

Russia's Attack on Ukraine, A Defining Moment?

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In the current climate it's easy to become pessimistic. Some contend the Russia's invasion of Ukraine as has parallels to the beginning of the second world war when, in 1938/39, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler used the grievances of the German-speaking citizens of the Sudetenland, then part of Czechoslovakia, as a prelude to war (Florea, 2022).

Following a peace conference brokered by Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini in Munich, the Sudetenland was assigned to Germany in early October 1938 (Britannica, 2022). The signing of the Munich Agreement on 29th September 1938 was intended to appease Hitler who'd proclaimed the Sudetenland to be his only "territorial demand". As history shows, those who'd ceded to Hitler's demands, including British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, were duped. Hitler's promises proved to worthless.

Vladimir Putin, President of Russia made no such promises. Indeed, as has he's proved in the past, Putin, like Hitler, has no qualms about invading territory that'd previously been part of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) and considered necessary to exert control over to protect Russia's interests.

In early August 2008 Russian military, under President Dmitry Medvedev who'd succeeded Putin, then serving as PM, invaded the Republic of Georgia. This country had been created in 1991 following the fall of the Soviet Union under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev who'd implemented glasnost (openness) enabling free speech and a critical press as well as perestroika (restructuring) in order to achieve greater efficiency through decentralised decision-making (Zubok, 2021).

Georgia had been engaged in ongoing conflict with Russian-backed provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which wished to become separate republics for a number of years (CNN, 2021). According to a European Union investigation carried out after the ten-day conflict, the Russo-Georgian War led to the death of 844 soldiers and civilians, many more wounded, and up to 200,000 displaced people (EU, 2008).

Russia, though widely condemned at the time, and having been accused of human rights abuses, believed it could exert its will without serious loss to its international reputation and that economic sanctions were tolerable. Precisely the same logic of backing separatists was used by Russia, in February and March 2014, once again under the Presidency of Vladimir Putin, when it invaded and annexed the Crimean Peninsula in the west of Ukraine.

Though only three deaths resulted from Russia's incursion into Crimea, Ukraine's citizens were left with no doubt about the threat posed by its dominant neighbour. Ukraine's significance as a former USSR state was underlined by the number of nuclear warheads located on its soil making it the world's third largest holder of such weapons.

Because of Ukraine's stockpile, like Belarus and Kazakhstan, it was subject to the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances at The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Conference on 5th December 1994. The purpose of the Budapest Memorandum was, in return for Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan relinquishing their nuclear weapons, they'd be offered assurance and protection against potential aggressors. Given this memorandum was signed by Russia, the USA and the UK, it's understandable many argue this justifies external intervention in Ukraine in dealing with the threat it now faces.

What's certain in the confusion created by the invasion of Ukraine by Russia is that many are already dead. Though impossible to derive a precise number, the casualties are already being measured in thousands (Baynes, 2022). A humanitarian tragedy is already apparent with the fact that one million Ukrainians have fled and, according to the UN refugee agency, this number is expected to exceed 4 million (Guardian, 2022).

The World Health Organization (WHO) have expressed concerns that the health care implications of the conflict in Ukraine is creating an "emergency" and that attacks on hospitals are going to add to the toll of deaths and suffering being experienced (BBC, 2022). Ukrainian ambassador to the United Nations, Serhiy Kyslytsya, has accused Russia of violation of human rights and of having engaged in genocide which is intended to "deprive Ukraine of the very right to exist" (Bennetts et al, 2022).

As is being widely reported, indiscriminate use of shelling and cluster bombs against civilians – a war crime – is increasing the toll of death and suffering with each passing hour (Philp et al, 2022). Scenes of horror and suffering are simply dreadful.

How the invasion of Ukraine will be concluded is a moot question. Given the unwillingness of major powers, especially those belonging to NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), to be drawn into a conflict with Russia that could precipitate a much greater conflagration, and though the resistance being shown by Ukrainians in defending their country is to be commended, it's very likely we're witnessing the 'death' of Ukraine as an independent western-looking democracy.

Though conflicts are unfortunately far too frequent, Russia's invasion feel ghastly in that, as well as being on the edge of Western Europe, and therefore, on our doorstep, there's going to be a profound economic impact it's for many other countries' economies including the UK's. Russia, now subject to sanctions from across the globe is, according to ex-Russian Prime Minister, Mikhail Kasyanov, facing "economic disaster" (Inman and Rankin, 2022; Robinson, 2022).

Russia's economy, dependent on exporting oil and gas, which it possesses in vast quantities making it a major player in the world market, is being hit hard by sanctions which, as the parlance goes, are initially intended to impel certain behaviour and, if this fails, to compel. Clearly, in the case of Russia, any threat posed by possible sanctions proved insufficient.

However, whether the level of severe sanctions compel, as is hoped, Russia to abandon its invasion of Ukraine and withdraw with immediate effect remains to be seen. Significantly, what's already occurred is that the wholesale price of gas, coal, aluminium and a range of other 'rare earth' minerals vital to production of a wide range of goods, as well as grains including wheat, barley and corn, have risen alarmingly (Hume, Wilson and Terazono, 2022).

As we'll all have discovered recently, energy bills were already going up dramatically. The fact that the wholesale price of gas is currently ten times higher than this time last year means unless there's a vast improvement over the summer months when, due to reduced demand, there's usually a fall, we can expect to see another hike from October 1st when Ofgem (Office of Gas and Electricity Markets) review the 'price cap' in August. At present, you'd have to be pretty optimistic to see how the disastrous situation in Ukraine will be quickly resolved.

Nonetheless, and though the sudden spike in the price of commodities will inevitably feed into the inflation cycle, potentially causing a fall in discretionary spending, this is a burden we're going to have to endure as a cost of punishing Russia for its actions (Wilson et al, 2022). In the absence of military action against a heavily armed superpower which possesses nuclear warheads, strangling

Russia's economy is the only way it can be held to account for its illegal aggression (Terazono, Hume and Fildes, 2022).

What's for sure is that we are about to see a re-evaluation of the geopolitical landscape in a way that, until last week's invasion, probably only existed as a worst-case scenario in strategic planning by all governments including our own (Balfour et al, 2022). What Russia has achieved, not by intent, is to strengthen the alliance created in the aftermath of the second world war when, following the defeat of the Nazis – assisted in no small part by Russia – the USSR was thought to pose the greatest threat for the future. In any reordering of relationships, China, seen as an ally of Russia, will be crucial (Massie, 2022).

Putin by his action has turned his country into a pariah state (Farge, 2022) and the level of disinvestment by major companies is breath-taking (Economist, 2022). This will unfortunately make life even more challenging for Russian citizens than it already was due to policies implemented by Putin (Schwab, 2022).

That these are extremely dangerous times is not an overstatement. Cool heads and calm counsel is essential in dealing with a Russia whose leader appears driven by a combination of self-aggrandisement, greed that's allowed him to create a Kleptocracy which has enriched him and his obedient oligarchs (Burgis, 2020), and a probable sense he's got nothing to lose by upping the stakes regardless of the appalling cost.

Whatever the eventual conclusion to the current conflict, the eventual cost will be, as in every war, measured in the human suffering inflicted on the vast majority of those with no wish other than to live their lives in peace and work for a better future for their children. Putin has, according to opinion polls conducted in Sweden and Finland, ensured a majority of people in those countries believe it's now essential to become a member of NATO (Lewis, 2022).

Moreover, Putin's increasing willingness to engage in military action in pursuance of which ever imagined grievance takes his fancy, should make all governments redouble their efforts to achieve cooperation and mutual respect which were the foundations of the modern society so many died for, due to Hitler's delusions and genocidal thinking. As Shrimpsley (2022) contends, the "rhetoric of Global Britain" is now looking outpaced and defence through cooperation with the EU is essential lest this country wishes to risk "becoming a supporting actor in its own backyard and a bit-part player everywhere else."

Finally, as a counterbalance to the current misery and pessimism, it's worth remembering that better times will eventually return. In the 1970s the energy crises, caused by wars in the Middle East, led to a re-evaluation of energy use (Macalister, 2011). Social historian Andy Becketts's book, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (2010), is an excellent distillation of events.

In 1973 when the price of a barrel of oil quadruped because OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) imposed an embargo to punish America and the west for its support of Israel in the Yom Kippur war against Egypt, what became known as 'demand destruction' occurred.

Demand destruction is caused by a downward shift in the curve showing consumer demand who, because of sustained high prices, significantly alter their behaviour. It's speculated that this is very likely to happen if the current high price of energy is sustained over coming months during prolonged conflict between Ukraine and Russia (Paraskova, 2022).

Like the 1970s energy crises, many believe the currently exorbitant wholesale costs of energy and the reliance of Europe on Russian gas will create new opportunities and be the catalyst for increased

effort to achieve the transition to a greener economy (Terazono, Hume and Fildes, *ibid*; Millar, 2022). As the adage goes, necessity will become the ‘Mother of invention’ and we can expect to see innovation and creative solutions to replace fossil fuels that have, indirectly or otherwise, been the cause of, and have funded, conflict.

Putin’s decision to invade a peaceful country could, similar to Hitler’s decision to invade his former ally the Soviet Union in ‘Operation Barbarossa’ between June and December 1941, ultimately lead to his undoing (Graef, 2022). If that’s the case and he’s replaced by a new leader committed to democracy within Russia and respect for neighbouring countries, long-term this will be a good thing.

Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine may indeed turn out to be a defining moment.

In the meantime, we place our hope in those defending Ukraine against subjugation by Russia and do everything possible to ensure there’s sufficient pressure to end the conflict. If this means paying higher prices for fuel, energy and a range of foods and goods, awful as this will be for hard-pressed families, this is what we must collectively endure in solidarity with Ukraine.

As utterly brilliant comedian/actor the late Robin Williams once remarked, “Comedy is acting out optimism.” What’s without doubt is that those supportive of freedom, peace and security across the world, owe an immense debt to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a former actor and comedian, who continues to display remarkable courage and leadership.

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