**Ukraine, Invasion, and the Future**

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Bombs are falling on Kharkiv and Kyiv and Russia in what has become the largest and bloodiest conflict Europe has experienced since World War II. Roughly two thousand Ukrainians have been killed or wounded, somewhat fewer Russians, and hundreds of thousands will soon become refugees. President Vladimir Putin has surrounded Ukraine with 190,000 troops as an initial step in order to recreate Russia’s standing as a superpower and the old Soviet sphere of influence. This was not President Biden’s decision; he worked off the information given him by his staff and agencies. Everything short of sending troops is being used by the United States and its allies to halt the Russian invasion. That includes using proxies like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to ship military hardware to Kyiv, immobilizing assets, blocking imports of semi-conductors, freezing oligarchs’ bank accounts , excluding Russia from SWIFT, and halting the Nord-Stream 2 gas line to Europe. These policies are stringent and hard-hitting, though their effectiveness is not guaranteed.

Sanctions might lose their force once Russia employs proxies to carry on its businesses. When it comes to investment and trade, there is China and perhaps Iran. National ambitions are decisive, and it would make sense for Putin to turn in their direction. Tensions along the northern border between Russia and China would undoubtedly diminish and President Xi Jinping would find an enthusiastic supporter for his anti-Western policies concerning Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Senkaku Islands. With its huge deposits of oil and natural gas, trading with Iran would compensate for losses uncured by NATO blocking Russia’s Nord Stream 2 gas line. It is apparent from the billions upon billions invested by the Chinese in Africa and the Middle East, money is no object for them.

Among the mistakes in formulating foreign policy is an over-emphasis on “costs.” The reality is that the cash can always be found, whether by the United States or an economically impaired Russia. The reality is that few wars or invasions ever turn a profit, either for the victor or the loser. The Ukrainian War would probably not have occurred in the first place were the conflict about economic interests, which are calculable and susceptible to compromise. But that is far less the case when it comes to national pride, geopolitical ambitions, or matters of “credibility.” There is nothing to calculate in any of this, and such concerns have spurred the present crisis.

Seeking to reassert its global standing as first among equals, which had eroded so notably during the Trump years, the United States stubbornly emphasized the *right* of NATO to remain open to any future applicant. How that *right* should have come to pass remains unclear, and Russia views it as nothing more than an ideological justification for threatening its security and colonizing its presumed sphere of influence. Russia’s actions also rested on national pride and political traditions rather than the calculable economic benefits it would derive from defeating Ukraine. That is because its basic foreign policy aims have been the same since the time of Peter the Great, namely, securing control of warm water ports and building buffers against invasions by the West as occurred in 1812, 1914, and 1941. Russian troop movements initially reflected the old concerns with borders and ports, before encircling Ukraine, which was left to pay the price for its neighbor’s fears.

Emphasizing such concerns, both the United States and Russia substituted a speculative possibility for an immediate reality. Ukraine originally wished only to join the European Union for its economic benefits. Any discussion about Ukraine joining NATO, according to decision-makers, was probably a decade premature. But the truth of the matter is that Ukraine’s future was a secondary concern. President Biden had already begun sending military aid so that, without using its own troops, the United States could again dominate global policy even as Russia and Ukraine were left to battle it out, Meanwhile, Russian policy from the start involved subordinating Ukrainian sovereignty to Russian ambitions. Thus, Ukraine became “collateral damage:” its sovereignty was sacrificed for the *rights* of NATO, and the geo-political aims of Russia, as surely as Czechoslovakian sovereignty was sacrificed in 1938 in order to achieve “peace for our time.”

The United States and Russia might yet reach agreement on a deal that would prevent Ukraine from entering NATO while giving it full membership in the European Union. But this would mean compromising NATO’s *right* to expand indefinitely, Russia curtailing its national ambitions, and each side tempering its ideological claims. The West would need to recognize Russia’s legitimate security concerns, Putin would rethink plans to recreate the Soviet bloc. As for Ukraine, unconditional surrender is unacceptable. Its leaders must keep all options open. Negotiations are underway, but there is the distinct possibility that they will collapse. Arming the Ukrainian masses will spur commitment, and international solidarity, but it will also likely produce a bloodbath as the prospects for military victory remain bleak. Lacking other alternatives, Ukrainian leaders will need to organize g a government in exile

Perhaps framing the matter in this way can prove useful for the future. Outrage passes, but geo-political aims are resilient. Sober concern over Russia’s sphere of influence is completely legitimate. But self-righteous indignation is not. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 still enables the United States to “protect” Latin America from foreign interference and, using this justification, it has supported any number of the most brutal dictators. It is worth recalling that JFK was even ready to blow up the world over Russia’s installment of missiles in Cuba. Though world-wide protests and condemnations greeted Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, things were similar in 1956 when the Soviet Union crushed the Hungarian revolt and in 1968 when its tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia and put an end to the “Prague Spring.”

Talk came cheap, but anti-Russian policies quickly vanished. Ukraine is poised for defeat and, should that occur, the site of resistance must find a new location: Ukraine will need to exist outside its borders. Things can change, mistakes can occur, war is unpredictable. Who knows what can happen? Mass demonstrations by Russian citizens might imperil Putin’s regime. The blitzkrieg might slow to a crawl. Refugees might impact the crisis. Sanctions might have a more devastating effect than expected. Russia’s resources for continuing the invasion might dry up. Nevertheless, there is nothing certain about any of this.

Relations between Ukraine and Russia have been historically complex. Parts of Ukraine were incorporated into the Russian Empire during the 19th century, and dreams of independence spurred resistance to the Czar. Tempted by Lenin’s support for the right of national self-determination, Ukraine joined the USSR as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, however, Lenin changed course: the “right” of national self-determination was deemed valid only in capitalist countries. This set the stage for future tensions between the two nations. But there was also the suffering of the Ukraine under Stalin’s artificially imposed famine of 1932-1933; nearly four million people perished. Anti-Russian hatred became so intense that parts of Ukraine actually extended to the Nazis in 1941; that was before their bloody experience with anti-Slav racism turned them against the invader. After World War II, little changed: Ukraine would remain part of the Soviet Union until its implosion in 1989. With the Maidan revolts of 2014, however, the pro-Russian government of President Viktor Yanukovych was toppled and Ukraine celebrated its sovereignty. Nevertheless, the weaker nation remained in the shadow of the stronger.

The issue is not whether Ukraine is historically part of Russia, but whether it is still considered within its sphere of influence. Its geo-political position makes Ukraine valuable for buffeting Russia’s borders and defending its access to warm-water ports. Thinking about matters this way, however, substitutes future concerns for present realities. No invasion or interference is on NATO’s agenda, though raising such speculative possibilities can ignite nationalist passions. The United States should already start thinking about Putin’s plans for Bulgaria, Hungary, and Poland. The current crisis is complex and solving it will prove even more so. Experts and even the best media pundits will make mistakes. Nevertheless, the shameless hypocrisy of Republicans transcends all that.

Initially attacking Biden for his “weakness” in “standing up” to Putin, while equally opposed to sending in troops, Trump’s partisans now claim that the invasion was Biden’s fault. It’s as if his warnings about the United States mounting a robust response was the reason for Russia’s decision to invade. But it gets worse. Republicans will undoubtedly oppose any prudent policy. They have no use for policies that might temper tensions with China or result in a new nuclear treaty and new economic relations with Iran. It is hard to believe that they will endorse any treaty with Russia that would reduce the number of nuclear weapon and reject their pre-emptive use. Republicans have also not exactly been welcoming to refugees. These reactionary politicians have nothing to contribute other than the plaintive cry: “Do something!”

But there are no easy solutions. The practical issues facing all parties are interlaced and complex enough: how best to end to the conflict, or maintain a site of resistance, provide humanitarian aid for the Ukrainian people, deal with a looming refugee crisis, prevent any spill-over of the conflict and, finally, eliminate threats concerning the use of nuclear weapons. Only the ethical aim is clear: mitigate circumstances where, as Thucydides noted in his *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, “the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must.”

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