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Ukraine, Ideology and Military Spending: Rethinking International Security

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Abstract

How well do Russian and “Western” public narratives about the current Ukraine war correspond with policymakers’ real agendas? Is it credible that Russia intervened to “denazify” Ukraine, or that the US and other NATO members are arming that country in order to uphold a “liberal democratic” world order? What are the actual intentions of the various policy elites? This article explores these questions against the backdrop of post-Cold War geopolitics. To assess competing ideologies and probe underlying policy dynamics, I compare US/NATO and Russian military spending from 1992 to 2021. These data call into question both Russian nationalist and dominant Western narratives and reveal the true role of NATO expansion in the policy dynamics leading to war. The article concludes with the emerging New Cold War and an alternative paradigm of world order based on verifiable security agreements.

UKRAINE, IDEOLOGY AND MILITARY SPENDING: RETHINKING INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Introduction

While literal fighting and killing has raged in Ukraine since Russia’s 24 February 2022 invasion, another kind of war is being waged in a parallel universe of ideas. The physical war requires vast amounts of weapons, soldiers, training, ammunition, vehicles, fuel, and other resources—

massive costs which someone has to pay. It is ideology that legitimizes such expensive projects and the transfer of wealth from Russian, Ukrainian, European, and US citizens to the special interests who benefit from war, particularly defense contractors and military bureaucracies. This article provides an overview of the Russian and “Western” ideologies that keep resources flowing into the Ukraine war. I then provide historical data on Russian and US/NATO military spending that shed light on the real policy dynamics currently obscured by the fog of ideological war. The paper concludes with alternative paradigms of world order beyond Ukraine.

The Specter of Russian Imperialism

On one level, the warring parties’ ideological justifications for fighting in Ukraine seem oddly consistent. American, European, and Russian hawks alike seem to agree that the war is about Russian imperialism. Their differences are not about the supposed fact of Russian imperialism, but about how it is evaluated. Western elites see Russian imperialism as a threat to their “liberal democratic” values and the US-led world order, while Russian ultranationalists see imperial expansionism as a restoration of their country’s bygone days of power and glory, originally under the Czars and more recently under the Soviet Union.

The agreement of US and European hawks with their Russian counterparts about the alleged fact of Russian imperialism merits closer examination. At issue is the crucial distinction between public justifications for a policy and the real rationales for action held by policy makers and discussed behind closed doors. There may be substantial overlap between what policy makers say publicly and their real intentions, but it certainly cannot be assumed that these are identical. In some cases, they may be very far apart indeed.

In October 1962, for example, the Soviet Union justified putting nuclear missiles in Cuba as an act of solidarity with that country, which had experienced the Bay of Pigs invasion the previous year. Based on the policy record, however, political scientists have concluded that the main reason for stationing the missiles was really to shore up the Soviet nuclear deterrent, which the Russians believed inadequate in the face of US military superiority (Hilsman, 1987).

To take another example, the United States justified using atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 as a way of ending the war with Japan without massive US casualties, which would otherwise occur in an invasion of Japan. It is now known from internal government documents, however, that the atomic bombings had other objectives, mainly to compel Japanese surrender to the US before Russia entered the war against Japan and to demonstrate to Soviet leaders America’s awesome new power and willingness to use it (Alperovitz, 1994; Stone and Kuznick, 2012/2019).

Similarly, it should not be assumed that public statements by the warring parties in Ukraine today express their real intentions unless the statements can be independently confirmed by corroborating evidence. Do claims about defending liberal democracy or making Russia great again shed light on actual reasons for the conflict, or are they politically expedient rationalizations that obscure the real policy agendas at issue in the war?

In a 22 March 2022 *New York Times* Op Ed, historian Jane Burbank outlined Russian imperialist ideology, while uncritically assuming that it explains Putin’s invasion the previous month.

“Since the 1990s,” she wrote, “plans to reunite Ukraine and other post-Soviet states into a transcontinental superpower have been brewing in Russia. A revitalized theory of Eurasian empire informs Mr. Putin’s every move.”

The word “plans” suggests the work of a policymaking bureaucracy, and yet the author provides no evidence whatsoever about planning in the Kremlin. Rather, she invokes the writings of Russian intellectuals such as Aleksandr Dugin, for whom it is the destiny of Russia to become a “world empire;” she then simply *assumes* that such ideas have been adopted by policy elites. In support of this assumption, she cites public statements by Vladimir Putin, most notably in July 2021 about Russians and Ukrainians being one people. She concludes, ominously: “The goal, plainly, is empire. And the line will not be drawn at Ukraine.” (Burbank, 2022)

In light of the abovementioned historical examples (the Cuban Missile Crisis and the atomic bombings of Japan), the question we must ask is whether Putin’s imperialist-sounding statements reveal the actual intentions of Kremlin planners, or whether they are rhetorical “red meat” intended to shore up his popularity with Russian nationalists and legitimize allocation of public revenues to the country’s military industrial complex. While Burbank provides a helpful reconstruction of Russian imperialist ideology, she sheds no light on this question.

NATO Expansion and “Denazification”

Before testing claims about Russian imperialism against objective data (as opposed to public statements by Putin and others), I turn now from Russian hawks such as Aleksandr Dugin to two of their American counterparts, Michael McFaul and Robert Kagan, who argue that Russia must be defeated in Ukraine in order to uphold “liberal democracy” in the world. I begin with McFaul’s 20 October 2022 PowerPoint and oral presentation to Stanford University alumni entitled, “Putin’s War in Ukraine: Causes and Consequences” (McFaul, 2022), a concise argument for maximalist U.S. war aims in Ukraine.

McFaul begins by critiquing an alternative to the Russian imperialist theory of the Ukraine invasion, namely, that NATO expansion posed an intolerable threat to Russian security. Like Jane Burbank’s arguments, McFaul’s rest mostly upon public statements, particularly (1) by Putin in 2000 that he did not perceive NATO as a threat; (2) by Putin in 2002 that he regards Ukraine as free to have its own relationship with NATO; and (3) by Dmitry Medvedev in 2010 that the period of conflict between Russia and NATO was over.

However, McFaul chose to ignore other statements that contradict this picture. These include Putin’s response to NATO’s April 2008 Bucharest Summit; his 21 December 2021 statement that NATO members’ arming of Ukraine posed a threat “on the doorstep of our house” and that “we simply have nowhere further to retreat to;” and a 22 February 2022 speech in which he said “we are categorically opposed to Ukraine joining NATO because this poses a threat to us.” In addition, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated at a 14 January 2022 press conference that “the key to everything is the guarantee that NATO will not expand eastward.” (See Mearsheimer, 2022, for these statements by Putin and Lavrov).

In addition to cherry picking the public record, McFaul misleadingly claims that, “On the eve of this war, there was no push for Ukraine to join NATO.” Here he chooses to ignore the 10 November 2021 U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership, which not only called for Ukraine to join NATO, but threatened war by affirming an “unwavering commitment” to the reintegration of Crimea into Ukraine (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

McFaul also addresses the claim by Putin that the Russian invasion was needed to “denazify” Ukraine, which McFaul equates with removal of Volodymyr Zelensky. This way of defining denazification is a straw man, however, since the neo-Nazi element in Ukraine is not the Zelensky administration, but the Azov Regiment, Right Sector, and other groups who allegedly have persecuted and killed thousands of Russian speaking Ukrainians, particularly in the Donbas. To be sure, Zelensky has certainly failed to protect Ukraine’s citizens from fascist violence, but it does not follow that denazification can be equated with removal of Zelensky. On the historical roots of Ukrainian fascism, see Sakwa (2015/2022) and on the rise of neo-fascist activity in Ukraine in the years since the Maidan uprising, see Golinkin (2019).

None of this is to say that statements about the threat of NATO expansion and/or the need for denazification, taken by themselves, explain Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. Assessing that question requires corroborating evidence, to which we will turn below. First, however, we must examine claims that a liberal democratic world order is at stake in Ukraine. Here, I turn to Robert Kagan’s (2023) *Foreign Affairs* article, “A Free World, If You Can Keep It: Ukraine and American Interests.”

Defending “Liberal Democracy”

In the above-mentioned article, Robert Kagan frames the geopolitical situation like this: “The United States has joined a war against an aggressive great power in Europe and promised to defend another small democratic nation against an autocratic great power in East Asia.” Thus, according to Kagan, we are dealing with a Manichean conflict between Good and Evil. Ukraine is said to be without qualification “democratic” (no hint of neo-Nazi violence there), Russia is “aggressive” (no consideration that Western militarism might threaten Russian security), and “autocratic” China is menacing another small democracy (not threatening US access to Taiwan’s microchips).

Staking out a position on this high moral ground, Kagan then turns to history, beginning America’s geopolitical saga at the end of 1915, when “it became clear that not even the combined power of France, Russia, and the United Kingdom would be sufficient to defeat the German industrial and military machine. A balance of global power that had favored liberalism was shifting toward antiliberal forces.” Incredibly, Kagan here counts Czarist Russia (one of the most autocratic regimes on Earth) on the side of “liberalism,” and Imperial Germany, which was rapidly democratizing at the time (Craig, 1978), on the “antiliberal” side.

Similarly, according to Kagan, Americans fought Hitler “not because they faced an immediate threat to their security but to defend the liberal world beyond their shores.” This statement is manifestly absurd, given that the United States only declared war on the Third Reich after Hitler declared war on the US.

The author concludes, “Americans have ever since struggled to reconcile these contradictory interpretations of their interests—one focused on security of the homeland and one focused on defense of the liberal world beyond the United States’ shores. . . . in the eight decades from World War II until today, the United States has used its power and influence to defend the hegemony of liberalism.” And finally, “the defense of Ukraine is a defense of the liberal hegemony.”

This claim—that American power upholds “liberalism” throughout the world—merits closer examination. During the eight decades to which Kagan refers, the United States has generally used military force, covert operations, and other forms of power to subvert movements and governments “unfriendly” to US corporate interests and to install and maintain “friendly” regimes, typically right-wing dictatorships (Bacevich, 2021; Blum, 2014; Chomsky, 1979/2015, 2004; Johnson, 2004; Stone and Kuznick, 2019).

The list of these interventions is long and well documented. It includes but is not limited to: the Philippines (1940s and 1950s), Iran (1953), Guatemala (1953-1954), Costa Rica (mid 1950s), Indonesia (1957-58), Vietnam (1950-1973), Cambodia (1955-1973), Laos (1957-1973), Haiti (1959-1963), Guatemala (1960), Algeria (1960s), Ecuador (1960-1963), The Congo (1960-1964), Brazil (1961-1964), Peru (1960-1965), Dominican Republic (1960-1965), Cuba (1959-1980s), Indonesia (1965), Ghana (1966), Uruguay (1964-1970), Chile (1964-1973), Greece (1964-1974), Bolivia (1964-1975), Guatemala (1962 to 1980s), Costa Rica (1970-1971), Iraq (1972-1975), Angola (1975-1980), Zaire (1975-1978), Jamaica (1976-1980), Granada (1979-1984), Morocco (1983), Suriname (1982-1984), Libya (1981-1989), Nicaragua (1978-1990), Panama (1969-1991), Iraq (1990-1991), Afghanistan (1979-1992), El Salvador (1980-1994); Eastern Europe (1990s to the present); Bosnia (1992-1995), Kosovo (1998-99), Libya (2011), Caucasus (mid-2000s), Syria (2011 to 2018), and Ukraine (2014).

Calling this litany of American interventions a defense of “liberal democracy” is reminiscent of George Orwell’s words in *1984*: “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.” And apropos Orwell, this is indeed how war propaganda works—in order to legitimize global militarism and domination, it is necessary to characterize these things as a noble enterprise serving a higher purpose. For the Spanish conquistadors, it was leading lost souls to Christ; for the British, it was the White Man’s Burden; and for Americans today, it is defense of “liberal democracy.”

Before concluding this section, let us note two points about Kagan’s frequent reference to “Americans’ interests” in the context of military policy. First, which Americans? The middle-class taxpayers who disproportionately pay for the country’s endless wars? Or the defense contractors, Pentagon bureaucrats, oil companies, and other big special interests who disproportionately benefit from them? Clearly, there is no monolithic national interest (D’Agostino, 2012), a concept that only serves to camouflage the war racket, as Major General Smedley Butler called it.

Second, Kagan’s discourse of “interests” when talking about military power suggests that it is somehow legitimate to use force or threaten to use force in pursuit of economic or other advantage. Alternatively, to put an altruistic face on “interests,” the United States and its allies,

according to Kagan, have wielded and should continue to wield “superior power on behalf of their vision of a desirable world order.”

Under the United Nations Charter, however, the only legitimate uses of force are for self-defense (narrowly defined as repelling an armed attack on one’s territory) or for collective security (if authorized by the UN Security Council). In fact, the uses of force endorsed by Kagan are what the Nuremberg Tribunal defined as “Crimes Against Peace.” The time is long past to reject this criminal discourse of “national interests” as a justification for war. In the concluding section of this article, I will address the hawk objection that “it’s a jungle out there” and that compliance with international law is a utopian luxury that “we” cannot afford.

Military Spending Tells the Story

From the above analyses, it should be clear that US and European claims about defending “liberal democracy” have little or no basis in the historical record. Nor is Vladimir Putin’s talk about “denazification” a credible explanation for the invasion. Human rights violations have been reported on both sides of the Donbas conflict, and in any case, humanitarian justifications for military interventions should never be taken at face value.

This leaves us with two competing theories of the Ukraine war: Russian imperialism and NATO expansion. As we have seen, Putin has made public statements consistent with an imperialist agenda, but corroborating evidence is needed to know whether this is just political rhetoric or an actual basis for Russian foreign policy. In addition, Putin has made contradictory public statements about NATO expansion, sometimes denying that it threatens Russian security, and at other times calling it an existential threat.

Regarding NATO, McFaul (2022) argues that it has never invaded Russia and never would, so it cannot pose a threat to Russia. This may be true, but by the same reasoning, it was equally unthinkable prior to 2014 that Putin’s Russia would invade Europe. (This is not to imply that Russia became a threat to Europe after the annexation of Crimea, which was triggered by a U.S.-supported anti-Russian coup in Kyiv, only that Russia certainly posed no threat before the annexation. See Sakwa, 2015/2022, and Cohen, 2019/2022, and Benjamin and Davies, 2022.) Notwithstanding this lack of threat to European security, however, NATO expanded further and further into Eastern Europe, enlisting Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999; Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Bulgaria in 2004; and solicited membership by Georgia and Ukraine at the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit.

To be sure, the Baltic and Eastern European countries had historical reasons to fear Russian imperialism in the post-Cold War period. However, this did not require the leaders of NATO to admit these countries into the alliance, nor does it entail that the former’s decision to do so was motivated by genuine concern for the latter’s security. Indeed, if such considerations were paramount, NATO was in a strong position to negotiate demilitarization and verifiable security arrangements on behalf of the vulnerable Eastern Europeans. Its failure to exhaust this remedy before expanding the alliance raises the question, at least for this author, whether the leaders of NATO were cynically exploiting the fears of Russia’s neighbors in the service of an imperialist and lucrative (for military-industrial interests) policy towards Russia.

For purposes of this article, however, let us consider a traditional “security-dilemma” model of NATO expansion. In that case, we would have a classical chicken-and-egg problem. NATO expansion, in the view of western hawks, was justified by Russian imperialist thinking, such as Aleksandr Dugin’s 1997 book *Foundations of Geopolitics*. For Russian elites, on the other hand, NATO’s unprovoked expansion was evidence that this nuclear-armed military alliance poses a real (not imaginary) threat to Russian security. To adjudicate these conflicting interpretations, let us now turn to objective data on US/NATO and Russian military spending.

The following US/NATO figures are the sum of the military expenditures of the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany; the combined contributions of other NATO members are small by comparison and can be disregarded for purposes of this analysis. The US/NATO and Russian data are from the SIPRI Military Expenditure Data Base (2023) and are in constant 2020 US dollars. Here are what the data show (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

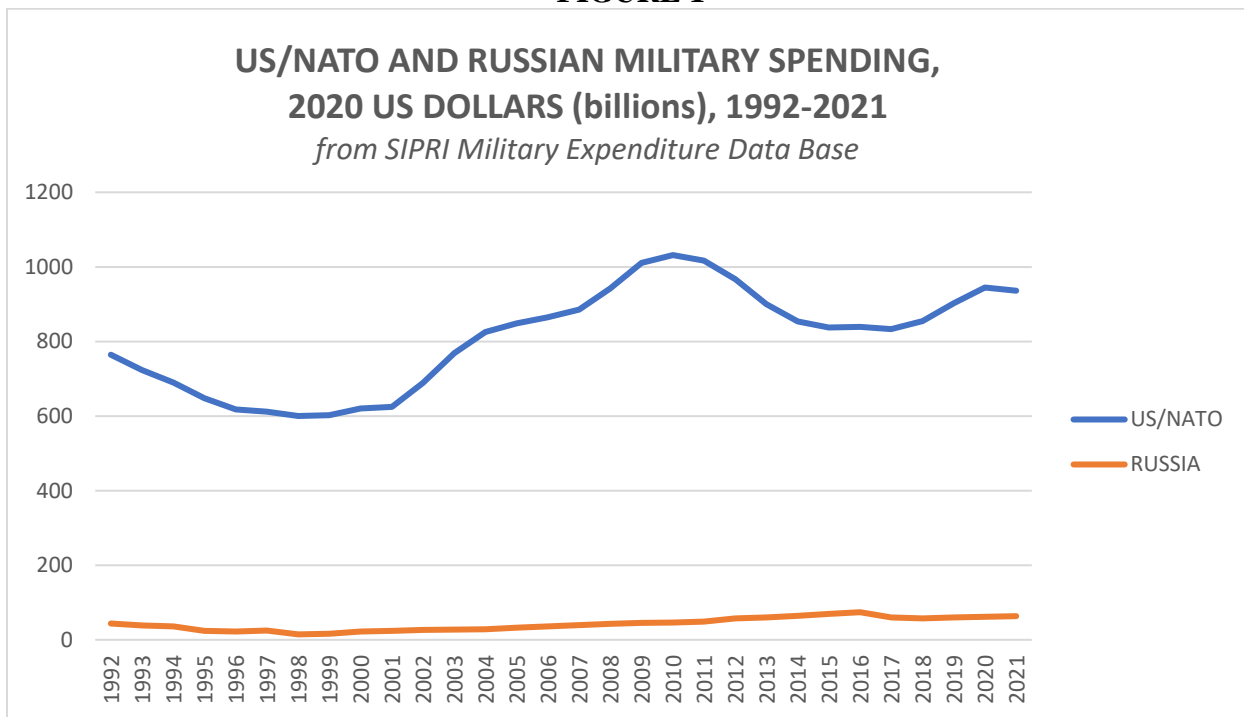


Figure 1 shows that in 1998, the US/NATO spent 600 billion dollars on their militaries and Russia spent 15 billion (less than 3% of US/NATO); these amounts are the lowest for both sides in the post-Cold War period. Outspent by a factor of 40 to 1, Russia clearly posed little or no military threat to Europe in 1998. In this context, Aleksandr Dugin’s vision of Russia becoming a “world empire” in the coming decades was simply delusional. All this was certainly common knowledge for policy elites in the Kremlin, the Pentagon, and Brussels alike.

Notwithstanding the overwhelming military superiority that the US/NATO held vis a vis Russia in 1998, over the next 23 years, the former increased their military expenditures 56% from their already astronomical baseline (600 billion) to 936 billion dollars in 2021. This period also saw

the first wave of NATO expansion in 1999, the second (“Big Bang”) wave in 2004, the 2008 threat to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, US support for the 2014 anti-Russian coup in Kyiv (Sakwa, 2015/2022, and Benjamin and Davies, 2022.), and the 2021 U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership, calling for Ukraine to join NATO and threatening a war to reintegrate Crimea into Ukraine.

Confronting this extraordinary escalation of US/NATO military power, Russia increased its military spending over 300% from 15 billion (its 1998 baseline) to 63 billion in 2021. Notwithstanding this massive effort at catch-up, Russia went from being outspent by 585 billion dollars in 1998 to 873 billion dollars in 2021, a large increase in the US/NATO’s already absurd level of overkill. These relationships are evident from Figure 1, which graphically encapsulates the whole statistical picture and all its underlying data.

In summary, the notion that Russia and the US/NATO are comparably matched players on the geopolitical stage is a complete myth. To be sure, Russia’s large armed forces as measured by numbers of troops may well have posed a threat its neighbors. As discussed above, however, this cannot explain why NATO’S leaders chose to militarize European and international security, rather than pursue negotiated and verifiable threat reduction initiatives. And the US/NATO could have made peace from a position of overwhelming strength, as shown both by the above-referenced military spending data and US global projection of power including more than 700 military bases abroad compared with Russia’s less than 20.

Imperialist rhetoric may play well with nationalist elements in Russia, but the Kremlin—far from fielding military resources capable of conquering Europe—is hard pressed to defend its own borders from an expanding military alliance that entirely dwarfs its economic and military capabilities. That is the story the military spending data tell, which (like other actions) speak louder than words. These data are a total *reductio ad absurdum* of the Russian imperialism narrative.

The Ukraine War: A Causal Theory

We can conclude that the post-Cold War expansion of NATO played a role in the etiology of the Ukraine war; even Michael McFaul (2022) acknowledges this much. However, the expansion of NATO per se is not a sufficient explanation for Putin’s 24 February 2022 invasion. To gain a more adequate understanding of causes, it is necessary to step back and take a broader historical view of Western-Russian relations.

In the seven years between the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the first wave of NATO expansion in March 1999, both US/NATO and Russian military expenditures were declining, as seen in Figure 1. In the United States, there was talk of a “peace dividend”—the long overdue redeployment of resources from military production to civilian investment, which could bring about general prosperity.

Meanwhile, Boris Yeltsin had outsourced Russia’s transition to capitalism to Western banks and economists, and Wall Street was sharing the spoils of the Russian economy with a new class of

oligarchs, all at the expense of the Russian populace (Stiglitz, 1994). What brought this short-lived era of demilitarization and neoliberal profiteering to an end?

First, permanent war economies and national security states had become entrenched in Russia, Europe, and especially the United States, and defense contractors and their counterparts in government needed new threats to justify their continued control of public revenues (Melman, 2001). The expansion of NATO was a natural outgrowth of this militarized system of political economy in the West, as were “Full Spectrum Dominance,” the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, a new arms race with China, and nuclear weapons “modernization.”

Second, by the time Vladimir Putin was elected President of Russia in May 2000, the country was ready to turn the page on his predecessor’s disastrous neoliberal experiment. Putin enacted reforms that benefited ordinary Russians, simultaneously earning their political support (Sakwa, 2007) and sealing his fate with Western elites, who perceived a strong Russian leader and state as an obstacle to their own economic and geopolitical agendas (Lauria, 2022).

Putin initially sought good relations with US/NATO leaders, and many of the latter wanted good relations with Russia, but the hard liners sabotaged these efforts. Especially in Washington, the war lobby’s capture of foreign policy became evident with the relentless expansion of NATO and other militarization of international security culminating in the current war.

In a highly perceptive analysis of these dynamics written a month after Putin’s 24 February 2022 invasion, eminent journalist Joe Lauria (2022) noted public statements by Joe Biden suggesting that the real objective of US policy in Ukraine is regime change in Moscow. After the “Big Bang” wave of NATO expansion in 2004, Putin was openly critical of Western militarism, which he denounced at the 2007 Munich Security Conference. The US and NATO, reacting to Putin but also confirming his perception of Western hostility, solicited Georgia’s and Ukraine’s membership in NATO at the alliance’s Bucharest Summit the following year.

Having overwhelming military superiority over Russia during this entire time (see Figure 1; note also the more than 700 US military bases abroad compared with Russia’s less than 20, as indicated above), the US and NATO could have acted to defuse these tensions if there had been a will to do so. Instead, the United States pursued a hawkish foreign policy under President Barak Obama that included support for an anti-Russian coup in Kiev in 2014 (Sakwa, 2015/2022, and Benjamin and Davies, 2022.), which was followed by Russian annexation of Crimea. Relations between the two sides continued to deteriorate, leading up to the current Ukraine war. Even now, however, little has changed in the completely lopsided military imbalance between the US/NATO and Russia. As the side that is holding nearly all the cards, the former can pursue peace at any time. Why does this not happen?

In addressing this question, first let us dispose of the myth that the fighting continues because the Zelensky administration wants to continue fighting. Even if this is the Ukrainian government’s preference, Zelensky’s continual petitions to Washington and Brussels for military aid underscore the dependence of Ukraine on the US and NATO members to fund the war and provide advanced weapons and training. This dependence means that the US and NATO can

prevail upon Ukraine to negotiate an end to the war at any time. The reasons this does not happen have little to do with Kiev.

There may be two reasons why the war continues, and both are related to the question why the “peace dividend” after the Cold War was so short lived. First, a prolonged war in Ukraine is a huge bonanza for US defense contractors and Pentagon bureaucrats, who exert outsized influence on US foreign policy. A December 2022 *New York Times* article (Lipton et al, 2022) chronicled this boom. William D. Hartung, a public interest analyst quoted in the article, said that the weapons makers are “riding high again, and Ukraine just gives them another argument as to why things need to continue onward and upward.”

Defense contractor Raytheon “went through six years of Stingers [anti-aircraft missiles used by Ukraine] in 10 months.” Allocating 45 billion dollars more than President Biden requested (for a total of 858 billion for Fiscal Year 2023), Congress put military spending “on track to reach its highest level in inflation-adjusted terms since the peaks in the costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars between 2008 and 2011, and the second highest in inflation-adjusted terms since World War II” (Lipton et al, 2022).

Second, the war aims of the US and UK are apparently not to uphold Ukrainian security; indeed, US policy has been described as “fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian” (Bandow, 2022). Rather, the aims are apparently to completely defeat and humiliate Vladimir Putin, exhaust Russia economically through a military competition which it cannot win (as the US did previously with the Soviet Union), and see Putin replaced with a Yeltsin-like leader who will give Western corporate and financial elites unimpeded access to the Russian economy (Lauria, 2022). There is evidence this game plan is backfiring and that the war is enabling Putin to consolidate his power (Troianovski and Hopkins, 2023), but this would hardly be the first time the United States has persisted with a failed foreign policy.

Indeed, Joe Lauria (2022) proposes the entirely plausible hypothesis that Washington designed its policy in Ukraine precisely to entrap Russia in a war that would be the Putin administration’s undoing. As Lauria points out, there were two precedents for such a policy. First, on 3 July 1979, President Carter signed a directive secretly aiding the anti-Soviet mujahideen; this was apparently intended to draw the Soviets into a quagmire in Afghanistan, which in fact did occur, contributing to the eventual collapse of the USSR. Second, President George H. W. Bush signaled to Saddam Hussein (via US Ambassador April Glaspie in a 25th July 1990 meeting with the Iraqi dictator) that the US would not intervene if Iraq invaded Kuwait. In a bait and switch maneuver, when Iraq subsequently did invade, the US then led a war against Iraq that decimated its armed forces and showcased America’s latest weapon systems; for an in-depth account of this backstory of the Iraq war, see Hilsman (1992).

To be sure, the above explanation of the Ukraine war is necessarily incomplete and tentative. The real intentions of US and NATO policy will not be known with much confidence until historians and political scientists in the future have adequately analyzed the relevant internal policy documents, most of which are not yet in the public domain. The most anyone can provide at this point is informed speculation, but that is vastly preferable to the tsunami of war

propaganda currently flooding the international mass media. In that spirit, I offer the above causal theory.

Beyond Ukraine: Demilitarization or a New Cold War?

I will conclude by addressing whether a demilitarized world order is really possible, and if so, what a pathway to it might look like. This relates to the above-mentioned objection of hawks that “it’s a jungle out there” and that the US and its allies need to utilize “superior power,” not international law, “on behalf of their vision of a desirable world order,” as Robert Kagan (2023) put it.

First, given our militarized status quo, the world can at best expect a new Cold War, and possibly a “hot” nuclear war if worst case scenarios for Ukraine materialize (Mearsheimer, 2022, and Benjamin and Davies, 2022.). Under Robert Kagan’s Manichean view of the world, which is apparently shared by the Biden administration, the US and NATO should be willing to use force to defend “liberal democracy” from “aggressive” and “autocratic” great powers, particularly Russia and China. I exposed the fallacies of this paradigm earlier in this article; its role in provoking Putin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine (or at the very least its failure to deter the invasion) constitute a further reason to reject it. But it remains to be shown how a viable alternative can be crafted, which is the subject of this concluding section.

The alternative I propose, which is well-defined and supported by the peace studies literature (Butfoy, 1997; Global Action to Prevent War and Armed Conflict, 2008; Benedict et al, 2016), is the path of verifiable security agreements. Contrary to conventional wisdom, this path does not require all signatories to be liberal democracies, since violations of the agreements can be detected by all parties, triggering remedial actions. Bilateral US-Soviet successes, relying on satellite verification (Day, 2022), include the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, SALT I, and START I treaties. Multilateral successes include the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). (To be sure, North Korea withdrew from the NPT, and Iran was possibly in violation before the JCPOA. But these failures were small for a treaty with 190 states parties, especially compared to the nuclear-armed signatories’ non-compliance with their NPT disarmament obligations; see Deller, et al, 2003).

In short, governments know how to negotiate verifiable security agreements and have done so successfully in this and the previous century. Autocratic governments, which have participated in these agreements, are not an obstacle. Rather, the obstacle is the stranglehold that defense contractors, military bureaucracies, and other special interests have over foreign policy, particularly in the United States, currently the world’s only superpower. (The US, a liberal democracy, actually has a poor record of compliance with security related treaties; see Deller et al, 2003).

As for Ukraine, negotiations to end the war can build upon and update the 2014-2015 Minsk agreements. To be sure, full diplomatic resolution of the status of Crimea and other territory annexed by Russia may not be possible in the near future. However, a long-term cessation of hostilities, such as the 1953 armistice that indefinitely suspended the Korean War, is certainly a

possibility. For other regional and global demilitarization initiatives, see Global Action to Prevent War and Armed Conflict (2008), Benedict et al (2016), and Butfoy (1997). Far from being an untried, utopian experiment, the path of threat reduction through verifiable agreements is a practical and tested paradigm of international security. Given its record of success, and the militarists' record of failure culminating in the current Ukraine war and looming New Cold War, the burden of proof is not on doves to show that demilitarization can succeed, but on hawks to show that it cannot.

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