

Ukraine: No Adequate Response

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As Russia's war on Ukraine is well into its second month, we can start to make up the balance on the West's response. The good news? Ukraine is still standing. The bad news? Almost everything else, notwithstanding the self-congratulatory and complacent highlighting of the 'impressive' unity of NATO and the EU. That's a mighty low bar for impressive, given the urgency of the situation.

Aiming this low, presenting illusory unity and posturing as an achievement, dangerously undermines the West's case in several ways. First of all, it leaves Ukraine out in the cold. Yes, the country does receive Western military and intelligence aid that is probably instrumental in its ability to withstand the Russian attacks. And yes, going further could mean risking direct conflict between NATO and Russia, which is not a desirable outcome in anybody's books. Even so, there's a huge gap between what Western capitals say about the importance of Ukraine and stopping Putin and what is being done in practice.

No wonder that there is cynical talk now of the West, with all the caveats that term deserves, being ready to fight Russia 'to the last Ukrainian'. While exercising caution in order to avoid WWIII is to be applauded, letting Vladimir Putin dictate the terms on which a conflict in Europe is being fought, presents its own dangers. If there is any creative and original thinking happening on how to resolve this, it is not being shared by the West's political and military masterminds. They'd better hurry, because, despite Ukraine's impressive resistance and the Russian forces' much-advertised underperformance, the battlefield situation remains highly uncertain.

That leaves the economic, i.e. sanctions, and the diplomatic paths as the main avenues for action. Here the gap between Western rhetoric and action is even more glaring. Yes, a lot has been done, but so much hasn't. Particularly the Western European unwillingness to face economic hardship in order to effect a much faster end to the reliance on Russian energy is ugly to behold. Western governments balk at adding to an admittedly already deteriorating economic situation, with price rises squeezing especially the lower incomes. A further fuel shock would certainly exacerbate the situation.

But this is all about priorities. The refusal to act is more than anything else an extension of the ideological economic conservative orthodoxy of the past decades that is aimed at doing away with protections for the lowest incomes. Even during the pandemic, support was very unevenly distributed in most European countries, with large companies often profiting disproportionately. Now, with this geopolitical crisis, there seems to be no willingness at all anymore to redistribute the burdens that it brings with it. Instead governments choose to soft-pedal on sanctions that can actually bite.

The main initiative on the diplomatic front that can be taken is speeding up Ukraine's EU-membership application. Certainly at this point, with a momentary stabilisation of the situation on the ground and the Ukrainian government more firmly in control of Kyiv, this option should be more urgently discussed. Even giving Ukraine candidate status will send a signal, albeit one still not strong enough. Instead, some major EU countries, especially France and the Netherlands, oppose a special procedure, partly out of a general unease over the EU's expansion over the past couple of decades that has brought countries into the fold that are now having problems with the rule of law and democratic standards. Legitimate as these concerns might be, it's totally misplaced to fight that battle over the back of the Ukrainians who need the EU's support right now. The UK's position in this

is noteworthy as well, having been one of the EU-members most strongly arguing for expansion into the 2010's only then to ditch the whole of the EU.

This overall lack of adequate support for Ukraine, given the stakes for Europe, feeds into the second problem that the Western response is facing: The failure to convince important non-Western countries and economies to oppose Russia. Even purported Western allies, such as Israel and the Arab Gulf states are hedging their bets, admittedly because of local imperatives – in Israel's case the Russian role in Syria, but even so it's not a good look. The West's own reluctance to put itself on the line is cited by some long-time allies such as Pakistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan, who's facing domestic challenges, has railed against the supposed hypocrisy of asking Pakistan to implement sanctions while the West keeps trading (fuel) with Russia, asking if the EU considered him and his countrymen as "slaves".

And that's just how the West's stance goes down with its traditional allies. India, for a while moving slowly towards the Western camp, unsurprisingly stuck to its long-held neutral position. But it's still a bit of a snub to receive Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and openly state that it will not throttle trade with Russia. China's position is clear: Any situation that causes trouble for the US and the EU is a good thing and should be fanned where possible.

Taken together, this means that a significant chunk of the world will not support the West in its opposition to Russia, let alone against China, should future tensions arise. While there are many underlying reasons and economic and geopolitical trends that lie at the root of this, the West's own, perceived, half-hearted response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine also plays a role.

Ultimately, it feeds into a more fundamental narrative that's developing of Western ineffectiveness and callousness. Plagued by populist movements, discord, fragmentation and growing economic and social inequalities, the West clearly does not have its own house in order. Brexit and Trump were a few of the indicators that something is amiss, and they were certainly picked up around the world. The UK's supposed closeness to the EU during the Ukraine crisis is a farce that nobody takes seriously, as none of the underlying issues have been resolved.

Internationally, over the last few decades, the West's interventions have been failures and disastrous for local populations. From Iraq to Libya, Afghanistan and now Mali, Western interventions have not achieved their aims and have left carnage in their wake. The Russian intervention in Syria has possibly been even more disastrous for the local population and for neighbouring countries sheltering refugees but it has achieved its aims. The latter will be noticed by many countries that are now sitting on the fence. Anyone who thinks that the West has responded adequately to the invasion of Ukraine, should think again. It's doubtful even that such a response is possible without a fundamental renewal inside the Western countries and a corresponding re-evaluation of their international stances.