

The geopolitical dimensions of the coup in Ukraine

By Peter Schwarz
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“When the Soviet Union was collapsing in late 1991, Dick wanted to see the dismantlement not only of the Soviet Union and the Russian empire but of Russia itself, so it could never again be a threat to the rest of the world,” wrote former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in his recently published memoirs. Gates was referring to the then-Secretary of Defense, and later US Vice President, Dick Cheney.

The statement sheds light on the geopolitical dimensions of the recent putsch in Ukraine. What is at stake is not so much domestic issues—and not at all the fight against corruption and democracy—but rather an international struggle for power and influence that stretches back a quarter of a century.

The *Financial Times* places the recent events in Ukraine in the same light. In an editorial on February 23, it wrote: “For a quarter of a century this huge territory perched precariously between the EU and Russia has been the object of a geopolitical contest between the Kremlin and the west.” In 2008, a clumsy attempt by President George W. Bush failed to draw the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO, “But the Maidan revolution now offers a second chance for all parties to reconsider the status of Ukraine on the fault line of Europe.”

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 was an unexpected gift to the imperialist powers. The October Revolution in 1917 had removed a considerable part of the world’s surface from the sphere of capitalist exploitation. This was regarded as a threat by the international bourgeoisie, even long after the Stalinist bureaucracy betrayed the goal of world socialist revolution and murdered an entire generation of Marxist revolutionaries. In addition, the economic and military strength of the Soviet Union presented an obstacle to US world hegemony.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the introduction of the capitalist market created conditions for the social wealth created by generations of workers to be plundered by a handful of oligarchs and international finance. The social

gains made in the field of education, health care, culture and infrastructure were smashed and left to decline.

This was not enough, however, for the US and the major European powers. They were intent on ensuring that Russia could never again threaten their global hegemony, as is made clear in the above cited statement of Dick Cheney.

By 2009 the US-dominated NATO military alliance had absorbed into its ranks almost all of the East European countries that had once belonged to the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. But attempts to incorporate former Soviet republics into NATO failed—with the exception of the three Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—due to resistance from Moscow. Ukraine, with its 46 million inhabitants and its strategic location situated between Russia, Europe, the Black Sea and the Caucasus, invariably was at the centre of these attempts.

As far back as 1997, former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote that without Ukraine, any attempt by Moscow to rebuild its influence on the territory of the former Soviet Union was doomed to fail. The core thesis of his book *The Grand Chessboard* is that America’s capacity to exercise global primacy depends on whether America can prevent the emergence of a dominant and antagonistic power on the Eurasian landmass. (See: “The power struggle in Ukraine and America’s strategy of domination”)

In 2004 the US and the European powers supported and financed the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine that brought a pro-western government to power. The regime rapidly broke apart, however, due to internal strife. The attempt in 2008 to draw Georgia into NATO by provoking a military confrontation with Russia also failed.

Now the US and its European allies are intent to use the putsch in Ukraine to once again destabilize other former Soviet republics as well and draw them into their own sphere of influence. In so doing they risk an open armed conflict with Russia.

Under the headline “After Ukraine, the West Makes Its Move for the Russian Periphery,” the *Stratfor* think tank,

which has close links to the US secret services, writes: “The West wants to parlay the success of supporting Ukraine’s anti-government protesters into a broader, region-wide campaign.”

“A Georgian delegation is currently visiting Washington, and the country’s prime minister, Irakli Garibashvili, is scheduled to meet with U.S. President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State John Kerry this week,” *Stratfor* reports. Moldovan Prime Minister Iurie Leanca is also scheduled to visit the White House for a meeting with US Vice President Joe Biden on March 3. “High on the agenda of both visits are the countries’ prospects for Western integration—in other words, how to bring them closer to the United States and the European Union and further from Russia.”

Lilia Shetsova from the US foundation Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (sic) in Moscow, also argues that the coup in Ukraine be extended to other countries and Russia itself. “Ukraine has become the weakest link in the post-Soviet chain,” she writes in a comment for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. “We should keep in mind that similar upheavals in other countries are possible.”

Shetsova stresses a feature of the Ukrainian revolution that she wants to retain at all costs: the mobilization of militant fascist forces. “Yanukovych’s downfall is essentially due to the ‘radical elements’ on the Maidan, including among others, the Right Sector, which have become a serious political force.” She continues: “Ukraine’s future will depend on whether the Ukrainians can maintain the Maidan.”

The “radical elements” which Shetsova wants to retain at all costs are armed fascist militias, which base themselves on the vilest traditions of Ukrainian history: the pogroms and mass murder of Jews and Communists carried out during the Second World War. The future role of these fascist militias will be to terrorize and intimidate the working class.

It took just a few hours for the reactionary social content of the upheaval in Ukraine to become clear. The “European values ” allegedly brought to the country by overthrow of the old regime consist of massive attacks on the already impoverished working class. As a condition for loans the country urgently needs to prevent impending bankruptcy, the IMF is demanding the floating of the exchange rate of the hryvna, a brutal austerity program and a six-fold increase in the price of household gas prices.

The floating of the country’s currency will lead to raging inflation, a corresponding increase in the cost of living, and the destruction of any remaining savings by ordinary Ukrainians. The austerity program will be primarily directed against pensions and social spending and the increase in gas

prices will mean that many families cannot heat their homes.

Ukraine is to be reduced to a country where well-trained workers and professionals earn wages far below those currently paid in China. This is of especial interest for Germany, Ukraine’s second largest trading partner (after Russia) and, with a volume of \$7.4 billion, the second largest investor in the country.

While for the United States the isolation of Russia stands in the foreground, Germany is interested in the economic benefits of Ukraine, which it has already militarily occupied twice, in 1918 and 1941. It wants to exploit the country as a cheap labor platform and use it to drive down wages in Eastern Europe and Germany even further.

According to statistics compiled by the German Economic Institute, labor costs in Ukraine are at the low end of the international scale. At €2.50 per hour worked, average labor costs (gross wages plus other costs) for workers and clerical employees are already well below those of China (€3.17), Poland (€6.46) and Spain (€21.88). In Germany, an hour of labor costs €35.66, i.e 14 times as much.

The Ukrainian Statistical Office estimates the average monthly wage at 3,073 hryvna (€220). Academics are also very poorly paid.

Former President Yanukovych himself was a representative of Ukrainian oligarchs. He only turned down the Association Agreement with the EU because he feared he would not politically survive the social consequences. Now his downfall serves as a pretext to introduce a level of poverty and exploitation totally incompatible with democratic norms and will lead to new social uprisings. It is precisely in order to suppress future social unrest that the fascist militias are to be retained.

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