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The New Turn in Ukraine: Putin's War Becomes Biden's War



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Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, it was fair to call the ensuing conflict “Putin’s war.” True, the U.S. and Europe could probably have avoided the invasion by calling a halt to NATO expansion and negotiating seriously with the Russians about key security issues. True, U.S. arms had been pouring into Ukraine since the overthrow of the pro-Russian government there in 2014, and Ukraine was using them to kill pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass region. But Putin was still responsible for crossing the line into organized violence. It does matter who shoots first, and he shot first.

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Even so, that is not the end of the discussion. Far from it. At first one could rightfully have called this Putin's war, but it has now become Joe Biden's war as well.

Consider what has happened so far. The advance of Russian troops toward Kyiv was stalled by a combination of factors, including Russian military problems, Ukrainian determination, and Western weaponry. Whether the invaders' intention was actually to take Kiev or to lay the groundwork for a more serious campaign in Ukraine's south and east is not clear, but the advance faltered with heavy losses in men and equipment.

Russia repositioned and strengthened its forces for an attack on the Donbass, long the arena for a violent civil conflict between pro-Russian and pro-Western Ukrainians, and the coastal provinces connecting that region with Crimea. The Zelensky regime requested additional arms from the United States, and the Biden regime granted it an additional \$800 million in advanced weaponry, in addition to the billions previously sent to Kyiv and a continuation of direct military support in the form of intelligence, training, and planning.

The Russians pressed their campaign in the south and east, but Pentagon and State Department officials, elated by Ukrainian successes, were now promising even larger shipments of heavy weapons to Kyiv and talking about a Ukrainian "victory" after several more months of fighting. The U.S. secretaries of State and Defense traveled to Ukraine and returned promising to provide the Zelensky regime with all the military and economic support it might need in order to "defeat" Russia and to "weaken" that nation to the point that it would be unable to threaten others militarily.

Clearly, the Americans' war goals had escalated. What, exactly, are these goals? Since the administration has kept them vague, nobody really knows, but one can easily imagine "maximalist" and "minimalist" positions. At the max, the U.S. hopes that Russia will be unable to secure control of the Donbass region and the Azov coast and will take so much punishment that it will be forced to admit failure and withdraw its forces, quite likely jeopardizing Vladimir Putin's hold on power. Minimally, the Biden regime wants Ukraine to do well enough in the field to fight the Russians to a draw and force them to negotiate on terms highly favorable to Kyiv.

Whichever scenario is followed, Washington's perspective has clearly become both more optimistic – even "triumphalist" — and more hardened. Biden and his team now want the war to continue for several months at least, and to assure this result have agreed to supply Ukraine with a larger quantity of sophisticated weapons than have ever been supplied by the United States to any other ally. At the same time, the President and his honchos are less inclined to take seriously the possibility of a major escalation of violence or resort to

cyberwarfare by the Russians, and more inclined to give Zelensky everything he wants short of a no-fly zone. (Apparently, even a no-fly zone is now being discussed sub rosa.)

What could possibly justify playing such a high-risk game of chicken? Philosophically, the argument seems to be that since Putin began the war unjustly, the Ukrainians and their sponsors have the right to intensify and prolong it in order to defeat and punish the aggressors. The assumption is that the defenders in an unjust war situation have no duty to negotiate with aggressors – not even if their own actions (and inactions) set the stage for the aggression, and not even if their refusal to negotiate risks starting a nuclear war.

Thus, if the Russians should respond to the latest U.S. escalation by – God forbid! – using hypersonic missiles or weapons of mass destruction, their actions would be considered an extension of Putin’s original sin rather than a response to a direct threat to their own security and welfare.

This illustrates the fallacy of defining a war as just or unjust purely on the basis of who began it. No – *a war is unjust not only if it is wrongly started, but also if it is wrongly escalated and prolonged.* The origins of a conflict alone do not determine its ethical or unethical content. If Putin now offered a ceasefire in order to negotiate the status of the Donbass republics and to assert other Russian needs and interests, would the U.S. and Ukraine be justified in refusing to talk in order to punish or “weaken” him? Of course not! In a world of competitive nations, “weakening” Russia as some Bidenites propose really means eliminating that nation as a significant player in international politics. If this is the nature of the threat now posed by the new U.S. war aims, Russians will naturally consider raising the ante by making new threats of their own.

What accounts for this new turn in American policy? One cannot avoid thinking that motives more complex and ambitious than the defense of Ukrainian independence are involved.

Calling the Russians’ nuclear bluff (if it is a bluff) and demonstrating the supreme power of U.S. weaponry secures American hegemony in all of Europe, demonstrates that the American Empire still has teeth, and prepares the ground for a U.S. “pivot” toward confrontation with China. The happiest campers in the American/European camp are the militarists, the military-industrial companies, and the politicians hungering for a new Cold – or, for that matter, Hot – war.

Whatever the relevant motives may be, it seems clear that Putin’s War has also become Biden’s War. The Russian leader wrongfully started it and the American leader wrongfully prolongs it. The war’s current victims are Ukrainians and Russians; its potential victims, if this escalation continues to spiral, are the peoples of Europe and the world. Surely, it is

time for all parties concerned to step back from the precipice, to sit together with Secretary-General Guterres, and to talk sensibly about their legitimate needs and interests.

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