



On the Mark: Unraveling the Ukraine-Russia Conflict

Dr. Mark Meiowitz Professor, State University of NY Maritime College

Mariupol, Kyiv, Bucha, Odessa, Crimea, Kramatorsk... Places we had not focused on before Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Now the war in Ukraine is the center of the world's attention. Millions of Ukrainians have been uprooted and are fleeing the country, and the death toll is mounting. Most horrifying is the Russian targeting of civilians as the world watches in shock as Russian troops target innocents and bomb hospitals, train stations and residential areas. Russia has been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

On February 24th, the world turned upside down. Russia commenced an unprovoked aggression against Ukraine.

It might be helpful to try to deconstruct some of the elements of these cataclysmic events. Here are some of the players and aspects of this conflict:

Russia - This is a one-man authoritarian onslaught. Vladimir Putin is of the view that Ukraine was always a part of Russia and that he needed to invade Ukraine to protect Russians and to suppress Nazi elements in Ukraine. Besides being absurd (as for the claim regarding the need to “denazify” Ukraine, Ukraine's President is of Jewish origin), these claims have no basis in history. For Putin the greatest disaster in history was the fall of the Soviet Union. Putin claims he must protect Mother Russia by stopping Ukraine from turning its sights to West and, more specifically, joining NATO. Yet, looking closely at this, the former Soviet satellites actually have wanted to be part of the West, not the Russian orbit. Ukraine is an independent country and member State of the United Nations that wants more than anything to be part of the West.

Here is the reason for Russia's actions: Russia has become more and more authoritarian and undemocratic under Putin. Peaceful protesters are arrested on the streets of Russian cities and Russians are cut off from outside news sources. For Putin, a free and independent Ukraine as a neighbor is a frightening challenge to his rule, which might influence the Russian people to want to be free and independent, just like Ukraine. One of the great ironies of this conflict is the fact that many of the Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine were told that they would



Mother and child are treated in the Israeli erected field hospital and emergency room in Ukraine.

Photo: YouTube generated.

be welcomed in Ukraine. Instead, Russian soldiers were befuddled to see Ukrainians gathered on the street to try to physically stop the Russians, telling the Russians to leave their country.

The Russian's military campaign has been a disaster (with Russian trucks and equipment bogged down and with heavy losses of Russian soldiers and materiel) and instead of being able to win a quick victory, including the Russian military aim of taking the capital Kyiv quickly and installing a puppet government, Russia has been pulling back from Kyiv and concentrating its energies on the Donbas region where separatist pro-Russian elements have been fighting against Ukrainian forces since 2014. Russia even proclaimed that the Luhansk and Donetsk areas in Eastern Ukraine were now independent from Ukraine, and are allied with Russia. Previously, Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 without justification. So the war continues with Russia's scorched earth attacks razing civilian areas and targeting civilians.

United States - President Biden's initial reaction to the conflict in Ukraine (including his comment that a “minor incursion” by Russia into Ukraine might not be an issue) (what he actually said: “I think what you're going to see is that Russia will be held accountable if it invades. And it depends on what it does. It's one thing if it's a minor incursion and then we end up having a fight about what to do and

not do.”) has given way to much stronger measures against Russia and in favor of Ukraine, including sanctions and the provision of humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine. However, President Biden also made clear that no US troops would enter Ukraine and that the United States would not support a “no fly zone” over Ukraine, something the Ukrainians have requested in desperation because of the scourge of Russian air attacks, Biden stating that this would lead to World War III. Putin escalated his nuclear preparedness posture which alarmed the US, but to Biden's credit, the United States did not increase its level of nuclear deterrence. These are fraught times.

House speaker Tip O'Neill once said that “all politics is local” and we are seeing this in connection with the Ukraine issue since Biden is worried about spiking gas prices in America - which led to Biden's treading lightly against Russia at the beginning of the invasion. However, Biden has now cut off gas imports from Russia and is trying to provide additional energy imports to Europe and also to reduce rising gas prices in America. Further, the US is implementing even stronger and more effective sanctions against Russia and prominent Russians, such as the oligarchs. Americans have also been impressed and moved by the resolve of the Ukrainian people in fighting back against the Russians. Zelensky's

remaining in Ukraine (saying that “I don't need a ride, I need more ammunition”) has been very impactful.

NATO - President Macron of France (who himself is in a battle for his political life against right-wing candidate Marine Le Pen) had said that NATO was “brain dead”, and indeed it was to a great extent with an unclear mission and future direction. Recent NATO meetings had helped to clarify NATO's need to reposition its approach to regional and global security (identifying Russia and China as the major adversaries threatening world peace). However, as a result of the Ukraine invasion by Russia, NATO has now become energized and united in the need to counter Russia and assist Ukraine. The major deficit here is that Ukraine is not a NATO member. At the same time, NATO members know that if Putin succeeds in Ukraine, he will next turn his attention to the NATO States, and to the Baltic States and even to Finland and Sweden. Great danger lies ahead.

Turkey - Turkey has played a key role in the conflict, but has utilized a multifaceted approach and policy. Turkey has condemned the invasion as a “grave violation of international law”. On the one hand, Turkey has provided Ukraine with its TB2 Bayraktar Drone, which has been very effective on the battlefield against Russia. On the other hand, Turkey is dependent on Russian gas (about 40% of Turkey's natural gas supply is derived from Russia) - so Turkey has not participated in sanctions against Russia. Also, Istanbul has become the locus of negotiations between Ukraine and Russia and Turkey purports to serve as a mediator in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Turkey itself has had a complicated relationship with Russia, with Turkey having fought over 17 wars with Russia throughout its history.

Germany - needs natural gas from Russia and was conflicted about whether it should shut down the Nord Stream 2 pipeline with Russia. With US pressure, Germany shut down Nord Stream 2, but Germany still faces a huge challenge in providing for its energy needs. The US is trying to aid in the effort of finding alternative energy sources. Germany has also been criticized

continues on page 10



On the Mark: Unraveling the Ukraine-Russia Conflict

By Dr. Mark Meiowitz Professor, State University of NY Maritime College

Continued from Page 8

for failing to provide robust military aid to Ukraine (for example when Germany initially offered to send military helmets to Ukraine)(in contradistinction to other European countries, such as the Czech Republic, which sent tanks and infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine).

China - China has been somewhat circumspect in its approach. While Chairman Xi has committed his country to an everlasting friendship with Russia, China has abstained on key votes in the United Nations regarding Russia. The Chinese are also not participating in the sanctions against Russia. The Chinese are watching the Ukraine situation carefully in light of China's own claims towards Taiwan.

India - Much to America's consternation, India has not supported sanctions against Ukraine and has abstained in the United Nations in various key votes regarding Russia's aggression in Ukraine. India is trying to walk the fine line of a third party, but it may find that it will end up pleasing no one.

Israel - Israel is also in a precarious position as it needs to have effective relations with Russia due to Russia's influence in Syria and the need for Israel to operate in Syria without interference from Russia. Israel has sent medical aid to Ukraine.

International Institutions - The international institutions have been completely ineffective in stopping this Russian carnage. The United Nations Security Council has been stymied by the Russian veto (indeed a Russian representative was, at the outset of the invasion, the President of the UN Security Council and cast the veto!). The International Criminal Court is looking into the allegations of Russian war crimes and crimes against humanity by Russia against Ukraine. The International Court of Justice issued a ruling that Russia must get out of Ukraine. Yet these actions have no way of being enforced - since all enforcement goes through the UN Security Council and there is that Russian veto again to stop the UN from taking action. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) did condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine (by a vote of 141 Member States out of 193 Member States), but the UNGA doesn't have enforcement power. Maybe, at this



Destroyed Russian tanks in Ukraine. The Russian military suffered enormous losses by the Ukrainian forces. Photo: YouTube generated.

point, we need a reset of our international institutions to figure out a way to prevent such aggressions in the future, especially by the so-called Great Powers (such as Russia). There have even been suggestions that a war crimes proceeding be convened, just like the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal was established at the end of the Second World War to bring Nazis to justice. This is probably a good idea even if Putin and his henchmen can never be brought into court, but they might be tried in absentia for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

One bright star - Russia was ejected from the UN Human Rights Council. While this has symbolic meaning (what was Russia doing on the UN Human Rights Council in the first place one might ask?), it does show an important effort to penalize Russia and expose its criminal behavior.

Europe - Before Ukraine, Europe appeared to be lost in space. The United Kingdom pulled out of the EU with Brexit, and NATO appeared to be listless. After the shock of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Europe is now trying to get its act together - but is still divided with countries like France and Germany loath to take strong steps against Russia (fearful of Russia's retaliation in possibly cutting off gas imports desperately needed by the Europeans).

European Union - The EU is now in the process of accelerating

Ukraine's accession to the EU, further solidifying Ukraine's connection to the West. Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, said on April 11th that Ukraine's admission to the EU was going to happen in a matter of weeks, not months or years. At the same time the EU must tread lightly, because "[i]n 2021, the European Union imported 155 billion cubic metres of natural gas from Russia, accounting for around 45% of EU gas imports and close to 40% of its total gas consumption".

Zelensky - We have seen the rise of an amazing statesman who has been compared to Winston Churchill. A former actor and comedian, Zelensky has riveted the world with his speeches to the US Congress, the UK Parliament, the South Korean Parliament, the Israeli Knesset and the UN Security Council. To the US Congress he reminded Americans of Pearl Harbor and 9/11 and asked for American leadership. To the UK Parliament, he invoked the struggle for Britain's survival against the Nazi onslaught (What he said: "Just the same way you once didn't want to lose your country when the Nazis started to fight your country and you had to fight for Britain."). To the South Korean Parliament, he reminded South Koreans of the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June, 1950.

To the Israeli Knesset he reminded Israelis of the words of Golda Meir in describing Israel's

need to defend itself (What he quoted from Golda Meir: "We intend to remain alive. Our neighbors want to see us dead. This is not a question that leaves much room for compromise."). To the UN Security Council, he was resolute in challenging the extraordinary lack of action by the UN and its affiliated bodies in stopping the Russian massacres in Ukraine. (What he said: "Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to remind you of Article 1, Chapter 1 of the UN Charter. What is the purpose of our organization? Its purpose is to maintain and make sure that peace is adhered to. And now the UN charter is violated literally starting with Article 1. And so what is the point of all other Articles?"). One might compare Zelensky to Ronald Reagan, also a former actor, who was known as the "Great Communicator". One can't forget Reagan's amazing words - "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall" and the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Empire collapsed. President Zelensky has truly spoken truth to power. His leadership will go down in history - the leader in a tee shirt speaking to the world's leaders, walking with Boris Johnson and other world leaders in Kyiv to show them the destruction that Russia has wrought. He has shown the power of effective leadership and communication.

At the end of the day it is almost impossible to unravel the various threads and aspects of this terrible conflict. The worst part is the toll of human lives.

An old adage - "Cui Bono" - who benefits? Will Russia really benefit from its having created this calamity. I think not. From now on, Russia and Putin are pariahs. They should be cast out of the international community and be called to task for the disaster they have caused. Unfortunately, given the vagaries of international politics, international trade and commerce, what might happen is that the world will want to return to business as usual, with a war-ravaged Ukraine that needs to be rebuilt, and the idea that might makes right. The world leaders must get together to make sure that the world after Ukraine is a more peaceful world with mechanisms to stop an aggressor in its tracks before it can wreak havoc and destruction on innocents and upend the world order.