No exit: Logic and rationality in the Ukraine crisis

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"The nations were caught in a trap … a trap from which there was, and has been, no exit".
Barbara Tuchman (2014), *The Guns of August*

The crisis in Ukraine is a symptom rather than the cause of the broader crisis in European security and global order. In the 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War in that year, none of the fundamental problems of European security were resolved, giving rise to the quarter-century of the cold peace, which in 2014 gave way to a renewed period of confrontation that assumed the form of a Second Cold War. Two fundamentally logical ways of understanding European order were at work, both rational in their own terms but rendered irrational when seen in the larger context of the challenge of creating a viable security order in a continent that has been so often ravaged by war. In other words, the logical is not always the most rational. As in the incompatible logics that led to war in 1914, it is not clear how the post-Cold War logical traps can be escaped. The perspective of alternative rationalities may provide an explanation of the logical traps, if not supply an exit route.

Competing logics

The problem of *competing rationalities* has long been identified as a central factor provoking the deterioration in relations between Russia and the European Union (EU) (Averre 2009), but the question can be reformulated.

On the one side there is the logic of *expansion*. This made perfect sense from the perspective of those who came to be seen as the 'victors' at the end of the Cold War. The long-term adversary not only renounced the ideology in whose name the struggle against capitalist democracy been waged, but two years later the homeland of revolutionary socialism disintegrated. This really did look like 'the end of history', with no sustained ideological alternative to capitalist modernity on offer. The expansive dynamic of the victorious West, moreover, was welcomed and embraced by much of the former Soviet 'empire' in Eastern Europe, and some of the post-Soviet states even aspired to join the institutions of victorious modernity, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU. Together these two organisations became the core of what at this time was rebranded as the Liberal International Order (LIO). This order, buttressed by its associated economic and cultural globalisation, offered an era of peace and prosperity, with state interests subordinated to the larger logic of multilateralism and rules-based order. If the issue was simply the enlargement of an impartial and universal normative order, then some of the later problems may have been avoided. However, at the heart of that order there was a hegemonic power system that was far from impartial and universal. The core of the LIO was a particular power system led by the United States, with its major multilateral manifestation, NATO, firmly part of that order. In other words, the LIO was a particular power system that not only claimed to be universal but it even presented itself as synonymous with order itself (Sakwa 2017a).

From the outset, the logic of expansion was opposed by Russia, the continuer state to the Soviet Union. Even in the last days of the USSR, the architect of perestroika, Mikhail Gorbachev, considered the end of the Cold War a mutual victory – the triumph of the New Political Thinking (NPT) that had long been nurtured in various academic institutes and think tanks, and of common sense (English 2000).

The logic of expansion was countered by the logic of *transformation*, the view that the end of the Cold War offered a unique opportunity to move beyond ideological confrontation between and within states. The idea of revolutionary socialism and class war would give way to a politics of reconciliation and all-class development. The logic of transformation encompassed a move away from hair-trigger nuclear deterrence (mutually assured destruction) and thus to broader arms control agreements. In Europe there would be a new pan-continental security and development order, designated the Common European Home by Gorbachev but later described by Vladimir Putin as Greater Europe. This was to be a house with many rooms, as Gorbachev (1989) described it; in other words, with a range of social systems but united in the desire for a new peace order to govern from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

The tension between these two logical systems gave way in 2014 to outright confrontation. Realists argue that there was no reason for the powerful West to make any serious concessions to the much weaker Russia (Wohlforth and Zubok 2017). This was the logic of power, and in the prevailing conditions, it was perfectly rational. However, for a way of thinking that is focused on power balances and capabilities, the advocates of expansion were remarkably negligent about the power consequences of their actions. Power is never an absolute but it is relational. An action on one side will have consequences on the other side, including various asymmetric responses. The structure of the international system is important, but even here there is room for interpretation about the operative model. Russia and its allies (notably China) believe that the international system is bigger than any particular order contained within it (above all the LIO), with the United Nations and other multilateral global bodies (notably the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organisation); whereas partisans of the LIO believe that their particular order is universal and applicable globally. Realists see the whole system governed by the rules of hegemony in an anarchical system, but this can be accompanied by 'offshore balancing' and thus avoiding direct and permanent confrontation with residual powers such as Russia (Mearsheimer 2001/2014).

Russian foreign policy in the post-communist era moved from the eager embrace of the West in the early 1990s, to a rather more cautious period of 'competitive coexistence' in the Yevgeny Primakov years in the late 1990s. Putin's 'new realism' from 2000 returned to elements of the transformation advocated by Gorbachev, although combined with less of his NPT internationalism and more sovereign internationalism. Putin tried to find a new way to reconcile the competing logics, and despite his increasingly bitter condemnation of what he believed to be the bad faith of the West, notably in his Munich Security Conference speech in February 2007 (Putin 2007), believed that some sort of cooperative *modus vivendi* could be achieved. However, the West's intervention in Libya in 2011 was the last straw, and put an end not only to Dmitry Medvedev's chances of a second term but also to the whole intellectual basis of the new realism. Instead, the Putin who returned to the Kremlin in 2012 no longer believed in the possibility of deep cooperation with the Western powers. This does not mean that Russia became a revisionist power. Instead, it was neo-revisionist: challenging the practices of the West, but defending the autonomy of the international system as a whole. This is the 'neo' part of the qualified revisionism pursued by Russia since 2012. Russia is not out to subvert the West but to change it – to try to make it behave according to the logic of

international law as formulated in the original Cold War rather than the logic of expansive ambitions that came to predominate in the post-Cold War years.

Russia defends the idea of conservative (or sovereign) internationalism, in which states compete and the balance of power is important, but this is tempered by international law and organisations, above all the UN. This is what gives agency, in the form of Putin's leadership, not only room for manoeuvre but also a normative basis on which to counter the logic of expansion. However, the extraordinary ambition of the expanding Atlantic power system after 1989, and even more so in its LIO guise, meant that ultimately the normative or institutional scope for innovation remained remarkably limited. As Fyodor Lukyanov notes, the solid post-war [1945] system (although not without moments of dramatic crisis) has now entered its finale: "The period of 1989-1991 did not destroy the model that emerged after World War II but deformed it" particularly because of the disappearance of the second centre. "The previous world order has not been replaced with something else, nor has it collapsed", and instead it has begun to crumble (Lukyanov 2019). In other words, from the Russian perspective, the expansive ambitions of the Atlantic power system after 1989 eroded even the modicum of order that had prevailed until then. Russia has repeatedly called for "the creation of a European international security system", although it is "well aware that it is unlikely to gain even the hypothetical support of its European partners" (Bordachev 2020).

Max Weber's distinction between formal and substantive rationality theoretically offers an escape from logical traps. Formal rationality mainly refers to rational calculation determined by rules, regulations, and laws to maximise profitability, and is often negligent of humanity. The model that dominates in the Western industrial world is one in which action has a consistent structure, and its elements point in one direction. In substantive rationality, the choice of means to ends is guided by a set of human values. It concerns several instead of final ends, with the focus on the values that guide people in their daily lives. Substantive rationality is a manifestation of a person's capacity for value-rational action. For our purposes, in International Relations theory, realism is very good at developing the logic of formal rationality in the behaviour of states (notably, the works of John Mearsheimer), whereas constructivism deals in neither logic nor rationality but emotions and constructed identities. Liberal internationalism deals well with normative and value issues in foreign policy, but ultimately fails to appreciate the question of power and identity in international politics. What this means for us is that the formal rationality (termed logical thinking in this paper) may lead to one set of conclusions in all three main schools of International Relations, but lack the larger human perspectives that govern substantive rationality.

The Ukrainian syndrome

This is the context in which the Ukraine crisis unfolded. The two models of post-Cold War international order came into confrontation, and were then 'weaponised' by competing domestic models of Ukrainian development. The division between the more 'pro-Western' social forces in the West of the country and the more 'pro-Russian' inclinations in the East and the South have long been apparent through differential voting patterns (D'Anieri 2019). It is hardly surprising that Ukraine is at the centre of the struggle between logic and rationality, since 'nearly all major efforts at establishing a durable post-Cold War order on the Eurasian continent have foundered on the shoals of Ukraine. For it is in Ukraine that the disconnect between triumphalist end-of-history delusions and the ongoing realities of great-power competition can be seen in its starkest form' (Plokhy and Sarotte 2020, p. 81). The struggle over geopolitical orientations is accompanied by two competing models of state development.

On the one side, the *monist* model stresses the development of a culturally distinctive and politically assertive form of Ukrainian nationalism. This is not the same as the integral nationalism of earlier years, although it draws on the legacy of Stepan Bandera, the founder of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Roman Shukhevich, the creator of the Ukrainian Partisan Army (UPA). Monist neo-nationalists argue that there is some sort of historically coherent autonomous essence to the Ukrainian nation that needs to be sculpted out of the larger East Slavic and Russophone block. This neo-nationalist approach sought hegemony over state and nation building in the post-Soviet years. It is neo-nationalist to the extent that its nationalism is moderated by civic inclusivity. Although its avowedly nationalist wing prioritises a single-minded vision of Ukraine, the country has been generous to its minorities. The starkest representation of the neo-nationalist monist approach was embodied in the 1996 constitution, which gave legal force to Ukraine as a politically mono-lingual country, although the use of other languages was recognised in non-political spheres. Thus, all documentation and official records are in the one language, even though a very large proportion of the population is multilingual, with about 20 percent predominantly Russian-speaking. zzz

The ideology of monist neo-nationalism is restitutive, seeking to restore perceived earlier distortions of Ukrainian national development. This conforms to classic patterns of post-colonial development, which also predominated in Estonia and Latvia. However, post-colonial identities by definition are hybrid, whereas in the Ukrainian case hybridity is tolerated at the cultural level, but was not given adequate constitutional expression. Post-communist Ukraine offered citizenship to all those living in Ukraine at the time of independence, but an exclusionary and didactic dynamic has been at work. This intensified in response to developmental and political failures, and was radicalised at the time of the Orange Revolution in late 2004, and even became militarized as a result of the Euromaidan revolution in 2014 (Katchanovski 2020). The loss of Crimea and the war in the Donbas endowed this militant neo-nationalism with a crusading edge that in the Petro Poroshenko years (2014-19) saw a campaign against Soviet and Russian historical and cultural legacies. The Ukraine case demonstrates that civic nationalism can be as exclusivist as ethnocultural nationalism (Zhuravlev and Ishchenko 2020). Thus, today monist neo-nationalism has become institutionalised and greatly constrains the room for manoeuvre by the leadership. It is now presented as the only authentic form of Ukrainian development (Sakwa 2017b). Concessions to the Donbas insurgency are seen as betrayal, and the war is defined as Russian aggression, and thus effectively an inter-state war.

There is, however, another side to Ukrainian state development, although since 2014 it has been greatly eclipsed. The monist neo-nationalist interpretation of Ukrainian national identity is challenged by the pluralists. They draw on post-colonial theory to argue that a hybrid and heterogeneous nation is something to be celebrated, on the model of many other countries and territories that have a multiplicity of histories and identities. In Wales and Canada, linguistic and territorial diversity have been constitutional in form. Pluralists stress the multiple character of Ukrainian state and national development over the centuries, which in the 20th century was reinforced by a high degree of territorial contingency. Ukraine is one of the few countries that resist giving constitutional expression to its diversity. Until 2014, Ukraine was very tolerant of other languages and identities, but the radicalisation of monist neo-nationalism after 2014 has pushed this to its limits and exposed the dangers of the lack of constitutional protection for other cultural and linguistic identities. Toleration is no substitute for the transformative constitutional incorporation of diversity. With a history of unstable and typically disastrous attempts at creating an independent Ukraine, concern about territorial integrity and national coherence is understandable. However, radical neo-nationalism alienated the population of Crimea and provoked the revolt in the East.

The tension between monist neo-nationalist and pluralist interpretations of Ukrainian national identity gave rise to 'the Ukraine syndrome', clashing interpretations of what it means to be Ukrainian. The syndrome shaped the debates over Ukrainian state development after 1991, and the tensions that it reflects were amplified by the larger European divisions in the post-Cold War years. The tension between the monist neo-nationalist and pluralist models of state development was exacerbated by the larger division between expansive and transformative models of European international politics. International conflict was internalised and the Ukraine syndrome was internationalised (Sakwa 2016).

The Minsk impasse

The Ukraine syndrome has domestic and international components, and the combination of the two creates a 'wicked' problem in which the various dimensions reinforce each other, and where there is no simple primary cause susceptible to resolution. The problem is multi-dimensional, and thus the solution will likewise have to incorporate multiple factors. Wicked problems require holistic solutions, but in our case existential issues of identity, even national survival, are at play, and no clear resolution can be found.

The Minsk II Accord of February 2015 stabilised the conflict and at first appeared to offer a route out of the crisis. The agreement stipulates, *inter alia*, that elections are to be held in the two breakaway republics (the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic) before control of the territories is returned to Ukraine. In the event, the Accord only stabilised matters, and became the main obstacle to change. It became one of the foundation stones of the 'five principles' outlined by Federica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in March 2016. The five principles were: full implementation of the Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia's former Soviet neighbours; strengthening the EU's resilience to Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on certain issues, such as counter-terrorism; and support for people-to-people contacts. Minsk became the cornerstone of relations between the EU and Russia, and thus placed an insuperable block on their improvement. This was a recipe for deadlock and rendered EU-Russian relations hostage to Kiev. These principles have imposed stasis in pan-European relations, with the Ukraine-related sanctions unanimously renewed every six months. New ideas about relations between Russia and the EU cannot be introduced as long as the system is locked into the rhetoric of the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

More broadly, there can be no return to the previous pattern of relations. 'Business as usual' had not helped avert the crisis in the first place, and it not clear what alternatives are available. The third Mogherini principle, resilience, was defined as a way of managing and suppressing threats emanating from Moscow, and thus reinforced Russia as the subaltern in the relationship. Russia's implicit recognition of its subordinate position came in the much-repeated formula that sanctions had been imposed by the EU, and therefore it was up to the EU to lift them. Russian formulation of alternatives to the existing pattern of relations was rendered illegitimate and diplomacy became no more than ritual. Russia is not a signatory of the Minsk Accords, and this only reinforces its marginality, with the initiative firmly in Western hands, even though in structural terms Russia is a major player.

Rather than providing a way of resolving the conflict, Minsk became the formula for freezing not only the war in Ukraine but the entire system of European international relations. This reinforced the pattern since 1991, characterised by the paucity of institutional and ideational innovation. Various ideas have been advanced to offer a way out for the Donbas,

typically drawn from the repertoire of ideas based on consociationalism. For example, in his meeting with Putin in March 2015, the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi offered the 'South Tyrol model', which grants the people of Trentino-Alto Adige (South Tyrol) wide autonomy as part of a wider Austrian-Italian settlement (Kortunov 2020). However, neither the international environment nor the character of Russo-Ukrainian relations is conducive to such a power-sharing settlement. Kiev fears that endowing the two republics with some permanent autonomous political status would grant them, and Moscow, leverage over Ukrainian politics, thus blocking Ukraine's road to NATO membership.

Above all, such a deal is blocked by the defenders of the monist neo-nationalist model of Ukrainian statehood. These include not just ultra-nationalists such as Oleg Tyagnibok's Svoboda Party and neo-fascist formations such as Azov, C14, the Social-National Assembly, and Revansh, but also mainstream political parties, including Yulia Tymoshenko's Fatherland Party and Petro Poroshenko's European Solidarity (Hahn 2020). Even the rather modest humanitarian step of restoring water supplies to Crimea and defining the war in the East as an internal Ukrainian conflict was met with howls of outrage. Commentators even suggested that such talk raised "difficult questions about the limits of democracy" (Nahaylo 2020).

Innovation is also blocked by the stasis in the EU itself. Since 2014, it has pursued a 'no talk, no meeting' approach, and although tempered in recent years, the fundamental principle of avoiding substantive negotiations with Moscow has held remarkably firm and is in conformity with Mogherini's five principles. The 'no talk' policy also includes relations with NATO. Meetings of the NATO-Russia Council were suspended in 2014, at the time when they were most needed, and although they have now resumed, their limited agenda has turned them into little more than mutual recrimination sessions. There is no discussion of fundamental issues of European security. The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov (2020), noted that NATO leaders stated that they were open to dialogue with Russia, but by that they meant "an opportunity for airing their grievances against Russia, primarily over Ukraine". He stressed that "NATO has nothing to do with Ukraine. We have dialogue with those Western countries that are engaged in Ukrainian settlement, first of all the participants in the Normandy format, France and Germany". In his view, NATO only aggravated the issue by declaring that at some point it expected Ukraine to join the alliance.

The European voice has been notable by its absence in even the little discussion about arms control agreements. The new Commission appointed in 2019 headed by Ursula van der Leyen argued that it would be more 'geopolitical', although it is not clear what is meant by this. If it means the assertion of the EU's collective interests in a more 'statist' and assertive manner, then that would be a recipe for disaster; but if it means taking into account the national interests of others, then it could open the door to renewed dialogue and diplomacy. Either way, it is clear that the EU has become a weaker player, with the European Parliament elected in 2019 more fragmented than ever before. To compensate, the EP has been assertive in various directions, including a strong green agenda and decarbonisation (Entin and Entina 2019). In September 2019 the European Parliament (2019) passed a controversial resolution likening the historical experience of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism, and noted that "there is still an urgent need to raise awareness and carry out moral and legal assessments of the crimes of communist dictatorships". The move effectively delegitimised the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, and intensified the mnemonic war between Russia and Europe. The clash of geopolitical and ideational logics was now reinforced by a cultural struggle over memory and history.

Zelensky looks for an exit

It is in this context that President Volodymyr Zelensky advanced various strategies to resolve the crisis. Zelensky won a landslide in the presidential election of 21 April 2019, and then on 21 July his party, Servant of the People, gained an overwhelming majority in parliament. His campaign promised peace, and on this basis won overwhelming public support. His basic strategy was to achieve some sort of 'grand bargain' with Putin, over the heads of the leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. He was critical of the Normandy format, suggesting the inclusion of the United States and the United Kingdom. He also suggested humanitarian outreach to the Ukrainians living in the breakaway territories (Kudelia 2020). Meeting at the UN in September, Trump showed no interest and instead advised Zelensky to 'get together with Putin to solve your problem' (AP 2019).

Soon after, Zelensky endorsed the 'Steinmeier formula', which stipulates the timing of the implementation of the law on the special status of the republics. It would come into effect when the polls closed after regional elections, but would only become permanent after the elections had been endorsed as fair by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and in conformity with Ukrainian legislation. Russia saw the formula as a way of ensuring that Ukraine did not renege on the Minsk obligation to provide autonomy for the two regions. The acceptance of the formula on 1 October sparked the mobilisation of neo-nationalist protest actions, with large rallies held on Maidan Square on 6 October and 8 December. In fact, a major coalition of civic activists mobilised against Zelensky's attempt to open up space for dialogue, considerably narrowing his room for manoeuvre in negotiations with Putin. The protest movement was reinforced by the coercive power of radical right-wing groups.

However, Zelensky was supported in his endeavours by Igor Kolomoisky, the oligarch who had long been one of his strongest backers and whose TV channel had broadcast the 'Servant of the people' series, which had propelled the actor playing the role of the fictitious president (Zelensky) to national prominence. In an interview with the *New York Times* in November 2019, Kolomoisky is reported to have stated, "They're stronger anyway. We have to improve our relations", comparing Russia's power to Ukraine's. He went on: "people want peace, a good life, they don't want to be at war. And you [referring to America] are forcing us to be at war, and not even giving us the money for it … You all won't take us [into NATO] … There's no use wasting time on empty talk. Whereas Russia would love to bring us into a new Warsaw Pact". Kolomoisky argued that he was working hard to end the war, but did not give details on how, but it was clear that he now rejected the idea of a war against Russia to the last Ukrainian the ideology of war against Russia to the last Ukrainian (Troianovski 2019, 13).

A prisoner swap in late 2019 was the first major step towards confidence-building, accompanied by the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from three points along the contact line. Then on 9 December a meeting of the Normandy Four in Paris brought Putin and Zelensky together for the first time, along with French President Emmanuel Macron and the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The talks were held in a constructive atmosphere, with the final communiqué recognising that the resolution of the Donbas conflict required an improvement in the European regional security architecture (Utkin 2019). However, no pathway to peace was devised. Zelensky was accompanied in Paris by Arsen Avakov, who had been confirmed as minister of the interior by Zelensky, a post he had held since immediately after the change of regime in February 2014. Avakov effectively acted as Zelensky's minder, ensuring that he did not stray too far from the monist neo-nationalist script. Even while the meeting in Paris was continuing, the former president, Petro Poroshenko was urging a rally in the Maidan to revolt against Zelensky if he gave too much away in Paris. It was clear that Zelensky's room

for manoeuvre was extremely limited. He boxed himself in further following the Paris meeting when, at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020, he effectively endorsed the opposition's 'red lines'. These included the need to fulfil 'security' requirements before regional elections could take place, including control over the border (possibly jointly with the separatist forces), and that the 'special status' powers devolved to the republics were no greater than those granted to other regions (Zelensky 2020). In other words, the 'Zelensky formula' modified the timing and sequencing of the Minsk Accords.

Direct talks with the leaders of the Russia-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine were a red line bitterly opposed by the neo-nationalists and their armed formations, such as Andriy Biletsky's Azov volunteer battalion and his later-established National Corps nationalist group. Most had been incorporated into the National Guard under Avakov, giving him the power to make or break elected leaders. On the other side, Zelensky appeared ready to cooperate with some of the 'pro-Russian' forces, including the former president, Leonid Kuchma, and possibly even Viktor Medvedchuk, whose closeness to Putin is both an asset and a liability. His Opposition Platform – For Life party scored a notable success by coming second in the 2019 parliamentary elections with 13 per cent of the vote, although fell far short of Servant of the People.

Despite the wave of criticism and his own red lines, Zelensky persevered in his peace efforts. In talks in Minsk on 11 March 2020 a tentative deal was struck that would give the DNR and LNR leaders a voice in the Minsk negotiations. This was accompanied by the idea of creating a National Platform for Reconciliation and Unity to promote 'dialogue' not only on the Donbas but also Crimea, as well as the other contentious areas in the West populated by Hungarians and others. However, follow-up meetings were cancelled because of the swelling coronavirus crisis. The Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) talks in Minsk were mediated by the OSCE and brought together two new actors: Andriy Yermak, Zelensky's chief of staff, and Dmitry Kozak, Putin's long-term fixer and new point man on Ukrainian issues (replacing Vladislav Surkov on 11 February). Yermak helped organise the prisoner exchanges in late 2019, and his promotion to Zelensky's staff on 11 February raised fears among neo-nationalists about a softening of the line. The Consultative Council would have seats allotted to 'authorised representatives' of the unrecognised republics, with 10 representatives of Ukraine and 10 from the two republics, and a member each from four observers: Russia, Germany, France, and the OSCE. All decisions would have to be approved by three-quarters of the representatives and would be considered advisory rather than binding. The main purpose of the Council would be "to conduct and develop proposals for political and legal solutions towards the settlement of the conflict" (Weselowsky 2020).

For the first time the political agency of the republics was recognised, prompting a wave of criticism. The *Kyiv Post* talked of "Zelensky's road to capitulation". It argued that Poroshenko understood something in any "peaceful resolution" with the Russians that Zelensky did not: "Never ever give even the slightest concession, because that will never bring peace, but simply an escalating demand for more" (Woloshyn 2020). The language of 'appeasement' was applied at this time, raising some fundamental questions about when it is appropriate to negotiate and when to stand up to a tyrant. If Russia's resistance to the post-Cold War expansionist logic is considered irrational, likewise its opposition to what it considers the 'coup' in Kiev in February 2014, then it was logical to counter its actions by all possible means. James Sherr, the veteran analyst of Ukrainian affairs, noted that these "unsettling events" [the discussions in Minsk] vindicated those who from the outset considered "Zelensky as all show and no substance", exposing his shortcomings of character and inability to manage external pressures amid failure to grasp "the existential nature of the threat that it [Russia] poses" (Sherr 2020). The idea of peace from this perspective is unthinkable.

There are also empirical obstacles. First, although the political subjectivity of the breakaway regions was acknowledged, matters there had progressed much further than Kiev allowed. The two republics, although beset by profound problems, have established the rudiments of statehood. Not only do the administrations function in the manner of states, delivering public services and goods, but they have also gained a degree of allegiance of their citizens. The original separatist aspirations were always more than simply a Russian-backed insurgency (Matveeva 2016, 2017). Russophone identity was now reinforced by access to Russian passports. Any deal would have to make provision for the legal protection of regional elites and citizens who believed their fate (like that of Crimea) lay with Russia. Second, Zelensky's 'red lines' contained unrealistic conditions about the sequencing of conflict resolution measures. Understandably, Kiev wanted to ensure that any vote in the republics was a genuine expression of popular desires, but to stipulate the complete withdrawal of Russian forces before the vote removed the one force that provided security guarantees to the republic's elites, although the introduction of some third (neutral) force has sometimes been mooted. Third, Zelensky's plans failed to provide for the genuine devolution of powers as well as guarantees that any power-sharing measures could not be unilaterally revoked. Zelensky found himself trapped: moves towards a sustainable resolution of the conflict enraged the neo-nationalist opposition at home; but failure to achieve some sort of peace undermined his popular support.

Putin's room for manoeuvre is also constrained by Communist and nationalist movements on his right, demanding that Russia defend compatriots in Ukraine. There is pressure for Moscow to recognise the two Donbas republics, a step that Putin is loath to undertake. They even call for Russia to intervene militarily in an open and direct manner, thus throwing down the gauntlet to the West (Beebe 2019, 118). In structural terms there was little scope for Russia to change its approach. As Andrei Tsygankov (2019) notes, "Ukraine has turned into an international systemic problem at the stage of transition to a new world order. … Ukraine [made] the results of the 1991 referendum the basis for the path to Europe without Russia (and at the same time at the expense of Russia). Today, this path has degenerated into a movement to embrace Europe as a result of anti-Russian sentiment". From this perspective, the model of Ukrainian state building since 1991, combining de-Russification at home and anti-Russianism abroad, precluded substantive peace negotiations.

Exit routes

The present status quo is unsustainable, but so are all of its alternatives. There is a profound desire for peace in Ukraine, yet mobilised civil society (with a large part of the most active NGOs funded by Western governments and foundations) is threatening a new Maidan if Zelensky makes the concessions essential for a peace order to be created. A change of regime in Kiev that brings to power 'pro-Russian' forces is unlikely, although in a situation of economic collapse and political turmoil, it cannot be excluded. Even then, regime collapse in Kiev would only intensify domestic civil conflict. Equally, Putin cannot give up the two republics without a negotiated settlement. Russia would be perceived globally as an unreliable partner, and Putin's own position would be challenged by domestic nationalist mobilisation. In this impossible situation, millions of Ukrainians are taking the 'exit' option (Simes 2020). Believing that there is no solution to the problem, they exit the problem itself. The confrontation over Ukraine and European security dilemmas more broadly have entered a dead end in which there appear to be no viable exit routes. However, all wars in the end come to some sort of conclusion, and there is no reason to believe that our case will be the exception – however long it takes. There four possible ways out.

The first is for Russia to accept the hegemony of the Liberal International Order, including the Atlantic power system at its core. This is the scenario advanced by radical liberals in Russia and their allies in the West. A new leader takes over from Putin, and pursues some sort of second perestroika. Domestically, this means wholesale 'reform', with the mass privatisation of state-owned enterprises and the retreat of the statist industrial policy pursued in the Putin years. In foreign policy it would mean accepting, finally, the expansive logic of liberal hegemony. Russia would finally be welcomed gratefully into the bosom of the Western power system, but no longer as a great power with national interests and geopolitical priorities of its own, but a as subaltern element. Russia, in other words, would finally embrace the 'defeat' that it had so stubbornly refused to since the early 1990s. In the most benign reading, this would make Russia the equivalent of a France or Germany, a post-imperial state building relations with its neighbours on the basis of equality and rule-based interactions. Moscow would abandon the two Donbas republics to their fate, while the Crimea question would be shelved – even the most liberal and Westernising government would find it impossible to return Crimea to Ukrainian jurisdiction, above all because it would run counter to the freely-expressed wishes of the Crimean population (Toal et al. 2020). State and society within Russia would finally be reconciled, the power of the security agencies restrained, the independence of the courts recognised, and the traditional 'guardianship' ideology of the regime rendered redundant. The entrepreneurial energies of the people would no longer be constrained by the threat of *reiderstvo*, and boom years would follow. A rather more pessimistic reading suggests some sort of repeat of the 1990s, with the social guarantees advanced by the Putin system undermined, and the rise of a new form of oligarchic capitalism.

The second is for the exact opposite. Instead of the dominance of the expansionist logic, let us imagine if the transformational logic embedded in the promise of 1989 had been fulfilled. A number of potential openings would have been explored. First, instead of the ideology of 'Europe whole and free', which explicitly challenged Gorbachev's formulation of a Common European Home, the pan-continental idea of Greater Europe would have been given institutional form. The Gaullist-Mitterandist idea of a confederation of Europe would perhaps have begun with a very loose Euro-Asian Commission, and then developed certain functional prerogatives, with the anticipated spill-over effects. Second, in the early 1990s there had been some discussion about creating some sort of European Security Council within the framework of what became, in December 1994, the OSCE. In the event, the plans were blocked, and the OSCE became a relatively marginal security organisation, dealing with conflict management (notably in the Donbas) and monitoring normative compliance with the human rights and democracy agenda. Third and above all, the logic of reconciliation would have prevailed across the continent, avoiding the dilemma of the 'lands in between', trapped between the expanding Atlantic power system and Russia's resistance. Conflicts over the 'shared neighbourhood' would have been avoided, and instead a cooperative logic of functional interdependence established. The Cold War alliance system in the form of NATO would gradually have become redundant. The promise of 1989 would have been fulfilled.

In a distinctive way, the post-Atlanticist element of this (although not the pan-continental part) was part of the Trump administration's project. President Donald Trump was ready to walk away from the Atlantic power system that his predecessors since 1945 had been so assiduously building. Even seasoned political commentators argue that "The decline of Europe as a force in world affairs and the shift of the axis of world politics to the Indo-Pacific are realities that American foreign policy cannot ignore. The liberal Atlanticist consensus cannot guide American foreign policy going forward, and new ways of thinking and acting will have to be found" (Mead 2019). In ideological terms, Trump repudiated the fundamental principle on which US foreign policy had been based, effectively since the

foundation of the state, namely the idea of America as the 'exceptional' nation. The practical consequences were clear. As far as Trump is concerned, multilateral organisations and commitments undermine America's ability to advance its national interests, and thus he tried to make the US one selfish state among others (Krastev and Holmes 2019, 146). However, the 'Trumanite' national security state ensured that his ability to reshape the security structure has been stymied (Glennon 2015). Trump's personal commitment to a grand bargain with Russia (designed largely to enlist Russian support in the major confrontation with China) has been blocked.

It was entirely natural that Trump's impeachment in 2019 took place over Ukrainian issues. In his telephone call of 25 July with Zelensky, Trump apparently threatened to suspend $391 million in military assistance and a visit to the White House unless Ukraine opened an investigation into former vice president Joe Biden's Ukrainian activities and possible Ukrainian meddling in the 2016 election (Memorandum 2019; Jenkins 2019). The case focused on whether Trump tried to blackmail Zelensky to gain electoral advantage over the probable Democrat contender for the presidency. However, as Nancy Pelosi, the leader of the House of Representatives who on 26 September triggered the impeachment hearing, admitted in December, "This isn't about Ukraine. It's about Russia … who benefited by our withholding of that military assistance? Russia. It's about Russia … All roads lead to Putin. Understand that" (Mascaro and Jalonick 2019). Almost all the witness testimony assumed that the US was at war with Russia and that Trump had committed treason on behalf of a hostile state, and that the president's attempts to conduct a foreign policy at odds with the national security state lacked a democratic mandate (Tracey 2020). The former National Security Council official Tim Morrison (2019), on the third day of the impeachment hearing on 19 November, argued that "The United States aids Ukraine and her people so that they can fight Russia over there, and we don't have to fight Russia over here". The assertion was repeated by Adam Schiff, the head of the House Intelligence Committee, in his marathon opening statement in the Senate impeachment trial, arguing that "The Kremlin showed boldly in 2016 that with the malign skills it honed in Ukraine, they would not stay in Ukraine. Instead, Russia employed them here to attack our institutions, and they will do so again". In other words, Trump had to be impeached not because of constitutional infringements but because he was part of a Russian conspiracy to undermine US security, spread disinformation, undermine faith in US intelligence agencies, and to 'remake the map of Europe by dint of military force'. The Democratic Party "was regrouping along the most retrograde Cold War lines" (Lazare 2020).

Renewed Cold War confrontation has now become part of the sinews of American foreign policy, and confrontation is here to stay with very limited room for US-Russian cooperation in the foreseeable future. Ukraine is the cornerstone of the conflict, with Moscow perceiving US policies in Ukraine as largely 'aimed at diminishing Russia through undermining its great power position', in line with Zbigniew Brzezinski's argument of the early 1990s that Russia without Ukraine cannot be an empire (Trenin 2020a). Henry Kissinger has long argued that "ultimate negotiation success depends upon the validity of your most basic assumptions, about the world, the situation, and your interests" (in Allyn 2019). In the absence of consensus on even basic issues such as the validity of arms control and the balance to be drawn between 'values' and 'interests', diplomacy has become hostage to short-term punitive actions and reactions. Kissinger distanced himself from the views of liberal interventionist Democrats and neoconservative Republicans who argued after 2014 that Russia must be 'punished' for its actions in Ukraine, whose voices were greatly amplified after Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 US presidential election. Instead, he argued that the US should place limits on the definition of its national interests and that it

cannot afford "to prioritize the isolation or weakening of Russia, let alone push for Russian collapse" (Allyn 2019).

The third way out (in part overlapping with the Trumpian transactional agenda) is great power summitry. It is under this heading that the idea of some sort of 'grand bargain' is mooted, in which the major powers (including China) come together to resolve specific issues as well as the 'rules of the road'. This is an unabashed 'geopolitical' approach, in which pragmatic deal-making takes priority over normative considerations. Dmitry Trenin, the Director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, notes that a new strategic balance can only be achieved through settlement of the Ukraine crisis. The preconditions for this "are the recognition of Crimea's status as Russian territory and the reintegration of Donbass with Ukraine on the basis of the Minsk Accords of 2015". At the same time, "Ukraine would become a country neutral to both the US/NATO and Russia and an associated partner of the European Union with an opportunity to further develop its relations with the EU" (Trenin 2020b). Others have argued for a grand bargain to be struck between Moscow and Washington over Crimea, while bracketing the Donbas conflict until some more propitious time for settlement emerges (Goldstein 2019). As a presidential candidate Trump argued that it was possible for Crimea to go back to Russia, but this was just another of his statements that inflamed the national security establishment (DeRensis 2019).

Listing these items demonstrates just how hard it would be to achieve a grand bargain, even if there was the will to do so. The harsh reaction to the rather modest proposals advanced in a report by the Euro-Atlantic Security Leadership Group is testimony to that. They suggested breaking the Ukrainian problem into component parts, with security, humanitarian, economic, and political steps, with signatories drawn from across the spectrum including retired General Philip Breedlove, the former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (Twelve Steps 2020). Presented to the February 2020 Munich Security Forum, the organisers were forced to remove the report from the MSF website. Given the renewed binary logic of the confrontation over Ukraine this was perfectly logical, but given the dangers of nuclear confrontation and the remilitarisation of Europe, such a sharp rejection of putative peace plans was far from rational.

This coincides in part with the fourth option, the primacy of sovereign internationalism combined with respect for the normative foundations (international law). This is precisely the model established at Yalta, in which the great powers pursued their own interests while at the same time creating the UN system. As far as Russia is concerned, its realist approach follows the logic of power, but any logical system has its limits, at which point it becomes irrational. In an important interview the Russian defence minister, Sergei Shoigu (2019), argued that the West showed its hand too soon in the early 1990s – intended to drive home its victory against Russia, and thus alerted it in time to prepare a response, in the form of Primakov's competitive coexistence strategy. Shoigu pushed ahead with the transformation of Russia's armed forces based on the logic of an adversarial relationship with the West. At the same time, Putin has drawn from classic realist theory about the dangers of overstretch (Wohlforth 2016, 35-53).

There is possibly a fifth option, based on the sovereign internationalism and diplomatic practices of the fourth. Crisis reinforces the role of the state as well as the need for international cooperation, and this was in evidence at the time of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. Solidarity in the face of a common external challenge has forced erstwhile adversaries to ally, as in the Second World War, and there were signs of this at the time of Covid-19. Three former US ambassadors to Ukraine argued that the crisis was an opportunity to end the war in Ukraine, and argued that "the United States and its allies should offer to lift international sanctions against Russia if Putin will end his military incursions into Ukraine" (Taylor et al. 2020). The idea was a positive one, but the way that it was formulated means

that it stood no chance of being implemented. As humourists argue, the only realistic option of bringing the sides together in the face of a common challenge is a visitation of hostile aliens from Mars.

Conclusion

The great power alignment at Yalta soon gave way to the division of Europe and the onset of the Cold War. The aspiration embedded in 1989 was to move beyond the logic of Yalta, but once again we have ended up where we began. The various exits appear a mirage. From this perspective, the exit route from the First Cold War was relatively straightforward – one side or the other would give up the ideological gauntlet and converge on a single model of modernity. Convergence theory in the 1970s assumed that this would take the form of some sort of middle way, with the West and the Soviet model of socialism each in their own way becoming social democratic. Although Gorbachev believed in some form of reform communism, returning to the 1968 Czechoslovak ideas of 'socialism with a human face', in the end this proved 20 years too late and unsustainable, and Russia took the path of a more radically market-centred model of the West itself. At the same time, the First Cold War was marked by various periods of détente, whereas the current one remains permanently mired in confrontation, although not excluding elements of cooperation. Trump certainly sought some kind of détente, but he was stymied in this ambition, and any Democratic successor will return to a more hostile approach. Exit routes from the Second Cold War are less predictable, although theoretically they should be far easier. After all, there is no entrenched ideological conflict, no struggle over territories (other than clashing integration projects in 'the lands in between'), and leaderships that meet regularly at G20 and other forums.

However, the renewed Cold War is far more intractable, and with it options for the resolution of the Ukraine syndrome, for a number of reasons. First, unlike the Soviet Union, Russia has relatively little agency in its ability to end the confrontation. The logic of the confrontation between expansion and transformation is absolute – there is no easily identifiable middle path. Either one side or the other has to capitulate. As long as Putin is leader there will be no capitulation, and hence the conflict will continue. It is also almost certain that his successor will pursue largely the same policies, since Putin's policies, in the main, reflect a solid consensus among the Russian elite.

Second, the lack of agency has yet another dimension. Although Russia throughout the crisis since 2014 has declared its willingness to cooperate, and it welcomed Macron's overtures in 2019, the EU as a hegemon is not ready to revise its view of Russia's position in the international system. Mogherini's five principles defined 'resilience' in terms of dealing with threats from Russia, and thus undercut the basis of normal interstate diplomacy. Russia seeks to base its foreign policy on the principle of sovereign internationalism, but when faced by the EU this became increasingly impossible. The actorness of the member states was undermined when it came to relations with Russia, while policy by the EU institutions became dependent on Ukraine's allies, many of whom advocated tough policies on Russia, in part as a consequence of the Soviet legacy of domination.

The Ukraine crisis reflects the larger crisis in the post-Cold War European security order. The tension between the logics of expansion and transformation has turned out not to be a contradiction, which is susceptible to resolution, but an antinomy – which cannot be resolved. The Ukraine syndrome of unstable internal development combined with its internationalisation threatens world politics with 'Ukrainisation' (Leibin 2020). Populist and militant insurgency at home combined with the weaponisation of international instruments by warring parties makes the Second Cold War far more unstable and unpredictable than the

first. No side can make concessions without losing face amidst the logic in which their post-Cold War international policy has been embedded. All the signs are clearly marked: ‘no exit’.

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