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Giving peace a chance : Towards a negotiated agreement in Ukraine

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WHILE BOTH SIDES ARE DETERMINED TO FIGHT ON, NEITHER CAN WIN

US faces dilemma over arming Ukraine

The US initially considered leaving the Ukrainian army to its fate, then backed it with massive arms shipments. Above all, it wants to stop the war escalating and is now signalling it's time for peace talks

Hélène Richard | Translated by George Miller



MANDEL NGAN AFP GETTY

Left Addressing the US Congress: Vice President Kamala Harris (left) and Speaker Nancy Pelosi hold the Ukrainian flag behind President Zelensky, Washington DC, 21 December 2022

> There has to be a recognition that military victory is not achievable through military means, and therefore you have to turn to other means
>
> Mark Milley

In recent weeks a new, more peaceful tone has been coming from the White House. There have been press leaks regarding contact between national security advisor Jake Sullivan and figures from Vladimir Putin's security council, including diplomatic advisor Yuri Ushakov. The existence of this channel – and the willingness to acknowledge it – has been interpreted as opening a preliminary phase for negotiations with Russia. The suggestion that talks may be on the horizon has been tempered by assurances that Kyiv is still calling the shots. On 14 December US president Joe Biden, on his way to the G20 summit in Bali, promised again that 'nothing about Ukraine [will be decided] without Ukraine.' Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Washington on 21 December sent a message of 'coordination and alignment', a White House official said the day before. Though the flow of arms and munitions to Ukraine continues, the idea of negotiations is no longer taboo in the US.

For once, it's the Pentagon rather than the White House which is promoting diplomacy in Washington. According to the chair of the joint chiefs of staff, General Mark Milley, a lull in the fighting during the winter could open 'a window of opportunity to negotiate'. The US military is convinced that neither side can defeat the other, while recognising that both are determined to fight on. 'There has to be a mutual recognition that military victory is probably – in the true sense of the word – not achievable through military means, and therefore you have to turn to other means,' Milley told the Economic Club of New York in November.

This diplomatic opening comes at a time when Washington has already banked some significant war gains. Russia has clearly exposed its military shortcomings. It suffered a third setback in Kherson, after the withdrawal from the Kyiv region last March and Kharkiv in September; its long-term modernisation has been damaged by technology embargoes. NATO has gained two new members, Finland and Sweden; the US military-industrial sector's order books are filling up; Germany opened its first floating LNG terminal in Wilhelmshaven in November, for the American gas now being pumped all around Europe. Long-term gas contracts with Algeria (to be supplied via pipelines) and Qatar (for liquefied natural gas) have achieved the energy decoupling between Europe and Russia that has been on the US agenda since the Nord Stream 1 pipeline was built in the 1970s. Undermined by soaring energy costs, European industry is losing its competitive advantage, particularly benefitting US competitors, which receive generous state financial protection.

This spectacular strengthening of the US's position is the result of a strategy that has made several U-turns, but has stuck to the same fundamental objective: to inflict, if possible, a strategic defeat on Russia which, with China, constitutes a systemic rival to the US. For Washington only defends just causes if they are likely to serve its interests. For example, the egregious flouting of international law by its ally Israel did not lead it to supply the Palestinians with rocket launchers; President Donald Trump even rewarded Israel in March 2019 by recognising its annexation of the Golan Heights, conquered in 1967 during the Six Day war, a decision which his successor has let stand. Despite their major contribution to the defeat of ISIS in Syria, the Kurds were immediately abandoned to Turkish forces in October 2019, when the US prioritised the wishes of its sensitive ally in Ankara.[1]

From sanctions to weapons

Washington, focused on its rivalry with China, was certainly far from thrilled by the prospect of an invasion of Ukraine, feared since November 2021. On the eve of the invasion, the US inclined towards abandoning the Ukrainian army to its fate, as it was not expected to withstand a Russian onslaught. President Zelensky was encouraged to leave the country and form a government in exile, far from the Russian special forces threatening Bankova Street (Ukraine's seat of government). The US and EU's coordinated strategy focused on massive, meticulously planned economic sanctions.[2] It was only in late March, when Russian troops were forced to withdraw from Kyiv's suburbs, that Washington decided to firmly support the Ukrainians with arms. The White House then took advantage of the Kremlin's strategic error, a change of tack reinforced by the shock on 1 April of the discovery of the Russian army's atrocities in Bucha. Meanwhile, Ukrainian hardliners stepped up their own pressure on Zelensky to resist the invasion.

Ukraine's Western allies dragged out discussions on the security guarantees that Ukraine wanted in return for possible concessions to Moscow, in particular the acceptance of neutral country status.[3] British prime minister Boris Johnson's impromptu visit on 9 April confirmed this: London, and certainly Washington, whose emissary he was, rejected such a concession to a 'war criminal'.[4] Negotiations, which were initially reduced to the level of contact groups, collapsed on 13 April. This was followed by more powerful weapons being supplied to Ukraine through the spring: as well as portable Javelin and Stinger missile launchers, adapted to harass Russian troops, there were medium- and long-range anti-aircraft and anti-ship defence systems.[5] Along with the Ukrainians' fighting spirit, these arms shipments played a decisive role in the success of the September counteroffensive, which allowed Kyiv to retake the southern city of Kherson.

The US, which had hesitated to back Ukraine and then invested considerable sums supporting it – nearly $47bn committed, including $23bn for military aid, according to the German institute KIEL[6] – now wants to apply the brakes. It knows that an escalation, which could bring direct confrontation with Russia, would squander its strategic gains. In late August some of Kyiv's operations on Russian soil angered the US. On condition of anonymity, Pentagon and CIA officials told the *New York Times*,[7] and thus Kyiv, that the assassination of Darya Dugina, the daughter of nationalist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, in late August, most likely by Ukrainian forces, had been a bad move. The White House gave the attack on the Kerch bridge linking Crimea with the mainland on 8 October a similarly cool reception.

These symbolic rather than military strikes – the bridge was quickly repaired in time for a visit from Putin – provoked Russia's first bombing campaign against Ukraine's energy infrastructure, and were further stepped up after Ukraine recaptured Kherson. Struggling on the ground, Russia has resorted to its main asset, the depth of its territory, from where it can shell parts of Ukraine far from the front line, including Dnipro, Zhytomyr, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Khmelnytskyi, Ternopil and Lviv, near the Polish-Ukrainian border.

Far from being a surprise, a missile striking Poland, a NATO member, at the end of October, was the type of event that Washington had feared, as it risked expanding the conflict. The White House immediately distanced itself from Kyiv's version of events, which wrongly blamed Moscow (it was an off-course Ukrainian missile). With some hesitation, Washington continued to provide Kyiv with the means to shoot down Russian missiles fired from within the Russian Federation.

'A provocative step'

Ukrainian attacks on strategic airbases in Russia's Saratov and Ryazan regions, more than 500km from the Ukrainian border, marked a new stage. The attacks used kamikaze drones, which Russian military analysts said would have required technical and financial assistance from the UK and US.[8] In addition, the US gave the green light for the delivery of Patriot anti-missile batteries, highly sophisticated weapons reserved for Washington's closest allies. Russia's ambassador to the US immediately called this a 'provocative step' which could have 'unforeseeable consequences'.[9] While no longer ruling out negotiations, the US seemed to be inching towards being a co-belligerent.

But US war aims are not set in stone. The idea of regime change in Moscow, which Biden voiced last March in a speech in Warsaw, is no longer officially on the table. On 6 December Biden's secretary of state, Antony Blinken, said US aid would be restricted to enabling the recapture of territories lost since 23 February 2022, thereby excluding Crimea and the separatist Donbass. Only the Baltic states and Poland support Kyiv's plan to continue the offensive to the very tip of Crimea, but these countries provide only a very small proportion of Ukraine's firepower.

The conflict has reached a level of intensity that makes backing down difficult. The belligerents' positions have hardened. For now, neither the Kremlin, which has staked the regime's survival on the outcome, nor Kyiv, which has suffered massive destruction, wants to return to the negotiating table. In September Russia annexed four Ukrainian regions, whereas in March it had seemed willing to consider evacuating Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in exchange for the independence of the Donbass and a Russian Crimea being recognised.

Zelensky displayed a largely theoretical interest in negotiations in his video address to the G20 on 15 November, setting as a precondition Russian troops' withdrawal behind 1991 borders, including leaving the Donbass and Crimea. In March these two regions were not part of the security guarantees Ukraine sought; at that time, it suggested it was prepared to consider discussing its borders with Russia. The 'security pact' that Kyiv is now demanding aims to perpetuate Western military and financial support by tying Ukraine closely to NATO and leaving the door to future membership open. This is far from the Ukraine's position at the start of the war, when the Ukrainian delegation raised the possibility of permanent neutrality status, a limitation of its military cooperation with NATO (no bases, no permanent foreign troops on its soil) and renunciation of any military nuclear programme. If implemented, this 'security pact', drafted by Zelensky's chief of staff Andriy Yermak and former NATO secretary general Anders Rasmussen, would achieve the strategic nightmare that Moscow sought to prevent by launching its attack on Ukraine in the first place: this is a failure that the Kremlin is not ready to accept.

Serious violation of the UN charter

By attempting to redraw borders by force, Moscow has committed one of the most serious violations of the UN charter, condemned even by the powers with which it has the closest ties (India, China). But a large majority of Russia's allies also rule out the option of Ukraine retaking Crimea or the Donbass by military means: apart from the nuclear risk, it would face hostility from much of the local population. The yes vote in the referendum on Crimea joining the Russian Federation in 2014, motivated in part by hostility to the overthrow of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych by the Maidan Square demonstrations, is rarely mentioned. It's the size of the yes vote (96%) that is problematic (the Tatar minority boycotted the referendum), along with the speed with which it was organised, and overseen by Russian troops without insignia.

The Donbass issue is thorny, too. After eight years of low-intensity warfare, the two separatist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk are more estranged from Kyiv than ever. These territories have been subjected to an economic blockade, to which Moscow has responded by issuing Russian passports on a massive scale. Unsurprisingly, Moscow's 'special military operation' was greeted with relief there, in contrast to other parts of the Donbass 'liberated' by Russian army shelling, notably Mariupol.[10] The failure of the 2015 Minsk Accords, which gave the Donbass special status within a federalised Ukraine, weighs heavily on resolving this issue. It will be difficult to convince the parties of the credibility of a political process that could in theory lead to a request for formal union with Russia (see *Giving peace a chance*).

Diplomatic efforts are currently focused on containing the impact of the conflict, rather than on finding a settlement. Managing the security of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, to which the International Atomic Energy Agency has had access since 1 September, prisoner exchanges, and the prevention of a food crisis are the only issues which both sides are willing to discuss. In the process, the centre of mediation activity is shifting from Europe, which is increasingly dependent on Washington, to the Middle East. The Berlin-Paris duo – sponsors of the 2015 Minsk Agreements – has had its day. German chancellor Olaf Scholz has called for recognition of a 'new reality', an 'imperialism' that leaves no room for compromise.[11] Only President Macron still shows a desire to stay in touch with Moscow, and in an interview with the French television channel TF1 on 3 December, he even said he favoured NATO 'giving security guarantees to Russia', not just to Ukraine. This caused uproar in the press and among EU leaders.

> Macron's offer to intercede is of little interest to the Kremlin. Kyiv and Moscow prefer to talk through Turkey. Other unexpected negotiators are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

Macron's offer to intercede is of little interest to the Kremlin because of France's fluctuating and isolated position in Europe. Kyiv and Moscow prefer to talk to each other through Turkey, which has emerged as a major platform for negotiations. Ankara hosted peace talks in March and worked to reach an agreement on Ukrainian and Russian grain exports through Black Sea ports last summer. Other unexpected negotiators are emerging, such as Saudi Arabia, which hosted prisoner exchange talks in September, and the United Arab Emirates, whose diplomatic efforts have led to the revival of Russian ammonia exports to Asia and Africa via a Ukrainian pipeline. More than ever, Europe's fate is being played out far from its borders ●

Hélène Richard is a member of *Le Monde diplomatique*'s editorial team

1 Georges Malbrunot, 'Comment les Kurdes ont été trahis par les États-Unis' (How the Kurds were betrayed by the US), *Le Figaro*, Paris, 9 October 2019 **2** See Hélène Richard and Anne-Cécile Robert, 'Russia and the West: between sanctions and war', and Hélène Richard, 'Can sanctions against Russia ever work?', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, March and November 2022 **3** See Igor Delanoë, 'Ukraine war: a new security order in Europe', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, September 2022 **4** Johnson's remarks reported by an anonymous source, a close advisor to Zelensky, to the Ukrainian journalist Roman Romaniuk, in 'From Zelensky's "surrender" to Putin's surrender: how the negotiations with Russia are going', *Ukrainska Pravda*, 5 May 2022, www.pravda.com.ua **5** See 'Les armes étrangères qui ont permis à l'Ukraine de tenir face aux Russes: Himars, Javelin, drones suicides…' (The foreign weapons that enabled Ukraine to stand up to Russia : Himars, Javelins, suicide drones), *Le Monde*, 17 September 2022 **6** Ukraine Support Tracker, Kiel Institute for the World Economy, www.ifw-kiel.de (accessed 16 December 2022) **7** 'US believes Ukrainians were behind an assassination in Russia', *The New York Times*, 5 October 2022 **8** See 'Kiev and Moscow start exchanging long-range fire' (in Russian), *Nezavissimaya Gazeta*, 6 December 2022 **9** Telegram account of the Russian Embassy in the United States, 14 December 2022 **10** See Loïc Ramirez, 'Donbass, life amid the shelling', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, September 2022 **11** Olaf Scholz, 'The global Zeitenwende: How to avoid a new cold war in a multipolar era', *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2023

TOWARDS A NEGOTIATED AGREEMENT IN UKRAINE

Giving peace a chance

Peace talks are possible if there is a political will to engage in them. How might this be achieved in the war between Ukraine and Russia?

Tapio Kanninen and Heikki Patomäki | Original text in English

Calls for a negotiated peace agreement in the Ukraine war have started to grow, even in the US. In early November 2022 General Mark A Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made one such call,[1] as did Charles A Kupchan, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, who urged that 'it's time to bring Russia and Ukraine to the negotiating table.'[2] However, no realistic terms for a possible peace deal have been elaborated.

Every peace deal is a hard compromise; in this case it needs to be acceptable both to Ukraine and Russia, in other words it must be seen to bring more benefits than losses to each, especially taking into account the failed Minsk I and II agreements. The role of the West, and in particular the US, will be decisive in convincing the victims of the invasion that peace negotiations make sense. The Ukrainians, who might insist on a total victory over the Russians to the very end, will need to receive assurances that the invasion will not rewarded and that a deal will not lead to the destabilisation of the whole international system.

> There is a dangerous trend to see the war in Ukraine as a struggle between good and evil

At the same time, it must be recognised that Russia has legitimate security interests and concerns and that some of its past and present demands are reasonable. While the US and NATO rejected the new Russia-NATO and Russia-US treaties proposed by Moscow in December 2021, some of their proposals could have been negotiated and agreed to, even if others were difficult or non-starters.[3] Negotiations are always possible if there is a political will to engage in them.

In 2022 a few (rare) proposals were made that could provide a basis for de-escalation and negotiation. When the Russian invasion started (in February), David Owen, Robert Skidelsky, Anthony Brenton, Cristopher Granville and Nina Krushcheva suggested in an open letter to the *Financial Times* that 'it should be possible for NATO, in close association with Ukraine, to put forward detailed proposals to negotiate a new treaty with Russia that engenders no institutional hostility. This would cover: the verifiable withdrawal of nuclear-capable missiles; detailed military confidence-building measures limiting numbers and demarcating deployment; and an international agreement on presently contested borders between Russia and Ukraine.'[4]

Strategy of 'altercasting'

Going beyond that proposal, Óscar Arias and Jonathan Granoff suggested in July 2022 that NATO should start to plan and prepare for the withdrawal of all US nuclear warheads from Europe and Turkey prior to negotiations.[5] Withdrawal would take place once peace terms were agreed between Ukraine and Russia. This move would not weaken NATO militarily, but the proposal would get Putin's attention and might bring him to the negotiating table. This strategy is called 'altercasting': the idea is to persuade the other by positioning them differently and persuading them to act in accordance with their new role. This is how Mikhail Gorbachev dealt with Ronald Reagan in the mid-1980s.[6]

A 'demilitarised zone' and a 'UN-managed territory' might also be useful when considering an eventual peace deal. Demilitarisation has often been used to build a neutral zone between parties in a violent conflict; the UN has a long history of using peacekeeping and peacebuilding to assist and administer demilitarised zones and trust territories.

The UN has also directly managed entire territories, at least temporarily, as with the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor 1999-2002. The tasks in that country included maintaining security and order, providing relief assistance, helping to rebuild infrastructure, administering the territory based on the rule of law, and helping with the drafting of a new constitution and holding of elections.

An option that should be seriously considered is to demilitarise the contested territories in Eastern Ukraine and put them temporarily under the auspices of the UN. After a period of back-channel diplomacy and negotiations, the UN Security Council could declare, or the parties could directly negotiate, a binding ceasefire, with the deployment of a peacekeeping force and other UN personnel. The areas of Ukraine occupied by Russian forces would be demilitarised and governed temporarily by the UN, with some flexibility in specifying the boundaries of the territories.

The need for a transition period

A longer transition would be required than in East Timor: from ten to 20 years. And as eastern Ukraine is a large area, it would require substantial peacekeeping and other resources and administrative personnel. A 'UN transitional administration of Eastern Ukraine' would also be tasked with helping to negotiate and draft a new legal basis for the status of these regions and holding regular elections, as well as a possible referendum.

Ukraine's military non-alignment remains a key issue and must be part of the negotiations. Moreover, as part of the core UN Security Council resolution, other confidence-building actions could be added, such as a resumption of Russia-NATO nuclear and other military risk reduction talks and official disarmament talks.[7] As in many peace deals, the warring parties need outside assistance in making the first moves towards peace. Third-party facilitators and mediators should come primarily from countries that both parties see as outsiders to the conflict and could include representatives from bodies such as the International Court of Justice or Permanent Court of Arbitration.

At present, there is a dangerous trend in international relations to see the war in Ukraine only in military and moralistic terms, as a struggle between good and evil. Diplomatic efforts to solve the conflict are few, and are even discouraged. We believe, however, that the framework we have outlined for starting negotiations could contribute to de-escalation – and to giving peace a chance ●

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1 Peter Baker, 'Top US general urges diplomacy in Ukraine while Biden advisers resist', *The New York Times*, 10 November 2022 **2** Charles A Kupchan, 'It's time to bring Russia and Ukraine to the negotiating table', *The New York Times*, 2 November 2022 **3** See Tuomas Forsberg and Heikki Patomäki, *Debating the War in Ukraine: Counterfactual Histories and Future Possibilities*, Routledge, 2023 **4** Lord Owen and others, 'Letter: Remember Kissinger's advice to the Ukrainians', *Financial Times*, London, 28 February 2022 **5** Óscar Arias and Jonathan Granoff, 'Nuclear strategy and ending the war in Ukraine', *The Hill* 19 July 2022 **6** Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 1999 **7** In December 2020 a high-level group of 145 former generals, politicians, ex-diplomats and academics from the US, Europe and Russia, all concerned about increasing risks of nuclear and other military accidents, signed a report entitled 'Recommendations of the Expert Dialogue on NATO-Russia Military Risk Reduction in Europe'. The talks continued in a smaller group but have essentially been moribund after the Russian invasion of Ukraine

IMPACT OF UKRAINE WAR ON FORMER SOVIET FIEFDOMS

Central Asian republics look for new allies

None of the five post-Soviet Central Asian republics have backed Russia's war in Ukraine, though they've carefully avoided condemning their powerful neighbour. Each has security worries of its own

Michaël Levystone | Translated by George Miller



ALEXANDER NEMENOV - POOL - AFP - GETTY

Russia's war against Ukraine has put the Central Asian republics in an awkward position. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which all gained independence in 1991, have close ties with Moscow but are also on good terms with Ukraine (like them, a former Soviet republic). At the UN, these states have all maintained cautious neutrality: their representatives have abstained in votes condemning Russia's aggression and annexation of Ukrainian territory (or, as Turkmenistan, did not vote at all).

Behind this apparently united front, though, there are subtle differences of position. Leaders in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have refrained from all comment for fear of alienating Russia, which guarantees their security against neighbouring Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan's position has been less consistent: initially it appeared to back the Russian invasion, which President Sadyr Japarov called 'a necessary measure to protect the civilian population of the territories of the Donbass, where a large number of Russian citizens live'; later Japarov acknowledged Ukraine's right as a sovereign state to determine its own foreign policy direction. Kyrgyzstan has even sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

The prospect of Russia bogged down in Ukraine has prompted Asian republics to diversify their partnerships to ensure their own security

So have the two Central Asian republics which have been most vocal in their support for Ukraine: Uzbekistan, and especially Kazakhstan, which has a large Russian minority in its northern region, regarded by some Russian politicians as a 'gift from Russia'. Kazakhstan restated its attachment 'to the principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty and peaceful coexistence' after the referendums that led to Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Astana and Tashkent have maintained the same stance they had to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. No Central Asian state endorsed this earlier appropriation of Ukrainian territory, just as none recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 war in Georgia.

These Central Asian states have also reacted alike in opposing Russian attempts to recruit seasonal workers from their countries to fight in Ukraine following Vladimir Putin's partial mobilisation on 21 September 2022. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and even Turkmenistan – the state which provides fewest workers for the Russian labour market – have reminded any expatriate nationals tempted by Russia's offer of citizenship that serving in a foreign army may incur a prison sentence when they come home. The partial mobilisation presented Kazakhstan, the only Central Asian state that borders Russia, with a challenge, as by 4 October it had experienced an influx of some 50,000 Russian men fleeing the draft. Of the 200,000 Russians who have entered Kazakhstan since Putin's call-up, 147,000 have gone on to third countries, according to Kazakh interior minister Marat Akhmetzhanov.[1]

Security ties with Russia

When it comes to security, Russia has the closest ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These three countries – along with Belarus and Armenia – are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the defence pact established by Moscow in 2002 to provide mutual assistance in the event of an attack on one of its members by another power. Russia operates strategic sites in each of these countries: military bases in Kyrgyzstan (the 999th Air Base in Kant) and Tajikistan (the 201st Motorised Infantry Division in Dushanbe and Kurgan-Tyube); and in Kazakhstan, the Baikonur Cosmodrome (used for space launches), a military airfield in Kostanay, and a radar station (Balkhash-9) and anti-ballistic missile testing range (Sary-Shagan range) near Lake Balkhash.

Although Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan distanced themselves from Moscow when they gained independence, they returned to the Russian fold in the mid-2010s. And after Shavkat Mirziyoyev became Uzbek president in 2016, bilateral relations improved significantly, enabling enhanced military cooperation between the two countries. However, Mirziyoyev, like his predecessor Islam Karimov, has refused to re-join the CSTO, which his country left in 2012 even though it actively contributed to its creation.

Turkmenistan, the region's most closed state, has made an unambiguous rapprochement with Moscow in the form of the strategic partnership treaty President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow signed with Russia in the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat, in October 2017. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan and Russia have concluded multiple defence agreements (including one in early 2022), and Russian soldiers are reportedly manning the Turkmen-Afghan border.[2]

A Pandora's box may have been opened when CSTO peacekeepers were deployed in Kazakhstan between 6 and 13 January 2022, a sign that the Astana regime, weakened by internal revolts, was on the brink of collapse. The CSTO now risks being seen as exceeding its strictly military role and becoming a potential vehicle for Moscow's interference in its neighbours' internal affairs. In Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon, who has faced a strong challenge since late 2021 in the autonomous region of Gorno-Badakhshan (which borders Afghanistan), has tried (unsuccessfully) to mobilise the CSTO, alleging infiltration by jihadists from northern Afghanistan.

Disapproval of Moscow's actions

In addition to the CSTO, another regional organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), has given Russia military influence in Central Asia (Turkmenistan is the only non-member). Created in 2001, the SCO regularly conducts joint manoeuvres in the region, particularly to combat terrorism and drug-trafficking. However, unlike the CSTO, Russia is not the SCO's only major power: China, India, Pakistan and now Iran (which joined last September) are also members. Since its creation, the SCO has had a strong political dimension, creating a platform for dialogue that Russia tried to turn into an anti-Western front as its relations with the US and the EU deteriorated.

However, most SCO heads of state, who met for the first time since the beginning of the war in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) in mid-September 2022, made their disapproval of Russia's behaviour known. While China's president Xi Jinping, whose alliance with Russia is highly ambiguous, was tight-lipped about the war in Ukraine, his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (guest of honour in Samarkand) and India's prime minister Narendra Modi called for a cessation of hostilities and a diplomatic solution to the conflict. The summit was held at a time when armed clashes had resumed almost simultaneously on the disputed border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and between those of Armenia and Azerbaijan, a sign of Russia's loss of influence on its Central Asian and Caucasian fringes.

The image of an aggressive Russia bogged down in Ukraine has prompted the Central Asian republics to diversify their partnerships to ensure their own security. This desire for freedom from Russian influence has already benefited Moscow's traditional rivals in the region.

As soon as the war broke out, China's defence minister, Wei Fenghe, secured military cooperation agreements with its Central Asian suppliers of oil (Kazakhstan) and natural gas (Turkmenistan). President Xi's first international trip since the Covid-19 crisis was to Kazakhstan, where he assured his counterpart, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, of China's support for Kazakh territorial integrity. The proposals he put forward the next day at the SCO summit (for the creation of a military training centre in the region and the training of 2,000 law enforcement personnel) indicate China's interest in Central Asian security.

Although this is not new, it constitutes a further chipping away of the tacitly agreed division of roles between Moscow, whose domain has been security, and Beijing, which led on infrastructure investment. China's discreet opening of a military outpost in Tajikistan a few years ago to prevent Uyghur jihadists based in northeastern Afghanistan from reaching Xinjiang was just the first step. China regularly organises anti-drug trafficking exercises with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It has also gradually established itself as an arms supplier to Central Asian regimes, including Turkmenistan, to which it has provided HQ-9 air defence systems.

Ties with Turkish speakers

Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey confined itself to cultural and economic cooperation with Central Asia's Turkic-speaking countries. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan – but, again, not Turkmenistan – all joined the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), a group set up by Ankara in the late 2000s to bring together countries with which it has a cultural affinity (including Azerbaijan). Since the war in Ukraine, Erdoğan's strategy of influence towards the Central Asian republics – including Persian-speaking Tajikistan – has included a military dimension. Turkey has concluded a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty with a framework agreement for enhanced military cooperation with Uzbekistan (29 March 2022); a framework agreement for military cooperation with Tajikistan (21 April); and most significant of all, a strategic partnership treaty with Kazakhstan (10 and 11 May), providing for joint military manoeuvres and a production facility to make Anka drones locally – a first, which demonstrates the importance of Kazakhstan, the region's energy giant, to Turkey.

The US, discredited by its chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, has also taken advantage of the war in Ukraine to re-establish a foothold in Central Asia. Its strategy for regaining regional influence has focused on counterterrorism, its particular concern being Afghanistan, where Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed by a US drone in July 2022. Tajikistan is a natural dialogue partner for Washington, sharing the West's view of the Taliban regime, which it sees as a security threat on a par with Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP, the Afghan branch of ISIS).

Tajikistan is the only SCO country that refuses to talk to the Taliban. Signs of the rapprochement between Washington and Dushanbe include the approval of a $60m military aid plan to secure the Tajik-Afghan border and the organisation by US Central Command (CENTCOM) of an anti-terrorist exercise in Tajikistan last August in which other CSTO members (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) participated, as did Uzbekistan.

To strengthen the considerably weakened ties between the Central Asian countries and their main strategic ally, a Central Asia-Russia summit was held in Astana on 14 October, but this forum only highlighted the awkwardness between Moscow and its regional partners. Tajikistan's president Rahmon questioned Putin at length, demanding more respect for the region's 'small countries'. His aim may have been to draw Putin's attention to the security problems of his country, which is in open conflict with Kyrgyzstan: since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Tajikistan has seen more than a thousand Russian soldiers and officers previously based there redeployed to the Ukrainian front. Viewed from this angle, Rahmon's intervention can be interpreted not just as a criticism of the former imperial power, but also as an appeal to Russia not to throw all its military resources into Ukraine ●

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Above Still talking: (L-R clockwise) Presidents Tokayev (Kazakhstan), Japarov (Kyrgyzstan), Putin, Rahmon (Tajikistan), Prime Minister Pashinyan (Armenia), Stanislav Zas, Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and President Lukashenko (Belarus) hold a CSTO meeting at the Kremlin, Moscow, 16 May 2022

1 'Kazakh Interior Minister Says 200,000 Russians Have Entered Country Since Mobilization', Radio Free Europe, 4 October 2022 **2** Bruce Pannier, 'How are Russian soldiers helping Turkmenistan?' (in Russian), Radio Azattyk, 6 January 2020

MYKOLA TYS - SOPA - LIGHTROCKET - GETTY

'TO FREE OUR BROTHER UKRAINIANS FROM MOSCOW'S CHAINS'

Ukraine's double bind

Ukrainians have responded with fierce defiance, and sometimes even humour, to Russian aggression. But creating a sense of patriotism has also reawakened some troubling ghosts from the past

Éric Aunoble | Translated by George Miller



ATTILA HUSEJNOW - SOPA - LIGHTROCKET - GETTY

In early July last year, as people drank coffee and browsed among new titles at the Old Lion bookshop and café in central Lviv, a biography praising the fascist leader Stepan Bandera (1909-59) published by the magazine *Lokalna Istoriia* (Local History) went on display next to bags printed with 'Make books, not war'. This sums up the double bind facing Ukrainians: their country is expected to represent Europe's peaceful, democratic values in the war with Russia, but it is also nourishing its patriotic impulse, even if that means cultivating old nationalist instincts.

This ambivalence has been visible since the Maidan protests in 2013. Supporters of the civic movement seeking closer ties with the European Union waved both the yellow-and-blue Ukrainian flag and the star-spangled one of the EU. And the demonstrators who commemorated the deaths of the 100 victims of the Ukrainian authorities' crackdown in February 2014 shouted, 'Glory to Ukraine, Glory to the Heroes!' In the 1920s and 30s this was the rallying cry of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B), the far-right ultranationalist group to which Stepan Bandera belonged.[1]

In 1942 his supporters founded the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA),[2] which the following year carried out the Volhynia massacre,[3] a brutal ethnic cleansing operation in which tens of thousands of Poles were killed. Despite this, the Ukrainian government in 2014 chose the official day of the UPA's establishment, 14 October, as Ukraine Defenders Day. The declared purpose of this public holiday was 'to honour the courage and heroism of the defenders of Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity, military traditions and victories of the Ukrainian people, foster the further strengthening of patriotic spirit in society and support the initiative of the Ukrainian public'.[4]

Since the outbreak of war last February, history has been used more than ever to drum up patriotism. A bill on the 'decolonisation' of place names was put before the Rada (parliament) in April 2022 and passed its first reading in July. Its purpose is to eradicate place names which 'symbolise the occupying state' or commemorate people who implemented the Soviet state's 'totalitarian policy'. This link between contemporary Russia ('the occupier') and the 'totalitarian' Soviet Union points up its similarity to 2015's decommunisation laws, which many historians criticised at the time.[5]

Seven years on, however, the perspective has shifted. In 2015 the Russian threat was presented as the legacy of 70 years of communist dictatorship. Now, the Soviet period is seen as one episode in centuries-long domination by Russia, all traces of which must be swept away. Russia's latest aggression has lent weight to the idea that Moscow's subjugation of Ukraine is a form of colonialism. However, that view has caused academic controversy; Swiss historian Andreas Kappeler, for one, rejects it[6] and sees the absence of a racist dimension as a critical difference between Moscow's relationship with Ukraine and Western powers' domination of their African and Asian colonies.

Ukraine is expected to represent Europe's democratic values in the war with Russia while cultivating old nationalist instincts

Authors of Russian classics attacked

Derussification began at local level even before the bill passed into law. Last May the local authorities in Sumy, a city of 260,000 in northeast Ukraine, put a 'decommunisation and derussification' page on their website,[7] listing all the changes to street names since 2015 and inviting discussion about the next phase. In June a major Lviv weekly attacked authors of Russian classics, such as Lermontov, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Pasternak, calling them 'killers, looters, ignoramuses' as part of a push to reform school syllabuses,[8] which were indeed revamped over the summer. Ukrainian-born writers who wrote in Russian, such as Gogol and Bulgakov, retained their place but 'foreign' Russian writers have been dropped.[9]

In September a local politician in Kharkiv proposed renaming the city's Pushkin theatre. A majority of the city council in this largely Russian-speaking city oppose this, but actors back it and want to rename their theatre after the Ukrainian dramatist and founding figure in Ukrainian literature, Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko (1778-1843). A bust of Pushkin in the city centre was twice vandalised before the authorities had it removed on 9 November.[10]

Is this cultural aversion to Russia, which is prevalent in politics and the media, also the dominant form of patriotism in the wider population? No, to judge by the streets of Lviv in early July. The city, which was the cradle of Ukrainian nationalism, has taken in many refugees from the Russian-speaking east.[11] Among locals and people from the Donbass, one way of expressing patriotism was immediately apparent: half to two thirds of people in the street were wearing T-shirts with the country's coat of arms, a gold trident on a blue background. The tone of the accompanying slogans was mild, such as the very popular 'Good evening! We are from Ukraine', the chorus of a hit song by the electronic duo PROBASS Δ HARDI.

Another indication of the prevailing tone of patriotism is the popularity of stamps that the Ukrainian post office has issued since the invasion. Several of them use humour: one stamp depicts the Ukrainian soldier on Snake Island who famously told an officer on a Russian warship to 'go fuck yourself'. Another shows a Ukrainian tractor towing away a Russian tank. And a third uses a child's drawing to celebrate the rebirth of the 'Ukrainian Dream', a reference to Ukraine's Antonov AN-225 Mriya ('Dream') aircraft – the world's largest plane – destroyed at Hostomel airfield last February. To these benign, sometimes mawkish forms of patriotism, can be added images of pets being rescued from the war.

'The red viburnum in the meadow'

Since the war began, one song above all has become the common anthem of resistance to Russian aggression: *Oi u luzi chervona kalyna* (Oh, the red viburnum in the meadow):

'Oh, in the meadow a red viburnum has bent down low, / For some reason, our glorious Ukraine is in sorrow. / And we'll take that red viburnum and we will raise it up, / And, hey-hey, we shall cheer up our glorious Ukraine!…Marching forward, our fellow volunteers, into a bloody fray, / For to free our brother Ukrainians from the Muscovite shackles.'

Last March Andriy Khlyvnyuk, frontman of the group BoomBox, recorded it in combat fatigues on Kyiv's Sophia Square, since when it has been covered by other Ukrainian artists and even Pink Floyd. It has become the focus of real popular fervour; when a street singer struck up the song in central Lviv, a crowd of a people who all knew the words joined in. It was also sung in a refugee camp for people who fled Luhansk on the outskirts of Lviv. More surprisingly, a video of Miss Crimea 2022 singing it in the annexed region led to her being fined.[12]

Though the song's lyrics make it relevant to the present, it dates from the early 20th century (the red viburnum has a long history in Ukrainian folklore). In 1914 it became the anthem of the Ukrainian Sich Riflemen (USS), 'the first and most durable Ukrainian military formation during and after the first world war', according to the Internet Encyclopaedia of Ukraine.[13] The Ukrainian Legion was, however, created as part of the Austro-Hungarian army; the Habsburgs, who had ruled Galicia (the region of which Lviv was the capital) for 150 years, welcomed the involvement of their empire's minorities in the war, even if it meant allowing Ukrainians to wear a yellow-and-blue badge on their Austrian uniforms. As the conflict went on, the USS fought in very different configurations.

At first, they were deployed in the Carpathians against the Russian army. After the October Revolution of 1917, some of them were sent as prisoners of war to serve the People's Republic of Ukraine, which had just been proclaimed in Kyiv, to protect it from Bolshevik incursions. After the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed in late 1918, other USS detachments attempted in vain to defend the Ukrainian flag flying over Lviv against the troops of Józef Piłsudski's newly independent Poland. The city was at that time the capital of another short-lived People's Republic of Ukraine, known as the Western Republic. In the Polish-Soviet war of 1920, under the orders of Ukrainian leader Symon Petliura, they supported Polish forces against the Red Army.

Although the riflemen initially wore the uniform of one of the empires that dominated Ukraine, then joined conflicting alliances, and ultimately failed to build an independent Ukraine, they nevertheless later became a 'site of memory' for the nationalist movement that had developed in the Galician diaspora beyond the Soviet border.

What began as a nationalist, regional reference point has now become a national symbol, shared nationwide regardless of political affiliation. This piece of Galician history has since replaced other sources of Ukrainian patriotism, such as the Ukrainian People's Republic (1917-18) – which had Kyiv, not Lviv, as its capital – whose leaders were self-styled socialists. This episode, though promoted by the authorities in the 1990s and 2000s, has been fading from memory since 2014. As has the reality of what the years 1914-20 were like on Ukrainian soil: a clash of empires, then of new states, in which Ukrainians were often found on opposing sides – in the Tsarist and Austro-Hungarian armies, among the Bolsheviks and of course in pro-independence political forces which charted their course according to the vagaries of shifting alliances.

The reappearance of the ghosts of the Sich Riflemen in this war highlights a particularly relevant paradox in the history of Ukraine's national movement: to fight the 'main enemy' in the east, it has had to rely on foreign protectors, who have unsurprisingly pursued their own interests ●

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Above United in song: Ukrainian refugees in Warsaw sing their national anthem on Independence Day, 24 August 2022 **Below** Writing for Victory: sales of these stamps will fund a demining machine, 1 September 2022



1 'Glory to Ukraine, History of a slogan of the struggle for independence' (in Russian), Radio Svoboda, 19 June 2017 **2** Timothy Snyder, 'The Causes of Ukrainian-Polish Ethnic Cleansing, 1943', *Past and Present*, no 179, 2003 **3** Andrii Portnov, 'Les massacres de Volynie' (The Volhynia Massacre), in *Histoire partagée, mémoires divisées: Ukraine, Russie, Pologne*, Antipodes, Lausanne, 2021 **4** Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINP), 'On the adoption of October 14 as the Day of the Defender of Ukraine', 2014 **5** David Marples et al, 'Open Letter from Scholars and Experts on Ukraine Regarding the So-Called "Anti-Communist Law"', *Krytyka*, Kyiv, March 2015, Laurent Geslin and Sébastien Gobert, 'Ukraine topples Lenin's statues', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, December 2016 **6** Andreas Kappeler, *Ungleiche Brüder: Russen und Ukrainer vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Unequal brothers: Russians and Ukrainians from the middle ages to the present day), CH Beck, 2017, also published in French **7** smr.gov.ua/uk/dovidka/dekomunizatsiya.html **8** Siuzanna Bobkova, 'A great power that produces small men' (in Ukrainian), *Vysoky Zamok*, Lviv, 30 June 2022 **9** Iana Osadcha, 'In Ukraine, school syllabuses changed because of the war' (in Ukrainian), *Ukrainska Pravda*, Kyiv, 16 August 2022 **10** suspilne.media, Kharkiv, 21 and 26 September and 9 November 2022 **11** 150,000 refugees in a region with a population of 2.5 million (regional administration website, loda.gov.ua/news/42121, 4 October 2022) **12** 'Miss Crimea fined for singing patriotic Ukrainian song', *The Guardian*, London, 4 October 2022 **13** Petro Sodol, 'Ukrainian Sich Riflemen', *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine*