



Stability Challenges and Opportunities Regarding the Russo-Ukrainian War

By Raymond A Millen, Ph.D.

Introduction

Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression on Ukraine raises a number of issues regarding the future stability in Europe and the international system. The Russian invasion is a direct challenge to international rule of law and stability of the international system. Specifically, it has violated the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which the Russian Federation reaffirmed Ukrainian independence, sovereignty, and border integrity.¹ A failure to respond to Russian aggression is appeasement and an incentive to further erode the international system. Consequently, the international community must take measures to moderate Russian aberrant foreign policy and uphold the global order.

A key factor in this conflict is recognizing the limitations of Russian military power and the critical role the energy sector plays in the global balance of power and stability.² Military experts assume that great powers with sophisticated militaries will always prevail in conflicts,³ but history suggests this conclusion is not always the case (e.g., U.S. War of Independence, the Russo-German War, and the Vietnam War). So far, Russian military operations have been unwieldy and savage. The farther west the Russian military advances, the greater its difficulties will multiply.

The United States must formally acknowledge the threat and lead a defensive Allied coalition to counter and punish Russia aggression. A U.S.-led coalition need not invoke an open conflict. Rather, the confrontation can remain below the threshold of general war by astutely employing the instruments of power (diplomatic, information/psychological, military, and economic). Accordingly, the Ukrainian government and military should remain at the forefront of the Coalition.

Because Putin's prestige and even political survival is at stake, the war will likely continue until the Ukraine is defeated and occupied, or Russia is defeated and withdraws completely. This paper touches on the significance of the conflict on international stability, the significant military

¹ Raymond A. Millen, "Does NATO Enlargement Spread Democracy? Evidence from Three Cases," Volume 2, *Democracy and Security* (Routledge part of Taylor and Francis Group, 2006). Co-authored with Dr. Wallace J. Thies and Dorle Hellmuth.

² Raymond A. Millen, "Reconfiguring NATO for Future Security Challenges," Volume 23, Number 2, *Comparative Strategy* (Routledge part of Taylor and Francis Group, April/May/June 2004).

³ John Lewis Gaddis: *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005).

challenges of the Russian military as the fighting continues, and the opportunities to restore European and international stability in response to Russian aggression. The conflict will be protracted and devastating for the Ukraine, and the aftershocks to international stability and global economies extensive. Ultimately, the Russo-Ukrainian War represents a direct challenge to the preservation of the international order.⁴

The Significance of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict to International Stability

If Russia prevails in this aggression, meaning the complete or partial annexation of Ukraine, international stability will erode. A Russian success—perceived or real—will signify a lack of international resolve and appeasement to aggression. While the initial and widespread sanctions on Russia are encouraging, they remain incomplete and are currently tolerable to Russia. Only unconditional sanctions—particularly on energy exports—show the necessary international resolve. If the senior Chinese leadership perceives a Russian success in Ukraine, it may be emboldened to invade Taiwan. Other totalitarian regimes, such as North Korea and Iran, may take advantage of the crisis to create regional instability as well. Successful aggression in Ukraine and Taiwan will not portend another Cold War; rather, it may signal a return to highly destabilizing great power politics, which led to two world wars.⁵

The Ukrainian conflict has an impact on European security and stability as well. European overdependence on Russian energy and susceptibility to economic warfare paralyze resolute action. In this regard, the United States should reassess its energy export policies. Unless European countries diversify energy imports, they will remain beholden to Russian foreign policy.⁶ While collective defense is a hallmark of NATO, neither Russia nor NATO is inclined to risk a general war over Ukraine—a non-NATO member. Hence, the western Ukrainian border shall remain a red line between Russia and NATO.

As long as sanctions and the war continue, the international community can expect Russia and China, operating in tandem, to weaken free world resolve. Russian economic coercion and cyberwarfare against countries supporting Ukraine are the most obvious ploys. Subversion, such as espionage, compromise, blackmail, disinformation, political agitation, and sabotage, is designed to sow confusion, weaken solidarity, and undermine collective will. The Allied coalition must vigorously counter these Russian and Chinese stratagems.

The Military Challenges for Russia

The conflict in Ukraine will likely remain protracted due to the limited capabilities of the Russian invasion forces, the determined resolve of the Ukrainian government, its military and its people, and the geographic character of Ukraine. The inherent firepower and maneuver advantages of mechanized forces are largely offset in extensive urban areas. Ironically, the destruction of buildings in urban areas through diverse munitions results in rubble, which defenders can fortify fairly quickly. Armored vehicles are vulnerable to short-range antitank fires and improvised explosive devices, thereby requiring significant infantry forces to secure urban

⁴ Vasyl Hummeniuk and Lubomyr Luciuk, *The Just War: Images of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army* (Toronto: The Kashtan Press, 2007).

⁵ Albert Seaton, *The Russo-German War: 1941-1945* (Great Britain: Praeger Publishers, 1971).

⁶ Raymond A. Millen, *Pax NATO: The Opportunities of Enlargement* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, August 2002).

areas. Urban military operations result in high casualties and widespread destruction.⁷ Hence, reducing a major city requires weeks of intense combat. The plodding Russian offensive suggests lackluster logistical capabilities and risk aversion. However, once the disparate fronts merge, the Russian military can adopt a broad-front strategy, permitting it to mass sufficient combat power at decisive points and to secure occupied territory with military government.

The stalwart resistance to Russian aggression is hardly surprising because the Ukrainian collective memory preserves the agony of Soviet rule. In the early 1930s, the Soviet regime committed genocide with a premeditated policy of collectivization, terror-famine, and liquidation of peasants (i.e., kulaks), killing a minimum of five million Ukrainians.⁸ During the Second World War, Soviet and German armies waged scorched earth policies during their respective retreats, leaving Ukraine devastated and requiring decades of recovery.⁹ Soviet and German occupiers conducted mass atrocities against Ukrainians during the war as well. From 1944 to 1953, Ukrainian insurgents fought both German and Soviet forces, inflicting and suffering exorbitant casualties.¹⁰ Given this history, independence and freedom are not abstract concepts; rather, Ukrainians have experienced Russian totalitarianism and understand what occupation portends.

Depending on the amount of destruction, casualties, and brutality, Russian occupation of Ukraine—partially or completely—can impose severe costs on Russia. The demonstrated intensity of Ukrainian resistance augurs a protracted insurgency, particularly if combined with conventional operations and steadfast foreign assistance. Occupation entails a dispersal of forces and extended logistical capabilities, both of which become vulnerable to conventional and unconventional interdiction. As Ukrainian resistance continues, Russian perseverance will erode.

Opportunities to Restore European and International Stability

Russia's war of aggression must have steep consequences. Diplomatic isolation of Russia should continue until its military forces are defeated and withdraw completely from Ukraine, to include Crimea. The International Court of Justice and other entities should pursue legal proceedings against Russian leaders for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Realistically though, the defeat of Russia and a change in government must occur before its leaders are held accountable. Continued UN censure and condemnation of Russian aggression underscores the ethos of the international rule of law. The international community must make it clear that gunboat diplomacy is intolerable.

All means of media (news, social, and entertainment) should focus on informing the Russian people that international actions are a response to their government's aggression and not a personal indictment against them. Putin's threadbare pretext of turning Ukraine into a buffer state requires a vigorous international rebuttal. Putin must not be allowed to invoke nationalism or preventive war as a rationale for the Ukrainian invasion. The Russian government cannot block all forms of media information all the time, so the effort must continue until Russia

⁷ Raymond A. Millen, *Tweaking NATO: The Case For Integrated Multinational Divisions* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, June 2002).

⁸ John J. Dziak, *Chekisty: A History of the KGB* (New York: Ivy Books, 1988).

⁹ Albert Seaton, *The Russo-German War: 1941-1945* (Great Britain: Praeger Publishers, 1971).

¹⁰ John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad* (London: Cassell Military Paperback, 2003).

withdraws completely. To resonate with the Russian people, information must remain truthful and consistent.

In contrast to collective defense, NATO's collective security missions are more suitable to counter Russian aggression below the threshold of open conflict. NATO intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s set the precedent for such action.¹¹ Increased security force assistance (e.g., supplies, equipment, weapons, training, and advisors) to the Ukrainian government is essential for both conventional and unconventional operations. Russian logistical systems appear particularly vulnerable, so focusing attacks on them as the Russian military penetrates farther west is an effective indirect strategy. Robust information operations and psychological warfare can erode Russian conscripts' morale and should encourage defections. The Allied coalition should comprise all countries that are willing to render support and not just NATO members. Consequently, the coalition should establish several secure bases of operation to support the Ukrainian cause. In conjunction with these efforts, international condemnation, sanctions, and isolation have the potential to impose significant pressure on the Russian military, economy, and national will.

Because the stakes are high, resolute action is essential. Oil and natural gas are the center of gravity for Russian military power, which is both a source of strength as well as a critical vulnerability. Hence, the United States needs to restore its energy sector (i.e., coal, oil, and natural gas) for its own independence and in support of enduring European energy needs. Depriving Russia of energy export revenues is the most effective means of impairing its war economy. Further, renewed investment in nuclear power is a long-term solution to US and European energy requirements by lowering dependence on fossil fuels. Russia must never again hold Europe hostage to energy imports.

Conclusions

Contrary to his claims, Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a war of choice and not necessity. This aggression is just the latest of a ruthless trend dating back to Chechnya, Georgia, the Crimea, and eastern Ukraine. International and national leaders should take him at his word that he wishes to restore the Soviet Union. China, Iran, and other authoritarian regimes are taking note of this conflict and may be emboldened to scorn the global order and international stability.

In view of the poor performance of the Russian military, Putin desires peace on his terms. Cease fire talks serve to permit the Russian military time to recover and shift forces. Russian foreign policy will likely pursue a Ukrainian surrender so as to limit casualties and destruction. Putin needs a functional Ukraine in order to consolidate gains, recover from the conflict, and continue his agenda of amassing power.

As calamitous as the conflict in Ukraine is, it is the most pertinent place to halt and perhaps reverse Russian depredations. The Ukrainian government, military, and people have displayed incredible national will, courage, and capability in the defense of their homeland. Assisting the Ukrainian cause with military and other resources is feasible, with the least risk of a general war.

¹¹ Raymond A. Millen, "NATO and the Revolution in Military Affairs," Volume 6, *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitschrift* (June 2002). Co-authored with Dr. Steven Metz.

As in the past, US leadership can galvanize European and international resolve to defeat Russian aggression. Appeasement for the sake of peace only delays a larger conflagration.

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