellion, but actively blocked others from providing). But if the US aims to weaken Russia via supporting this Ukrainian resistance, that is not a choice made by Ukraine; Ukraine did not invade Russia to give the US an avenue to weaken Russia. Russia invaded Ukraine; if Ukraine's resistance allows the US to weaken Russia by aiding it, Russia can thank Putin for that.

But in any case, the statement can mean virtually anything; Ukraine simply maintaining its right to existence, or to exist without suffering large territorial losses – a defeat of the aims of the Russian invasion – will weaken Russia. So anyone not advocating a Russian victory over Ukraine could also be considered to be in agreement with Austin. By providing any aid at all since Day 1, the US was helping "weaken Russia."

Some proclaim that this was not the original US aim, but Austin's statement heralded a "new" strategic turn in US policy. But if so, *they need to explain what has changed in practice*. Previously, they claim, the US was aiding the Ukrainian resistance with the aim of helping Ukraine resist the Russian invasion – for its own reasons, of course, but within these confines. Now the US is doing the same thing, aiding the Ukrainian resistance, but with the aim of weakening Russia. Pardon me for being confused about what has changed in practice.

A common claim is that by supplying arms to Ukraine, the US aims to drag out the war, so as to bog down and wear out Russia, the weakening of Russia being paid for by Ukrainian death and suffering. Social media is full of western leftist wits proclaiming "the US will fight Russia to the last drop of

Ukrainian blood.” Apparently, the reason millions of Ukrainians are resisting the Russian invasion is not because they don’t want to be overrun by a brutal imperialist power, but because they are unconsciously acting against their own interests, dying for a US aim of weakening Russia. If only they knew what these brave and smart western lefties knew, that their real interests lie in accepting colonial oppression, occupation, massacre and dispossession.

The obvious question arising from this assertion that the US wants to drag out the war to weaken Russia is ‘how can the war end more quickly?’ On the one hand, the assertion could mean that by allowing Ukrainians to better resist Russian conquest, these western arms *prevent the rapid end of the war via total Russian victory*, with its attendant massacres and war crimes, imposition of a fascistic regime of repression, and annexation of a large part of Ukraine. If these leftists advocate a rapid end of the war via this conclusion, so it is not “dragged out,” they should say so openly and stop beating around the bush.

But if they do not mean this, the only other way for the war to end more quickly and not bog Russia down would be for *a dramatic increase in the quantity and quality of arms deliveries to Ukraine*, so that it could *convincingly and quickly evict Russia* from its territory; while Russia would still be somewhat weakened by defeat, at least the war would not drag on, and hence the alleged aim of getting Russia stuck there and drained would not be fulfilled. In that case they should be denouncing the US for not supplying Ukraine arms of sufficient quantity and quality to do this, but only enough to fight on but not win. But it is unlikely they mean this either.

So if the idea is not a rapid end to the war via crushing Russian victory, nor via Ukraine swiftly driving out the invader, then the statement has no meaning, it is merely a piece of cheap rhetoric.

But of course, as tankies become pacifists, it is back to demanding “ceasefire and negotiations.” No rapid Russian victory, no total Ukrainian victory, but also no dragging out the war, because as we know, “negotiations” can end the war. That always works, and no-one ever thought of it before.

All Ukraine has to do is surrender to Russia’s “reasonable demands,” leading to a satisfied Russia calling a ceasefire; or if not, the US must negotiate this surrender “on Ukraine’s behalf.” Leaving aside how much this Imperial Left stance contradicts leftist stances in virtually every other struggle by a nation and people against imperialist aggression, occupation and conquest, how realistic is this ‘strategy’ on its own terms?

Russia engaged in a war of old-style conquest imperialism

To answer this, how has Russia responded to Ukraine’s proposals in March, discussed above, for no NATO, for neutrality with security guarantees, no joining any military blocs, a 15-year negotiation on Crimea with no military solutions? With what we have seen since – the complete destruction of Mariupol, the Bucha massacre, all the rest of the horror since. The last thing Russia wanted was for Ukraine to call its bluff.

The problem is that this “anti-imperialist” left do not understand the nature of imperialism; or by claiming that Russia is not an imperialist power, but rather just a large capitalist power with average expansionist tendencies, they imagine the same imperialist logic does not apply.

Russia is engaged in a war of late 19th century style imperialist conquest. Obviously, it is not unique in the world as western media claims, we’ve had Israel, Indonesia, Morocco, Turkey and others engage in wars of conquest and annexation in recent decades, greeted by either western indifference, or avid western and especially US support. Pointing out western hypocrisy is politically important as we confront the onslaught of self-serving and laughable propaganda about the world

being divided between “democracy and autocracy,” about there allegedly being a “rules-based international order” that no-one ever violated before Putin did, and so on. But fighting hypocrisy does not inform analysis of a concrete situation. These other cases are all of relatively small countries; the largest, Indonesia, was eventually defeated in East Timor (with the aid of a change in imperialist policy, indeed imperialist intervention in defence of east Timor), though not in West Papua. Turkey held back from formal annexation of northern Cyprus which it still occupies; and although it never faced western sanctions, its puppet ‘republic’ is not recognised by any country in the world. Obviously Israel/Palestine is the most globally consequential of these cases.

But this is the first time a major global imperialist power has engaged in 19th century-style ‘direct conquest’ imperialism since 1945. This is not a morality contest here, obviously the US invasion of Iraq was extraordinarily brutal and criminal, but the aim was not conquest as such; and of course both the US and Russia and others have engaged in massive and brutal “interventions” after being “invited in,” but once again this has not been about conquest as such. We need to wrap our heads around this fact.

In late April, Rustam Minnekayev, deputy commander of Russia’s central military district, stated that Russia planned to forge a land corridor between Crimea and Donbas in eastern Ukraine; this is rather obvious anyway – that is why Mariupol had to be conquered and destroyed, being right in the middle and a key port. These are of course Russian-speaking regions, where the ‘liberator of Russians’ slaughtered them. But he went on, noting that “control over the south of Ukraine is another way to Transdnistria, where there is also evidence that the Russian-speaking population is being oppressed.”

In other words, *the entire south of Ukraine, its entire Black Sea coast, is Russian imperialism’s aim.* Not only linking Donbas to Crimea, but also seizing Odessa and linking Crimea to the Russian-controlled fake ‘republic’ of Transdnistria, which Russia seized from Moldova decades ago (how amazing that a region under effective Russian control is also “oppressing” Russians now!). And if we take the more extreme ‘Eurasianist’ views into account, Moldova – a neutral state, like Ukraine, outside NATO – should probably also be worrying about its existence.

Of course, the enormous mobilisation of Ukrainian resistance has probably put the brakes on the more extreme Russian geographic aims – at this stage it looks like Russia will consolidate the Donbas to Crimea link conquest and will not have the capacity to venture beyond to Odessa – but that doesn’t alter the fact that these are Russia’s aims. And even just consolidating this part of the conquest locks Ukraine out from most of the Black Sea.

The evidence that Russia aims to annex its new conquests can be seen wherein “Russian officials have already moved to introduce the ruble currency, install proxy politicians in local governments, impose new school curriculums, reroute internet servers through Russia and cut the population off from Ukrainian broadcasts” in these conquered regions. Marat Khusnullin, Russia’s deputy prime minister for infrastructure, also stated that Russia intends “to charge Ukraine for electricity generated by the Ukrainian nuclear plant that Russian forces commandeered in the early weeks of the invasion.”

The Black Sea, of course is full of hydrocarbons. Let’s not make things too complicated. Russian imperialism wants them. It certainly doesn’t want its former colony to share any of them, and by cutting it off from most of its sea coast, can effectively blockade it into submission.

Where to now for US policy?

The opinions on where US policy is heading in response to this situation range from ‘the US will

continue to escalate until it leads to war with Russia' to 'the US will cut a deal with Russia and sell out Ukraine'. The scenario involving the US pressuring Ukraine into making a compromise that is not fully just once it feels Russia has been weakened enough, rather than pushing for full victory, is just as possible, if not more, than the projections of it drifting into war with Russia. Whatever the case, it is clear that the US and other imperialist powers are supporting Ukraine for their own reasons and their interests are not identical.

What then are the US interests involved? Obviously, US imperialism has already 'won' due to Putin's invasion: US 'security' hegemony over Europe is now stronger than at any time since the end of the Cold War, NATO is now adding new members, the many years of the Russian-German gas pipeline development have suddenly come to nothing. Obviously, US and western imperialism more generally does not want a Russian conquest of the entire Black Sea; and allowing Russia conquer much beyond where it already held in Ukraine before the invasion would not be good for US or NATO "credibility." But once that drive is defeated, there may be little appetite to keep backing Ukraine.

The simple fact is that US imperialism has not been in any "war drive" against Russia, and has no interest in one. There were no signs of any US build-up against Russia before the war, and while relations have been tense since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, they have been relatively normal, including a great deal of cooperation in places like Syria. While a certain amount of anti-Russian rhetoric may have characterised some US statements in comparison to the more accommodating Franco-German approach, this can be understood as part of keeping NATO - its tool for hegemony in Europe - "relevant", in particular among some of the more anti-Russian eastern European ruling elites (and even this had been wearing thin before Putin saved NATO - just a few months ago, a string of east European right-wing populist rulers were increasingly close to Moscow).

But it is important to not confuse this symbolic US-Russia "rivalry" - related to credibility, the size of the countries, military power, Cold War hangovers - to actual inter-imperialist competition. Their economies are just too different in both character and size for the US to see Putin's hydro-carbon-based economic fiefdom as a serious global competitor - that award goes to rising, hyper-dynamic Chinese imperialism. And getting bogged down in Ukraine is not conducive to the US 'pivot to Asia' where its Chinese rival is based, though for this very reason it may be very much in China's interests.

Yes, massive quantities of arms have gone to Ukraine, but there have also been clear limits: the US blocking of Poland from delivering warplanes for instance; and a no-fly zone has been placed off-limits by the US and the West from the outset.

One problem with confusing some rhetorical flourishes with US imperialist policy is that each of these 'gotcha' moments has been walked back by other US government figures. After Austin mentioned weakening Russia, Press Secretary Jen Psaki explained this simply meant "our objective to prevent that [Russia taking over Ukraine] from happening ... but, yes, we are also looking to prevent them from expanding their efforts and President Putin's objectives beyond that, too." When Biden said that Putin shouldn't remain in power, this was immediately hosed down by others in the US government. And when Rep. Seth Moulton stated "We're not just at war to support the Ukrainians. We're fundamentally at war, although somewhat through a proxy, with Russia," White House spokesperson Andrew Bates responded "President Biden has been clear that U.S. forces are not and will not engage in a conflict with Russia. We are supporting the Ukrainian people as they defend their country." Finally, in early May, the US government imposed new limits on the intelligence it shares with Ukraine.

Richard Haas, Thomas Friedman, Eliot Cohen: Voices from the US ruling class

Indeed, we can also find 'gotcha' moments of a different kind. On May 9, Biden expressed concern that Putin "doesn't have a way out right now, and I'm trying to figure out what we do about that."

This concern - to give Putin some "way out" to avoid the kind of destabilisation that could result from an outright defeat for Russia - is likely much closer to real US imperial interests than the imaginary spectre of the US aiming to "Balkanise Russia", more likely the very thing everyone wants to avoid. Such concerns are consistent with those expressed in several pieces by leading US ruling class strategists in the serious media. While these strategists do not create US policy, the explanations they give for what US policy should be are not only logical, but also coincide with the very limits of Biden's approach, and express a number of similar concerns.

The first of these is an article in *Foreign Affairs* by Richard Haas, President of the Council on Foreign Relations, who has served in various US governments since the late 1970s, including for Secretary of State Colin Powell in the Bush administration, as Director of Policy Planning for the US State Department from 2001 to 2003 during the lead-up to the Iraq war. So no lightweight. Haas begins:

"In principle, success from the West's perspective can be defined as ending the war sooner rather than later, and on terms that Ukraine's democratic government is prepared to accept. But just what are those terms? Will Ukraine seek to recover all the territory it has lost in the past two months? Will it require that Russian forces withdraw completely from the Donbas and Crimea? Will it demand the right to join the EU and NATO? Will it insist that all this be set forth in a formal document signed by Russia?"

"The United States, the EU, and NATO need to discuss such questions with one another and with Ukraine now. ... *To be sure, the Ukrainians have every right to define their war aims. But so do the United States and Europe. Although Western interests overlap with Ukraine's, they are broader, including nuclear stability with Russia and the ability to influence the trajectory of the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs.*

"It is also essential to take into account that Russia gets a vote. Although Putin initiated this war of choice, it will take more than just him to end it. He and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will both have to consider what they require in the way of territory and terms to halt hostilities. They will also have to decide if they are prepared not only to order an end to the fighting but also to enter into and honor a peace agreement. Another complexity is that some aspects of any peace, such as the lifting of sanctions against Russia, would not be determined by Ukraine alone but would require the consent of others."

Discussing several scenarios, Haas sees the scenario in which Ukrainian success reaches the point that it attempts to take back all territory seized since 2014, rather than only territory seized in 2022, as a destabilising outcome:

"... it is near impossible to imagine Putin accepting such an outcome, since it would surely threaten his political survival, and possibly even his physical survival. In desperation, he might try to widen the war through cyberattacks or attacks on one or more NATO countries. He might even resort to chemical or nuclear weapons. ... *Arguably, these aims are better left for a postconflict, or even a post-Putin, period* in which the West could condition sanctions relief on Russia's signing of a formal peace agreement. Such a pact might allow Ukraine to enjoy formal ties to the EU and security guarantees, *even as it remained officially neutral and outside NATO.* Russia, for its part, might agree to withdraw its forces from the entirety of the Donbas in exchange for international protections for the ethnic Russians living there. Crimea might gain some special status, with Moscow and Kyiv agreeing that its final status would be determined down the road."

Discussing the lessons learned from the Cold War and the balance achieved which guaranteed peace (between the superpowers that is), Haas notes that these are consistent with the very limitations of Biden's strategy:

"From the outset of the crisis, the United States made it clear that it would not place boots on the ground or establish a no-fly zone, since doing so could bring U.S. and Russian forces into direct contact and raise the risk of escalation. Instead, Washington and its NATO partners opted for an indirect strategy of providing arms, intelligence, and training to Ukraine while pressuring Russia with economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation."

From here on " ... success for now could consist of a winding down of hostilities, with Russia possessing no more territory than it held before the recent invasion and continuing to refrain from using weapons of mass destruction. Over time, the West could employ a mix of sanctions and diplomacy in an effort to achieve a full Russian military withdrawal from Ukraine. Such success would be far from perfect, just preferable to the alternatives."

The second piece was by long-term imperial columnist Thomas L Friedman in the May 6 *New York Times*. Like Haas, Friedman is no stranger to being hawkish when he believes such a stance is in US interests, but takes a similar view to what actual US interests are in this case.

He also warned that certain US actions "could be creating an opening for Putin to respond in ways that could dangerously widen this conflict — and drag the U.S. in deeper than it wants to be," which is all the more dangerous given Putin's unpredictability, and the fact that "Putin is running out of options for some kind of face-saving success on the ground — or even a face-saving off ramp."

Moreover, for Friedman, the problem is not only Russia, as "President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine has been trying to do the same thing from the start — to make Ukraine an immediate member of NATO or get Washington to forge a bilateral security pact with Kyiv" something Friedman clearly sees as against US interests.

Like Haas, he ultimately thinks that Biden has the right balance:

But my sense is that the Biden team is walking much more of a tightrope with Zelensky than it would appear to the eye — wanting to do everything possible to make sure he wins this war but doing so in a way that still keeps some distance between us and Ukraine's leadership. That's *so Kyiv is not calling the shots and so we'll not be embarrassed by messy Ukrainian politics* in the war's aftermath. The view of Biden and his team, according to my reporting, is that America needs to help Ukraine restore its sovereignty and beat the Russians back — *but not let Ukraine turn itself into an American protectorate on the border of Russia*. We need to stay laser-focused on what is our national interest and not stray in ways that lead to exposures and risks we don't want."

While much of the western left sees the US making Ukraine its 'protectorate', Friedman sees this as an evil Ukrainian plot which the US must be, and is, on guard against. "But we are dealing with some incredibly unstable elements, particularly a politically wounded Putin. Boasting about killing his generals and sinking his ships, or falling in love with Ukraine in ways that will get us enmeshed there forever, is the height of folly."

Before moving to the third, more hawkish, piece, it is worth noting that the editorial in the May 19 *New York Times* makes similar points to Haas and Friedman. While stating that the US goal to help Ukraine rebuff Russian aggression "cannot shift," nevertheless "in the end, it is still not in America's best interest to plunge into an all-out war with Russia, even if a negotiated peace *may require Ukraine to make some hard decisions*." The editorial warns that "a decisive military victory for

Ukraine over Russia, in which Ukraine regains all the territory Russia has seized since 2014, is not a realistic goal. Though Russia's planning and fighting have been surprisingly sloppy, Russia remains too strong, *and Mr. Putin has invested too much personal prestige in the invasion to back down.*" Therefore, "as the war continues, Mr. Biden should also make clear to President Volodymyr Zelensky and his people that *there is a limit to how far the United States and NATO will confront Russia*, and limits to the arms, money and political support they can muster."

So, apart from the odd gaffe, it seems difficult to find serious US ruling class opinion saying what much of the left is claiming it is saying. Actually, they appear to saying remarkably similar things to each other! Perhaps we can find the evidence in a more serious hawk?

The third piece by Eliot A. Cohen, writing in *The Atlantic* on May 11, may be such an example. A professor at The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, former Counselor of the Department of State, former editor of *The National Interest*, the title of his book *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force* tells us his views on the use military power. Not surprisingly, therefore, this article is more hawkish in tone than those of Haas and Friedman.

Cohen does not necessarily insist Ukraine must take back all territory lost, but he argues that Ukraine must define what its objectives are and that US policy should recognise "it will be up to Ukraine to decide what it wishes to accomplish." Having borne "the burdens of blood and sacrifice on a scale not seen since World War II" and with a cause "indisputably just," Ukraine "has every right to decide what it can and cannot accept and strive for." This is combined with the fact that Russia "has acted with unspeakable barbarity" and these "moral facts" should therefore "*modify or even outweigh coolly geopolitical calculations of the European balance of power.*" And when the war ends, western objectives should include helping to put Ukraine "in a condition to defeat further Russian aggression."

Cohen is an unalloyed partisan of US imperialism, but, from this, obviously hypocritical, perspective, we can at least say there appears to be more respect for Ukraine's self-determination than the more geopolitically-oriented views of Haas and Friedman, with their insistence on distinguishing the US from the Ukrainian interest.

Therefore, it is here we may expect to see some evidence of the alleged US imperialist desire to wage war on, to humiliate, or even 'Balkanise' Russia.

In reality, Cohen warns precisely about the dangers involved in Russia's defeat. He does not want Russia defeated in Ukraine in order to bring it to its knees and humiliate or 'Balkanise' it; on the contrary, he argues that while Ukrainian victory is necessary for other reasons, the negative side-effects of this are nevertheless very much against US and western interests.

"But all of this leaves the problem of Russia. ... If it is convulsed from within, it is less likely to be dominated by liberals (many of whom have fled the country) than by disgruntled nationalists. Putin may go, but his replacements are likely to come from similar backgrounds in the secret police or, possibly, the military." And it will be "more than usually difficult to bring it back into a Eurasian order that it, and no one else, has attempted to destroy" with its "utterly unjustified" attack on Ukraine with "its exceptional brutality, the shamelessness of Russia's lies and threats, and the grotesqueness of its claims to hegemony in the former Soviet states."

The result will be "*the hardest task of American statecraft going forward: dealing with a Russia reeling from defeat and humiliation, weakened but still dangerous.*" Indeed, the old Cold Warrior even sees the old Soviet Union as a more "rationalist" enemy, whereas a defeat for Putinist Russia

“will be much more like dealing with a rabid, wounded beast that claws and bites at itself as much as it does at others, in the grip not of a millennial ideology but a bizarre combination of nationalism and nihilism.”

Far from wanting to make “war on Russia”, Cohen thinks that apart from strengthening states on Russia’s borders, all the West will be able to do is “hope against hope that the new “sick man of Europe” will, somehow and against the odds, recover something like moral sanity.”

All US and western imperialist wars since 1945 have been against countries in regions of the former colonial world that they aimed to maintain domination of - from Indochina to Iraq and Afghanistan to Panama and Grenada and Nicaragua, and the current drone wars - and the list goes on. Quite simply, there has been no US “war drive” against Russia, not because the US does not engage in war drives, but because post-Soviet Russia has neither been an ideological enemy - quite the opposite - nor powerful enough to be a genuine imperialist rival.

On the contrary, it is Putin’s sudden resort to primitive conquest-imperialism that has thrown the established imperialist modus vivendi between the US, Europe and Russia to the woods, and the western reaction has been crisis management on the run. While the US has, naturally enough, taken full advantage of what Putin has offered them up on a plate by restoring unchallenged US hegemony in Europe via a strengthened NATO, the point is that *this is the US goal in itself*; there is no US or western interest in massive destabilisation, a huge black hole, in a gigantic country like Russia which, just a few months ago, was plenty lucrative for western capital, and was an integral part of the world capitalist economy.

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