



War in Ukraine and its “UN”intended Consequences

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This article addresses a great many points of importance related to the war in Ukraine, especially the need for negotiations and the role of the UN in peacekeeping, which no one seems to be thinking about. It offers a balanced view that shifts the focus from moral outrage shouted from every rooftop (on both sides) to a reference to root causes, missed opportunities and absence of leadership (also on both sides). – Editors

Abstract

Resurgent imperialism, extreme nationalism and mighty rearmament are among the long-lasting consequences of the ongoing war in Ukraine that, by virtue of its ferocious intensity, has taken the world by surprise. Rampant militarism is on the rise along with projected military spending and no country in Europe seems immune to the heavy rearmament syndrome. As military spending goes up, it is inevitable to ask to whom it is a benefit: Cui prodest?

There is still time to avert a long period of obscurantism, but ultra-nationalism and militarism are recipes for disaster. Restoring peace is however the one and only overriding priority for humanity. In the wake of the Russian attack on Ukraine, we all regretted that better use was not made of diplomacy, mediation, and common security mechanisms earlier in the conflict to address and resolve historical grievances.

Peace agreements are never completely just, but they can be wise. If adequate pressure were put in place on the parties involved, it is likely that the UN Security Council that failed condemn Russia for its aggression on Ukraine, would authorize a UN peace-keeping contingent. That would be probably the most effective way to deescalate tension between the East and West.

We need to recover the soft power of diplomacy that is the only conduit to a lasting peace.

This article is written with the humble, personal intent of seeing some way out of the quagmire the world is currently in, owing to the Russia-Ukraine crisis. However, it is hard to do so, through the fog of news and gunfire smoke. It is also written to remind us that the preservation of international peace and human security is the objective of the United Nations. Its failures seem to repeat and perpetrate the failures of the League. After 70 years of balance of powers and armed diplomacy, the world is again on the brink of widespread open conflict. The UN Security Council impasse is not the only cause of failure of the international security system. But politicians have no doubts and threw the dice. They are oblivious of their own nightmares.

Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN Secretary-General that perished in Congo during his relentless attempts to bring peace, kept saying that peace-keeping missions are not meant for the military. However, the military is perhaps the only factor that can sustain the peace. His legacy was one of a true leader that has doubts. His words should be a source of inspiration for the current “fast and furious” leaders.

*Sleepless questions in the small hours:
Have I done right? Why did I act just as I did?
Over and over again the same steps,
The same words: Never the answer*

(Dag Hammarskjöld – Markings, 1964)

1. Unintended Consequences

Resurgent imperialism, extreme nationalism and mighty rearmament are among the long-lasting consequences of the ongoing war in Ukraine that, by virtue of its ferocious intensity, has taken the world by surprise.

Humanity was just about to recover from an epochal disease that swept across continents and a war erupted in the coal mining, industrialized, Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk invaded by the Russian Army, de-facto resuming a dormant conflict in those separatist regions. The war of aggression has spread quickly throughout the country and large cities like Odessa and Mariupol have been targeted with the intent of annihilating and terrorizing civilians through wanton destruction, creating a gigantic wave of refugees in the heart of Europe.

As the conflict is unfolding, we see Ukraine exhibiting heroic resistance. There is a high toll of misery and death among civilians, but the propaganda machinery seems well in place, and it is not only one-sided. Patriotic rhetoric is being used to continue the invasion, to amass troops and weaponries, and to destabilize the coalitions of the willing, those in favour, and those against war.

Rampant militarism is on the rise along with projected military spending and no country in Europe seems immune to the heavy rearmament syndrome. Germany alone announced commitments to defence spending for 100 billion euros in 2022, doubling its annual budget. The UK, France and Italy followed with similar moves, complying with NATO demands. The planetary heavy rearmament race has just begun, in a quick turnaround. As military spending goes up, it is inevitable to ask to whom it is a benefit: *Cui prodest?* The answer would be clearly pointing towards the military industry as the list of war profiting corporations is well known. But for those in command, the rationale for a military build-up is not always the same: Investments in national defence and security. It does not matter if this is not people's priority.

The occurrence that building trust among people and nations would better serve international security is not even considered by political leaders at this time. After all, why bother with soft power and negotiation skills when you can buy tanks?

Vladimir Putin, the despotic tyrant that provoked all this, is apparently defiant, but knows well that down the line, with the Damocles sword of a likely criminal court indictment, and with a possible international arrest warrant over his head, plans to go skiing in St. Moritz might be postponed indefinitely.

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In the meantime, a new demagogic narrative is shaping up for popular consumption on all sides of the barricades. A sudden war for the capture of an underestimated, lost province of the former Soviet Empire has, in the collective imagination, quickly transformed yesterday’s friendly, extravagant, Russian tycoons with super yachts in *Cap d’Antibes*, into NATO members’ worst enemies. The fact that they voluntarily relinquished foreign companies’ shares and football teams in Premier League does not make them less guilty. By popular demand, “espionage” by those *nouveaux riches* must be stopped, as after three decades of courting them in the best European vineyards and chateaux, someone high up realized their money was gained unlawfully. They are all thieves! It was thus emphatically proclaimed. What’s next? A staggering drop in the consumption of Champagne and best Italian wines must be accounted for.

On the opposite side, while Putin’s chauvinism is climbing to 83% of civic support in public polls, silly demonstrations of patriotism make Russian models and influencers tear Chanel handbags into pieces as sanctions harden. It is the end of the West’s Vanity-Fair. But it is also the sign that the Belle Epoque of two generations of high-flyers, with its myth of globalization, brands and fashion bloggers is coming to an end. Abrupt, and without an ideological chasm dividing East and West. We still look the same, but are different. Or we are simply told we are different when similarities still match. Retrogressive forces are at work sowing the seeds of hatred, sectarianism, and obscurantism. Putin’s aggression is the result of a miscalculation, an ill-fated perception of the enemy’s weakness, and is also the consequence of what a disgraceful combination of autocrats, old-styled apparatchiks and sycophants can do.

One could say that this is an unprovoked, surreptitious assault against human wellbeing and security. It could be true, but even bystanders are not exempt from guilt. On the western camp, no visionary leadership is in sight to propose alternatives based on human dignity and real values. Lack of understanding of respective positions and grievances has already caused two consecutive world wars. The inability to listen and to keep the dialogue going is the main cause of terrible scenarios in front of us. There is still time to avert a long period of obscurantism, but ultra-nationalism and militarism are recipes for disaster.

The war in Ukraine and its level of destruction has, in less than a month, wiped out beliefs and convictions baby-boomers thought they could pass on to millennials as their legacy with generations of good memories, traditions and wealth. All the securities and codes of our civilization are now in peril, while the essence of globalization is questioned, and once permeable borders now resemble barricades and thick walls.

New greed has provoked unprecedented large-scale destruction, with a level of tension between East and West that is rising fast and appears to be without control. A vast region in the heart of Europe, disseminated with atomic power plants, is now the battlefield of young military recruits, intoxicated by propaganda and clouded by cheap vodka, which could easily provoke a nuclear accident many times more deadly than Chernobyl. The use of nukes, that we all thought was not even a remote option, is now evoked as a last resort by Washington and Moscow.

The confrontation between Russia and the United States continues to escalate at the time of writing and immediately flared up with verbal accusations, sanctions and forced expulsions, which were never witnessed during the Cold War. Europe, through the NATO alliance, followed the US lead and once more demonstrated its total lack of independence, not to mention a common foreign policy. The EU's constitutional resolve to uphold peaceful means of change instantly dissolved and no meaningful contribution was given by preventing the conflict's outbreak. Dispatching armaments, defensive or offensive, to support Ukraine, is the only highly debated question in parliaments, as appeasement scenarios have been abandoned for long, dissenting voices are accused of treason, and each country strikes best deals separately for oil and gas with the redemption and blessings of formerly labelled "pariah and terrorist" states.

The prolonged state of siege that Putin is inflicting on Ukraine, nurtured by the new Russian imperialism, is leaving behind hatred, destruction, and a common sense of defeat. Defeat of the new world order but also the demise of democratic ideals that transcend the glow of nationality. Hardly a voice was heard in 2014, among western nations, which would approve a war to prevent Russians from retaking Crimea. Now, prospects of a long conflict are hardening the resolve to overthrow the ultimate Leviathan and his imperialist nostalgia. Lessons from Syria, Libya, Sudan, and Afghanistan are yet to be drawn, if ever.

Henry Kissinger asked himself if a hypothetical beneficial evolution should compromise global security interests. He also warned that "independent nationalism is a virus that might spread contagion". The present crisis, as it was well documented by John Mearsheimer,* is the by-product of two irreconcilable ambitions: the expansion of NATO and Moscow's expectations that Western enemies should not be allowed to play in its own backyard, alias Ukraine. The foretelling analysis of Mearsheimer is outright striking: "The West's triple package of policies—NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion—added fuel to a fire waiting to ignite". Western affront is the unequivocal demonstration of turning Ukraine into its stronghold on Russia's border.

* John Mearsheimer, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014

Consequences of insensitive moves and wrong signals are in front of our eyes. The world system will never be the same.

Now, whatever the conclusion of the conflict will be, a gaping void between East and West will prevail for long, with new alliances (Russia and China have never been so close), vital interests and the relinquishment of hard-won international benchmarks and safeguards, such as the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, climate accords, fight on poverty and Sustainable Development Goals—all victims and unintended consequences of the war.

2. Peacekeeping and Diplomacy

Trying to explain the rationale of the conflict would be presumptuous and insensitive towards those who are suffering the most as bombing continues. However, never before has the world faced such a sudden shift in policy, from appeasement to direct confrontation and consequent escalation of threats.

Restoring peace is however the one and only overriding priority for humanity.

Peace agreements are never completely just, but they can be wise. If parties to a conflict had real grievances arising out of previously attempted negotiations, as it was the case after the 2014 violence in Donbass and war of Crimea, they should have been explored and addressed.

The Balkan conflict of the 90s, yet the deadliest war of the second half of the last century, despite all tragedies, unprecedented civilian targeting, ethnic-cleansing, rapes, and crimes of genocide, ultimately remained a regional conflict where superpowers were not directly engaged. That allowed for an arms embargo (not fully observed) and led to early diplomatic talks backed up by the UN Security Council. A Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General was promptly appointed and dispatched to the region. It was Cyrus Vance, former US Secretary of State, that immediately attempted to negotiate a cease fire. That happened three months after the war broke out (December '91) and it was sanctioned by the Security Council resolution 724, putting pressure on Javier Perez de Cuellar, then UN Secretary-General, to establish a voluntary peace-keeping force. An interim agreement was reached in February 1993 (UN SC resolution 743) that established a peace-keeping force of 25,000 soldiers, initially 11,000, made of 29 nationalities. Its role was primarily to create the conditions for peace negotiation. The Vance-Owen plan, named after the two negotiators, did not reach the intent of a peaceful agreement between belligerents. However, UNPROFOR, the UN peacekeeping mission, certainly averted further destruction in the first phase of the war. With the ceasefire, the city of Osijek under constant threat, did not follow the fate of Vukovar, the neighbouring town, sadly known for being obliterated by the shelling. Humanitarian assistance was made possible to large segments of population in former Yugoslavia, with assistance to refugees too. In addition, a UNPROFOR battalion was sent to Macedonia for conflict prevention.

Marginal containment of the war continued until 1995, but many lives were also preserved and bastions of civilization kept hopes of many alive.

Only those who have been living in a country at war can appreciate the value of UN presence, of a peace-keeping force that is certainly not equipped to withstand large scale military offensives, or to prevent mass atrocities, but it is up to the UN to provide a buffer between belligerents, and primarily an indispensable channel of communication and dialogue, the prologue of each peace agreement.

Peace-keeping operations are traditionally put in place after a ceasefire, when a peace settlement is elusive. In those contexts, the presence of a peace-keeping contingent serves to buy time and to control possible conflict escalation. We can credit UN peace-keeping with preventing or at least limiting the amount of armed conflict globally and reducing human casualties. Peacekeeping effectiveness is based on the principles of neutrality and consent of the parties involved. The great virtues of peace-keeping operations are their non-threatening and therefore face-saving character.* Exactly what Putin might be seeking for a way out of a long-lasting conflict that is certainly not in the interest of Russia.

The problem is that even if Russia and Ukraine both had an interest in a ceasefire once the respective strategic objectives are attained, meaning the preservation of its independence and most of its territory for Ukraine, and some territorial gains as a buffer zone for Russia, others would have to approve the dispatch of a sizable peace-keeping force.

The United States Administration so far has not evoked a similar prospect. It might very well be that the US is not seeking compromise but a regime change. The words of former Secretary of State, Anthony Lake, come to mind: “Let us be clear: peacekeeping is not at the centre of our foreign or defence policy. Our armed forces priority mission is not to conduct peace operations but to win wars.”† Long ago, another context, but those ideas are still floating. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin seems echoing those words when saying that the US wants “to see Russia weakened”.

However, if adequate pressure were put in place on the parties involved, it is likely that the UN Security Council that failed condemn Russia for its aggression on Ukraine, would authorize a UN peace-keeping contingent.

That would be probably the most effective way to deescalate tension between the East and West. But it would require a vision and the talent of a JFK. Graham Allison’s book “The essence of Decision” refers to the Cuban missile crisis and Kennedy’s tenure “as a guide to defuse conflicts, manage great-power relations and make foreign policy sound decisions”.

Calling your antagonist, a “butcher” and a “criminal”, as done by President Biden, is probably not mentioned as a good tactic in that ideal negotiations’ manual. It may be correct, but it is hardly wise.

In the wake of the Russian attack on Ukraine, we all regretted that better use was not made of diplomacy, mediation, and common security mechanisms earlier in the conflict to

* Sir Brian Urquhart, former UN Under Secretary-General for Special Political Affairs, described peacekeeping in such terms as “an effective symbol of the new determination to relieve the people of the world of unnecessary conflict, excessive armaments and the constant threat of war”. Beyond the “sheriffs’ posse” – *Survival*, Global Politics and Strategies, Volume 32, 1990- Issue 3

† Antony Lake, The Limits of Peacekeeping, *The New York Times*, 6 February 1993.

address and resolve historical grievances. There are ways to contain, and reverse dangerous situations and provide diplomatic tools to obtain peace. Among them, techniques normally used by the UN when the Council is not unanimous in its resolve, are: good offices, conciliation, mediation and delegation of responsibility to the Secretary-General.

*“Peace-makers should
fit in one vehicle
– Brian Urquhart.”*

Peace-making and good offices describe the UN Secretary-General’s activities to promote dialogue, facilitate the achievement of agreements and defuse tensions between parties in a dispute. Peace-making itself normally determines the size, scope, and duration of the process.

In the case of Russia and Ukraine, what is going on at the negotiation table? Peace-making activities are not visible these days. It is hoped that they take place behind the scenes. Silent diplomacy can still sort out positive effects and help craft a deal acceptable to all, ending, or at least suspending, the high intensity conflict.

Already in the 80s, with the UN Security Council paralyzed, Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar decided to undertake a political gamble. Gambling was applied to two issues with a high-risk factor: one was the crisis in Afghanistan and the other one was Cyprus. The Secretary General won a personal battle carving for himself a key role in mediating among the parties in those crises.

As delegations of Ukrainian and Russian negotiators assemble for TV coverage in Istanbul, it is hoped that a small team of skilled mediators is at work someplace. We need to recover the soft power of diplomacy which is the only conduit for lasting peace. “Peace-makers should fit in one vehicle”– Brian Urquhart said to the author of this article when interviewed about the means to solve conflicts. And he meant it.

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