

Playing with fire

BY MASSIMO BOFFA

Arguments for arming Ukraine cannot be made in a vacuum that does not take into account Ukraine's geography and history. Nor can the West ignore its own vulnerability and lack of strategy.

A man blows fire on a scarecrow with a mask depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin during celebrations to say farewell to winter in the western Ukrainian city of Uzhhorod, February 15, 2015.

Providing Ukraine with “lethal military aid” to fight the rebellion in the eastern territories of the Donbas is a very serious step in the escalation of the conflict between the West and Russia. Such a recommendation was sent to the White House and its allied governments by three influential American think-tanks – the Brookings Institution, Atlantic Council and Chicago Council – in a joint report published February 2, titled “Preserving Ukraine’s Independence, Resisting Russian Aggression: What the United States and NATO Must Do.” In particular, US President Barack Obama is urged to allocate, in military aid, a billion dollars a year for the next three years. So far Washington, which also provides “non-lethal” military assistance to Kiev (flak jackets, night vision goggles, first aid kits) has been opposed. But it is clear that on this very sensitive point, the presidential administration is divided and under pressure: the new secretary of defense Ashton Carter, for example, at a hearing before the US Congress, said he was “very much inclined” to arm Kiev. Those who are totally opposed to going down this road are largely European governments, led by Germany, who fear, rightly, an aggravation of the crisis, with results potentially out of control.

The main argument put forward by those who would arm Kiev is that of deterrence: it would give “the Ukrainian military sufficient means to make further aggression so costly that Putin and the Russian army are deterred from escalating the fight.” And yet it is unlikely that this would be the real effect of the de-

cision. Russia, rightly or wrongly, considers the Ukrainian crisis a direct threat to its security, a geopolitical challenge orchestrated by the West, the most dangerous since the end of the Cold War. Russia has also made clear that it will not allow the military defeat of the rebels. As things stand, everything suggests that military help for Kiev, far from softening Kremlin policy, would provoke a counter-escalation, making the war even more destructive. Already the war has caused more than 5,500 deaths, many of them among the civilian population, and a million refugees. But the risk is that this number will soar dramatically.

Many military experts are of the opinion that new arms will not change the outcome of the war. The Ukrainian army suffered its defeats less for lack of weapons technology, than because it is poorly organized and demoralized by a fratricidal war. Its difficulties increase when the “general mobilization” called by the government faced an upsurge of draft dodgers. Discipline is also a problem among the fighting forces;

it must be very serious if the Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, just passed a law that allows for superiors to deal with insubordination much more harshly and even shoot deserters. Moreover, it is not only the regular army fighting against the separatists; there are volunteer battalions, many of whom hold extreme right-wing political positions. Into whose hands would the lethal military aid go? The Ukrainians do not need new weapons, they need the weapons on both sides to be silenced so they can arrive at a negotiated solution to the conflict.

This is the real point. Today in Kiev there is a party more inclined to negotiations, that of President Petro Poroshenko, and a party more inclined to continue the war, which counts in its ranks Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk and emerged strengthened from the last election. In addition there is a wide range of ultranationalist forces threatening another Maidan if the government were to concede too much to the rebels. By sending weapons, the US and its allies would give a clear

signal of encouragement to the more intransigent party, more willing to use force to solve the insurgency problem in the eastern provinces as well as to shape the future structure of the Ukrainian state. And since a military victory is highly unlikely, the real prospect is that of a prolonged civil war. The West should, on the contrary, ask Kiev to do exactly what it is rightly asking the Kremlin to do in Donetsk: rein in the more bellicose of its protected forces and create conditions for a political settlement of the conflict. In such critical situations, it is important to give up unilateral representations of reality, and recognize that the obstacles to peace are not only from Moscow. Whoever cares about Ukraine must have the courage to speak a language of truth: tell Kiev that it cannot win and that it has to negotiate.

The contrary argument would object that this would reward “aggression” and encourage expansionist adventures in other theaters. But it is an objection that does not take into account the specific characteristics of the Ukrainian crisis and attaches to the oppo-



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A protester holds a banner reading "Foreign currency mortgages - SOS" during a rally against the banks and the fall of the ruble in central Moscow, December 28, 2014.

nents self-serving intentions. If one is to judge coldly, in fact, there are few indications that Russia intends to threaten NATO countries. It is not even likely that Moscow wants to annex the regions of southeastern Ukraine, as it may have seemed a year ago, after the annexation of Crimea. Subsequent events have shown that the Crimea was a egregious episode, but a unique one. By all appearances, Russia does not intend to "recreate the Soviet empire," as many commentators claim superficially, but to curb the expansion of NATO.

To imagine a political solution, it is necessary to assess the Ukrainian situation from the beginning and leave aside the oversimplifications, as if one side were right and the other wrong. It is true that Russia, with the annexation of the Crimea, has taken a grave step, redesigning borders of a sovereign European state (though it would not be the first time: the borders of Serbia were redesigned by NATO bombing). And the West cannot simply sit back and watch. But the revolution in Kiev on February 22, 2014, which overthrew the government of Ukraine and led to the current situation, was itself a violent act. The problem lies not in the formal legitimacy (still somewhat dubious) of what happened in Kiev. Rather, it lies in the fact that the Ukrainian state was based on a delicate balance: the southeastern regions are historically linked to Russia, the western regions to Central Europe. The effort to unilaterally break that delicate balance has caused the whole sequence of major events we see before our eyes. And as long as a lasting balance is not found again, the crisis will not be resolved.

the strategic value of Cuba for the safety of Americans certainly was not higher then than that of Ukraine's to the security of Russia today.

A lasting solution to the crisis must therefore realistically take into account several factors: the legitimate aspiration of Ukrainians to greater economic integration with Europe, the heterogeneity of their nation, recognizing the different sensitivities of those in the Donbas, and also the interests of its powerful Russian neighbor. Otherwise it will be almost impossible to keep Ukraine united. There are unofficial voices from Russia laying out the conditions that would be acceptable to them in resolving the conflict: ensuring the territorial integrity of Ukraine, grant autonomy to the eastern provinces, and ensuring the country's military neutrality (no NATO membership). As for Crimea, it is unlikely that an agreement can be reached, but the de facto situation may remain frozen, without de jure recognition by the international community (a bit like the annexation of the Baltic States by the USSR, which was not never officially recognized by the US). What, on the other hand, is the solution the West has in mind? If the goal is just to continue, and maybe even win the showdown, without indicating a possible compromise, the risk is that the current conflict will become still bloodier and the geopolitical balance in Europe will be disrupted for a long time to come.

There also needs to be a general rethinking of relations with Russia. The Ukrainian crisis, in fact, has distant roots. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West, particularly the US, lost a great opportunity to

It is not helpful to gloss over the real stakes, which for Russia is less the entry of Kiev into Europe than into NATO. Some say that Ukraine is a sovereign country and has the right to choose its own alliances. That sounds simple, but it is not, since no sovereign state – especially not Ukraine – can afford to ignore geography and history. If it does, the consequences can be tragic. When in 1961 Cuba decided to deploy Soviet missiles on its territory, US President John F. Kennedy did not consider even for a moment that the Caribbean island was a sovereign state, free to do what it wanted, and instead ordered a naval blockade – i.e., carried out an act of war, justified from the point of view of a leader whose primary concern was his country's national security. But



A street vendor shows a T-shirt with a portrait of Vladimir Putin. Putin's popularity has doubled in the months since he annexed Crimea and backed pro-Russian militias in eastern Ukraine.

build a solid partnership with Russia based on the recognition of common interests. Instead of seeing in Russia a strategic partner, with whom to share the responsibility of governing the world, it preferred to regard it as the loser of the Cold War, as a geopolitical opponent, ignoring its concerns and starting the gradual expansion of NATO eastward. This mistaken outlook has worsened since Vladimir Putin took power in 2000 and initiated a more assertive domestic and international policy.

Too often we are content with superficial interpretations about the Putin years. Too often we underestimate the fact that his great popularity at home and also his stature as a leader are linked to the way in which, after the chaos of the 1990s and the uncontrolled power of the oligarchs, he has been able to restore the state's authority. Putin inherited a country in shambles, torn apart by centrifugal forces; it had become irrelevant on the international level, and he has reversed the trend. All this cannot be dismissed summarily as the mark of an "undemocratic" or "authoritarian" policy. This would ignore a fact that may seem paradoxical: rarely, in their centuries-long history, have Russians enjoyed as much freedom and prosperity as in the Putin years. This is not to say that in Russia there aren't serious problems with the rule of law. But it means that if you want to make a historical judgment and not mere-

ly stop at the surface of the record, one must take into account a certain evolution. It makes little sense, in fact, from a historical point of view, to compare the freedoms that exist in Moscow to those in London, Paris or New York; it makes more sense instead to compare Moscow today to how it was yesterday or the day before yesterday. And the comparison tends to benefit the Putin years. And his policy of defending traditional spiritual and religious values (which incorporates many of the themes of the late Alexander Solzhenitsyn) deserves to be evaluated with greater respect, and not only as a pretext for demonization campaigns.

In short, the West seems to have bet on the wrong horse in Russia. It chose as a privileged interlocutor not the leader who reflects, for better or for worse, the popular orientation, but rather a radicalized minority that does not enjoy support at home. The West has given the impression of focusing not on a democratic evolution (consensus expressed democratically thus far has gone to Putin), but on "regime change," – i.e., a dangerous adventure, which would certainly not result in a Kremlin more amenable to the West, and would probably cast the world's largest country into chaos.

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