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Jacques Fontanel

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Could the war in Ukraine have been avoided? The responsibilities for the war in Ukraine

Jacques Fontanel

Economistes contre la Course aux armements

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the sole responsibility of the author of this report.

Summary : Power relations between states are often considered on the basis of divergent interpretations of constantly evolving international law. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is not new, but it became obvious in 2014, with the Maydan revolution, Moscow's annexation of Crimea and the armed conflict in the Donbass. Since the end of the Cold War, Washington has sought to prevent Russia from reconstituting a military bloc, and the White House has promoted the integration of the former People's Democracies and the Baltic States into NATO. The diplomatic game of Ukraine's membership of the European Union and NATO clearly marked the Western countries' desire to isolate Russia, which had become NATO's only real potential military enemy, by emphasizing Putin's hubris, the Kremlin's imperial aims and the danger of the Kremlin's nuclear power. The aim was also to reduce Russia to the status of a second-rate world power. In fact, the programmed failure of the Minsk Agreements is above all the consequence of the idea that the “possibility of direct war” between the two states was unlikely, as if war had lost its opportunities for action in Europe. For the Kremlin, Ukraine is an essential “security belt” for Russia. NATO, which had become too powerful, was perceived as an existential threat to Russia and its political system, making war “possible”. War could have been avoided, to preserve peace in Europe. Was Ukraine's membership of NATO a reliable means of avoiding conflict between

the two states? On the contrary, it was this demand for membership that triggered the special operation. The international diplomacy failure is undeniable.

Les rapports de force entre Etats sont souvent considérés sur la base d'interprétations divergentes d'un droit international en évolution constante. Le conflit entre la Russie et l'Ukraine n'est pas nouveau, mais il est devenu patent en 2014, avec la révolution du Maïdan, l'annexion de la Crimée par Moscou et le conflit armé au Donbass. Depuis la fin de la Guerre froide, Washington a cherché à empêcher la Russie de reconstituer un bloc militaire et la « Maison Blanche » a favorisé l'intégration des anciennes démocraties populaires et des Etats baltes au sein de l'OTAN. Le jeu diplomatique de l'appartenance de l'Ukraine à l'Union européenne et à l'OTAN marquait clairement la volonté des Pays occidentaux à isoler la Russie, devenue alors comme le seul véritable ennemi militaire potentiel de l'OTAN, en insistant sur l'hubris de Poutine, les visées impériales du Kremlin ou le danger de la puissance nucléaire du Kremlin. Il s'agissait aussi de réduire la Russie à l'état d'une puissance mondiale de seconde zone. De fait, l'échec programmé des Accords de Minsk est surtout la conséquence de l'idée selon laquelle la « possibilité d'une guerre directe » entre les deux Etats était peu envisageable, comme si la guerre avait perdu ses opportunités d'action en Europe. Pour le Kremlin, l'Ukraine constitue une « ceinture sécuritaire » essentielle pour la Russie. L'OTAN, devenue trop puissante, a été perçue comme une menace existentielle pour la Russie et son régime politique, rendant ainsi la guerre « possible ». La guerre aurait pu être évitée, pour préserver la paix en Europe. Est-ce que l'appartenance de l'Ukraine à l'OTAN constituait un moyen fiable pour éviter un conflit entre les deux Etats ? C'est au contraire cette demande d'appartenance qui a déclenché l'opération spéciale. L'échec de la diplomatie internationale est indéniable.

Russia, NATO, European Union, war, Minsk Agreements, war, international diplomacy

Russie, OTAN, Union européenne, guerre, Accords de Minsk, diplomatie internationale

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Yeltsin's desire to “rid” himself of the Soviet Union's territorial ornaments by restoring to the Moscow Kremlin the sole legitimacy of his action over historic Russia, during the period of double transition (transition to a market economy and profound conversion of the arms industries), Washington sought both to eradicate any possible return by Moscow to the planned economy of Communism, and to weaken Russia militarily, economically and politically, so as to make it a second-rate world power, despite the size of its nuclear arsenal. A strategy of containment of Russia's influence on former USSR member states was pursued, reducing the potential zone of pro-Russian influence.

The idea of a large-scale conflict between the two states had its origins in the “Maidan revolution” of 2014, a putsch against democratically elected President Yanukovich with the help of foreign forces, at a time when tensions in the Donbass had still not been eased by Ukraine's independence. An identity crisis erupted, with Ukraine questioning the use of Russian as an official language and a policy of presenting Soviet history as the result of Moscow's imperialist domination of Ukraine. Moscow's annexation of the Ukrainian Crimea, the scheduled failure of the two Minsk Agreements and continued military action in the occupied territories of the Donbass have obviously soured relations between the two countries.

In this context, the threat of Ukraine's entry into the NATO system was perceived by Moscow as a first-rate military threat to its own national security, recalling that the construction of NATO had already been justified by the Soviet threat to European territories. However, for most Western analysts, full responsibility for the “special

operation” lies with Vladimir Putin, whose hubris and imperial aims are supported by the warmongering religious positions of the Moscow Patriarchate (Fontanel, J. (2024a). However, war today cannot be the decision of a single man; it is the result of latent conflicts that render collective negotiations useless.

According to Geronimo¹ (2024), the war can also be read as the result of an international strategy pursued by the West against Russia since the end of the USSR on December 25, 1991. NATO remains in existence despite the collapse of the USSR. The integration of several former People's Democracies into the European Union, and then as members of NATO, has changed the politico-military situation, with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ultimately having no strategic interest other than in direct opposition to Russia alone (and its unfailing Belarusian ally), which is still militarily powerful thanks to its arsenal of nuclear weapons, despite its ten-year process of disarmament of conventional forces (Fontanel, J., Borissova, I., Ward, M. (1995).

Russia's severe economic crisis has led to the crisis of a military-industrial complex ill-prepared for the competitive system of market economies, except in the military sector. Russia was not sufficiently helped during this transitional period, and was supported by the United States as “the rope supports the hanged man”. Washington and the European Union supported Yeltsin's “shock therapy”, allowing the oligarchs of the political forces to plunder Russia's collective wealth. The aim was to prevent Russia from deploying influences contrary to American leadership, given its nuclear power, which made it as powerful and dangerous as ever. A policy of containment was adopted. In this context, a formal political democracy was instituted, in a historical atmosphere of plutocracy, then strongly dominant autocracy.

In these conditions, the defense of “democratic and economic freedom” consisted in encouraging the “forced” privatization of the public sector for the benefit of the few, strongly inspired by American advisors. During this period, Russia's life expectancy was drastically reduced, from 69.5 years in 1988 to 64.5 years in 1994 and 65 years in

¹ Geronimo Jean (2024) *Poutine, au cœur du piège ukrainien*, Sigest, Alfortville.

2003, figures comparable to and even lower than those of many developing countries. However, Russia retained its nuclear arsenal, making it a great power to the dismay of the Western world, which failed to convince Moscow to denuclearize its armed forces.

In 2008, at the Munich Conference, Vladimir Putin, faced with a Western coalition extended right up to Russia's borders, clearly challenged NATO's policy of integrating new European members. This is a lack of trust and friendship on the part of Western countries towards Moscow, and a direct threat to Russia. In this context, Ukraine's inclusion in the NATO accession process would be a major act of conflict. This Russian demand clashes with the fact that Ukraine is an independent country, which can therefore choose its own rules and means of national protection, notably by joining a multinational security alliance with Western countries. However, the European governments of the former USSR, in search of national security, express too little confidence in Russia, whose tutelary shadow still poses a threat. Since 1990, NATO has integrated 14 countries from the former Soviet bloc and the late Warsaw Pact, leading to a form of incomplete encirclement of Russia, then seen as the only threat in Europe. The “color revolutions”, supported and relayed by Western human rights associations and public bodies, promoted the rise of liberal democracy. According to neo-liberal theorists, economic globalization meant that the establishment of a market economy was a factor for peace (Brunat, E., Fontanel, J. (2021). However, injunctions and slogans impose themselves on people like so many truths, whose historical or scientific confirmation is lacking, especially when they serve a political discourse.

The Russian people consider the Ukraine to be Russia's “little sister”, with a shared history and security system. Following the renunciation of the Association and Free Trade Agreement with the European Union in favor of a similar agreement with Russia, in November 2013 the Euromaidan movement, supported by the NSA (National Security Agency), a popular movement, accused Viktor Yanukovich, the elected President, of corruption and called for his impeachment (Delesse, 2016). In the same movement, Ukraine abandoned the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and less

than a month later, the conflict in Crimea fomented by Moscow concluded first with Crimea's declaration of independence, followed two days later (March 18, 2014) by its annexation by Russia (Brunat, Fontanel, 2014; Fontanel, 2014) These battles exacerbated the violence between pro-Russians and pro-Europeans, leading to armed territorial conflicts installed in everyday life. In April 2014, the Republics of Donetsk and then Lugansk were self-proclaimed, leading almost immediately to a Ukrainian military offensive in the Donbass. At the end of May 2014, Petro Poroshenko is elected President and signs an association and free-trade agreement with the European Union.

Given the military conflicts, the Minsk I (September 2014) and Minsk II (signed between Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists, mediated by Germany and France) agreements aimed to shape a diplomatic solution to the conflict. The Minsk Accords provided for an OSCE-monitored ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the vicinity of the contact line, the adoption by Ukraine of a special territorial status for the Donbass, the organization of new elections and the granting of an amnesty for all combatants, as well as the decentralization of power in the Donbass through an amendment to the Ukrainian Constitution. They soon appeared to be a fool's game. In March 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky was elected President of the Republic of Ukraine, he announced in 2020 that Ukraine wanted to retake Donbass by force, and in November 2021 he secretly signed a Strategic Partnership Charter with the United States. The popular uprisings in the Donbass have enabled Russia to support Russian-speaking minorities and envisage its return to the Russian Federation. For Jean Geronimo (2024), the United States had three reasons for amplifying the Russian threat: firstly, to strengthen its power within NATO, to justify the scale of its military spending, and secondly, to take Moscow's place in the gas trade.

Faced with the failure of the Minsk Accords and Ukraine's desire to rejoin the Western fold by applying for membership of the European Union and NATO, Moscow committed itself to developing military maneuvers near Ukraine in order to dissuade it from joining NATO, on the understanding that the Crimea issue was no longer negotiable

for Vladimir Putin. War was announced by Vladimir Putin. “With the approval of the (Russian) Security Council, I have decided to conduct a special military operation. Its aim is to protect people who have been the victims of intimidation and genocide by the Kiev regime for the past eight years. And to do this, we will fight for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine” (Putin, Speech to the Nation, Moscow, February 24, 2022).

In this context, Vladimir Putin bears a clear responsibility for the origin of this war, and the massive attack is undoubtedly Putin's exasperated reaction to the wall of silence that has been built up in the face of his demands for negotiation. Vladimir Putin's hubris has undoubtedly led him to take personal revenge on Zelensky, who is accused of derailing the Minsk Accords and breaking promises by playing a double game unfavorable to Russia. Of course, war is highly reprehensible, but it also depends on the reasons why this ultimate solution was chosen. U.S. military support for the Ukraine, repeatedly proposed up until NATO membership, was an act of belligerence unacceptable to Moscow. There were two reasons for the confrontation:

- firstly, the historical betrayal of Kiev, which demands the support of a country historically opposed to Moscow, when the kinship chains between Ukraine and Russia have been close to osmosis;
- secondly, that of NATO's strategy, which seeks to damage Russia's interests by de facto denying it great-power status, reducing it to a state that, while dangerous with its nuclear weapons, is isolated and losing influence in the region.

For the West, the question of the “Nazification” of Ukraine seemed to be an inappropriate piece of repellent language aimed at Russian citizens. Russia and Ukraine paid a heavy price in the Second World War. There remains a deep-seated anguish among the Russian people, who were betrayed by Ukrainian resistance to Moscow communism, and supported Nazi Germany, which was perceived as a liberator. On the question of responsibility, Westerners argue that, under international law, the Donbass is Ukrainian territory and that responsibility must not be reversed. The right of peoples to self-determination must be respected. On this basis, Vladimir Putin

considered that the Minsk Agreements had reached a definitive impasse. War was inevitable. The West came to the rescue of a corrupt state, which a few oligarchs, supporters of Zelensky (himself corrupt), ran according to their own interests. The pro-NATO rhetoric is becoming unbearable for the master of the Kremlin, who has immediately recognized the independence of the two separatist republics of Lugansk and Donetsk. For Vladimir Putin, Russia's security can only be achieved through the neutrality and demilitarization of the Ukraine, in order to face up to a NATO that is now negatively associated with it in terms of security.

Europe has followed its American ally into a conflict that was no longer really its own, whatever most Western analysts may say. For more than a century, Ukraine has always seemed intimately linked to Russia; remember, for example, that the USSR had three votes in the United Nations General Assembly, on behalf of Belarus (still as close to the Kremlin as ever) and Ukraine, in addition to Russia and the USSR. This exception to UN membership contradicts Vladimir Putin's historical challenge to the independence of a Ukrainian state. Europe then engaged in an economic war of “limited scope”. It immediately suffered considerable economic consequences both for its gas imports and for its exports and the establishment of multinational companies, at a time when public policies were still committed to fighting the Covid-19 pandemic (Brunat, Fontanel, 2023), Washington has once again come out on top, thanks to the development of its military-industrial complex, the partial substitution of Russian gas supplies to Europe, and the assertion of its Western leadership, previously seriously undermined by its failures in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. This policy puts Europe back in a position of military tutelage in favor of the United States. Long gone are the days when de Gaulle defended a Europe that extended as far as the Urals.

The existence of Russia's nuclear force worries all its opponents, even though, according to official Soviet and then Russian doctrine (“no first use”), it can only be used in the event of aggression, even aggression using only conventional weapons if the existence of the state is threatened. In 2024, Russia will have 5580 nuclear warheads, compared with 5044 for the USA, 500 for China, 290 for France, 225

for India, 220 for Pakistan, 90 for Israel and probably 50 for North Korea. By 2020, the idea of war in Europe was far removed from the strategic positions of the European Union's leaders. France had also progressively abandoned its relative military independence with its return to the fold of the USA (Fontanel, Hébert, 1997), demonstrating an excessive dependence on American weapons of deterrence. More seriously, President Macron even declared NATO “brain-dead”, no doubt influenced by Donald Trump's disrespectful interest in this collective defense institution.

The demise of the USSR was a resounding victory for Western values. The aim was to marginalize Russian power and replace it directly in the territorial spheres formerly under Soviet influence. Over the past 20 years, the United States has used the full range of economic, political, strategic and diplomatic weapons to weaken Russia and its economy (Fontanel, 2019). Washington only allowed Russia to join the World Trade Organization only in 2012, more than a decade after China's entry in 2001 (Fontanel, 2013). Against this backdrop, Russia has played an active role in the establishment of the BRICS, an association of states gradually conceived as a force to challenge American-Western power. As far as the war in Ukraine is concerned, not all countries in the South subscribe to the Western thesis.

The war is having perverse, but also unexpected “boomerang” effects. Firstly, Russia's action has not been condemned by many countries in the South, which at least implicitly continue to trade with Russia, taking a position that Pontius Pilate would not have rejected in his day. Secondly, despite the economic sanctions imposed by Western countries, Russia is discovering a new economic and social resilience, and proving itself capable of “circumventing” the sanctions. Finally, with China, India and the other members of the BRICS, the States are questioning their refusal of Western influence and American hegemony. In fact, the war is not leading to Russia's isolation, as all the states that wish to establish a New International Economic Order are finding in this conflict the means to come together and no longer respond to the doxa and international law defined by the OECD Club. The opening up of the BRICS to ten supposedly emerging countries

such as Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia (Argentina having refused the seat) bears witness to this shift, when we can detect “rogue states” (Russia, Iran) and historical partners of the United States such as the oil-producing countries of the Gulf.

The BRICS are organizing and developing, increasingly openly challenging American and even Western hegemony by creating their own mechanisms. Swift's famous “nuclear bomb”, for example, did not have the force that Westerners had imagined, as the operation led the countries eventually involved to find other solutions that proved sufficiently acceptable to all parties. The European states themselves have been affected by this breakdown in trade, to the extent that they have not benefited much from the global growth potential available since 2022. Germany is undergoing a major industrial crisis, while France is heavily in debt. The United States is a major beneficiary of this situation. Thanks to the IRA (Inflation Reduction Act of 2022), Washington has returned to protectionism and even mercantilism. Its energy production has increased, and it now enjoys a growth rate far higher than that of Europe.

The loss of the territories now occupied by Russia seems almost definitive, not least because the population that has remained there is primarily committed to a Russian future. Finnish-style “neutrality” is required, with a form of demilitarization, particularly of heavy weapons, as was the case with nuclear weapons at the time of the break-up of the USSR (Fontanel, 2024). The neo-liberal thinking of globalization has reduced Russia to a mere producer and exporter of energy resources and raw materials. In this context, Moscow's voice became deliberately inaudible in the race towards global opulence and peace. This was certainly no reason to relegate it to the status of a second-rate political and strategic player, to whom a second-rate place should be offered. Will Ukraine's eventual membership of NATO have helped it avoid war with Russia? In an analysis known as “enlightened catastrophism”, the aim is to convince economic players and citizens of the imminence of the crisis, and to make use of the past. “What should we have done to avoid it? “The terrible thing about catastrophe is that not only do we not believe it will happen, but once it does, it

appears to be part of the normal order of things” (Dupuy, J-P., 2004).). As in the case of the ecological catastrophe to come, humanity is at a “tipping point”, but the powers that be, both public and private, are reluctant to take radical measures that could put their personal interests at stake. Has the situation in Ukraine improved with the war on its soil? It's hard to accept this hypothesis, even in the long term.

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