

REFLECTIONS ON THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

We should make no mistake, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is an attack, in contravention of international law, against a sovereign state. An attack incidentally not in some far off place, easily dismissed as inconsequential for the rest of the world, but in Europe. Angela Merkel is reported to have stated today, the invasion “marks a turning point in the history of Europe after the end of the Cold War. There is no justification whatsoever for this blatant breach of international law.” While I could address the legal implications in greater detail, that is not my purpose today. I will digress though for a moment to point out that while the UN Security Council was holding a meeting to address the crisis, the current president of the Security Council is the Russia Ambassador.

Once again, we have made a mistake. In 2014, Vladimir Putin seized Crimea, without consequence. The mistake was in failing to respond. While post-war Europe witnessed Soviet tanks roll into Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and multiple conflicts in the Balkans following the breakup of Yugoslavia, this feels very different – dangerously different, and it is not clear where Putin will stop.

While many may claim Putin’s media performances this past week suggest he is deranged, overcome by paranoia, turbo-charged by isolation in his bunker, and ultimately no longer rational, I am not sure that is the case. Putin knows exactly what he is doing, and there is little standing in his way.

Recall too that he has been hugely active beyond his borders, either directly or through proxies – undermining democracy at every opportunity (with targets well beyond elections in the United States and in western Europe). He invaded Georgia in 2008 (less than six months after the NATO Bucharest Summit, which declared that Georgia and Ukraine could one day become NATO members) signaling that he would be prepared to use force against a country that was falling out of his orbit of control. In 2014, he seized Crimea. He is seeking to destabilize the Sahel through deployment of the Wagner group. His GRU has attacked Russians outside of Russia, and he largely turns a blind eye to cybercriminals operating in Russia. A UN investigation into atrocities committed in Syria in the latter part of 2019 accused Russia of direct involvement on war crimes for indiscriminate bombings of civilian areas. Not surprisingly, Assad is reported to be supporting Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

Ironically, after a few years of focus on Russia’s hybrid warfare capabilities and penchant for asymmetrical warfare (known as the Gerasimov doctrine), we saw this week conventional warfare unleashed with devastating consequences. This is an important reminder that while cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and drone technologies are evolving at lightning speed, conventional capabilities cannot be allowed to atrophy.

Would we be facing today’s crisis if we had done more to bolster Ukraine’s security following the seizure of Crimea? Would we have been better off had Europe reduced its energy dependence on Russian gas? Should we have imposed more sanctions and undertaken other forms of hybrid warfare?

Many Were Surprised

I got it wrong. This was not because I believed Putin's and other Russian officials' assurances over the past months that notwithstanding the deployment of troops, materiel and logistics support – creating a force primed for war, there would be no invasion. Ukrainian officials and many in Europe criticized the drumbeat of warnings from the Biden administration. Western intelligence called Putin's bluff on the false flag excuses – so he moved without them. The requests for military assistance from the eastern “republics” did not justify invasion of those areas, let alone the rest of the country.

I got it wrong because, in contrast to the massive propaganda effort in 2014 positioning the seizure of Crimea as a patriotic act, there seemed to be so little effort this time to prepare Russians for war or for casualties. I looked at the efforts taken by the Kremlin to white-out Russian casualties in 2014. The green men were on vacation. Will Putin stop when the casualties – his casualties – mount, and Russians question why sons, fathers, uncles, friends gave their lives. Putin seems totally indifferent to the costs.

I got it wrong because the post-Cold War security architecture was supposed to deter the very actions we saw this week. While the experiment that started in 1951 and ultimately gave birth to the European Union had at its core the deep desire to avoid another military conflict between European states, that effort did not cover all of Europe.

That many seasoned observers, not to mention leaders in the region who in some cases were quite belligerent in their criticism of U.S. warnings, got it wrong as well is of little solace.

Now What?

At this point, what are we left with? We are no longer in the realm of deterrence but of imposing consequences.

As was the case in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia 1968, we will not come to the rescue of the victims of aggression with troops or a NATO-enforced no-fly zone. We must welcome those who choose to flee Ukraine. We will be increasing military aid to NATO allies in eastern Europe, but we must be especially steadfast in our support of countries that will now be on the frontline of Russian aggression, particularly the Baltic states. Down the road we may well be looking at supporting an insurgency in Ukraine against the occupying forces.

In the short term, our options are limited. Recall that in his speech on Monday undertaking to recognize the independence of the separatist regions, Putin declared, “Anyone who tries to get in our way, let alone tries to threaten us and our people, should know that Russia's answer will be immediate, and it will lead to consequences of the sort that you have not faced ever in your history.” This threat by the way comes from a country with nuclear weapons.

We have an array of sanctions to deploy, but they are not without adverse consequences for those who must approve them. Denying Russian access to SWIFT banking system is

facing opposition from Germany and Italy. The impact of cutting off gas supplies is complicated by the dependence of Europe on Russian gas and the enormous challenges of ending that dependence. The arrival of milder weather and higher storage levels may mitigate the impact somewhat. Sustained higher gas and oil prices will contribute to inflation and impact consumers, particularly in Europe. The UK already faces surging costs of living, as a result of the pandemic and Brexit, which is shaking consumer confidence.

The sanctions must be applied and they must be enforced. Here the UK has an important, albeit delicate, role to play given the extent to which Russian money has infiltrated so much of Britain and the go-it-alone stance of Global Britain following Brexit. We will need to bear witness if the worst excesses of the Russian playbook come to pass – mass arrests, assassinations. We must help Germany and others offset the loss of gas, exacerbated by Chancellor Merkel’s decision in 2011, following the damage to the Fukushima nuclear plant caused by an earthquake and tsunami, to phase out nuclear power by 2022. In the longer-term, ending that dependence may have benefits in the fight against greenhouse gas emissions.

We must stay on message. The victim of Russian aggression is not “The Ukraine” – a region or an abstract construct susceptible of being swept into a sphere of influence, but rather it is Ukraine, a sovereign country that has been invaded by a nuclear-armed rogue state. The invasion must be seen as a threat to Europe and global security. There invariably is reluctance to draw comparisons to Hitler, as the comparisons then are prone to implicate the broader horror of the Holocaust. But as the Ukrainian journalist Nataliya Gumenyuk noted in a dispatch published yesterday in the Guardian, while the comparison to Hitler seemed exaggerated, even vulgar, what other analogy is there when “[w]ith no reason, in an act of pure madness, an old-fashioned air assault has been inflicted on a neighboring country.” On July 24, 1941, Kyiv was bombed by Germany, and on February 24, 2022, Kyiv was bombed by Russia.

We must see the actions of Putin in the context of a broader assault on democracy. This in my view had little to do with NATO, and everything to do with the prospect of Putin seeing on his doorstep an evolving democracy, where freedom has the potential to translate into improved standards of living that would stand in stark contrast to the sclerotic Russian economy.

We must fight the multi-pronged disinformation campaigns that so often are incubated in, and unleashed from, Russia. Putin’s justification for the invasion was laden with distortions and disinformation, and those themes are being amplified by propaganda, media and social media posts. Right wing commentators are aligning with Putin’s views and far right elements on social media channels are using the invasion as a way to attack the Biden administration. Pro-Russian narratives on social media, as well as other media outlets, reportedly have surged in recent days. We can expect that the invasion will be seen by some through the prism of conspiracy theories.

We must remember that Putin is not alone – he belongs to a club whose members do little to hide their authoritarian ideology, and they will be watching the resilience of democracies as we respond to the threat posed to the global order.

We must be prepared for retaliation by Putin for the sanctions already imposed and likely to be imposed in the coming days. That retaliation is likely to come at the very least in the form of cyberattacks following the Russian asymmetric warfare playbook.

Finally, and this is a longer-term issue, there is the question of the future of NATO. Will the shock of conventional warfare on the continent be the catalyst for Europe to assume a greater role in its defense? There are any number of reasons why this becomes a critical question for Europe, and the answer could have significant implications for the nature of the transatlantic alliance. Will Sweden and Finland be prompted to seek to join NATO or will they fear such a move would provoke the Russians?

The Biden administration has consistently communicated its support for Europe, but Europeans would be justified in questioning that commitment. The United States may well have withdrawn from NATO had Trump remained in the White House, and regrettably 2024 looms large in the minds of many Europeans. The United States has shifted its defense priorities to countering China, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan and AUKUS deal did not instill much confidence in terms of U.S. commitment to NATO. Some questioned whether early signaling by the Biden administration that US forces would not engage with Russia was appropriate.

A Broader Message

Here in the United States, we too must stay on message, and that means ensuring that our positions on Ukraine and Russia are clear, and whenever possible bipartisan. We must call out the events of the past week for what they are – the actions of an autocrat – authoritarian and neo-nationalist. Yes, in our country, we must confront in the strongest terms the apologists for Putin, and we must confront our own backsliding on democracy. We came close to finding ourselves in an autocracy. Recall that the infamous call on July 25, 2019 was about holding up military aid to Ukraine unless the Ukrainians would announce investigations of Joe and Hunter Biden. Imagine in this time of geopolitical crisis that has the potential to have far broader repercussions beyond Ukraine what the last few weeks would have looked like had Donald Trump remained in the White House.

Nancy Pelosi, speaking at a dinner on Monday, framed the then possible attack on Ukraine as an attack on democracy. My father, had he lived beyond his 62 years, would have turned 100 today. He left his native Germany on board a ship bound for New York alone at the age of 12. In the early 1970s, over dinner, in between intense debates over the Vietnam War, and as the uncertain prospects of détente loomed, he would often return to a theme – how easily a population could surrender to base instincts of an autocrat and how important it was to stand firmly against those tendencies. We have today a reminder how important it is to stand against autocracy, in support of democracy.

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