

The power struggle in Ukraine and America's strategy for global supremacy

Peter Schwarz
23 December 2004

In 1997, former US security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski published a book entitled *The Grand Chessboard* that attracted considerable attention and treated America's strategy for global supremacy. By chessboard, Brzezinski meant Eurasia, the enormous land mass comprising two continents and containing the majority of the world's population.

According to the core thesis of the book, "America's capacity to exercise global primacy" depends on whether America can prevent "the emergence of a dominant and antagonistic Eurasian power." Brzezinski then concluded: "Eurasia is thus the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played."

One should recall these lines in the course of studying the events of the last weeks in Ukraine. Should the Western-oriented Viktor Yushchenko—a man bound to the US by a myriad of political and economic ties—succeed in becoming president, then the US would occupy a strategically important, possibly crucial position on Brzezinski's global chessboard.

If one regards American foreign policy towards Russia over the last 15 years in its entirety, then one finds one noteworthy constant. Independent of the ups and downs of bilateral relations—at times close, on other occasions strained—the US has worked systematically to contain the collection of states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union. For more than four decades, the Soviet Union had formed the most important obstacle to the unrestricted world domination of American imperialism—now the US was at pains to ensure that under no circumstances could Russia ever play a remotely comparable role.

The first Iraq war in 1991 already undermined to a large extent the influence of Moscow in the Middle East. The same process took place in the Balkans following the war on Serbia in 1999 in the Balkans. In 2001, in the context of the Afghanistan invasion, the US established military bases for the first time in former Soviet republics and emerged as a presence in Central Asia. Since then, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and to some extent Azerbaijan have allied themselves to the US. One year ago, they helped lift a rabidly pro-Western regime to power in Georgia. In Europe, most members of the former Warsaw Pact, including the former Baltic Soviet republics, have now joined NATO and the European Union. Should Ukraine now switch to the Western camp, Russia would be largely isolated.

In his book of seven years ago, Brzezinski had already referred in this respect to the relevance of Ukraine. Its secession, he wrote, would drastically curtail Russia's geopolitical options. "Even without the Baltic states and Poland, a Russia that retained control over Ukraine could still seek to be the leader of an assertive Eurasian empire.... But without Ukraine and its 52 million fellow Slavs, any attempt by Moscow to rebuild the Eurasian empire was likely to leave Russia entangled alone in protracted conflicts with the nationally and religiously aroused non-Slavs, the war with Chechnya perhaps simply being the first example."

The *Stratfor* news web site, which has close links to the American intelligence apparatus, revived this analysis following the recent struggle for power in Ukraine. In an analysis of recent events, *Stratfor* concludes

that the secession of Ukraine not only weakens Moscow with regard to foreign policy, but also, "without Ukraine, Russia's political, economic and military survivability are called into question." The *Stratfor* report continues: "To say Russia is at a turning point is a gross understatement. Without Ukraine, Russia is doomed to a painful slide into geopolitical obsolescence and ultimately, perhaps even non-existence."

With nearly 50 million inhabitants, Ukraine is, after Russia, by far the biggest of the successor states of the Soviet Union. Russia has about three times as many inhabitants. Ukraine is connected to Russia not only by a lengthy common history, extending back to the Kiev Rus in the ninth Century, but also close economic relations. Russia is by far its largest trading partner. During the past 300 years, the largest part of today's Ukraine was either Russian or Soviet national territory, or both. During this period a considerable exchange of population took place. Seventeen percent of the Ukrainian population are of Russian descent and nearly half the population speaks Russian. The heavy industry of the Eastern Ukraine, developed under the Soviet regime, is closely linked with its Russian counterpart. The dissolution of these links would have damaging consequences for both countries.

An additional factor is the strategic significance of Ukraine. Eighty percent of Russian gas and oil exports to Europe—its most important source of foreign exchange—flows through Ukrainian pipelines. The main base of the Russian Black Sea fleet, Sebastopol, is also situated on Ukrainian national territory.

"It would not take a war to greatly damage Russian interests, simply a change in Ukraine's geopolitical orientation. A Westernised Ukraine would not so much be a dagger poised at the heart of Russia as it would be a jackhammer in constant operation," according to *Stratfor*. A possible consequence, according to the news service, is a more aggressive foreign policy on the part of Russia as well as powerful domestic shocks in the course of which "millions of people could die."

The parallels to the Balkans are obvious here. The break-up of Yugoslavia left the country in ruins, wracked by continuous ethnic tensions and hatred, which regularly erupt into violence. Corrupt regimes with connections to organised crime predominate, and bitter poverty and unemployment are widespread. Germany and the US went to considerable lengths to promote the downfall of Yugoslavia, by supporting the independence of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. The mini-states, which resulted from the break-up of Yugoslavia, are incapable of independent economic or political existence, but can, however, be manipulated and controlled by the Great Powers as desired.

The war against the remnants of Yugoslavia served to finally smash the last remaining political structure in the region that retained a certain political independence—notwithstanding the reactionary character of the Milosevic regime. It is characteristic that the movement, which eventually brought the pro-European Union and US regime to power in Belgrade, now serves as a model for the opposition in Kiev.

For a long time, the aim of American foreign policy has been to drive a wedge between Russia and Ukraine and draw the latter into NATO. (I will not deal here with the role of European powers; that requires its own article.) In 1997, Brzezinski referred in his book to “[T]he growing American inclination, especially by 1994, to assign a high priority to help Ukraine sustain its new national freedom.”

In January 2003, the US Ambassador in Kiev, Carlos Pascual, gave a lecture to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington on American-Ukrainian relations. He posed the question: “Should Ukraine belong in the Euro-Atlantic community?” and answered without reservation in the affirmative.

John Herbst, who replaced Pascual as ambassador in September 2004, made the same point at his confirmation hearing before a US Senate committee. He stated that “Ensuring the integration of Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic community” was a critical foreign policy goal.

Herbst promised, “If confirmed, I will make it a priority to do what I can to ensure that the Ukrainian authorities allow for a level playing field for presidential candidates and that election preparations and the election itself are carried out in a free and fair manner. Having an electoral process that meets OSCE [Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe] standards and a result that reflects the will of the people is vital to the success of Ukraine’s ambition to join NATO and to move closer to the European Union.”

The irony of these remarks can scarcely have been lost on the assembled senators. At the time of the hearing, Herbst represented the US as ambassador to Uzbekistan, whose autocratically dominant president, Islam Karimov, a former secretary of the Communist Party, maintains friendly relations with Washington. Despite the fact that Uzbek elections do not correspond in the slightest to OSCE standards and opposition parties have been banned for 10 years, Karimov receives several hundred million dollars annually from America. In return, he put a military base at the disposal of the US for its war against neighbouring Afghanistan. When Herbst left his post shortly after the senate hearing in Tashkent, Karimov awarded him the “Order of Friendship,” while the departing ambassador praised the president as “a very strong and wise person.”

While Herbst’s references to “free and fair” elections were nothing more than empty rhetoric, his promise to interfere with all his might in the Ukrainian elections was meant with utter seriousness. In the past two years alone, the American government has spent more than 65 million dollars to help the Ukrainian opposition to power. This has been confirmed within the past few days by government representatives. Additional millions came from private donors such as the Soros Foundation, and European governments.

Naturally, these funds flowed indirectly to political parties. As the US government stresses, they were made available to serve in general the “promotion of democracy.” It is an open secret that such funds benefited the opposition almost exclusively. The money went to institutes and non-governmental organisations that advise the opposition, assist it with the most modern technical aids and advertising techniques, and train election helpers. Visits paid by opposition leader Yushchenko to American politicians were also financed with these funds. Also funded in the same manner were the voter opinion polls, which were then held up as proof of election fraud by the government camp.

As well as exercising a general influence in the elections, these funds also serve to deepen corruption. Even if one excludes direct bribery, such sums in a country where average monthly wages are between \$30 and \$100 must have a corrupting effect. Whoever has access to the financial means available to the opposition is able to ascend socially. Yushchenko was able to profit personally from this process. He sits on the supervisory

board of the International Centre for Policy Studies, a think tank financed by US government funds.

How the change of power in Ukraine was prepared

While the US has sought for a long time to remove Ukraine from the sphere of Russian influence, its support for the opposition around Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko is of more recent origin. More precisely, this opposition only developed when serious tensions emerged between the US government and long-time Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma.

Kuchma, who replaced Leonid Kravchuk in 1994 as president, was quite prepared to work closely with the US and the European Union. He cooperated fully with the International Monetary Fund, expressed himself in favour of European Union membership and even lodged a formal request in May 2002 for NATO membership. Ukraine also sent its own troops to Iraq, to support the American occupation of the country.

Kuchma was always forced, however, to maintain a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, he worked against the break-up of Ukraine into an eastern region oriented to Russia and a western half of the country that looked to the West—a threat that hung in the air continuously after Ukraine established its independence. On the other hand, he had to take into account the country’s strong economic dependence on Russia. In particular, the Ukrainian power supply depends nearly completely on Russian oil and gas.

Kuchma made absolutely clear, however, that he was determined to maintain the independence of Ukraine, which is the guarantor of the wealth of the national elite. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, which had been sealed by Kuchma’s predecessor Kravchuk together with the Russian president Boris Yeltsin and Belarus’s Stanislav Shushkevich at the end of 1991, created the conditions for the concentration of social wealth in the hands of a few clans of oligarchs. This policy of “unrestrained privatisation” swept through Ukraine and Russia during the 1990s and was unreservedly supported by the Great Powers.

Kuchma is closely connected with the oligarch clan of his hometown Dnipropetrovsk, which is led by his son-in-law Viktor Pinchuk. Pinchuk is regarded as the second-richest man in the country after Rinat Achmetov, the boss of the oligarch clans of Donetsk.

The leader of the opposition, Viktor Yushchenko, stood loyally at the side of Kuchma during the period of privatisation. In 1993, he took over as president of the Ukrainian central bank and acted as the country’s contact man for international finance. In 1999, he was appointed prime minister by Kuchma. The second leading figure in the opposition, Yulia Tymoshenko, followed in the wake of Kuchma’s Dnipropetrovsk clan into high government office. She was a member of the Yushchenko government and made millions through dealing in natural gas.

Kuchma dismissed Yushchenko in April 2001. His policy of opening the country up to international capital through reform of the energy sector encountered resistance from the clans of oligarchs in the east of the country. After a temporary solution, Kuchma finally appointed the scion of the Donetsk clan, Viktor Yanukovich, as prime minister.

Nevertheless, the US still refused to exclude any and all cooperation with Kuchma and Yanukovich. In the autumn of 2003, both men visited the US. Kuchma met with President George W. Bush, while Yanukovich was received by Vice President Dick Cheney and other top officials. A year before, a meeting of ministers in Prague had agreed upon a timetable for Ukraine’s admission into NATO.

However, tensions developed that finally pushed Kuchma more closely

in the direction of Moscow and were crucial in the decision by the US to give substantial support to the opposition candidate.

First, there was the so-called Kolchuga affair. Two years ago, Washington accused Kuchma of personally certifying sales of the early warning system Kolchuga to Iraq.

In contrast to conventional radar systems, the Ukrainian early warning system works passively and cannot be located by the airplanes it has detected. With a range of 800 kilometres, it is considered to be the most effective of its kind. Iraqi defence batteries would have been able to detect oncoming US planes without giving away their own location.

Supported by the US accusations, a Kiev judge launched an investigation into Kuchma's activity on suspicion of corruption, misuse of power and arms trafficking with Iraq. He was supported by the Ukrainian opposition. The supreme court, however, intervened to stop the procedure.

Kuchma always rejected the accusations made by the US government, and no proof was ever found that the Kolchuga system was supplied to Iraq. Nevertheless, relations between Ukraine and the US deteriorated in 2002 as a result of the affair. Kuchma tried once again to improve relations in the following year by dispatching Ukrainian troops to Iraq—a decision that met with broad popular opposition.

Oil and gas

A second point at issue is the control and use of Ukraine's oil and gas pipelines. For Russia, Ukraine is the most important transit country for its oil and gas exports. The large pipelines, built since the 1970s, linking Soviet oil and gas fields and western Europe, make their way across Ukrainian territory. For their part, the US and the European Union have sought for some time to establish a transportation route for oil from the Caspian region that bypasses Russia, using Ukraine for this purpose.

A pipeline has been built extending from Odessa to Brody, connecting the Black Sea to the Polish border. Caspian oil can now be pumped through Georgia to the Black Sea, and after a short transit by sea directly to Polish refineries, and from there to Europe. Both Russia and the bottleneck represented by the Bosphorus strait are bypassed en route.

The pipeline, 674 kilometres in length, was completed in May 2002, with the support of the Halliburton subsidiary Kellogg Brown, and has since then stood empty. The pipeline is waiting for oil from the Caspian region as well as the connecting pipeline in Poland, which still has to be built.

Eventually, the Ukrainian government negotiated with Russian oil companies over use of the pipeline in the reverse direction. Russian oil could thereby be shipped from Odessa over the Black Sea and exported to the world market. For a period of five months, a section of the pipeline was actually used for this purpose. Then alarm bells began to ring in Washington. Cheney personally pressed Yanukovich during his visit to Washington to refuse to agree to the use of the pipeline in the opposite direction. In February of this year, the cabinet in Kiev finally passed an appropriate resolution. Since then, the pipeline has been inoperative.

The influence of Russian energy companies in Ukraine is also regarded with concern by Washington. Two years ago, ambassador Carlos Pascual sharply criticised the Gazprom company (which has links to the Russian state) at a meeting of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. One has the impression, he said, that Russian companies received investment possibilities "without paying the full value of the assets that they are investing in, which is not good for Ukraine."

Herbst went on: "[T]here are a couple of examples recently that, I think, are to Ukraine's strategic disadvantage, particularly in the gas and oil

sector. In the recent agreement that was signed between Gazprom and Naftogaz [Ukraine's national gas and oil company] on the development of an international consortium, that agreement...specifically states that those two companies together must decide on any management proposals for an international consortium to control Ukraine's international gas transit system. In other words, Gazprom has a veto over what Ukraine wants to do in the management of its gas transit system. Gazprom cannot be happier: This has been one of the things that they have been seeking to get since 1992."

There can be no doubt that Washington's interests will be better protected by Yushchenko than by Yanukovich, who is supported by Moscow. In addition, Yushchenko has emphasised his attachment to the values of "the rule of law" and the free-market economy—shorthand for security and guarantees for foreign investment funds.

Conflicts between the Great Powers

US ambitions for global supremacy are encompassing ever-larger parts of the globe. In the course of the struggle for the Ukrainian presidency, American and Russian interests have clashed in a manner and sharpness that vividly recall the period of the Cold War. Following the bloody conflict in the Balkans and the forcible subjection of Iraq, Ukraine and Russia itself threaten to become the scene of violent struggles.

European—and above all, German—interests are also directly affected by the change of power in Ukraine, and, in the longer term, the two rising Asiatic great powers, China and India, are also involved. In addition to purely geostrategic criteria, another issue just as important for the world economy of the twenty-first century lies at the heart of this conflict—control of the worldwide power supply of oil and gas. In this respect, the significance of the issues fought out in Ukraine recall the conflicts that erupted in Europe at the start of the twentieth century over control of mineral resources.

If one considers the fact that the European Union receives nearly 20 percent of its oil and 44 percent of its gas imports from Russia, with 80 percent of these products passing through Ukrainian pipelines, then the significance of the balance of power in Ukraine for the economic future of Europe becomes clear.

As is well known, conflicts over the mineral ore reserves of Lorraine and the coal of the Ruhr district contributed largely to the outbreak of the First World War. The situation with regard to international energy and transport routes is just as explosive today. For the time being, the disputes are still being conducted on a political level, characterised by manoeuvres and tactical shifts. But all the conditions for a further escalation are present. America's strategy for supremacy threatens to plunge mankind into a maelstrom that will make the current Iraq war appear relatively benign.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact