The War in Ukraine, International Security, and the Left

written by Taras Bilous | May 24, 2024

Update: The 2024 Daniel Singer Prize has been awarded to Taras Bilous for this essay. *New Politics* is proud to have been one of the original publishers.



"The Russian invasion of Ukraine has no justification, but NATO…" It is difficult to describe the emotions I and other Ukrainian socialists feel about this "but" in the statements and articles of many Western leftists. Unfortunately, it is often followed by attempts to present the Russian invasion as a defensive reaction to the "aggressive expansion of NATO" and thus to shift much of the responsibility for the invasion to the West.

One example of this is Susan Watkins' editorial in *New Left Review*. In it, the author calls the Russian invasion of a country that is not now and is unlikely to ever become a member of NATO a "war of Russia against NATO," effectively denying Ukraine's subjectivity. In addition, Watkins argues that Biden "could no doubt have prevented an invasion had he been willing to negotiate a serious agreement on military frontiers."

Such a position has been met with criticism from Eastern European leftist authors, in particular Jan Smolenski and Jan Dutkiewicz. They pointed out that the Eastern European states joined NATO voluntarily, with the support of the majority of their populations, and did so given their own concerns, usually ignored by critics of NATO enlargement.

Since these issues are often a stumbling block in leftist discussions of the war in Ukraine, let's examine them in more detail – especially since, in my view, they are also important for shaping leftist strategy on international security issues.

Finlandization

Could this war have been avoided by agreeing that Ukraine would not join NATO? Any serious answer to this question must take into account the fact that in the run-up to the war, the Kremlin demanded far more than that. In particular, the draft treaty between Russia and the United States, published by the Russian Foreign Ministry on December 17, included a clause stating that the US would not develop bilateral military cooperation with states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union and not members of NATO (Article 4) – Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

Some readers may assume that this clause appeared in the draft treaties so that later there would be something to concede during negotiations, but there are good reasons to doubt it. Shortly before the draft treaties appeared, Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, and Alexander Baunov, a fellow at the same center, wrote that for Moscow's elites, close military cooperation

between Ukraine and the United States had become as unacceptable as Ukraine's accession to NATO.

Therefore, although the media often reduced Russia's demands to Ukraine's neutrality, they were in fact more serious. The European neutral states, in particular Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, and Finland, are not prevented by their status from developing cooperation with the United States in the field of armaments. All these states also take part in NATO's Partnership for Peace program. Military cooperation between Ukraine and the United States also began when Ukraine declared its non-bloc status. Ukraine and the USA signed a treaty on military cooperation in 1993, Ukraine and the USA have been organizing the international military exercise Sea Breeze since 1997, and Russia took part in it in 1998.

After 2014, military cooperation with the United States and NATO was an important factor in the modernization of the Ukrainian army. Without it, Ukrainian resistance to Russian invasion would have been significantly less effective. Had this cooperation ceased at Russia's request, Ukraine would have been less secure, and therefore the Ukrainian government might have been forced to comply with other Russian demands. In this regard, the term "Finlandization," used by many authors, better describes the essence of Russian demands. During the Cold War, Finland not only did not join NATO, but also took into account numerous "wishes" of the Soviet leadership, in particular, it rejected the Marshall Plan and extradited all fugitives from the USSR. (In addition, the Finno-Soviet Treaty of 1948 provided for military cooperation between Finland and the USSR in the event of an attack on the USSR through Finland.)

Finland pursued this policy after its defeat in the war, in which it was allied with Nazi Germany. Realizing that the Soviet leadership could turn Finland into another satellite if it so desired, agreeing to certain restrictions in exchange for maintaining its political system and sovereignty was a rational solution for the Finns. At the same time, Ukraine was not in such a predicament before the current war, and most did not agree to Russian demands.

Here the difference between the original "Finlandization" and the situation on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is obvious. The Finnish policy of neutrality and consideration of Soviet interests was based on agreements between Finland and the USSR, while in Ukraine the Kremlin wanted to negotiate with the United States and NATO. At the time, the Kremlin had apparently lost hope that it would be possible to force the Ukrainian authorities to comply with Russian demands, or that pro-Russian forces would come to power in Ukraine. Therefore, the Kremlin decided, against the wishes of Ukraine's people, to negotiate the future of Ukraine with those whom it viewed as the "masters" of that power.

It should be noted that the Kremlin may have needed the draft treaties not as a last attempt to negotiate, but to legitimize its invasion. We don't know exactly when Putin made the decision to invade, and we will only be able to say for sure once the Kremlin archives are opened. But we can assess the information that is available to us. The essence of the Russian proposals was practically a division of Europe into spheres of influence between Russia and the US. I do not know if Susan Watkins understands this, but that is what she actually supported in her *New Left Review* essay, writing "In calling for a stable settlement of military borders, the Kremlin has a good case."

The Cuban Missile Crisis

Imagine: A nationalist revolution takes place in a country near an imperialist state that regards the territory as its sphere of influence. The imperialist state attempts to prevent the ultimate loss of influence over the politics of the first country using brute force and in league with opponents of the revolution. A post-revolutionary government regards an alliance with a rival superpower as a

guarantee of security. The threat of nuclear war arises. This is a story not only about Ukraine, but also about another country with which many authors, including the aforementioned Dmitri Trenin, have compared Ukraine – Cuba.

Of course, there are many differences between those two cases. The class and ideological nature of the revolutions and superpowers were very different. But as far as international security is concerned, these differences are not decisive. The Cuban Missile Crisis is indeed a good analogy for Russian aggression against Ukraine, so let's look at it a little more closely.

The Cuban Missile Crisis arose from the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba and ended with their dismantling in exchange for US guarantees of non-aggression against Cuba and the withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey. Did military cooperation between Cuba and the USSR cease after that? No. Were Soviet troops (which the Cuban government viewed as a guarantee of its security) withdrawn from Cuba? No.

In Ukraine, on the other hand, there are no US missiles with nuclear warheads. Even participation in NATO does not necessarily imply the deployment of missiles – in this regard, the example of Norway, which was the only NATO country that shared a border with the USSR during the Cold War and therefore was wary of placing missiles on its territory, is quite telling.

Moreover, the US, while rejecting Russia's opposition to NATO's enlargement, has at the same time offered new arms control arrangements. According to Alexei Arbatov, a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and a leading Russian expert on security and disarmament issues, until recently these proposals were put forward by Russia as well and were of serious interest in terms of easing tensions and strengthening European security. However, this time, the Russian leadership dismissed them as "secondary."

U.S. President John f. Kennedy gave guarantees of non-aggression against Cuba and agreed to remove American missiles from Turkey. In this way, he showed that his primary concern in this case was security. Russian President Vladimir Putin, on the other hand, rejected the US offer and went to war. In doing so, he showed that his primary concern was not security, but his desire for the return of Ukraine to Russian control, or at least the conquest of new Ukrainian territories. Indeed, the caution Western states have shown toward Russia even after the full-scale invasion began shows the hollowness of Russian security concerns. Russia has the best security guarantee – nuclear weapons. The Kremlin itself never tires of reminding us of this.

With regard to Ukraine, what if the US had made big concessions to Russia? What would they be? In the run-up to the invasion, there were numerous statements that Ukraine's accession to NATO was not on the agenda. The most outspoken was former NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer: "Everyone, including Putin, knows that Ukraine will not become a NATO member in the foreseeable and unforeseeable future. It's already a buffer country. It's something you'll never hear NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg say; his position won't allow it. But I can say that now." Nevertheless, the Kremlin demanded a guarantee. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov first responded to the idea of a temporary moratorium on NATO expansion by saying that it was unacceptable for Russia, and Putin himself spoke critically about it a few days before the invasion.

Most likely, the Kremlin would only have been satisfied with the complete fulfillment of its demands. But what would that mean for Ukraine? On the eve of the invasion, things were not going well for Volodymyr Zelenskyy, now a political superstar. His popularity ratings were falling, while those of his main rival, former President Petro Poroshenko, were rising. US agreement to Russia's demands would have greatly exacerbated the situation. And if the Ukrainian government, having lost US support, had met any of the Kremlin's demands, it would have been guaranteed to lead to a political

crisis and an escalation of violence. It is quite possible that this would have created better conditions for the invasion of Russian troops as "peacekeepers." In this case, Ukrainian realities would have been much worse than they are now.

I am not claiming that in the last months before the invasion, the West and/or Ukraine could not have prevented war. But a serious examination of this possibility requires deeper analysis and access to the Kremlin archives. I think this will be an interesting question for future historians. In the meantime, those Western leftists, so eager to criticize the US for what Russia did, should refrain from claiming that Washington should have simply complied with Russian demands. After all, it could very easily have been the decision of one man – Vladimir Putin – to prevent the war. All he had to do was not give the order to start the invasion.

NATO expansion

Fortunately, on the question of NATO expansion historians have already provided a convincing answer. One of the best analyses published so far is Mary Elise Sarotte's book *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*. Sarotte does a good job of showing that NATO's open-door policy has indeed undermined US-Russian cooperation on arms control and the formation of a broader international security system. NATO expansion gave trump cards to Russian revanchists and hawks and buried the political prospects of liberals who advocated closer cooperation with the West, like Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev.

In this sense, the growth of NATO did create favorable conditions for the outbreak of war. But *how* and *why* it happened is also important. Tony Wood, in an article in the same *New Left Review*, writes that the "emergence of an increasingly assertive and militarized Russian nationalism is inextricable from that process [NATO expansion], because it was in large part propelled and reinforced by it." But what Wood fails to ask is why NATO expansion has caused such a reaction. In my opinion, the answer can easily be found in Sarotte's book, to which Wood repeatedly refers.

Was it a reaction to the fact that legitimate Russian *security concerns* were neglected, as many authors have claimed? I don't think so. Seriously, how could the accession of the Czech Republic and Hungary to NATO create a threatening situation for Russia? It's enough to look at the map to give the obvious answer: no way. Then why was their accession to NATO perceived negatively in the Kremlin? Because they recently belonged to the Soviet zone of influence. And also because their accession was part of the formation of a new international order in which Russia no longer had the status of a superpower equal to the United States.

It was the pain of a lost empire that provoked revanchist sentiments. In Sarotte's book this is repeatedly seen as, for example, when Yeltsin demanded special status for Russia under the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, on the grounds that Russia was a *"great country with a great army and nuclear weapons"* (p. 190). And, Eastern Europeans, after all, could observe these emotions of the Russians with their own eyes. Therefore, instead of talking about the *emergence* of Russian nationalism, as Tony Wood does, in my opinion it is more appropriate to talk about the *transformation* of Russian great-power chauvinism as a reaction to NATO's growth. When it became clear that Russia would not occupy as privileged a position in the new international order as Russian elites wanted, there was a growing desire among them to reconsider this order.

Sarotte's book also shows that, up to a certain point, the US tried to accommodate Russian sentiments so as not to obstruct the formation of a more secure international order. In particular, this manifested itself in the PfP program, which was designed to ensure that accessions to NATO would not happen too quickly, but would develop into something more. And characteristically, in President Bill Clinton's words, "Ukraine is the linchpin of the whole [PfP] idea" (p. 188). In the

1990s, it was obvious to everyone that Ukraine could not join NATO. Ukraine's accession to NATO was a red line for Moscow primarily because of the same great-power chauvinism, because of the special role Ukraine plays in Russian national mythology.

According to Sarotte, it was through Ukraine that Eastern European governments who wanted their countries to join NATO agreed to participate in the PfP as a compromise. But events in Russia, such as Yeltsin's anti-parliamentary coup in 1993 and the war in Chechnya, increasingly pushed Eastern European states to pressure the US to allow them to join NATO. They managed to get Article 5 extended to them to shield themselves from possible armed aggression from Russia. But the result was a new dividing line in Europe that separated Ukraine from its Western neighbors. Countries that were less threatened by Russian aggression became better protected, while Ukraine, for which the threat was greater, found itself in a "grey zone." This is why in December 1994, after the publication of the communiqué on NATO's open-door policy, Kyiv became nervous, while Moscow was furious (p. 201).

Another negative consequence of NATO enlargement was that the process of transforming the CSCE/OSCE, a conference for East-West dialogue created in the 1970s[1] into an international organization was never actually completed. The US decision to make NATO the bedrock of security in Europe has made the strengthening of the OSCE irrelevant. Had NATO's open-door policy started at least a few years later, it would have provided an opportunity to turn the OSCE into a more effective organization.

After the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the OSCE became a completely irrelevant and most likely dead organization. But this should not prevent us from seeing alternatives to the development of the international security system. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission had played an important role in resolving the war in Donbas. But its influence could have been much greater if its mandate had been expanded. Ukraine constantly demanded this, but thanks to consensus decision-making in the OSCE, Russia constantly blocked this decision. Thus, the Kremlin sabotaged implementation of point 4 of the Minsk Protocol, which provided for monitoring by the OSCE mission of the *entire* section of the Ukrainian-Russian border in the combat zone (and not just at the two border checkpoints that Russia allowed until fall 2021).

NATO and the CSTO

Before turning to the results, let's look some more at attitudes toward military alliances. It might help to compare NATO to its Russian counterpart, the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization established in 1992).

First, it is possible to argue that NATO is a contradictory phenomenon, which on the one hand serves as a cover for US imperialism, and on the other hand is an instrument of protection for many smaller countries. In the same way the CSTO is a cover for Russian imperialism and was recently used to suppress a popular uprising in Kazakhstan, but serves as protection for a relatively democratic Armenia. Acknowledging this fact does not make you a fan of either American or Russian imperialism.

Second, Susan Watkins writes that NATO proved "dispensable" to invade Iraq, but she does not say that this was the case because of French and German resistance. It is also telling that Kazakhstan refused to send its troops to Ukraine, even though the invasion began a month and a half after the Kremlin helped suppress the uprising in Kazakhstan. But just as this was not an insurmountable obstacle for the United States – it created a Multi-National Force, bypassing NATO – so for Russia, Kazakhstan's refusal did not prevent it from launching the invasion of Ukraine. It should not be forgotten that the key problem in both cases is imperialism (American or Russian), not NATO and

the CSTO.

Third, we should stop identifying all military actions of member countries of military alliances with the actions of these military alliances. It is not NATO as an organization that is now conducting a military operation in northern Syria, it is Turkey. And the problem here is Turkish hostility to the Kurds, not NATO. Likewise, if Turkey attacks Greece, it is not NATO attacking one of its members. Also, it is not the CSTO that is now at war against Ukraine, but Russia with the help of Belarus. Fortunately, Kazakhstan and Armenia are not involved in the war.

In addition, one should not identify NATO and "the West" as Susan Watkins did in her statement "NATO won the Cold War without firing a single shot." But it wasn't NATO that won the Cold War, it was the West that fired many shots. NATO is only one of the tools. It is not surprising that a group of states, some of which had an aggressive neo-colonial policy, also had among their many instruments a defensive alliance, whose functions changed only after this group of states won the Cold War.

Fourthly, the US and Russia can do without NATO and the CSTO for their imperialist policies, but there is no defense alternative for the Eastern European states and Armenia yet. And if you cannot offer an alternative to the people of countries that seek protection in such structures, it is better not to urge them to give up such protection.

An outline of a leftist strategy for international security

The decisions made in the 1990s–2000s have already become history, and the past cannot be brought back. Focusing on these mistakes now is the same as criticizing in 1939 the Treaty of Versailles, when it had already lost relevance. What are needed now are concrete solutions that can hasten Russia's defeat and make *today's* world a safer place. On the other hand, as with the Treaty of Versailles, old mistakes can provide lessons for shaping postwar policy.

Did the expansion of NATO have an impact on the outbreak of this war? Yes. But there are very different ways of talking about this. When leftists and "realists" say that NATO expansion "provoked" Russia, they are thereby saying that *to some extent* the Russian invasion was at least partially justified, even if they deny it. Watkins does the same, arguing that the Russian invasion "was not unprovoked." It is the same as saying that the Cuban Revolution and the cooperation of Fidel Castro's government with the USSR provoked the United States. Of course, it is not a problem for "realists" to say so, but who on the Left would justify the aggressive US policy towards Cuba in this way?

The fact that the Cuban Revolution was more progressive than the Ukrainian Maidan is no excuse for such a double standard. If any imperialist state saw a revolution in its sphere of influence as a threat to itself and a "bad example" for other countries in its sphere, socialists should not use the fact that this revolution was supported by a rival superpower to condemn the revolution. It should also be noted that this applies not only to the Maidan of 2013–2014, but also to Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004. It was after the latter event, a few years before the NATO Bucharest Summit, whose declaration proclaimed that Georgia and Ukraine "will become members of NATO," that there was a noticeable landslide in Russian politics, indicating that the Russian elite viewed the events in Ukraine as a threat to itself.

The comparison with Cuba also tells us that we must treat different concerns differently. The deployment of nuclear missiles near a country's borders and the entry of a neighboring country into a military bloc or military cooperation with a rival state are of a different order. We should support and call for mutual restrictions on the deployment of nuclear weapons (and for global nuclear disarmament in general). But sometimes the only real alternative to military cooperation with one

imperialist state against another is the total subjugation by an aggressive imperial power. Privileged inhabitants of Western countries, who do not have to worry that their country might be conquered by Russia, have no moral right to criticize those who seek protection in cooperation with those Western states. And if one criticizes any military cooperation, then criticism should not turn into support for the division of Europe or the world into spheres of influence.

Does this mean that the Left should have supported NATO expansion? No. Jan Smolenski and Jan Dutkiewicz argued that an intellectually honest critique of NATO expansion would lead to a critique of Eastern European politicians and voters who have embraced the ideals of democracy and national self-determination. But it did not. Eastern European democracies had the sovereign right to make the choice they considered best for their security. But a country's entry into an international organization depends on the decision of both sides. And the US had to make a choice that would better ensure the security of not only those states that joined NATO, but also those that were not joining NATO. The addition of countries to NATO may have increased their security, while harming Ukraine's. From this perspective, the rapid transition to NATO's open-door policy was wrong.

As Mary Sarotte and Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy pointed out in a joint article, in the 1990s the US had a much better and much less costly chance to solve the security issue for Ukraine than it did. First, they could have prioritized the development of the Partnership for Peace program over the rapid expansion of NATO. Second, they could have given Ukraine effective security guarantees in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. Ukraine demanded this at the time, but under general pressure from the United States and Russia, the Ukrainian government was then forced to agree to a worthless piece of paper. Not giving such guarantees in exchange for nuclear weapons was a terrible mistake that, in the long run, dealt an even greater blow to nuclear disarmament than NATO expansion.

However, that was more about the past. What conclusions can be drawn for the Left's approach to international security for the future? For the Western European Left of recent decades, if there was any alternative to NATO, it was the idea of a common international security system that would encompass "West" and "East" after the end of the Cold War. But if it made sense in the 1990s, it already looked unrealistic after 2008 and more so after 2014. For some reason, however, these leftists stubbornly ignored the fact that Russia, which in the early 1990s advocated an enhanced role for OSCE, subsequently became the main opponent of OSCE reform and strengthening. Another part of the European Left, particularly the Polish left-wing alliance Lewica, proposes a European security system as an alternative to NATO – a common army, a missile defense shield, an energy policy, etc. Such a system would help EU members but not those outside the EU. On the contrary, this project carries with it threats of "Fortress Europe" (the same could be said of the previous idea). Therefore, priority must be given to a global security system.

In the recent Athens Declaration, Jeremy Corbin, Yanis Varoufakis, and Ece Temelkuran said that "lasting peace can be achieved only by replacing all military blocs with an inclusive international security framework." It's difficult to disagree with this, but they didn't offer ways to create such a framework. At the same time, there is already a system that fits their description, although it performs its functions inefficiently: it is the UN. I know that many are skeptical of the idea of the United Nations. But so far, I have not seen any of the critics suggest a better alternative. And instead of looking for excuses for inaction, we should look for possible ways to push through changes. What is more utopian — to reform the UN, or to create from scratch a similar system that would unite the countries of the Global South and the Global North, but would be more effective?

Unfortunately, even after Zelenskyy's statement at the Security Council meeting about the need for UN reform, the only response I have seen in the left-wing media is an explanation of why this is impossible. But this article by Jon Schwarz is revealing for what it never mentions: the "Uniting for

Peace" resolution as an alternative to Security Council unanimity. This resolution shows that reform is not so impossible. If the Council really cannot be reformed, its role must be marginalized. In fact, while I was writing this article, a step was taken in this direction: The General Assembly, at the initiative of Liechtenstein, adopted a resolution that provides for an emergency session of the General Assembly when a member of the Security Council uses its right of veto.

We have the prospect of an escalating confrontation between the US and China ahead of us. And in this conflict, the international Left must not repeat the mistakes many of them have made against Russia. China may not mind sharing spheres of influence with the US, but this is not something the Left should support. Instead of worrying about considering China's interests, as many leftists have worried about considering Russia's interests, we should think about how to protect small states from domination by all imperialist states. In particular, the international Left should be thinking about how to protect Taiwan without allowing war, not about how to force Taiwan into submission to the PRC. (The fact that Taiwan is not a member of the UN is a problem to be solved, not a reason not to defend Taiwan.)

Some leftist authors have pointed out that the population of states that abstained during the UN General Assembly vote on Russian aggression against Ukraine combined is nearly half the world's population. But to suggest that this represents the position of half of humanity is to ignore Chinese imperialism and the Indian far-right government. In my view, more important was Barbara Crossette's observation that small states, in particular India's neighbors, have predominantly supported Ukraine. Obviously, they were feeling threatened by neighboring great powers.

We do not need to idealize the UN at all. So far, it really is an ineffective instrument. And even without the problem of the veto power of the permanent members of the Security Council, there are other serious problems with the UN Charter. As Darrel Moellendorf has rightly pointed out, the principle of the sovereign equality of states under the UN Charter means not opposing armed incursions into the territory of other states at the invitation of the official government of that state to suppress revolution, but opposing states' support for revolutionary movements in other states. This contradicts the ideas of socialist internationalism. And in this respect, those leftists who justified the Russian invasion of Syria by referring to the legitimacy of this invasion have actually betrayed socialist principles.

But despite all its shortcomings, for now the UN is the only real alternative to military alliances to protect weaker countries from subjugation by stronger neighbors and the most promising instrument for democratizing the international order and increasing the influence of small and poorer states.

As I wrote in another article, perhaps it is now because Russia is invading Ukraine that for the first time in all the years of the UN's existence there is a real chance for reform. In past decades, this was almost impossible, and in a few years, the confrontation between China and the United States may become so acute that it will be impossible again. Therefore, we need to act on this now. And the greatest responsibility lies with the Left that resides in the countries that are permanent members of the Security Council.

P.S. Methodological remark. In her article, Susan Watkins accused the press of "casuistic contortions." In using the word in this sense, she follows the tradition established by Blaise Pascal's Lettres provinciales, which sharply criticized Jesuit casuistry. But in fact, Catholic casuistry as a method of practical reasoning was not such a negative phenomenon. Incidentally, this year Verso Books published a work by Carlo Ginzburg on Pascal, Machiavelli, and casuistry. In a broader sense,

casuistry is inherent in many cultural traditions. And in the past few decades casuistry has experienced rehabilitation and revival in moral philosophy. So, to forestall accusations of casuistry, I will write at once that my approach in this article was casuistic, in a good sense.

[1] Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) which became the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in January 1995. Eds.