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US, EU Sacrificing Ukraine to 'Weaken Russia': Former NATO Adviser Jacques Baud

Former Swiss intelligence officer and NATO adviser Jacques Baud on the roots of the Ukraine-Russia war and its growing dangers.

By Jacques Baud and Aaron Mate
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As the Russia-Ukraine war enters a new phase, former Swiss intelligence officer, senior United Nations official, and NATO advisor Jacques Baud analyzes the conflict and argues that the US and its allies are exploiting Ukraine in a longstanding campaign to bleed its Russian neighbor.

Guest: Jacques Baud. Former intelligence officer with the Swiss Strategic Intelligence Service who has served in a number of senior security and advisory positions at NATO, the United Nations, and with the Swiss military.

Transcript

AARON MATÉ: Welcome to Pushback. I'm Aaron Maté. Joining me is Jacques Baud. He has served in a number of senior security and advisory positions at NATO, the UN, and with the Swiss military. He is also a former strategic intelligence officer with the Swiss Strategic Intelligence Service. Jacques, thank you for joining me.

JACQUES BAUD: I thank you for inviting me.

AARON MATÉ: Let me just start by asking you to talk more about your background and how it has informed your visibility into the crisis in Ukraine.

JACQUES BAUD: Well, as you just said, I'm a strategic intelligence officer. I used to be in charge of the Warsaw Pact forces in strategic…that was during the Cold War, but still, I have a good visibility on what's going on in Eastern Europe. I used to speak and read Russian as well, so that gives me some access to some documents. And recently I had been seconded to NATO as head of the struggle against proliferation of small arms. And in that capacity, I

was involved in several projects from 2014 onwards with NATO in Ukraine. And so, I know the context quite well. I was also monitoring the possible influx of small armaments in the Donbas in 2014. And I have also worked—because in my previous assignment in the UN, I used to work on the restoration of armored forces, so when the Ukrainian armed forces got some problems with personnel issues, with suicide, with all these kind of things that you had in 2014, also problems in recruiting military—I was asked to participate on the NATO side on several projects in restoring Ukrainian armed forces. And so that's a little bit, in a nutshell, my background regarding this area.

AARON MATÉ: You've written a lengthy article which I will link to in the show notes for this segment, and you lay out the causes of the Ukraine conflict in three major areas. There is the strategic level, the expansion of NATO; the political level, which is what you call the Western refusal to implement the Minsk agreements; and operationally, the continuous and repeated attacks on the civilian population of the Donbas over the past years and the dramatic increase in late February 2022.

Let me ask you to start there. Talk about what you call the dramatic increase on civilians inside the Donbas in February, the period that led to the Russian invasion, immediate period, and how this escalation of attacks, as you say, helped lead to this war, this Russian invasion.

JACQUES BAUD: Well, I think we have to understand, as you know, that the war in fact hasn't started on 24 February this year. It started already in 2014. But I think that the Russians always hoped that this conflict could be solved on a political level, in fact; I mean the Minsk agreements and all that. So, basically what led to the decision to launch an offensive in the Donbas was not what happened since 2014. There was a trigger for that, and the trigger is two things; I mean, it came in two phases, if you want.

The first is the decision and the law adopted by [Volodymyr] Zelenskyy in March 2021—that means last year—to reconquer Crimea by force, and that started a build-up of the Russian armored for…not the Russian, [rather] the Ukrainian armored forces in the southern parts of the country. And so, I think the Russians were perfectly aware of this build-up. They were aware that an operation was to be launched against the Republics of the Donbas, but they did not know when, and, of course, they were just observing that, and then came the real trigger.

You may remember that—I think it was on the 16th of February—Joe Biden, during a press conference, told that he knew that the Russians would attack. And how would he know that? Because I still have some contacts, and nobody actually thought that the Russians—before end of January, beginning of February—I think nobody thought that the Russians would attack Ukraine. So, there must have been something that made Biden aware that the Russians would attack. And this something, in fact, is the intensification of the artillery shelling of the Donbas starting on the 16th of February, and this increase in the shelling was observed, in fact, by the [Border] Observer Mission of the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe], and they recorded this increase of violation, and it's a massive violation. I mean, we are talking about something that is about 30 times more than what it used to be, because the last eight years you had a lot of violations from both sides, by the way. But suddenly on the 16th of February you had a massive increase of violation on the Ukrainian side. So, for the Russians, Vladimir Putin in particular, that was the sign that the operation—the Ukrainian operation—was about to start.

And then everything started; I mean, all the events came very quickly. That means that if we look at the figures, you can see that there's, as I said, a massive increase from the 16th-17th, and then it reached kind of a maximum on the 18th of February, and that was continuing.

And the Russian parliament, the Duma, also was aware of this possible offensive, and they passed a resolution asking Vladimir Putin to recognize the independence of the two self-proclaimed Republics in the Donbas. And that's what Putin decided to do on the 21st of February. And just after adopting the decrees, the law recognizing the independence of the two Republics, Vladimir Putin signed a friendship and assistance agreement with those two Republics. Why did he do that? So that would allow the Republics to ask for military help in case of attack. And that's why, on the 24th of February when Vladimir Putin decided to launch the offensive, it could invoke Article 51 of the UN Charter that provides for assistance in case of attack.

AARON MATÉ: And as you noted, the OSCE documented a big increase in ceasefire violations, artillery firing on the rebel-held side, but do you think, based on what you observed of the positioning of Ukrainian troops, do you think that the threat of an imminent invasion or assault by the Ukrainian forces was real? Can you gauge that from how they were positioned on the other side of the front line?

JACQUES BAUD: Yes. Absolutely. I mean, we had reports, and those reports were available during the last couple of months. Since last year we knew that the Ukrainians were building up their forces in the south of the country, not on the eastern border with Russia but on the border with the contact line with Donbas. And, as a matter of fact, as we have seen from the 24th of February, the Russians had almost no resistance in the start of the offensive, especially in the north. And so, they could, what they have done since then, they could surround the Ukrainian forces in the south, in the southeast part of the country—that means between the two Republics of the Donbas and the Ukraine mainland, if you want. And that's where the bulk of the Ukrainian forces are today. And according to the…that's exactly the Russian doctrine to fight, I mean operational doctrine. Their main offensive was on the south, clearly, because the objective stated by Vladimir Putin—we can probably come back on these details later on—but this was demilitarization and denazification.

Both objectives, in fact, were about to be done or to be reached in the south of the country, and that's where the main efforts of the offensive was done. In the offensive order, the effort against Kiev is a so-called secondary effort, and it had, as a fact, you had two functions basically. First of all, to put some pressure on the political leadership in Kiev because the name of the game is to bring the Ukrainians to the negotiations. That was the first objective of this second effort.

The second objective of this second effort was to bind or to pin down the rest of the Ukrainian armed forces so that they could not reinforce the main forces which are in the Donbas area. And that worked quite well. So that means that the Russians could surround, as I said, the main forces, the bulk of the armed forces—the Ukrainian armed forces. Once they have achieved that they could withdraw some troops from Kiev, and that's what they have done since end of March. They have pulled several units in order to reinforce what they want; I mean their own forces to carry on under the main battle in the Donbas area. So now they are pulling, and they have pulled these troops from the Kiev area, and these troops will now help to flank for the vanguard, the offensive against the main forces in the Donbas. And that's what some called the 'mother of all battles' that is currently going on in

the Donbas area, where you have—nobody knows exactly the number of Ukrainian troops; estimates vary from sixty thousand to eighty thousand who are surrounded—and the forces would be cut in smaller cauldrons and then destroyed or neutralized.

AARON MATÉ: It's pretty clear to me that Zelenskyy's government had no interest in serious diplomacy on all the critical issues that could have avoided a war, and I think the main factor is what I presume to be US pressure behind the scenes, which we can't fully prove now. But I imagine evidence of that might come out later. And certainly, the open hostility of Ukraine's far right, who essentially threatened Zelenskyy's life if he made peace with Russia. And these threats have dogged him throughout his presidency and continued right up to the eve of the invasion, and it led to people like his top security official saying in late January that the implementation of the Minsk accords would lead to Ukraine's destruction—after Zelenskyy was elected on a platform of implementing Minsk—and that carried over to the final talks on implementing the Minsk accords that were brokered by Germany and France.

At those talks in February, Zelenskyy's government all of a sudden refused to even speak to the representatives of the rebels, which makes an accord possible. And meanwhile you had developments like this, which we just learned about from *The Wall Street Journal,* which was that the German chancellor [Olaf] Scholz on February 19th told Zelenskyy that, quote, "Ukraine should renounce its NATO aspirations and declare neutrality as part of a wider European security deal between the West and Russia." And this pact Scholz proposed would be signed by Biden and Putin, but Zelenskyy rejected this—rejected out of hand.

But my question is, because I think it's pretty conclusive that the Zelenskyy-Ukraine side sabotaged diplomacy, but what about Russia? Do you think Russia exhausted all of its diplomatic options to avoid a war? For example, why not go to the UN and ask for a peacekeeping force in the Donbas? And second of all, if the aim is to protect the people of the Donbas, why invade far beyond the Donbas and not just go there?

JACQUES BAUD: Well, I think the Russians have totally lost faith in the West. I think that's the main thing. They don't trust the West anymore, and that's why I think now they rely on a total victory on the military side in order to have some benefits in the negotiation.

I think Zelenskyy…I'm not sure exactly if he's so reluctant to have peace. I think he cannot do it. I think from the very beginning he was caught between his…remember that he was elected with the idea of achieving peace in the Donbas. That was his objective; that was his program as president.

But I think the West—and I would say the Americans and the British didn't want this peace to occur. And of course, the Germans and the French who were the guarantors of the Minsk agreement for the Ukrainian side, they never really implemented this—their function. I mean, they have never done their job, clearly. And especially France, which is simultaneously a member of the Security Council. Because I will just remind you that the Minsk agreements were also part of a resolution of the Security Council. So, meaning that they have not only the signature of the different parties that was done in Minsk, but you have also the members of the Security Council who were responsible for implementation of the agreement, and nobody wanted to have this agreement made. So that means that, I think, there was a lot of pressure on Zelenskyy so that he wouldn't even talk to the representatives of the two breakaway Republics.

And after that we have seen, by the way, that we have several indications that Zelenskyy was not completely, or is not completely, in control of what's going on in Ukraine. I think the extreme, let's say, nationalist extreme right—I don't know exactly what is the right term because it's a mixture of everything—but these forces definitely prevent him, or prevented him, so far to do anything. And we can see also that he's back and forth regarding peace. As soon as he started, you may remember that at the end of February, as soon as Zelenskyy indicated that he might be willing to start negotiations, this was the time where these negotiations were to take place in Belarus. Within hours after Zelenskyy decided that, the European Union came with a decision providing for half a billion arms to Ukraine, meaning that the Americans, certainly, but I think the West as a whole, made every possible effort to prevent a political solution to the conflict, and I think the Russians are aware of that.

Now we have also to understand that the Russians have a different understanding of how to wage a war on the Western powers, especially the US. That means that in the West we tend to, if we negotiate, we negotiate up to a certain point and then negotiations stop, and we start war. And that's war, period. In the Russian way of doing things, it's different. You start a war, but you never leave the diplomatic track, and you go on both ways, in fact. You put mental pressure and you try to achieve an objective, also with diplomatic means. This is very much a Clausewitzian approach to war—when [Prussian general and military theorist Carl von] Clausewitz, as you know, defined war as the continuation of politics with other means.

That's exactly how the Russians see that. That's why during the whole offensive, and even at the very beginning of the offensive, they started, or they indicated they were willing, to negotiate. So, the Russians certainly want to negotiate, but they don't trust the Western countries—I mean the West at large—to facilitate that negotiation. And that's the reason why they didn't come to the Security Council. By the way, they know that, probably, because, as you know, this physical war that we witness now is part of a broader war that was started years ago against Russia, and I think, in fact, Ukraine is just…I mean, nobody is interested in Ukraine, I think. The target, the aim, the objective is to weaken Russia, and once it will be done with Russia, they will do the same with China, and you can already see. I mean, we have seen that now, the Ukrainian crisis has overshadowed the rest, but you could have a very similar scenario happening with Taiwan, for instance. So, the Chinese are aware of that. That's the reason why they don't want to give up their, let's say, relationship with Russia.

Now, the name of the game is weakening Russia, and you know that there have been several studies done by the Rand Corporation on extending Russia, overextending Russia, and so on, and where the whole scenario is…

AARON MATÉ: Just to explain that for people who aren't familiar with it, Rand is a Pentagon-type think tank, and they did a study in 2019 looking at all the different ways in which the US could overextend and unbalance Russia, and the top option was to send weapons to Ukraine to fuel a conflict there that could draw Russia in, which is exactly what's happened.

JACQUES BAUD: Absolutely. And I think that this is a complete design for weakening Russia, and that's exactly what we see unfolding right now. We could have anticipated that, and I think Putin anticipated that. And I think he understood that, if on the end of February, I mean, on the 24th of February, or let's say just before because he had to make the decision before, but in the days before deciding on the offensive, he understood that he could not do nothing. He had to do something. The Russian public opinion would never

have understood why Russia would remain just observing the Donbas Republics being invaded or destroyed by Ukraine.

So, nobody would have understood that. So, he was obliged to go. And then, I think…and that's what, if you remember what he said on the 24th of February, he said regardless of what he would do, the amount of sanctions he will receive would be the same. So basically, he knew that the slightest intervention in the Donbas would trigger a massive launch of sanctions, so he knew that. So, then he decided, 'Okay, then I have to go for the maximal option,' because one option would have been just to reinforce, don't mess with the Republics and just defend the Republics on the line of contact. But he decided to go for the larger option, which is to destroy those forces that threatened Donbas.

And that's where you have those two objectives. Demilitarization, which is not the whole demilitarization of all Ukraine, but it was to suppress the military threat that was on the Donbas; that's the main objective of that. There's a lot of misunderstanding of what he said and, of course, he was not very clear, but that's part of the Russian way of communicating and doing things. They want to keep options open, and that's the reason why they say the minimum things and they just say what's necessary. And this is exactly what Putin meant on the 21st, what he said about suppressing the military threat against the Donbas. Denazification had nothing to do with killing Zelenskyy or destroying the leadership in Kiev. That was definitely not the idea, and, as a matter of fact, as I said, the main way they conceive war is to combine a physical action and diplomatic action. So that means that in such a way of doing you have to keep a leadership and you have to keep them in order to negotiate, and that's why there was no way you would kill or destroy the leadership in Kiev.

So, denazification was basically not about the 2.5 percent of the extreme right in Kiev. That was about the 100 percent of Azov people in Mariupol and Kharkov, and this kind of thing. So, we tend to misunderstand because some people said, 'Well, but, you know, why denazify? Because there is only 2.5 percent of political rightwing parties, only 2.5 percent or something like that, so it's meaningless. So, why denazify? It makes no sense.' But it was not about that. It was definitely about those groups that were in fact recruited from 2014 by the Ukrainians in order to, let's say, I would say pacify or control. I don't know exactly what's the right word for that, but to fight in Donbas. These people were extremists, fanatics, and these people were dangerous.

AARON MATÉ: And one of the points you make in your article, which I didn't know, is that part of the reason why Ukraine had this need for militias, far-right militias and foreign mercenaries, is because of a high rate of defection inside its own military ranks, people not wanting to serve, and even defecting to the other side of the rebellion in the Donbas.

JACQUES BAUD: Exactly. In fact, I noticed that, as I told you, I was in NATO and was monitoring the influx of weapons in the Donbas, and what we noticed is that we couldn't identify import of weapons or export of weapons from the Russian side to the Donbas. But what we could see is that you had a lot of Ukrainian units who defected, in fact, and complete battalions. And in 2014, most of the heavy artillery that the Donbas gained were from defectors. The whole units defected with ammunition and people and all that. The reason is that the Ukrainian army was based on a territorial…was manned and organized on a territorial way. That means you had a lot of Russian-speak[ers] in the armed forces. Once they were sent to fight in the Donbas, they didn't even want to fight their own colleagues and Russian-speaking people, so they preferred to defect.

And in addition to that you had in 2014, I mean in 2014 to 2017, in that period the leadership of the Ukrainian army was extremely poor. You had a lot of corruption. I'm not sure that the military was prepared for such a kind of war, in fact, because the war that was fought at that time by the rebels was very similar to what you can see in the Middle East today, or in the last years. That made very mobile units moving around very rapidly, much faster than the heavy units that the Ukrainian army had, and, as a result, if we see the pattern of the different battles that were fought in 2014, 2015, you could see that the Ukrainians could never lead. They had never the initiative. The initiative was always with the rebels. And it was not guerrilla. That's important to say. It was kind of extremely mobile warfare. And in addition to that you had, I think, the army was not really prepared to fight in general. So, you had a lot of suicides, you had a lot of alcohol problems, you had a lot of accidents, you had a lot of murders within the Ukrainian army.

And that led a lot of young Ukrainians to leave the country, because they didn't want to join the army. And what I'm saying is, I mean, it was recorded and reported by official reports in the UK and the US, I think. They made some very interesting reports on the low rate of recruitment of individuals, because people didn't want simply to join the army. And that's the reason why NATO was involved, and I was involved in such a program, trying to reshuffle the image of the army and find solutions to improve the recruitment condition of the army, and things like that.

But the solutions that were provided by NATO were in fact institutional solutions that would take time, and in order to compensate with lack of personnel and probably to have more aggressive military personnel, they started to use internationalists and mercenaries, as a matter of fact. Nobody knows exactly the number of these paramilitaries or extreme rights militias. Reuters put the figure at one hundred thousand. I'm not able to verify that, but that was a figure given by Reuters. And that seems to fit what we can observe now in the different regions of the country. So, these paramilitaries took a major role not in mobile warfare, and I would say [not in] the normal field warfare, but they were used in maintaining order within cities. And that's exactly what you have today in Mariupol, for instance, where you had those people, because they are not equipped for field operations. They are equipped for urban warfare. They have light equipment, they have some armored vehicles, but they don't really have tanks, anything like this.

So, this is definitely units that are meant for urban warfare. That's what they do in major cities. And these guys are extremely fanatic, we can say, and they are extremely dangerous. And that explains the way Mariupol, the battles and the extremely brutal fights that you have in Mariupol as an example, and we probably will see the same thing in Kharkov, for instance.

AARON MATÉ: As we wrap, I want to ask you about some of the recent atrocities that we've seen reported. There were reports of mass civilian killings by Russia inside the town of Bucha and also killings of Ukrainian forces, and then you had the attack on the train station in Kramatorsk. I'm wondering if you've evaluated both of these incidents and what you make of them.

JACQUES BAUD: Well, there are two things in that. And the first is that the indication we have on both incidents to me indicates that the Russians were not responsible for that. But, in fact, we don't know. I think that's what we have to say. I mean, if we're honest, we don't know what happened. The indications we have, everything, all the elements we have tends to point at Ukrainian responsibilities, but we don't know.

What disturbs me in the whole thing is not so much that we don't know, because in war there's always such situations, there are always situations where you don't know exactly who is really responsible. What disturbs me is that Western leaders started to make decisions without knowing what's going on and what happened.

And that's something that disturbs me quite deeply, that before having any result of any kind of inquiry, of investigation, and I mean international, impartial investigation, without having that we start already to take sanctions, to make decisions, and I think that illustrates how the whole decision-making process in the West was perverted. Since February or even before, in fact, because we had a similar thing after the hijacking—or not hijacking, by the way, it was not a hijacking—but the incident in Belarus with this Ryanair flight. You may remember last May, last year, that people started to react just minutes after the incident was reported in the press, even they didn't know what was going on! So, that's this way of doing from the political leadership in Europe, I mean the European Union, but also in European countries. That disturbs me as an intelligence officer. How can you make a decision with such impact on populations or on whole countries that disturbs even our own economies? So, it tends to backfire on us. But we take decisions without even knowing what's going on, and that, I think, indicates an extremely immature leadership that we have in the West in general. That's certainly the case in the US, but I think in this example of the Ukraine crisis shows that the European leadership is not better than what you have in the US. It's probably even worse, I think, sometimes. So, that's what should worry us, that you have people deciding based on nothing, and that's extremely dangerous.

AARON MATÉ: Jacques Baud, he is a former strategic intelligence officer with the Swiss Strategic Intelligence Service, also served in a number of senior security and advisory positions at NATO, the UN, and the Swiss military. Jacques, thank you very much for your time and insight.

JACQUES BAUD: Thank you for everything. Thank you.

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Aaron Maté is a journalist and producer. He hosts Pushback with Aaron Maté on The Grayzone. In 2019, Maté was awarded the Izzy Award (named after I.F. Stone) for outstanding achievement in independent media for his coverage of Russiagate in The Nation magazine. Previously, he was a host/producer for The Real News and Democracy Now!.

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