

ARENA

Collateral Warfare: The US proxy war in Ukraine



Photographer: Michal Chelbin

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The war in Ukraine has achieved nothing and is good for no one. Those responsible for the invasion are the Russian and American leaders who let it happen: President Putin who ordered the 'special military operation' in

February, and President Biden and his predecessors who effectively incited it. Since 2014, Ukraine has been the turf on which the United States has vied for supremacy with Russia. The Soviet and American victors of the Second World War, allies then but enemies since 1947, both want their nations to be ‘great again’. Putting themselves above international law, the American and Russian leaders have made Ukrainians into ants, trampled as the elephants fight.

War to the last Ukrainian?

Russia’s special military operation, launched on 24 February 2022, soon turned into an invasion, with heavy costs on both sides. Instead of lasting three or four days and being confined to Donbas, it has become a strung-out war elsewhere. But it could have been avoided. In the Minsk Accords in 2014 and 2015, compromises to end the conflict in Donbas were proposed, and at peace talks in Istanbul in late March 2022 Russia agreed to pull back its forces from Kyiv and other cities. In this proposal, Ukraine would be neutral, non-nuclear and independent, with international guarantees of that status. There would be no foreign military presence in Ukraine, and Ukraine’s constitution would be amended to allow autonomy for Donetsk and Luhansk. Crimea would be permanently independent of Ukraine. Free to join the EU, Ukraine would commit to never joining NATO.

But an end to the war is not what President Biden wanted: the United States and its NATO allies, he said, would go on supporting Ukraine ‘[not just next month, the following month, but for the remainder of this entire year](#)’. And next year too, it would seem, if that’s what regime change in Russia takes. Biden wanted not a wider war but a longer one, lasting until Putin is overthrown. In [March 2022](#) he told a summit of NATO, EU and the G7 states to steel themselves ‘for the long fight ahead’.[\[1\]](#)

‘It’s a proxy war with Russia, whether we say so or not’, Leon Panetta [admitted](#) in March 2022. Obama’s CIA Director and later Secretary of Defense urged that more US military support be given to Ukraine for doing America’s bidding. He added, ‘Diplomacy is going nowhere unless we have leverage, unless the Ukrainians have leverage, and the way you get leverage is by, frankly, going in and killing Russians. That’s what the Ukrainians’—not Americans—‘have to do’.

The terrible suffering inflicted on people in many parts of Ukraine has been called genocide by Biden and President Zelensky. Whether or not this term is accurate, invasion is a war crime, as is military aggression.[\[2\]](#) But if war by proxy is underway, blame should be assessed carefully—the stakes are high. The US coalition was guilty of both crimes during the Iraq war. In keeping with that earlier war of aggression, despite the International Criminal Court’s current investigations, any prosecution of the leaders of the United States, Russia or Ukraine is unlikely to succeed, since none has ratified the Rome Statute and thus none of them acknowledges the court’s jurisdiction.[\[3\]](#)

The new way of war

On one hand, the war seems conventional: Russians and Ukrainians are digging trenches and fighting with guns, bombs, missiles and tanks. We read of Ukrainian soldiers using hobby-shop drones and quad bikes, and picking off Russian generals with sniper rifles. On the other hand, the United States and its allies are providing Ukraine with high-technology weapons, intelligence and capacity for cyber operations. [Russia confronts America’s clients in Ukraine](#), but for now is fighting them with one hand behind its back—the one that could launch nuclear destruction.

Chemical and biological weapons are also in the mix. But which side might use them? Since at least 2005 the United States and Ukraine have been [collaborating on chemical weapons research](#), with some [business interests](#) involved now confirmed as being [associated with Hunter Biden](#). Even before the Russian invasion, President Biden warned that Moscow might be preparing to use chemical weapons in Ukraine. One NBC News headline

candidly admitted, ‘The US is using intel to fight a war with Russia, even when the intel isn’t rock solid’ .[\[4\]](#) In mid-March, Victoria Nuland, US Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs and an active supporter of the 2014 Maidan coup against the Russian-backed Azarov government, [noted that](#) ‘Ukraine has biological research facilities’ and expressed US concern that ‘research materials’ might fall into Russian hands. What those materials were, she didn’t say.

Both Russia and China complained to the United States in 2021 about US-funded chemical and biological warfare laboratories in states bordering Russia. Since at least 2015, when Obama banned such research, the United States has set up biological weapons facilities in former Soviet states close to the Russian and Chinese borders, including in Georgia, where leaks in 2018 were reported to have caused seventy deaths. Nevertheless, if chemical weapons are used in Ukraine, Russia will be the party blamed. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg [warned early on](#) that Russian use of chemical or biological weapons would ‘fundamentally change the nature of the conflict’. In early April, Zelensky said he feared that Russia would use chemical weapons, while Reuters cited ‘unconfirmed reports’ in the Ukrainian media of chemical agents being dropped in Mariupol from a drone—their source was [the Ukrainian extremist Azov Brigade](#). Clearly there has been a media program of hardening opinion before the fact.

The information war

We have seen and heard only a fraction of what is happening in the fight for Ukraine. Now, the iPhone camera is both an asset and a weapon, as is digital image manipulation. ‘Deepfakes’ can make a person on screen appear to be saying things they haven’t. After Zelensky was [seen apparently ordering surrender](#), the fraud was quickly exposed. But did Russians do this to invite surrender, or did Ukrainians use it to expose Russian tactics? Who knows what’s true?

In this new war, governments are fighting to control the narrative. Russia closes Instagram; China bans Google. Australia’s former Minister for Communications Paul Fletcher tells social media platforms to block all content from Russian state media. The United States shuts down RA, the English-language Moscow news service, and Twitter (pre-Musk) obediently cancels independent journalists’ accounts. YouTube deletes videos disputing assertions about Russian war crimes in Bucha shown by Maxar. But note that YouTube is owned by Google, a [Pentagon contractor that collaborates with US intelligence agencies](#), and Maxar owns Google Earth, whose [images from Ukraine are dubious](#). RA, TASS and Al-Jazeera report the operations of the Azov brigades, while CNN and the BBC point to Chechen conscripts and the Wagner Group of Russian mercenaries being active in Ukraine. Corrections to unreliable reports are few. A headline in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 13 April 2022 read, ‘Russian “fake news” claims are fake, say Australian war crimes experts’.

On 24 March 2022, 141 delegations in the UN General Assembly voted in favour of a resolution holding Russia responsible for the humanitarian crisis and calling for a ceasefire. Almost all G20 members voted in favour, reflecting media commentary and public opinion in their countries. Five delegations voted against it, and thirty-eight abstained, including China, India, Indonesia and all the other ASEAN countries except Singapore. No majority Muslim country supported the resolution; nor did Israel, where memory of the massacre of nearly 34,000 Jews at Babi Yar near Kyiv in September 1941 by the German army is indelible. Having shared Russia’s suffering in the Second World War, Israel refused to co-sponsor the US resolution in the UN Security Council on 25 February 2022, which failed.

Not since the Iraq invasion of 2003 has world opinion been so polarised. Not since the Cold War have so many nations been so anti-Russian. In late March, the focus was on Bucha, north of Kyiv, where horrifying reports of massacred civilians suggested that the Russians were, if not genocidal, at least barbarians. Counternarratives quickly appeared on social media, with some quickly shut down. Other shocking events had occurred, but how are we to be sure some weren’t staged? Repeatedly screened images of pristine stuffed toys lying neatly on top of devastation looked suspect to those familiar with European-funded White Helmets’ operations in Syria. In

Mariupol, the drama theatre below which civilians were sheltering was bombed, and a maternity hospital was destroyed. Missiles were reportedly fired into a train station in Kramatorsk where crowds were trying to escape. Although Western mainstream media uncritically accepted Ukrainian reports blaming Russia for all these attacks, [some independent reporters](#) have raised serious doubts. [Some have claimed](#) the theatre bombing was a Ukrainian false flag event and that the hospital had been evacuated and occupied by the Azov Brigade before Russia attacked it, and that the two missiles at Kramatorsk were identifiably Ukrainian, fired from Ukraine territory.

For Moscow, the information war seems as good as lost. Saturation-level television coverage and media commentary have won over those same Western hearts and minds that were sceptical of or opposed to US interventions during the Vietnam and Iraq wars. Again, we should be cautious. Don't forget that the United States congratulates itself on running a highly professional message-management operation, producing [‘sophisticated propaganda aimed at stirring up public and official support’](#). The American National Endowment for Democracy finances the prominent English-language *Kyiv Independent*, whose pro-Ukrainian reports—some sourced from the Azov Brigade—are in turn uncritically aired by such outlets as CNN, Fox News and SBS. An unprecedented international effort is being led by a British ‘virtual public relations agency’, PR-Network, and the ‘intelligence agency for the people’, the UK- and US-funded Bellingcat. The collaborating nations have been successful, CIA Director William Burns candidly [testified](#) on 3 March, in ‘demonstrating to the entire world that this is premeditated and unprovoked aggression’.

But what is the US aim? War propaganda always demonises the enemy, but American propaganda demonising Putin sounds eerily familiar from previous US-led wars for regime change. Biden has called Putin a ‘butcher’ who ‘cannot remain in power’, even though Secretary of State Blinken and NATO’s Olaf Scholz hastily denied that the United States and NATO were seeking regime change in Russia. Speaking off-record to US troops in Poland on 25 March, Biden again slipped, saying [‘when you’re there \[in Ukraine\]’](#), while former Democrat adviser [Leon Panetta urged](#), ‘We’ve got to continue the war effort. This is a power game. Putin understands power; he doesn’t really understand diplomacy...’.

[Western media continue this condemnation of Russia and Putin](#), whom they have demonised for more than a decade. To those who were only recently objecting to ‘cancel culture’ and ‘false facts’, the new allied patriotism may seem a relief. It supports the suffering Ukrainians, blames Russia, and excuses the United States and NATO of any responsibility.

Warnings were on record

Ukraine became a Soviet republic in 1922 and, with the rest of the Soviet Union, suffered the Holodomor, the Great Famine brought on by the forced collectivisation of agriculture in which millions of Ukrainians died, from 1932 to 1933. Ukraine remained in the Soviet Union until the latter collapsed in 1991, when it became independent and neutral. It was predictable that American triumphalism and Soviet humiliation would eventually produce a clash between two leaders such as Biden and Putin.

In 1991, the United States and the United Kingdom repeated what American officials had told President Gorbachev in 1990: that NATO would expand ‘not one inch’ to the East. But it has, taking in the Baltic States and Poland—fourteen countries in all. Restraint and diplomacy worked briefly in 1994, when the Budapest Memorandum prohibited the Russian Federation, the United States and the United Kingdom from threatening or using military force or economic coercion against Ukraine, Belarus or Kazakhstan ‘except in self-defence or otherwise in accordance with the [Charter of the United Nations](#)’. As a result of other agreements, between 1993 and 1996 the three former Soviet republics gave up their nuclear weapons, something Ukraine may now regret and Belarus may renege on.

In 1996 the United States announced its determination to expand NATO, and Ukraine and Georgia were offered the opportunity to seek membership. In 2003–05, anti-Russian ‘colour revolutions’ took place in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, with the latter being seen as [the biggest prize in the new Cold War](#). Putin repeatedly protested against the expansion of NATO and opposed membership for Ukraine, a possibility that Western countries kept alive. In 2007, fifty prominent foreign policy experts wrote to President Bill Clinton opposing NATO expansion, calling it a *‘policy error of historic proportions’*. Among them was George Kennan, American diplomat and Russia specialist, who deplored it as *‘the most fatal error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era’*. Nevertheless, in April 2008 NATO, at the behest of President George W. Bush, called for Ukraine and Georgia to join it. Aware that pulling Ukraine into the orbit of the West could damage Putin at home and abroad, Ukraine’s pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich [refused to sign an Association Agreement with the EU](#).

The warnings continued. In 2014, Henry Kissinger argued that having Ukraine in NATO would make it a theatre for East–West confrontation. Anthony Blinken, then in Obama’s State Department, [advised an audience in Berlin](#) against the US opposing Russia in Ukraine. ‘If you’re playing on the military terrain in Ukraine, you’re playing to Russia’s strength, because Russia is right next door’, he said. ‘Anything we did as countries in terms of military support for Ukraine is likely to be matched and then doubled and tripled and quadrupled by Russia.’

But in February 2014 the United States [backed the Maidan coup](#) that ousted Yanukovich. The [new government of Ukraine](#) banned the Russian language and actively venerated Nazis past and present, in spite of Babi Yar and the 1941 Odessa massacre of 30,000 people, mainly Jews. Rebels in Donetsk and Luhansk, supported by Russia, were attacked in the spring of 2014 in an ‘anti-terrorist’ operation by the Kyiv government, backed by US military trainers and US weapons. A plebiscite, or ‘status referendum’, was [held in Crimea](#), and in response to 97 per cent support from a turnout of 84 per cent of the population, Russia re-annexed the strategic peninsula.

Efforts to quell the conflict by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe produced the two Minsk accords of 2014 and 2015. Although they promised self-government to the Donbas region, fighting continued there. Zelensky was hostile to the Russian-tied opposition and to the [peace accords he was elected to implement](#). In the final round of the Minsk talks, which concluded just two weeks before Russia’s February invasion, a ‘key obstacle’, [The Washington Post reported](#), ‘was Kyiv’s opposition to negotiating with the pro-Russian separatists’. As the talks stalled, the *Post* admitted, ‘it’s unclear how much pressure the United States is placing on Ukraine to reach a compromise with Russia’.

President Obama had held back from arming Ukraine against Russia, and it was Trump, his successor, the supposed Russophile, [who did so](#). In March 2021, Zelensky ordered the recapture of Crimea and sent troops to the border, using drones in violation of the Minsk accords. In August, Washington and Kiev signed a [US–Ukraine Strategic Defense Framework](#), promising US support of Ukraine to ‘preserve the country’s territorial integrity, progress towards NATO interoperability, and promote regional security’. Closer partnership between their defence intelligence communities was offered ‘in support of military planning and defensive operations’. Two months later, the US–Ukrainian [Charter on Strategic Partnership](#) declared American support for ‘Ukraine’s aspirations to join NATO’ and its own status as a ‘NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner’, providing Ukraine with increased NATO weapons shipments and offering integration.^[5]

The United States wants NATO allies as buffer states against Russia, but ‘partnership’ falls short of defending Ukraine. Equally, Russia wants buffer states between it and NATO. Retaliating against the US–Ukraine agreements, Putin in December 2021 stated that Russia and Ukraine were no longer ‘one people’. On 17 February 2022, Biden predicted that Russia would attack Ukraine within the following few days. Ukrainian shelling of Donbas intensified. Four days later, Putin declared the independence of Donbas, for which Russia had [until then espoused autonomous or self-determination status](#). The ‘Great Fatherland War’ began two days later.

Will Ukraine be saved?

With both hands tied behind their backs, the United States and its NATO allies have only weapons and sanctions to offer. But banning imports from Russia, shutting down Russia's access to investments abroad, and closing Russia's access to the SWIFT bank exchange system will not save Ukraine: on the first day after the invasion [Biden even admitted](#) that 'Sanctions never deter', and Boris Johnson's spokesperson candidly stated that sanctions 'are to bring down the Putin regime'. But sanctions have not produced America's desired result in Cuba, North Korea, China, Iran, Syria, Venezuela or anywhere else. Rather than being bled into submission, Russia will win the war, because Putin has to. But [should NATO join it, all bets are off](#).

Moscow is likely to gain permanent control of Mariupol, Donetsk and Luhansk, and gain a land bridge to Crimea and territory east of the Dneiper River where much of Ukraine's agricultural land and energy resources are situated. The Gulf of Odessa and Sea of Azov have oil and gas reserves, which may continue to be exported to Europe, which needs them. Wheat exports to China will continue. The rest of Ukraine, denied NATO membership, may become an economic basket case. Countries that need Russian exports are avoiding US dollars and trading in roubles. Russia's public debt is 18 per cent, much lower than that of the United States, Australia and many other nations. Despite sanctions, [only a total energy embargo will seriously affect Russia](#), and that isn't likely to happen.

Australians absorb only the mainstream media accounts. Most are appalled by the suffering inflicted on Ukrainians, and [81 per cent want Australia to support Ukraine](#) with humanitarian aid, military equipment and sanctions. The studio audience of the ABC's *Q+A* program on 3 March largely accepted presenter Stan Grant's expulsion of a young man who asked about violation of the Minsk Accords. But those who identify with Ukraine—a disposable US ally—should consider its similarity to Australia.

President Zelensky warned the Australian parliament on 31 March of threats facing Australia, implicitly from China. His message was that we cannot rely on the United States to send troops or aircraft to defend Australia any more than Ukraine can. He seems to understand that Ukraine is collateral damage in the long-range strategy of Britain and the United States, which intend regime change. He knows that NATO's founding purpose was to oppose the Soviet Union. Successive Australian governments have unsuccessfully sought written confirmation—which ANZUS does not provide—that the United States will defend Australia. But the message is clear. Your country is yours to defend, says the United States. The US Army's Chief of Staff [recently pointed to the lessons of Ukraine for America's allies](#), asking, 'Are they willing to die for their country?' He mentioned Taiwan, but he could have been talking about Australia. Instead of paying attention, then Prime Minister Scott Morrison imitated past American presidents' talk of an evil empire and an axis of evil, with rhetoric about a 'red line' and an 'arc of autocracy'.

What happens in Ukraine will show Australia how reliable our American allies are. It should make our ministers who expect a war with China think about who will defend us and who will win it.

[1] Washington is determined, [The Asia Times concluded](#), to 'destroy the Putin regime, if necessary by prolonging the Ukraine war long enough to bleed Russia dry'.

[2] A crime of aggression or crime against peace is the planning, initiation, or execution of a large-scale and serious act of aggression using state military force. This crime under the ICC came into force in 2017 (Ben Saul, 'Executions, torture: Australia Must Push to Hold Russia to Account', [The Sydney Morning Herald](#), 7 April 2022).

[3] Don Rothwell, 'Holding Putin to Account for War Crimes', *The Australian*, 6 April 2022.

[4] [Ken Dilanian, Courtney Kube, Carol E. Lee and Dan De Luce](#), 6 April 2022; [Caitlin Johnstone](#), 10 April 2022.

[5] Aaron [Maté](#), ‘[Urging regime change in Russia, Biden exposes US aims in Ukraine](#)’, 29 March 2022. The US agreed to provide intermediate range missiles, giving [Ukraine the capacity to hit Russian airfields](#).



[‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality’: Putin’s Remaking of Imperial Russia](#)

[Roger D Markwick](#), Jun 2022

Russia is better viewed as a ‘subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric world’.

About the author

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