

Ukraine War: Climbing the Escalation Ladder to Oblivion

Disdaining Diplomacy, Seeking Victory

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Ever since the Ukraine War started on 24 Feb 2022, the NATO response, mainly articulated and materially implemented by the U.S., has been to pour vast quantities of oil on the flames of conflict, increasing the scale of violence, the magnitude of human suffering, and dangerously increasing the risk of a disastrous outcome.

Not only did Washington mobilize the world to denounce Russia's 'aggression,' but supplied advanced weaponry in great quantities to the Ukrainians to resist the Russian attack, and did all it could at the UN and elsewhere to build a punitive coalition hostile to Russia but coupled this with a variety of sanctions and the demonization of Putin as a notorious war criminal unfit to govern. This perspective of state propaganda was faithfully conveyed by a self-censoring Western media filter that graphically portrayed on a daily basis the horrors of the war experienced by the Ukrainian civilian population and a newly West-oriented enthusiasm for the ICC gathering as much evidence as possible of Russian war crimes.

Such a posture contradicted its intense past opposition to ICC efforts to gather evidence for an investigation of war crimes by non-signatories in relation to the U.S. role in Afghanistan or Israel's role in occupied Palestine. To some degree such one-sidedness of presentation was to be expected, but its intensity in relation to Ukraine has been dangerously irresponsible and amateurish with respect to the wider human interests at stake, and in a profound sense, the wellbeing of Ukraine and its people.

Even Stephen Walt, an influential commentator on U.S. foreign policy, who is a prudent critic of the Biden failure to do his best to shift the bloody encounter in Ukraine from the battlefield to diplomatic domains, nevertheless joins the war-mongering chorus by

misleadingly asserting without qualification that “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is illegal, immoral, and unjustifiable.” [Walt, “[Why Washington Should Take Russian Nuclear Threats Seriously](#),” *Foreign Policy*, May 5, 2022] It is not that such a characterization is incorrect, but unless softened by explanations of context it lends credibility to the war-oriented, self-righteous mentality displayed by the Biden presidency. Perhaps Walt and others of similar persuasion were striking this posture of going along with this public portrayal of the Ukraine Crisis as part of striking a Faustian Bargain to gain a seat at the table so that their message of caution could be effectively delivered.

To be clear, even if it can be argued that Russia/Putin have launched a war that is unlawful, immoral, and unjustified, context is important if peace is to be restored and catastrophe avoided. For one thing, the Russian attack may be all of those things alleged, and yet form part of a geopolitical pattern of established behavior that the U.S. has itself established in a series of wars starting with the Vietnam War, and notably more recently with the Kosovo War, Afghanistan War, and the Iraq War. None of these wars were legal, moral, and justifiable, although each enjoyed a geopolitical rationale that made them persuasive with U.S. foreign policy elites and its closest alliance partners. Of course, two wrongs do not make a right, but in a world where geopolitical actors enjoy a license to pursue their strategic interests, it is not objectively defensible to so self-righteously condemn Russia without taking account of what the U.S. has been doing around the world for several decades.

In a somewhat insightful fit of frustration, George W. Bush after a failure to gain UN Security Council authorization in 2003 for the use of regime-changing force against Iraq, declared that the UN would lose its ‘relevance’ if it failed to go along with the American imperial plan of action, and so it did. The ambiguity as to international law arises from the UN Charter own equivocation, asserting that all non-defensive uses of force are prohibited, a position reinforced by the amended Rome Statute governing the International Criminal Court by declaring ‘aggression’ as a crime against the peace, while conferring a right of veto.

How can this right of veto be conferred on the five permanent members of the Security Council, which has the effect of precluding any decision that clashes with their strategic interests, be reconciled with the prohibition on aggression.

Such a right of exception is complemented by the experience of international criminal law, which from Nuremberg to the present has exempted from accountability dominant geopolitical actors, even for such incredible acts as dropping atomic bombs on overwhelmingly civilian targets at the end of World War II.

This gray zone separating law from power is further reinforced by the existence of spheres of influence claimed and dominated by geopolitical actors, which if territorially proximate and identified as such, tend to be respected by adversaries. Such compromised sovereignty of these borderland countries is descriptive of the mutual tolerance exhibited during the Cold War of the division of Europe, showing forbearance even in the face of ‘unlawful’ violent interventions. In this sense, Ukraine finds itself in the unenviable position of Mexico. Long ago the great Mexican cultural figure, Octavio Paz, proclaimed the tragedy of his country ‘to be so far from God and so close to the United States.’

These considerations are mentioned here not to defend, much less exonerate Russia, but to

show that the world order context of the Ukraine War is deeply problematic in relation to normative authority, especially when invoked in such a partisan manner. In contemporary *geopolitical* relations, as distinct from normal state-to-state or international relations, *precedent* takes the place of *norms* and *rule-governed* behavior. Antony Blinken has muddied the waters of international discourse by falsely claiming that the U.S., unlike adversaries China and Russia, is as observant of rule-governed behavior as are 'normal states' in relation to peace and security.



April 27, 1999, Surdulica, Serbia, in the series of NATO's civilian bombing, the house of Milić was hit by projectile and the whole family was killed: Milorad (15 years), Stamenka (65), Aleksandar (35), Miljana (14), Vladimir (11), Vesna (35) and three more neighbours who sheltered in the house were killed as well

In this sense, it is appropriate to look back at NATO's clearly unlawful war of 1999 that fragmented Serbia by granting Kosovo political independence and territorial sovereignty before uncritically condemning the Russian annexation of four parts of eastern Ukraine after admittedly dubious referenda. Again, it is important to recognize that there may be cases where the fragmentation of existing states is justifiable on humanitarian grounds and others where it is not, but to claim that Russia overstepped the limits of law in a context where power has shaped behavior and political outcomes in similar cases is to prepare the public for a wider war rather than leading it to seek and be pragmatically receptive to a diplomatic compromise.

This contextual understanding of the Ukraine War is in my judgment highly relevant as it makes the current fashion of mounting legal, moral, and political arguments of condemnation distract from following an otherwise rational, prudent, and pragmatic courses of action, which from the beginning strongly supported an all-out effort to encourage an immediate ceasefire followed by negotiations aiming at a durable political arrangement not only between Russia and Ukraine, but also NATO/U.S. and Russia. That the U.S. Government never to this day has indicated any interest, much less a commitment to stopping the killing and encouraging diplomacy, despite the mounting costs and risks of prolonged warfare in Ukraine should be shocking to the conscience of peace-minded persons and patriots of

humanity everywhere.

Beyond this, catastrophic costs are presently being borne by many vulnerable societies throughout the world from the spillover effects of anti-Russian sanctions and their impact on food and energy supplies and pricing. Such a deplorable situation, likely to get worse as the war is prolonged and intensified, is now also bringing closer to reality growing risks of the use of nuclear weapons as Putin's alternatives may be narrowing to acknowledging defeat or personally falling from power. While not relenting a bit on implementing an aggressive approach to gaining Ukraine's ambitions of victory, Biden himself acknowledges that any use of even a tactical nuclear weapon in Ukraine would with near certitude lead to Armageddon. This duality of assessment (combining escalating the war and anxiety as to where it might lead) seems like an embrace of geopolitical insanity rather than a recognition of the somber realities at stake.

As always actions speak louder than words. Blinken facing a rising public clamor for negotiations responds with his usual feckless evasions. In this instance, contending that since Ukraine is the victim of Russian aggression it alone has the authority to seek a diplomatic resolution and the U.S. will continue to support Ukraine's maximal war aims, including even their extension to Crimea, which has been part of Russia since 2014.

Context also matters in relation to the conduct of the war. Its major escalation within the month of the sabotage of Nord Stream gas pipeline to Europe, which Blinken again confounded by calling it 'a tremendous opportunity' to make weaken Russia and lead to greater European energy independence. Such an operation initially implausibly attributed to Russia, yet later more or less acknowledges as part of the expansion of the war by reliance on 'terrorist' tactics of combat.

Its latest expression is the suicide bombing of the strategic Kerch Bridge on October 7th, connecting Crimea and Russia, a major infrastructure achievement of the Putin period of Russian leadership and supply line for Russian troops in Southern parts of Ukraine. These operations contain the fingerprints of the CIA and seem designed as encouragement to the Ukrainian resolve to go all out for a decisive victory, sending Putin unmistakable signals that the U.S. remains unreceptive to a responsible geopolitics of compromise. The U.S. anger directed at Saudi Arabia for cutting its oil production is one more sign a commitment to a victory scenario in Ukraine as well as a reaction against the Saudi resistance to U.S. hegemonic geopolitics. With such provocations, it is hardly surprising, although highly unlawful and immoral, for Russia to retaliate by unleashing its version of 'shock and awe' against the civilian centers of ten Ukrainian cities. Such is the vicious escalation!

Always lurking in the background, and at Ukraine's and the world's expense, is Washington's geopolitical opportunism, that is, seeking to defeat Russia and deter China from daring to challenge the hegemonic unipolarity achieved after the Soviet disintegration in 1992. It this huge investment in its militarist identity as the sole 'global state' that alone explains this cowboy approach to nuclear risk-taking and the tens of billions expended to empower Ukraine.

Such a tragic political drama unfolds as the peoples of the world and their governments, along with the United Nations, watch this horrendous spectacle unfold, seemingly helpless witnesses not only to the carnage but to their own national destinies.

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