
War and Peace in the new Millennium. The Conflict in Ukraine and the Uncertainties of the Present

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the present situation and some of the causes leading to a dramatic confrontation, initially supposed to be short and effective, between Russia and Ukraine. After one year, the struggle is even more problematic with no signs announcing an end to it, and tensions increasing in multiple geographical areas. The text intends to investigate opposing perspectives on the war and analyze geopolitical and economic aspects that may have been instrumental in the development of the present dangerous crisis.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Geohistory, Economics, Neoliberalism, Hybrid Threats, Ukrainian Conflict

One year has passed since the Western world, and the world in general, realized that we were entering a new phase in history and, as many times before, this new phase was inaugurated by a war, euphemistically called special operation. That day in February brought about shock, incredulity, fear, despair and death. There were divisions in the ways to tackle the unpredictable: the sudden events made many countries reconsider everything they thought they had known until then and some others silently align with the aggressor in wait for some opportunities to explore. One common reaction in the beginning was the numbing perplexity that dominated the minds of many. The cogent question was, and still is, why we did not see it coming. How could this new version of Russia be the real one? After Mikhail Gorbachev's process of change, his *glasnost* and semi democratic *perestroikas*, the constant presence of president Putin in international consortia and his relevant political role in his country and abroad, the West had believed in a positive future and in a friendly Russia on its way to democracy and freedom, a majestic country to cooperate with. Powerful nations would mutually control their power, the East could be friend with the West, the North with the South—geographically, socially, economically, culturally—and together they could improve and enhance their own countries and contribute to the improvement of developing states. Something went wrong. Idealism is not for practical politicians, except in election campaigns, nor for tycoons, entrepreneurs, financiers or plutocrats.

The new Millennium is unfortunately not exempt from wars, as the multiple conflicts around the world demonstrate. Now it is dramatically near on the European soil, as the devastating conflict in Ukraine shows. A general, superficial, idea of global unity in the world had dominated a mentality frequently imbued with wrong ideals about the benefits of neoliberalism in the last few decades. Neoliberalism is becoming one of the most problematic elements of our era, as George Mombiot thoroughly demonstrates in his essay *How Did We Get Into This Mess? Politics Equality, Nature*

(2017), an idea, which he had already reiterated in his article in *The Guardian* dated 15 April 2016 (“Neoliberalism - the ideology at the root of all our problems”). Mombiot is not the first to show the evils of our society. Almost a quarter of a century ago, Naomi Klein had warned the world with her influential text *No Logo* (2000). Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007) is equally surprisingly clear about the dreadful economic evils of our societies. Even new forms of economy, such as ubereconomy, which originally seemed an opportunity for financial expansion for middle to lower layers of society, has become a target of neoliberalism. Industrial, commercial or financial juggernauts tend to absorb various fields of production into megabillionaire activities.¹ Economists, historians and political analysts have started introducing theories and hypotheses about a possible new world order, which could develop in many directions, as political, financial and economic scenarios change introducing new stakeholders in the race for predominance.² As Michael O’Sullivan highlights in *The Levelling. What’s Next After Globalization* (2019), global economy, which was deemed a great opportunity for humanity, has become a sort of nightmarish landscape with valleys, where the poor find it difficult to survive, and extreme peaks, which only the superwealthy can dominate.³ The world has become a place for the few immensely rich while a vast majority is merely surviving. What O’Sullivan conceives are two opposing scenarios for the future: the bleak pessimistic one likens our period to the one preceding the First World War when the first collapse of globalization became evident and brought about wars and devastation. The other optimistic scenario is the way to multipolarity with more countries being able to be part of future changes and decisions, not only political or financial. Nations, which can do things successfully and effectively, would represent the advantage of a multipolar world.

When O’Sullivan wrote his text in 2019, he mentioned a liminal risk that he considered improbable: the conflict between two economic superpowers such as the USA and China. Neither geopolitical experts nor economists nor politicians could apparently predict what was going to happen with Russia. Interestingly, neither scholars nor experts could really foresee the events, with one exception. As *The Washington Post* recently revealed on January 31 2023, only a Ukrainian intel chief, Maj. Gen. Kyrylo Budanov, was able to anticipate the imminent risk before February 24, 2022. The world’s consortium was somehow unanimous, with various nuances, in condemning the

¹ The French conglomerate LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, belonging to Bernard Arnault, is one example of those macro businesses. It continuously expands and progressively absorbs renowned luxury firms around the world with what seems a process of commercial “phagocytosis”, typical of megacorporations around the world. Joel Bakan’s *The Corporation. The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (2003) gives a significant outline of the corporative processes in the twentieth Century and the new Millennium. The two movies originated from his ideas—*The Corporation* (2004) and *The New Corporation. The Unfortunately Necessary Sequel* (2020)—explore the global dangers of this system, based on an American model, which has been exported to the entire world.

² It is necessary to make a distinction between economic and globalized world order and political world order. While the economic world can function thanks to globalization, the political world order is continually modified by contingencies. According to Ukrainian intelligence officer Oleskii Arestovich the so-called “world order” that existed before February 2022 has been completely shattered by the conflict and cannot be recovered. See his interview with Greta Cristini (ed.) in the geopolitical review *Limes*: “La Nato non funziona, il futuro è l’U24” in *La Cortina d’acciaio*. 5/2022. The title of the review special issue is “Steel Curtain”, which reprises and modifies the known catchphrase “Iron Curtain” used during the Cold War. Of Georgian, Belarusian, Polish and Russian origins, Arestovich was against the joining of Ukraine with Nato and the EU. Now he thinks that a mutual system of defense (U24) could be strategically more effective than Nato. In previous years, Arestovich predicted the inevitable explosion of a conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

³ On February 8th 2023, the Guardian (Instagram) reported a study from Greenpeace UK (appeared on Twitter), which claims that “if you earned £40,000 a day from when Jesus was born to the present day, you would still not make the as much as Shell did in profits last year. This could be a clear description of what corporations can do thanks to neoliberalism, in a period when “soaring inflation, climate-driven disasters inflicted untold hardship on hundreds of millions across the world in 2022” (@Guardian). Pandemics and the war have to be added to the previous list as further calamities of the 2020s. What is even more problematic is that profits remain in a limited number of hands

sudden attack, apparently justified by Russia after years of linguistic, social and political tensions and local fights in the eastern parts of Ukraine.⁴ According to the Western perspective, the invasion is a dramatic trespassing, which ignores an independent country's sovereignty, whereas it represents a due and necessary process to re-acquire lost territories after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 according to a Russian perspective, which is completely supported by its political nomenclature. Evidently, Russia never overcame the deception for the loss of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, the USSR. The deception burnt silently under the ashes of post-communism. In March 2022, *The Economist* published an interview with political scientist John Mearsheimer, who claimed that the West was responsible for the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The polarization of the world is reflected in political scientists' opinions on the matter that are antithetical and without solution. Some other experts are currently dating back the cause of the present war to the Obama's presidency. The American president's soft reaction to the invasion of Crimea supposedly emboldened the Russian president. Lawmakers who advised Obama to react and arm Ukraine were ignored and the Ukrainian requests for help were rejected.

There are multiple reasons for the generalized lack of awareness about the conflict. Geopolitical, social and historical facts were considered secondary, or even non-existent, compared to the race towards megamillions, which was prepared by Reaganomics and Thatcherism in the 1980s and became evident at the commencement of Y2K. History, both remote and recent, was forgotten or dismissed; Western perspective—trying to conceal its flaws—became dominant⁵; we generally shrugged at NATO's progressive expansion; warnings from dangerous regimes' dissidents were ignored⁶; problematic macroeconomic and microeconomic effects of neoliberalism were overlooked, climate change was minimized and the signal of impending energy crises were disregarded. A large number of rich European and non-European countries, inebriated by big money, have steadily sold out assets to China, the USA, Russia and other countries, while less developed nations, in which corrupt governments rule, open their doors fast to foreign exploitation, in spite of years of struggling against traditional colonialism. Other countries are too poor to react against interferences and exploitation. Senior policy advisor Andrej Kortunov explains that the idea that Russia has to expand its borders incessantly was attributed to Catherine the Great.⁷ Putin considers some nations outside Russia as “*russskij mir*”, the Russian world that he wants back.⁸ Despite the independence of a number of territories after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia is still the biggest nation in the world.

⁴ Some nations such as Brazil, India and South Africa (apart from China and Iran) did not condemn the invasion.

⁵ Historian Roman Ferrari Zumbini claims that Western countries and Europe, in particular, suffer from an intellectual “narcissism”, which was inherited from the French philosophers of the Enlightenment, who marked their mentality. This cultural inheritance makes them believe they can export their democratic ideals without considering the inner cultural and social differences of other countries. Another mistake is forgetfulness of time and history. The loss of historical memory is the greatest dagger. Romano Ferrari Zumbini (2022). *Il Grande Giudice: il Tempo e il Destino dell'Occidente*. Roma: Luiss University Press.

⁶ The disappearance and/or incarceration of people contrary to regimes is a sad practice, which was never out of fashion in countries, in which human rights are not always respected. The imprisonment of dissidents is common. The reiterated repression of protests is a signal that liberty remains a utopia in a dramatically polarized world. The mysterious deaths of Putin's critics since the beginning of the war as well as oligarchs living abroad are equally baffling. Remembering the tragic death of a Russian journalist, which inaugurated the progressive silencing of the free press, Shaun Walker observed, “A decade after the assassination of Anna Politkovskaya news organizations increasingly avoid topics that could anger the Kremlin” (*The Guardian*, 5 October 2016).

⁷ Andrej Kortunov (2022). “Nato, il nemico utile” in *Limes. La Cortina d'Acciaio*. 5/2022 (maggio):77–83, page 77. The title of the article can be translated as, “Nato, the useful enemy”.

⁸ This statement is taken from an interview with Finnish MP Erkki Tuomioja. See Federico Petroni e Nicola Guerra (2022) “La Nato non userà la Finlandia per minacciare la Russia” in *Limes La Cortina d'Acciaio*. 5/2022 (maggio) 105–108, page 105. The title could be translated as, “Nato will not use Finland to threaten Russia”.

Notwithstanding its geographical predominance and its unlimited natural resources, Russia has shown a desire to regain control of strategic areas that used to belong to the Soviet Union. While several politicians around the world were enjoying mutual friendships with the leader of the Kremlin, some problematic aggressions started occurring using various motivations. Chechnya (1999), Crimea (2014), Georgia (1921), Kazakhstan (2022) are some examples of the Russian intention to recover its lost territories. The reason for occupying them may be dictated by several reasons. It is true that some lands are significant for their resources and strategic positions. In reality, the intention to occupy and conquer seems to betray the need to counter balance the expansion of the West. In some experts' views, the omnipresence of the USA, NATO and EU supposedly pushes the Russian government towards aggression. Behind these potential motivations, the crucial theme is that the fall of the Soviet Union was a historical shock from which Russia has never really recovered. It is an antithetical view of history compared to the Western perspective. Whereas the West rejoiced after the fall of Berlin wall, Russia was shocked to see its world suddenly altered. The change unchained private entrepreneurial activities. The immense riches and the wide opportunities that the new context offered were exploited by a minority of people, who were able to move fast in the post-soviet era and become millionaires. New dynasties of oligarchs became the masters of the Russian industry and trade, both domestic and foreign. And many of them became part of the political intelligentsia.

Putin's policies include more or less evident interferences in Belarus, Moldova and Serbia, among others. Meanwhile some minorities in former Eastern-bloc countries have supposedly expressed a desire to join mother Russia again, whereas Belarus has a government and a leader directly controlled by Putin. Moldova's political crisis is considered a consequence of Putin's maneuvers. Serbia's tense relationship with Kosovo and its recent agreement with Putin may raise more than one eyebrow. Russia's imperialism was only apparently dormant for less than a decade, but it seems quite active now. Leaving aside for a moment a Western mentality might help comprehend Putin's perspectives. He shows a cold stance and a czar's attitude in politics, in his country and abroad. Endowed with natural charisma, unquestionable savoir-faire and kindness, he appears to be wearing the mask of the naïve, as Oliver Stone's 2017 documentary seems to confirm, leaving many viewers perplexed and unsure about his real motivations. Putin has arguably never stopped living in the KGB era when doubts, lack of trust and hatred overshadowed any political relations. His entourage's virulent statements in various media ever since the beginning of the war, especially against Europe, represent a further confirmation, however surprising to many, of his anti EU position, censure of NATO and rejection of the Western world in general and the USA in particular, which he considers the one and only imperialist country in the world.⁹

In 1904, political geographer Halford Mackinder presented to the British Geographical Society a world map divided into three main areas. According to his studies the most important and strategic territory, or "pivot area", lay in Eurasia. It partly corresponded to Russia and to a semicircle of nations at its southern frontier. The area was denominated Heartland and in Mackinder's idea, whoever was able to dominate the Heartland was automatically able to dominate the world. Even though

⁹ *The Times* has published an article about Putin on February 22, 2023, claiming that the leader's personality has metamorphosed, as his "confidence" for his multiple successes has turned into "arrogance". They also claim that, "previously Putin was willing to listen to alternative perspectives". Now nobody in his circle seems to offer different hypotheses.

the theory is outdated today due to the advancement in technology, transport and globalization, the USA's recent history shows how they have consistently tried to exert their influence in an area that ideally joins the Eastern Mediterranean to the Pacific and includes the heartland. The lands involved are Syria, Afghanistan and Caucasian republics, Iraq, Iran, Vietnam and Korea, among others. It may not be casual that the United States have attempted, more or less successfully, to control several nations lying in this ideal line after World War II. Japan, South Korea, the Philippines have strengthened their exchanges with the USA, making the question of Taiwan more cogent for China, which, like Russia, resents American intention to spread its area of influence that both China and Russia consider imperialism screened by a surface of democratic values.¹⁰ Like Russia, China feels surrounded by American vassals. Both China and Russia consider America the real imperialist power, an opinion that is difficult to dismantle. China seems to be moving tentatively, with half-hearted cautious proposals for peace in Ukraine, which are in favor of Russia. The USA's progressive control of the Atlantic and the Pacific by means of commercial agreements and political influence has proceeded hand in hand with its exploitation of African assets and its invasions of Asian countries meant to take control of essential areas and natural resources while causing havoc and devastations.¹¹ North Korea and Iran stand with China and Russia. North Korea has been launching test missiles in what seems to be a show of strength directed at Japan, South Korea and the USA. Iran has provided drones to be used for deadly attacks in Ukraine. However, a potential ally for Russia, India has claimed that a strong effort is necessary to have peace.¹² A hypothesis might be that the Russian president started his operation with a different scenario of alliances in mind, a scenario that has become blurred and uncertain with the passing of time, but the risk of a global war becomes more and more possible.

The USA have expanded their political influence through NATO, a choice that has made Russia feel threatened at his own borders. Some experts have deemed this NATO expansion a mistake, which can be seen as a dangerous provocation. Other political scientists find that this expansion is necessary in order to preserve a balance between contrasting forces. Countries that are relatively distant from the Eastern limits do not fully grasp the dynamics concerning NATO. Other countries have gradually changed their position. Traditionally neutral nations in Europe, Sweden and Finland, have modified their stance after the invasion of Ukraine. Historically part of the Swedish kingdom, Finland underwent a process of "Russification" in the second half of the nineteenth century. It became a nation after the fall of the czar's empire. Russia invaded the country when the Nazis invaded Poland, but Finland was able to maintain its independence. Tourists and traders have crossed the long dividing line between Finland and Russia with mutual benefits in the last decades. The situation has suddenly changed for the worse after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The relaxed atmosphere of peaceful exchanges has been lost, as a sense of impending danger has replaced the tranquil situation at the border. In spite of the Turkish veto, Sweden and

¹⁰ The question of Chinese balloons flying over the USA has created more tensions. Both countries accuse each other of provocation, the former for flying these objects, without specifying their use and the latter for destroying them despite the lack of any threat. See [ccn.com](#) (February 3, 2023), [bbc.com](#) (February 5, 2023), [cbsnews.com](#) (February 7, 2023).

¹¹ See the books by political commentator Kevin Phillips: *American Dynasty* (2004) and *American Theocracy* (2006). Like other scholars and experts, Phillips criticizes some aspects of the American system and, in particular, its obsession with oil.

¹² The fifth most important economy in the world, "India stands for peace", President Modi reiterated in October 2022. See "India considers war as last resort; strength necessary for peace: PM Modi" in *Business Standard*, October 24, 2022.

Finland consider that the only way to protect themselves is to enter the group of NATO countries. In these tragic days in the aftermath of terrible events in Turkey and Syria, some political observers think there could be space for more “earthquake diplomacy”, which eased the tense relationship between Greece and Turkey back in 1998. After being included in the EU, the three Baltic republics (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) have enjoyed the flourishing of cultural and commercial exchanges, but, still remembering the dangers of past invasions, they resent the vicinity with Russia and want to reinforce their borders. Poland has expressed analogous feelings. The invasion of Ukraine has awoken ghosts of the past when Hitler decided to invade the country and transform it in German and Russian areas, in accordance with Stalin. These countries think that it is essential to help Ukraine to prevent Russia from attacking other countries, an idea that may seem remote to other nations, but it is a clear and present danger for countries that experienced German and Russian prevarication in the past. European countries in general feel baffled. The EU was founded with the aim of economic, commercial and political cooperation and with the basic idea of eliminating the specter of war, which ravaged their countries for centuries. Many European citizens are convinced that one solution could be to stop sending armaments to Ukraine. A general unconscious trust for Putin, who had become a household name and an appreciated political figure among the great leaders of the earth, makes many think he would stop the war immediately after such a move. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that invasion would stop, and there is fear of escalation, no matter what the decisions will be.

The winners of the last world conflict used theoretical lines to draw a world that in their intentions should last for decades, or even centuries, after 1945. They were the powerful countries of the earth and thought their memo could be reliable and durable. It was not. Every land has a history of its own, its special geography, its traditions, its culture, its language, its dialects, its minorities, its beauty and they all need to be preserved. Sadly, many countries are devastated by bloody conflicts in many areas of the world. Peace is the goal of several countries and it is what most common people desire in this world, but peace has subjective nuances. If on the one hand, pacifists and pacifiers would like Russia to stop its aggression and abandon war, on the other hand, many observers think that Ukraine should stop fighting because they are convinced that Russia would immediately give up its invasion. Unfortunately, both perspectives could turn out to be ineffectual. Russia would be afraid of being considered weak if it stopped its operation now. Ukraine would be afraid of losing its independence and sovereignty if it decided to stop fighting. Many forms of menace linger on our planet: pandemics, cyber attacks, hybrid threats, wars, but one is particularly anguishing.¹³ The nuclear threat becomes more real by the day, but we are thoughtlessly moving towards the Armageddon. Spirals of consumerism distract some countries, while others are busy trying to overcome poverty and need. There can be no winners and there can be no losers. Observing how a majestic country of strong people

¹³ Hybrid threats include cyber attacks on an international level. The last two decades have seen the multiplication of media platforms involvement in the spreading of fake news, the disrespect of privacy, identity thefts, secret interference in citizens' choices, tentative disruption of national media systems and meddling in elections. One relevant political scandal is connected to the still unclear problem of Cambridge Analytica (an ideal offspring of Echelon surveillance program created in the 1960s) and the data apparently provided by Facebook in order to maneuver and deviate results in political elections. A scandal that becomes even more relevant considering that “Facebook was encountering election interference content as far back as 2006, some 10 years before Mark Zuckerberg first acknowledged the issue” (SkyNews, November 20, 2022). The most recent discovery concerns the disturbing results of an investigation leading to the discovery of a team of the so-called disinformation industry meddling in elections all over the world in the past ten years (*The Guardian*, February 15, 2023).

that have worked hard for centuries to build a beautiful nation with its wonderful, culture, literature and music could lead us all to self-destruction is disconcerting. A deep sense of nostalgia for an idealized epoch before February 2022, which probably did not exist, is mingling with a conscious desire for peace. There still is time to choose widespread progress, welfare, and prosperity. It is essential to find a way out of this problematic impasse, even though no clear strategies have been found yet.¹⁴

¹⁴ For possible new scenarios, in depth analyses and better understanding of the present situation, see: www.limesonline.com (Editor-in-chief: Lucio Caracciolo).