

Henry Kissinger, the Ukraine Conflict and the Meaning of History

Markus C. Kerber

Memorandum N° 39

Mai 2023

When in 2014 the former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger opposed Ukraine's membership of Nato, he reiterated a position he had already taken in 2007. His argument was historically founded and paid heed to the unique relationship between Ukraine and Russia, in addition to the ill-defined borders of Ukraine and her neighbours since the end of World War I. Referencing the significance of history, Kissinger admonished the West with a most remarkable sentence: „The West must understand that to Russia, Ukraine can never just be a foreign country.“¹ He furthermore alluded to early Russian history in the Kievan-Rus area of Eastern Europe and the various inseparable historic links between the two countries. His penetrating analysis acknowledged the importance of conflicts and their settlement, by integrating the full meaning of history into diplomatic thought, a subject Kissinger in his academic beginnings dealt with in ambitious texts.²

Since 2014 we have witnessed Russian expansionism not only by occupying Crimea, but additionally by annexing parts of Georgia, menacing Azerbeidshan and Moldavia and also repressing riots in Kasachstan. The malediction of imperial temptation seems to have remained a feature of Russian politics and surprisingly enough is approved by a large part of the Russian population. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia is therefore only the continuation of a revisionist territorial strategy deeply rooted in the imperial consciousness of the KGB-elites in the Kremlin. The military aggression against Ukraine is a new tactical theatre of operation but not a strategic change. All German governments since Schröder's at the start of this century have cherished their belief in peaceful cooperation with neo-Soviet Russia. This stance can only be explained by a potent mixture of economic interests (cheap natural gas) and political blindness. So Russia's imperialism is not new, but has become more apparent to a wider public since February 24th 2022.

Despite that strategic continuity of Russian policy, Henry Kissinger changed his mind in January 2023. In his address to the Davos World Economic Forum, he endorsed Nato membership of Ukraine by arguing that in view of the national resolve of the Ukrainians and the uncontested leadership of President Selensky, the entry of Ukraine should no longer be blocked.³ However, Kissinger also recommended keeping the door open for a dialogue with Russia, a nuclear power and a large country whose collapse would mean instability for the whole world.

Kissinger's *volte-face* neglects some strategic considerations. Ukraine is far from being a country with democratic tradition and rule of law. Raging corruption and palpable anti-semitism would pose those problems which the EU encounters on a smaller scale in Bulgaria. But what weighs most against Ukraine's Nato membership is the division of those countries which advocate it:

For Poland, this would be a positive move to strengthen the weight of Eastern European countries on the anti-Russian front, in the context of the Baltic states which are entirely dependent upon Nato. The U.S. and perhaps the U.K. might view Ukrainian membership as a subtle way of ringfencing Russia. And Germany as always, would follow. The E.U. with the EU Commission's president behaving like *Evita Peron* and the High Representative Borrel merely consider Nato Membership and EU entry of Ukraine as an option to increase EU-central power in Brussels.

¹ Washington Post March 5th 2014

² Kissinger, The meaning of history , Refelctions on Spengler, Townbee , Kant Harvard 1957

³ Kissinger on January 18th 2023 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbCFnn_g_MI

Are all Nato member countries ready to pledge full solidarity with Ukraine in case of renewed aggression, thus becoming parties in a future war between Ukraine and Russia? Despite its vigorous response in the Ukraine conflict, the „troubled partnership“ as Kissinger described NATO in 1965⁴, might run into further trouble if member countries do not share the same sense of belonging and as a consequence, unlimited military solidarity. So far, the supply of arms to Ukraine – though difficult to organize – has worked well to assist Ukraine in self defence, without those countries directly touching the battlefield.

Although Kissinger's new proposal clearly lacks strategic logic by excluding from consideration how divided the West fundamentally is on the Ukraine question, his move is that of an authoritative world figure with an uncontested reputation. His support for Nato membership might show the Russian rulers that they could achieve the opposite consequence of what they intended through the invasion of Ukraine: Nato membership and thus the perpetual presence of Nato military bases on their doorstep.

Therefore the Kissinger *démarche* might at the very best serve as a tactical bargaining tool to end the war by negotiation as soon as possible. Far reaching territorial compromises will have to be accepted by both sides. But such face saving measures are not only indispensable for a settlement. They are also the prerequisite for the effective abolition of the menace to central Europe by the missiles Putin has deployed in *Oblast Kalinigrad*, the former northern part of East Prussia. Effective ringfencing of Russia in this extremely vulnerable area is more important for Nato than the abrupt entry of Ukraine whose leader has shown a unique talent of putting war on stage.

⁴ Kissinger, The troubled partnership, 1965