

War in Ukraine: A Continuation of the Cold War?

When we thought the end of the pandemic was around the corner (except in China where the government is obsessed with a draconian COVID-19 zero policy), people around the world was shaken by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, although President Putin chose to call it “a special military operation”.

The war in Ukraine reminds us that power politics is well alive in the mindset of human beings. It means that we have not changed much since we became the dominant specie on this planet, and despite the network of international institutions built after War World II to avoid war and maintain global balance.

To put it in simple terms, power politics is the exercise of military, economic or any other form of power carried out to influence or control the behavior of a state in a manner desired by another state exercising such a power from a stronger position.

In this regard, Russia exercised the most basic form of power politics, placing its military at the border with Ukraine to send a message to the government and people of Ukraine: submit to the dictates of Russia or face the consequences. Certainly, the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky decided to follow the independent path they had already achieved after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The Russian attack has been executed on the east and south of Ukraine, although initially the Russian troops were heading to the capital, Kyiv, but suddenly were redeployed due to unexpected resistance from Ukrainian forces. The Russian invasion is now focused on the eastern and southern part of the country where most of the ethnic Russian population live.

Certainly, the history of Russia and Ukraine is very much intertwined. Both peoples come from the same ethnic group, Slavs, and trace their cultural origins to *Kievan Rus*, a period when Kyiv became the center of Slavic power in the early middle age. Russian and Ukrainian languages are similar, although both languages evolved to acquire their own identities. Most of Russians and Ukrainians are Christians, belonging to the Eastern Orthodox Church. No without reason, Pope Francis compared the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the killing of Abel by his brother Cain, described in the Bible.

According to historical accounts, *Kievan Rus* became the center of Slavic power from northern Europe (Scandinavia) to the Black Sea, ruling over a loose federation of principalities from the late 9th century to the first half of the 13th century, when it succumbed to the Mongol attacks.

Later on, Kyiv felled under control of several competing states such as the Duchy of Lithuania (14th to 16th centuries), the Kingdom of Poland and Poland-Lithuania Commonwealth (14th to 16th centuries) the Crimean Khanate (15th to 18th centuries), Otoman Empire (14th to 20th centuries) and the Russian period, which included the Tsarist and Communist Russia from the 18th century to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Russians ruled Ukraine over 300 years, but before that period Ukrainians managed to obtain some autonomy during the Cossack rule (Cossack Hetmanate, 1649-1775), established in the central north-eastern regions of Ukraine. Ukraine also experienced a brief and precarious independence between the collapse of the Tsarist Russia in 1917 and the establishment of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republic (USSR) in 1922.

Ukraine finally became an independent nation in 1991 after the dissolution of the USSR. It also became part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), integrated by former soviet socialist republics, but withdrew from the grouping in 2018 due to rising tensions generated by the Russian occupation of Crimea, and ensuing war against a separatist movement backed by Russia in the Donbas region.

To understand the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we have to bear in mind two key moments in the history of Ukraine-Russia relations: the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Euromaidan of 2013 or Revolution of Dignity.

The Orange Revolution was originated by massive protests against the presidential election results in 2004 between two Ukrainian candidates, Viktor Yushchenko and the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich, where the latter was declared the winner; however, there was ample evidence of fraud, and a new run-off was held resulting in the victory of Viktor Yushchenko. These protests became a milestone in Ukraine politics, showing a citizen movement challenging government attempts to impose a candidate via election fraud in the post-soviet era. Indeed, it represented a bad example for the neighboring and strong-handed governments of Russia and Belarus, generating a potential contagion effect beyond the borders of Ukraine.

In addition, and another cause of concern for Russia, was the approach of Ukraine to the European Union as well as its bid to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was created to contain the soviet communist expansion after War World II. Certainly, these developments (anti-Russian protests and possible access to the EU market and security scheme) deeply shaped the animosity of President Putin towards Ukraine.

The second development in the Ukraine-Russia relations was the Euromaidan, a series of protests at the Independence Plaza of Kyiv in November 2013. These protests erupted after the pro-Russian government of President Viktor Yanukovich suspended the signature of an association agreement with the European Union, and instead sought closer economic relations with Moscow. In fact, Yanukovich had already stopped Ukraine's accession bid to NATO a few months after he won the 2010 presidential election, in line with his pro-Russian stand.

The long protests in favor of the European association agreement ended up with the ousting of President Yanukovich in February 2014, who fled to Russia. In response, the Russian government occupied and annexed the Crimean Peninsula, which houses the strategic Russian navy base of Sevastopol in the Black Sea and is mostly populated by ethnic Russians. Later on, in April of the same year, Russian-backed separatists declared independence from Ukraine establishing the

People's Republics of Donetsk and the People's Republic of Luhansk in the region of Donbas in south-eastern Ukraine, near the Russian border. It triggered a conflict between the government of Ukraine and Russian-instigated rebels, which has lasted until today. Interestingly, on February 21, a few days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Moscow recognized the independence of both, Donetsk and Luhansk.

The Russian Invasion of Ukraine has generated international condemnation and strong economic and other sanctions from the US, the European Union, Japan and other countries. At this moment, Russia is focusing his war efforts to control the eastern and southern parts of Ukraine, seeking perhaps to block the access of Ukraine to the Black Sea. Indeed, Russia might be pursuing the creation of a buffer zone extending probably to Moldova, given the possibility of Ukraine to become a member of NATO. In this regard, we recently heard a Russian general talking about the establishment of a land corridor from Donbas all the way to Transnistria, a Moldova region populated by Russian-speaking people near the border with Ukraine.

Assuming there is no further escalation of the conflict such as employing higher-grade weapons (chemical or nuclear) from Russia, European nations or the US, Putin might attempt to secure his positions in the so-called land corridor and declare victory on May 9 (Day of Victory against Nazi Germany) for the consumption of the Russian people, saving his face and maintaining his grip on power.

This scenario implies that NATO and US would resort to some sort of containment strategy, similar to that applied in 1947 to stop the expansion of the Soviet Union. This strategy called for "a long term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies". I have already explained about the US containment policy in a previous article titled "*A New Cold War or Emerging Digital War?*" posted in my blog sunao.co.

However, this time, the objective of Western nations would be restraining the expansion of high-tech authoritarian or strong-handed form of governments in Europe and other parts of the world. It would no longer be a struggle to show what economic system is superior; it would be a battle to show what political system, using artificial intelligence and other tool of the digital age, is more efficient to maintain the stability of societies across the world.

In my view, this is a continuation of the Cold War, with a digital component, reactivated by the Trump administration when the US imposed restrictions and banned Chinese high-tech companies considered a risk to the US national security. Certainly, the Russia invasion of Ukraine will bring Russia and China much closer than before as they share the same form of high-tech authoritarian form of capitalism, and indeed need each other to face the challenges posed by the US and its allies.

Dr. Ritter Diaz
International Consultant
Tokyo, April 25, 2022

A note of thanks to Ayana Diaz Hatada for the Japanese translation.

Sources:

“Kievan Rus”, The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed on March 30, 2022.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Kyiv/History>

“Cossack Hetmanate”, New World Encyclopedia, accessed on April 2, 2022.

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cossack_Hetmanate

“Orange Revolution”, Wikipedia, accessed on April 3, 2022.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orange_Revolution

“Euromaidan”, Wikipedia, accessed on April 5, 2022.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euromaidan>

“Russian General Lets Slip a Secrete Plan to Invade Another Country and Seize Ukraine’s Entire Coastline”, Barbie Latza Nadeau, April 22, 2022; accessed on April 23, 2022.

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/russian-general-lets-slip-a-secret-plan-to-invade-moldova-and-seize-ukraines-entire-coastline?source=articles&via=rss>