

Notes on Ukraine

In light of the current events in Ukraine we have decided to make the Notes From the Editors for the April 2022 issue of Monthly Review immediately available. —Eds.

The Editors of Monthly Review

As we write these notes at the beginning of March 2022, the eight-year limited civil war in Ukraine has turned into a full-scale war. This represents a turning point in the New Cold War and a great human tragedy. By threatening global nuclear holocaust, these events are also now endangering the entire world. To understand the origins of the New Cold War and the onset of the current Russian entry into the Ukrainian civil war, it is necessary to go back to decisions associated with the creation of the New World Order made in Washington when the previous Cold War ended in 1991. Within months, Paul Wolfowitz, then undersecretary of defence for policy in the George H. W. Bush administration, issued a Defense Policy Guidance stating: “Our policy [after the fall of the Soviet Union] must now refocus on precluding the emergence of any potential future global competitor.” Wolfowitz emphasised that “Russia will remain the strongest military power in Eurasia.” Extraordinary efforts were therefore necessary to weaken Russia’s geopolitical position permanently and irrevocably, before it would be in a position to recover, bringing into the Western strategic orbit all of those states now surrounding it that had formerly either been parts of the Soviet Union or that had fallen within its sphere of influence (“Excerpts from Pentagon’s Plan: ‘Preventing the Re-Emergence of a New Rival’,” New York Times, March 8, 1992).



The War in Eurasia. Image credit: “[Twilight: The Erosion of US Control and the Multipolar Future](#),” Dossier 36, The Tricontinental, January 4, 2021.

The Wolfowitz Defense Policy Guidance was adopted by Washington and all the leading U.S. strategic planners, whose views at that point increasingly reached back to the classical geopolitical doctrines introduced by Halford Mackinder in imperial Britain before the First World War, and that were further developed by Karl Haushofer in Nazi Germany and Nicholas John Spykman in the United States during the 1930s and '40s. It was Mackinder who in 1904 introduced the notion that geopolitical control of the world depended on domination of Eurasia (the main land mass of the European and Asian continents), which he referred to as the Heartland. The rest of Asia and Africa together with the Heartland made up the World Island. Thus arose his oft-quoted dictum:

*Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland:
Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island:
Who rules the World Island commands the World.*

This geopolitical doctrine was, from the first, aimed at world dominance and has governed the imperial strategy of the leading capitalist nations ever since, in the form of what is commonly referred to as “grand strategy.” But while it dictated the thinking of such U.S. national security figures as Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, geopolitics was for a long time downplayed in the public sphere due to popular identification of it with the doctrines of Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, with the demise of the Soviet Union and the growth of the United States as a unipolar power, geopolitics and the Heartland doctrine were once again openly avowed by U.S. strategic planners, generating a new post-Cold War imperial grand strategy (John Bellamy Foster, “The New Geopolitics of Empire,” *Monthly Review* 57, no. 8 [January 2006]).

The most important architect of this new imperial strategy was Brzezinski, who earlier on, as Jimmy Carter’s national security advisor, had laid the trap for the Soviets in Afghanistan. It was under Brzezinski’s direction, following a secret directive signed by Carter in July 1979, that the CIA, working together with the arc of political Islam stretching from Muhammad Zia-ul Haq’s Pakistan to the Saudi royals, recruited, armed, and trained the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. The CIA’s buildup of the Mujahideen and various terrorist groups in Afghanistan precipitated the Soviet intervention, leading to an endless war that contributed to the destabilisation of the Soviet Union itself. To queries as to whether he regretted establishing the arc of terrorism that was to lead to 9/11 and beyond, Brzezinski (who posed in photos with Mujahideen fighters) responded by simply saying that the destruction of the Soviet Union was worth it (Natylye Baldwin, “Brzezinski’s Mad Imperial Strategy,” *Natylye’s Place*, August 13, 2014; Ted Snider, “Living with Brzezinski’s Mess,” *Antiwar.com*, August 26, 2021, “Brzezinski’s Prophecy About Ukraine,” *Teller Report*, February 15, 2022).

Brzezinski remained a key advisor to subsequent U.S. administrations but did not have a prominent official role, given his hawkish reputation and the extremely negative view of him in Russia, which, in the early 1990s under Boris Yeltsin, had a close, puppet-like connection to Washington. Nevertheless, more than any other U.S. strategic thinker, it was

Brzezinski who articulated the U.S. grand strategy on Russia that was enacted over three decades by successive U.S. administrations. The NATO wars that dismembered Yugoslavia in the 1990s overlapped with the onset of NATO's

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eastward expansion. Washington had promised the Kremlin under Mikhail Gorbachev, at the time of German reunification, that NATO would expand “not one inch” to the East into the former Warsaw Pact countries. Nevertheless, in October 1996, Bill Clinton, while campaigning for reelection, indicated that he favoured the expansion of NATO into the former Soviet sphere and a policy was put into motion the next year, followed by all subsequent U.S. administrations. Shortly afterwards, in 1997, Brzezinski published his book, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, in which he declared that the United States was in a position “for the first time ever [for] a non-Eurasian power” of becoming “the key arbiter of Eurasian

power relations,” while also constituting “the world’s paramount power.” In this way, the United States would become the “first” and the “last” global empire (Brzezinski, *Grand Chessboard* [Basic Books, 1997], xiii, 209; Diana Johnstone, *Fool’s Crusade* [Monthly Review Press, 2002]; “NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard,” National Security Archive, George Washington University; “President W. J. Clinton to the People of Detroit,” United States Information Agency, October 22, 1996).

In order for the Atlantic Alliance under U.S. leadership to dominate Eurasia, it was first necessary for it to gain primacy over what Brzezinski called “the black hole” left by the Soviet Union’s departure from the world stage. This meant seeking to diminish Russia to the point that it could no longer claim great power status. The key “geopolitical pivot” on which this turned, Brzezinski insisted, was Ukraine. Minus Ukraine, Russia was irrevocably weakened, while a Ukraine that was incorporated as part of NATO would be a dagger at Moscow’s heart. Yet, any attempt to turn Ukraine against Russia, he warned, would be seen as a major security threat, a red line, by Russia itself. This then required the “enlargement of NATO,” extending it all the way to Ukraine, shifting strategic weapons to the East, with the object of eventually gaining control of Ukraine itself. The enactment of this grand strategy would likewise make Europe, notably Germany, more dependent on the United States, undercutting the independence of the European Union (Brzezinski, *Grand Chessboard*, 41, 87–92, 113, 121–22, 200).

There were, of course, hazards to the great game. Although the United States, Brzezinski argued, should support the expansion of NATO all the way East into the former Soviet Union, penetrating into Ukraine, with which Russia shared a

The relation of Brzezinski’s “grand chessboard” strategy to the actions actually taken by Washington over the last three decades should be obvious. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, NATO has absorbed fifteen countries, all to the East, which were previously part of the Warsaw Pact or were regions within the Soviet Union.

1,200-mile border, he noted that, if this succeeded, it would inevitably force Russia in the arms of China. China and Russia might form an “antihegemonic bloc” opposed to the United States, possibly including Iran as well. The result would be a geopolitical situation akin to the early Cold War in the days of the Sino-Soviet bloc, though this time with a much weaker Russia and a much stronger China. The answer to this, in Brzezinski’s mind, was to pressure China via

Taiwan and Hong Kong, and also on the Korean Peninsula, and through the promotion of an expanded alliance centred on Japan and Australia. This would place the United States in a favourable position to combat both China and Russia.

However, in all of this, according to the Brzezinski doctrine, the key to the checkmate of Russia, and the weak link with which Washington could gain dominion over Eurasia, remained Ukraine. Complete U.S./NATO dominance of Ukraine was a virtual death threat to Russia, possibly even pointing, under further pressure, to its own breakup into lesser states. China then would also be destabilised from its Far West (Brzezinski, *Grand Chessboard*, 103, 116–17, 164–70, 188–90).

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East, which were previously part of the Warsaw Pact or were regions within the Soviet Union. On its East, along the borders of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, NATO has seen a major military buildup. It currently has an air presence in Estonia, Lithuania, and Romania. U.S. troops and NATO multinational troops are massed in Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Romania. NATO missile defence facilities are located in Poland and Romania. The object of all of these forward

military installations (not to mention those in Central and Western Europe) is Russia ("Here's Where Alliance Forces Are Deployed Across Eastern Europe," CNN, February 10, 2022; "Why Russia Wanted Security Guarantees from the West," Strategic Culture Foundation, February 27, 2022).

In 2014, Washington helped engineer a coup in Ukraine overthrowing democratically elected President Victor Yanukovich. Yanukovich had been friendly to the West. But in the face of financial conditionalities imposed by the International Monetary Fund, his government turned to Russia for economic help, enraging the West. This led to the Maidan coup only months afterwards, with the new Ukrainian leader being hand-picked by the United States. The coup was carried out in part by neo-Nazi forces, which have historical roots in the Ukrainian fascist troops that assisted in the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Today, these forces are concentrated in the Azov Battalion, now part of the Ukrainian military supported by the United States. The domination of Ukraine by right-wing Ukrainian ultranationalist forces and

Following the coup, the predominantly Russian-speaking Crimea decided to merge with Russia through a referendum in which Crimean people were also given the option of going forward as part of Ukraine. The largely Russian-speaking Donbas region in the Eastern part of the country meanwhile broke away from Ukraine, in response to the violent repression against ethnic Russians that had been unleashed by the new right-wing government.

Russophobe groups as a result of the coup led to rebellions in the Eastern Donbass region of the country and to a brutal repression, with more than forty people burned alive in the public Trades Union building in Odessa, to which they had fled, at the hands of right-wing forces (Bryce Green, "What You Should Really Know About Ukraine," FAIR, February 24, 2022; David Levine, "Council of Europe Report on Far-Right Massacre in Odessa,"

Word Socialist Web Site, January 19, 2016).

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repression against ethnic Russians that had been unleashed by the new right-wing government. This resulted in the formation of two peoples' republics of Luhansk and Donetsk in the context of the Ukrainian civil war. Luhansk and Donetsk received military backing from Russia, while Ukraine (Kyiv) received ever-greater Western military support, effectively commencing the longer-range process of incorporating Ukraine into NATO (Arina Tsukanova, "So Who Annexed the Crimean Peninsula Then," Strategic Culture Foundation, March 28, 2017; "What Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics Are," Strategic Culture Foundation, February 28, 2022).

In the war of Ukraine on the Russian-speaking population in the breakaway republics of Donbass, some 14,000 people were killed, and 2.5 million people displaced, most of them taking refuge in Russia. The initial conflict ended with the signing in 2014–15 of the Minsk Agreements by France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, and endorsed by the UN Security Council. According to these agreements, Donetsk and Luhansk were to be given the right to self-government, though remaining in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the military conflict continued and eventually intensified again. In February 2022, there were 130,000 Ukrainian troops besieging and firing on Luhansk and Donetsk, effectively tearing up the Minsk Agreements (Abdul Rahman, "What Are the Minsk Agreements—And What Are Their Role in the Russia-Ukraine Crisis," February 22, 2022; "Who Is Firing at Whom And Who Is Lying About It?," Moon of Alabama, February 20, 2022).

Russia insisted on adherence to the Minsk Agreements along with a demand that Ukraine not be brought into NATO and that the rapid U.S.-backed military buildup in Ukraine directed against the Donbas republics cease. Vladimir Putin declared that these demands were all "red lines" for Russia's security, which if crossed would force Moscow to respond. When Ukraine and U.S.-dominated NATO continued to cross the red lines, Russia massively intervened in the ongoing civil war in Ukraine in alliance with Donetsk and Luhansk.

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War is a crime against humanity and today war between the great powers threatens total annihilation. The only answer is to give peace a chance, which requires finding a solution that guarantees the security of all parties to the civil war in Ukraine as well as Russia. In the longer view, we must recognise that war is endemic to capitalism, and both Russia and the NATO powers are capitalist. Only a return to the socialist path in both Ukraine and Russia can offer a lasting solution.

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