

*On the Edge of the Abyss*  
*or,*  
*How to Wage War on War?*

Edgar Morin<sup>1</sup>

Writing these lines, I am reminded of the anguish that gripped me during the Russian missile crisis in Cuba in 1962. I was hospitalized in New York and my friend Stanley Plastrick told me daily that New York was in danger of being annihilated by an atomic bomb. Then the compromise came in extremis and Khrushchev withdrew his missiles.

Today, once again I see us on the brink of an abyss, and in the absolute uncertainty of tomorrow.

*The simple and the complex*

Let us try to see clearly what is simple and at the same time complex. The simplicity lies in the fact that there is an aggressor and an aggressed, that the aggressor is a great power and the aggressed a peaceful nation. The complexity is that the Ukrainian problem is not only tragic and upsetting but has multiple intertwined implications and multiple unknowns.

Let us then try to imagine a possible peaceful solution that would not spell the peace of the graveyard for Ukraine.

Let us also recall that Ukraine was divided at the end of the 18th century by Poland (itself subsequently divided), the Russian Empire, and the Austrian Empire. It became independent during the wars following the revolution of 1917, but was defeated in 1920 and integrated into

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the Soviet Union. Its peasantry suffered cruelly from the kholkoization of agriculture and the great famine of 1931. For a while, Ukrainians had the illusion of being delivered by the Wehrmacht; in 1941, Bandera, an independence fighter who had become a collaborator, proclaimed a pseudo-independent republic under the German occupation. Ukrainians, however, actively participated in the resistance to Nazism.

It is during the decomposition of the USSR that Ukraine and Belarus gained independence in agreement with Russia, led by Yeltsin.

The situation of Ukraine worsened concomitantly with the worsening of relations between Russia and the United States.

Ukraine is not only a major geopolitical prey for Russia and America, it is also a major economic prey. It is the leading European reserve for uranium, the second for titanium, manganese, iron, and mercury. It has the largest area of arable land in Europe and 25% of the world's black soil. It produces and exports barley, corn, and other agricultural products.

Following a democratic revolution, Ukraine came under increasing pressure from Russia and in 2014 aspired to join the European Union. Putin then annexed Crimea and fostered the uprising and autonomy of the Russian-speaking region of Donbas. It must be recognized that Crimea is a Russianified Tatar province but not Ukrainian and that keeping the Donbas in Ukraine would require a federal solution. Putin justified his action by proclaiming on March 18, 2014, "they lied to us repeatedly, they made decisions behind our backs, they presented us with a fait accompli. This happened with the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] to the east, as well as with the deployment of military infrastructure on our borders." In fact, an ongoing war in the Donbass had begun despite the Minsk agreements.

In an article published in *Le Monde* on May 3, 2014, I predicted the danger:

"Unfortunately, as far as Europe is concerned, the impotence of the West is not only military in character. It is not only an impotence of will. It is an impotence of political thinking, and of thinking as a whole. It would be desirable that Hollande, Fabius, and Manuel Valls become aware of the merciless rise of the perils and propose the only coherent plan of peace, that of a federal Ukraine, a link between West and East. We are no longer in the time when we must seek the best, we are in the time when we must avoid the worst."

Since 2014 the infernal feedback loop of East-West conflict has worsened and the worst has happened in March, 2022.

### *The fatal spiral*

This conflict has been provoked both by Putin's growing ambition to integrate the Slavic part of the Russian Empire into his domain, and by the concomitant enlargement of NATO around Russia. It is more broadly determined by the intensifying conflicts of interest between the two superpowers following the Bush-Putin entente of 2001.

There was the reconstitution of Russia as a military superpower, establishing its zones of influence in Syria and Africa, the bloody reintegration of Chechnya through two wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2001), the military intervention in Georgia (2008), and then the growing pressure on Ukraine. At the same time, without a UN mandate, the second war of invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003 was catastrophic for the entire Middle East, followed by internal wars at least until 2009, and the invasion of Libya in 2011. Finally, the United States was engaged in a war in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021.

While in 1991 the American president had verbally promised Gorbachev that NATO would not be enlarged to include the former People's Democracies, in 1999 NATO integrated Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, then the Baltic republics, followed by Romania, Slovenia, then Albania and Croatia in 2004, creating a de facto encirclement of Russia (with two gaps, Georgia and Ukraine).

This "objective" encirclement has reminded the Kremlin of the encirclement of the USSR by the capitalist countries between the two wars and the “containment” policy of the Cold War. Hence, from a more subjective viewpoint, we see the development of an obsessive psychology in Putin and the hardening of his authoritarian regime.

Under the guise of war against Afghanistan, the USA has installed military bases in the former Soviet republics of the south, in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, while also in practice pursuing encirclement in Siberia.

We cannot hide either the role of growing opposition between two superpowers to extend or safeguard their areas of influence, or the role of encirclement by NATO.

A significant development is that, since the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States is now determined to avoid any distant war while the Ukrainian government aspires to be protected by the European Union and NATO.

However, it is necessary to consider that Vladimir Putin feels more and more strongly that what is tolerated for the United States, especially military interference in sovereign countries, is condemned for Russia. He will not tolerate Ukraine's move to the West. He knows that the United States would not intervene militarily if he invades Ukraine. He may be thinking of a quick invasion and he has already organized reserves in case of economic sanctions, which

he underestimates in the long term, but maybe he thinks that everything will be settled in the short term. Without wanting to be psychological, I can imagine the evolution of this authoritarian personality, for whom Western democracies are decadent, who is increasingly hardening his military-police regime in Russia, who believed for a time in 2001, in mutual sympathy with Bush, that the United States would treat his great country with dignity. He tends to hide the fact that his wars in Chechnya, his interventions in Georgia and finally in Ukraine in 2014 have put America and Europe on alert.

Cautious and cunning at first, Putin became bold in 2014 and is now driven by a terrible rage.

It should also be recognized that, while Russian troops were concentrated on the border of Ukraine, Biden made a speech on March 1, 2022, intransigent in tone but where there is a small capital phrase—"we will not make war"—which, while legitimate, has upset the United States in the balance of power. And similarly, no people, no government in Europe has considered going to war over invaded Ukraine, despite the constant appeals of President Zelenski and Macron's multiple attempts to negotiate with Putin.

### *The difficulty of waging war on war*

The heroic resistance of President Zelenski, his government, and the Ukrainian people has undoubtedly surprised Putin as much as it has aroused our admiration. It even made Putin abandon the huge lie of denazification, speaking now instead of Ukrainian nationalists. It has undoubtedly helped to unify democratic and national Ukraine.

Similarly, Putin's war is unifying Europe, in its disapproval and reaction, at least for a while. The West is trying to do everything short of outright war: this would be a generalized catastrophe that would plunge Ukraine, Europe, and America into a terrifying new world war. Hence the economic response of multiple and generalized sanctions (personally I deeply oppose sanctions against culture, music, theater, the arts); then the response is amplified by economic aid, then with military assistance to Ukraine, and the organization of reception of refugees. And then we have the formation of a legion of volunteers to fight in Ukraine. One of the features of the tragedy is that we can afford neither weakness nor strength and that we are forced to navigate between the two in an uncertain manner.

That said, it should be remembered that sanctions also hit those who carry them out. Thus Europe will risk a shortage of gas and other products.

The economic war could be effective in the long term but by then Ukraine will have been swallowed. It could have major effects in Russia, impoverish the population, arouse a strong opposition (accurate information is already coming through a thousand private channels in Russian cities), and strengthen or overthrow Putin's authoritarian power.

Where is the borderline between economic warfare, assistance in arms, the intervention of volunteers, and the war itself?

The distant bombings, the ruins, the deaths, the exodus that hit Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan are on our doorstep.

At this point we have Putin's repeated threat of an unstoppable weapon against those who would attack Russia: "you would all be vitrified". Would he, in an excess of rage, be capable of taking action? In any case, the slippage towards a war that would exceed in horror the two previous world wars is not an impossibility.

As I write these lines, Kiev has not fallen.

Macron has made a new and valiant effort with Putin, without result.

Everything is uncertain, everything is dangerous.

The compromise solution acceptable to all would be a neutral and federal Ukraine, given its ethnic and religious diversity. It is currently unattainable.

A peaceful settlement of the war would allow for more general negotiations between Russia, the United States, and Europe. I don't know if the Unity acquired during the crisis by the European Union will be maintained; there will be a new element: German rearmament, which will give Germany a hegemony that will not be only economic.

While waiting for a hypothetical solution, the permanent danger remains. How can we find the way between culpable weakness and irresponsible intervention?

In any case, we have very often seen that the consequences of interventions go against intentions and decisions, both in the East and in the West.

Edgar Morin