

# Introduction: A civilian airliner in the firing line

On 17 July 2014, Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 was brought down over eastern Ukraine, a few minutes before it would have crossed into Russian airspace on its journey from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur. The incident, killing all on board, occurred six months after Ukrainian ultra-nationalists had seized power in Kiev (Kyiv) with Western support, triggering the secession of Crimea and a Russian-Ukrainian insurgency in the Donbass (Donetsk and Lugansk provinces or *oblasts*, see Figure 0.1).

In this book I analyse the MH17 catastrophe as a prism that refracts the broader historical context in which it occurred, arraying its distinct strands and their interrelations in a rare moment of clarity. These strands included the capsizing of the European and world balance of power after the collapse of the USSR; the resurrection by the Putin leadership in Moscow of a Russian state and economy strong enough to resist Western direction; the Russia–EU energy connection; the civil war in Ukraine that followed the seizure of power of February 2014, and the attempt to turn Russia into an enemy again, legitimising NATO and EU forward pressure and the new Cold War. There is no way that the disaster can be understood as an isolated incident, a matter of identifying the immediate causes of the crash, or who gave the order to shoot it down if it was not an accident. The analysis must cast its net much wider, if only because many conclusive details are either missing or shrouded by the fog of the propaganda war that broke out immediately afterwards. Certainly an investigation of the catastrophe cannot remain confined to the forensics or rely on phone taps provided by the intelligence service of a regime in Kiev which, by any standard, should be considered a potential perpetrator.

To begin with, the downing was, as one researcher phrases it, a *systems* event, involving a missile crew targeting Malaysia's Boeing 777-200, intentionally or by mistake, as well as 'policy decisions, including Ukraine's decision to allow passenger aircraft to overfly a war-zone and Malaysia Airlines' decision to take advantage of the Ukrainian authorities' reckless permission [to do so]'. Thus, 'the commercial aviation network space (governments, regulatory authorities, airlines, shareholders, customers, etc.) incubated the MH17 disaster until, on 17 July, 2014, a missile crew added [a] "trigger event"'.<sup>1</sup>

In its turn, this trigger event was the likely result of conflict, which generates perceptions and actions across a further range of parties, each of which may contribute to activate the 'trigger'. This was the case, for instance, in September 1983, when a Korean Air Lines Boeing 747 on a flight from Anchorage to Seoul was shot down by



**0.1** Ukraine in 2014: oblasts and provincial capitals; neighbouring countries.

a Soviet Su-15 fighter. The Boeing had strayed into Soviet airspace for several hundred kilometres, around the time an American military reconnaissance plane was also aloft, possibly to test radars of some of the Soviet Union's most sensitive military installations on Sakhalin Island and the Kamchatka peninsula. When it did not respond to repeated signals to return to its normal flight path, the Korean Air Lines plane was shot down. This too was no mere isolated 'disaster', but part of a larger picture, which included then-President Ronald Reagan's warlike rhetoric about the 'Evil Empire', doubts among the Soviet leadership about the president's sanity, the deployment of Pershing II missiles to Europe, and the imminence of a major NATO exercise, 'Able Archer'. All this produced a real war scare in the Kremlin. This filtered down to area commanders who made the fatal decision for the fighter plane to fire, to which Moscow could only respond with a clumsy denial.<sup>2</sup>

The conflict in Ukraine and the downing of Flight MH17 are also related to the challenge posed to Western global governance by a tentative, initially involuntary, bloc of large contender states led by China and Russia. Russia is at the heart of a Eurasian alternative to the neoliberal EU, whilst China is the obvious centre of the 'BRICS' countries (the others being Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa). The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, established in 2001, is another of the bloc's supporting structures. In the days immediately preceding the downing, the BRICS heads of state, hosted by the Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff (since removed by a soft coup staged in May 2016), signed the statute establishing a New Development Bank as a direct challenge to the US and Western-dominated World Bank and IMF. Still in Brazil before flying back to Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin on the fringes of the football world cup finals also

agreed with German Chancellor Angela Merkel to pursue a comprehensive Land for Gas deal. Its tentative provisions included normalising the status of Crimea in exchange for a massive economic rehabilitation plan and a gas price rebate for Ukraine.<sup>3</sup>

Russia's energy resources were key to this deal and, more broadly, to forging a symbiosis with the EU, in particular with Germany and Italy. After the Nord Stream pipeline across the Baltic, agreed in 2005 and linking Russia and Germany directly, a South Stream counterpart across the Black Sea was contracted with ENI of Italy in 2007, to be extended through a grid into southern Europe as far as Austria, with German companies involved too. This sort of German–Russian rapprochement goes back to the days of Bismarck and around the turn of the twentieth century gave rise to the notion that Anglo-America, the heartland of liberal capitalism and the potentially excluded party from such a rapprochement, should consider its prevention the priority of its European diplomacy. For, by the sheer size of the Eurasian land mass (for which the term 'heartland' was coined originally), not to mention the formidable combination that European industry and Russian resources could constitute, unity among the Eurasian states had long appeared threatening to the supremacy of the Anglophone West.<sup>4</sup>

Energy diplomacy likely explains the sanctions the United States imposed on Russia following the coup in Kiev, and it may explain why Washington stepped up the level of punitive measures so drastically on 16 July, one day before MH17 was brought down, while the BRICS leaders were still in Brazil and Putin and Merkel agreed to work on a solution to the crisis. However, these sanctions were still to be underwritten by an EU summit and expectations were that this was not going to be smooth sailing, because several EU states balked at the prospect of a further disruption of their gas supply, agricultural exports and other economic links with Russia. These hesitations were only overcome after the catastrophe occurred the next day. The Land for Gas negotiations, too, were immediately terminated. South Stream, already being opposed for violations of EU competition rules, was finally abandoned on 1 December 2014. It was replaced by a tentative agreement with Turkey on an alternative route, but this too was disrupted by the shooting down of a Russian jet over Syria by an F-16 from the NATO air base at Incirlik in southern Turkey in November 2015. It was only revived after the failed coup against the Erdoğan government in July 2016.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that we are in the midst of a struggle of world-historical proportions between two conflicting social orders: the neoliberal capitalism of the West, locked in a crisis caused by speculative finance, yet still hostage to it, versus a state-directed capitalism. Fought out in Russia's 'Near Abroad', in the Middle East, in the South China Sea, and elsewhere, this struggle, like all modern wars, tests 'the viability of the political, cultural, and economic institutions of various adversaries, and their outcome has with time reflected these domains at least as much as the balance of military power'.<sup>5</sup> In the stand-off over MH17, for instance, the West's superiority over Russia in news management is obvious.

This brings us to another issue of method. The operation of large-scale political-economic processes always involves, ultimately, class formation and struggle. Their analysis therefore requires the identification of strategic class agency.<sup>6</sup> Since not all strategic action is a matter of overt, transparent procedure, class analysis must necessarily encompass what Peter Dale Scott calls 'deep political analysis'. A deep political system or

process, he writes, is one 'which habitually resorts to decision-making and enforcement procedures outside as well as inside those publicly sanctioned by law and society'. Deep political analysis, because its object is shrouded in secrecy, 'enlarges traditional structuralist analysis to include indeterminacies analogous to those which are studied in chaos theory'.<sup>7</sup>

Too often, consideration of the political netherworld is dismissed as conspiracy theory. But the fact that there is an abundant supply of simplistic conspiracy theories cannot be an excuse for not investigating the role of provocation and manipulation by criminal or deep state agencies, certainly not after recent revelations about such actions by Snowden, Assange and Manning.<sup>8</sup> Whether we are looking at the new Cold War with Russia, the contest between the West and the BRICS contender bloc, the Ukrainian civil war; or the downing of flight MH17 itself, political and economic forces involved were often acting through 'deep' channels not acknowledged by the authorities exercising legitimate state power, and certainly not shared with the audiences of the mainstream media.<sup>9</sup> Once again, this rules out a straightforward 'whodunit'.

Our task, then, will be to connect the macro-context of the heartland–contender structure of the global political economy with the micro-structure of the actual downing of Flight MH17 in the Ukrainian civil war. This complex set of connections is not only inevitably obscured by deep politics, it is also plagued by contradictions, misperceptions and failure. After all, as the theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz, said, 'Man with his incomplete organization is always below the line of absolute perfection, and thus these deficiencies, having an influence on both sides, become a modifying principle'.<sup>10</sup> How human imperfection modified, in the final instance, the global contest between a crisis-ridden West and a resurgent 'rest', tragically adding the MH17 disaster to the carnage already in progress in Ukraine, will also concern us in this study.

The book is set up as follows. In Chapter 1, I argue that in the current new Cold War with Putin's Russia, the West operates from a perspective inspired by the mentality of extreme risk-taking that stems from the dominant role of finance in contemporary capitalism. In fact, the post-Soviet space became a testing ground for predatory finance and for the uncompromising authoritarianism that we also see emerging in the West. The financial crisis of 2008 coincided with the first test of strength with Russia, when the Bush Jr. administration encouraged Georgia to try and recapture its breakaway province of South Ossetia by force. The European Union was simultaneously trying to commit former Soviet republics to an Eastern Partnership and EU Association, a barely disguised extension of the Euro-Atlantic bloc into the former Soviet space.

In Chapter 2 my argument is that the dividing lines established by the enlargement of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in 1922 and the addition of Crimea to it in 1954, remained operational after independence. The Russian-Ukrainian population in the south and east favours close ties with Russia; the Ukrainian population in the westernmost parts has a history of resistance to it. This fragile unity is best accommodated by federalism, and the fraction of the oligarchy of post-Soviet Ukraine that slowly gained the upper hand in the struggles over the control of gas distribution and transit from Russia to the EU and Turkey, was of federalist stripe. By 2004, society grew restive over the endless plunder amid mass poverty and destitution. In the 'Orange Revolution' of that year, protest over

election fraud was exploited by lesser oligarchs to try and wrest back control over gas and other economic assets from the billionaires associated with federalism.

The decision of President Yanukovich not to sign the EU Association Agreement in November 2013 sparked another round of demonstrations. For Ukraine, the agreement would have had grave economic consequences, but in the eyes of many, especially the urban middle classes, Yanukovich's readiness to accept a Russian counteroffer was a missed chance to stop the plunder by the oligarchy, by then including the president's family. As I argue in Chapter 3, the armed seizure of power on 22 February 2014 occurred on the back of these demonstrations and put state power in the hands of Ukrainian ultra-nationalists and actual fascists. The EU, which had mediated between the president and the opposition, allowed itself to be unceremoniously sidelined by the United States, which was not a party to the agreement. Instead US Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt and other Western diplomats negotiated with the co-founder of the fascist party of independent Ukraine and commander of its militia, Andriy Parubiy, on the modalities of removing Yanukovich by force. Parubiy led the armed groups in the Maidan uprising (named after the square in central Kiev from where the largest of the anti-government assaults were staged during the previous months) and in that capacity was responsible for the shooting of demonstrators and riot police that in the West is routinely attributed to the authorities. The coup provoked the secession of Crimea and the uprising in the Donbass. Importantly, Parubiy, put in command of all military and intelligence operations as Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) after the coup, played a crucial role in the 'Anti Terrorist Operation' to bring the rebellious provinces to heel – until three weeks after the MH17 disaster.

The West committed itself to the coup regime in Kiev right away and actually identified who should lead the new government (as revealed in the notorious, leaked phone call between US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Ambassador Pyatt). As we see in Chapter 4, the hacked e-mails of NATO commander General Breedlove reveal that US advisers were directly involved in getting the coup government in Kiev to respond with force to the uprising in the eastern provinces, on the express supposition that this was the time and place to confront Russia and China. My argument is that time and again, the forces of compromise, nationally and internationally, were cut off by a distinct war party made up of NATO hardliners and Ukrainian ultras. Whether the downing of MH17 was a conscious move in this context cannot be established, but there is no doubt that the disaster swept aside all remaining hesitations in Europe to go along with the new round of sanctions on Russia imposed by the United States the day before.

From the start, the civil war had been portrayed in the West against the background of an alleged Russian intervention in Ukraine and the MH17 catastrophe was seamlessly woven into this narrative. So, when the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, solemnly stated, three days after the event, 'We saw the take-off. We saw the trajectory, we saw the hit. We saw this aeroplane disappear from the radar screens. So there is really no mystery about where it came from and where these weapons have come from', there was little doubt he was speaking of Russia.<sup>11</sup> In fact, no evidence has been provided by the United States and NATO, or the EU following their lead, to substantiate this claim. It remains an insinuation. In Chapter 5, I review the results of the official investigations into

the MH17 disaster, which Ukraine delegated to the Netherlands. Both were profoundly compromised by granting the coup government in Kiev a veto over any outcomes, a novelty in the history of aviation disaster investigation that was considered shameful even in Ukraine.

The immunity from criminal prosecution was granted on 7 August, the day Andriy Parubiy stepped down as NSDC secretary. Since NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen paid a lightning visit to Kiev that very day, with tanks patrolling the streets, I ask the question whether Rasmussen had come to express support for President Petro Poroshenko and the immunity was the price to ward off another coup. Eventually the criminal investigation by a Joint Investigation Team (JIT), whose progress report was delivered in September 2016, confirmed the conclusion of the Dutch Safety Board (DSB, in Dutch, OVV), that the plane had been downed by a Buk (SA-11) surface-to-air missile hit. The JIT added that the Buk unit had been transported from Russia, fired a missile from rebel-held territory, and then was transported back. This had been the original scenario floated by the minister of the interior of the coup government in Kiev, Arsen Avakov, and his spokesman, Anton Gerashchenko, right after the downing, in order to inculcate Moscow.

Russia's Eurasian Union project has been set back seriously by the de-linking of the Ukrainian economy from the former Soviet division of labour, as I document in the remaining part of Chapter 5. Hence from the Russian angle, the MH17 disaster is only one element in a much broader picture covering the coup and the civil war; its more than ten thousand dead and more than a million refugees. Nevertheless, through the entire process Moscow, too, has adopted a strange posture that does not inspire confidence. Excluded from both investigations, it has not come up with compelling evidence exculpating itself and/or the insurgents, either. After a press conference on 21 July, at which the military challenged the accusations being made against it, the Russian authorities criticised the Dutch-led investigations mostly through private parties, notably the company that produces the Buk system, Almaz-Antey. Besides reticence about exposing the true reach and capacity of its satellite and radar intelligence, the explanation for these oblique hints and last-minute revelations can only be that for Moscow there are other priorities in Ukraine and even in its relations with the West than revealing the truth about MH17 – just as for the United States and NATO, which have consistently failed to back up any of their claims concerning Russian or insurgent responsibility, geo-political considerations come first.

## Notes

- 1 Simon A. Bennett, 'Framing the MH17 disaster: more heat than light?' *International Journal of Aviation, Aeronautics, and Aerospace*, 2 (4) 2015, Scholarly Commons (online), p. 10. All online sources are posted with the full web address, with the complete bibliography, at <https://sussex.academia.edu/KeesVanderPijl> and <https://der-abschuss.blogspot.nl/>.
- 2 Mel Goodman, 'The "war scare" in the Kremlin, revisited: is history repeating itself?' *CounterPunch*, 27 October 2015 (online); Bennett, 'Framing the MH17 disaster', p. 11.
- 3 Margareta Pagano, 'Land for gas: Merkel and Putin discussed secret deal could end Ukraine crisis'. *Independent*, 31 July 2014 (online); Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2015, pp. 171–2.

- 4 Halford J. Mackinder, 'The geographical pivot of history'. *The Geographical Journal*, 23 (4) 1904, pp. 421–37; see my *Global Rivalries from the Cold War to Iraq*. London: Pluto and New Delhi: Sage Vistaar, 2006, ch. 7.
- 5 Gabriel Kolko, *Century of War: Politics, Conflicts, and Society Since 1914*. New York: The New Press, 1994, p. xvii.
- 6 I have developed this notably in *The Making of an Atlantic Ruling Class*. London: Verso, 1984, new edn, 2012; *Transnational Classes and International Relations*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- 7 Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* [with a new preface]. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996 [1993], pp. xiii, xiv and xi–xii, respectively.
- 8 Robert Cox, 'The covert world'. In *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilization* [with M.G. Schechter]. London: Routledge, 2002, and Eric Wilson, ed., *Government of the Shadows: Parapolitics and Criminal Sovereignty*. London: Pluto, 2009.
- 9 Karel van Wolferen, 'The Ukraine, corrupted journalism, and the Atlanticist faith'. *Unz Review*, 14 August 2014 (online).
- 10 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* [ed. and intro A. Rapoport; trans. J.J. Graham]. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968 [1832], p. 106.
- 11 Cited in Pieter Omtzigt, 'MH17 en de radar'. *Jalta.nl*, 23 October 2015 (online).