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Mis(understanding) the War in Ukraine

And the prospects for peace

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drawn enormous international attention. The event became a sensational topic for mass media, a hot issue for scholarly debate, a headache for politicians within and beyond the country, a challenge for international security and law architectures, and a tragedy for Ukrainian citizens and residents.

I have approached this article both as an analyst and a citizen. A citizen of Ukraine, first and foremost, but also of a global community of mankind. My goal is not to add another analysis of the crisis to the pile of many. It is rather to point out – in the spirit of dialogue, cooperation and constructive criticism – some misconceptions prevailing in the existing narratives.

Misinterpretations not only diminish “analytical clarity” and “explanatory power,” the terms academics often throw around. Most importantly, they yield incorrect implications for policymaking, which in the current context means human lives. In this regard I would like to offer a corrective by focusing on three aspects: the aggressor (Russia), the defender (Ukraine) and the neutral partner (India).

First, most of the world has condemned Russia as the immediate aggressor. Let me reiterate the point and make it crystal clear. Vladimir Putin unleashed a full-scale war on the neighbouring sovereign nation under the hideous pretext of “denazification,”

“demilitarization” and “protection” of the Russian-speaking people in the Donbas. Putin is the one and only person guilty of destruction, bombings and civilian deaths in Ukraine. Experts have talked about other parties indirectly involved in the conflict: the US, the EU, NATO, or Western media. Is it surprising, however, to see some analysts add Ukraine to this list.

Two arguments are usually raised to support this move. One of them goes as follows. Ukraine has been consistently mistreating its Russian-speaking population in the east, just as Putin has been saying all along. To quote one such analysis, “Ukraine itself has behaved in a despotic way, vis a vis its ethnic Russian minorities. Policies of exclusion and phobia led to targeting these minorities, who felt they should have been part of Russia.” Such a description does not take into account the socio-political context on the ground. As a result, it is largely detached from reality.

Take the often-cited language issue, for instance. Even though the state made Ukrainian the official language in the wake of Euromaidan, a lot of people continued using Russian. For many, including myself, it is still a mother tongue. For all, there have never been communication problems between Ukrainian and Russian speakers. The use of Russian remains both a moral right and a legal one enshrined in the Constitution of Ukraine. A lot of people still exercise it freely, especially in the Russian-speaking Donbas region that became my home.

The other argument refers to the presence and threat of “neo-Nazis” like the “Azov” military unit. Indeed, the role of these formations must not be underestimated. They were actively engaged in the Euromaidan revolution and the Donbas war, often resorting to violence. Yet like any other committed ideologues, they deploy radical means to defend their country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Furthermore, to claim that these paramilitary units determine Ukraine’s policy is too much of a stretch. There are no nationalist forces in the Ukrainian parliament, and their support among the general population is absolutely marginal.

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The second point concerns the defender, that is the people of Ukraine.

Benedict Anderson famously said that nations are imagined communities. Nations are not only imagined. They are lived out through everyday practices and resistances. Sometimes these are silent and invisible. Sometimes they are loud and clear.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has catalyzed enormous civilian resistance. From stopping tanks with bare hands to creating an IT army; from joining territorial defence units to building up mutual aid networks; from tearing down road signs to confuse Russian troops to offering them jokingly a lift back to Russia after they have run out of fuel. Heroic actions have sprung among ordinary people as much as in the army. Among these people, ironically, are the "desperate and excluded Russian minorities." This is hardly surprising, however, considering how brutal and destructive Putin's "protection" turned out to be.



The essence of "ruskiy mir": Kharkiv, one of the largest Russian-speaking cities of Ukraine, after Russian bombings

In 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas war broke the Ukrainian nation. In 2022, Ukraine's identity is being revived and consolidated through these myriad acts of courage, defiance and resistance. A few days ago, Putin put Russia's nuclear forces on alert. Mad Vlad does have weapons of mass destruction. By now, however, his miscalculation is clear. Ukrainians have weapons of mass resistance.

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To be sure, while this war brings out the best in many Ukrainian people, it also does the opposite for some of them. I absolutely abhor and condemn the acts of discriminatory

and racist attitude toward foreign students – many of whom come from India – at the border check points. Such behaviour must be immediately and unconditionally exposed and condemned.

The third and final aspect is about India's attitude toward the Ukraine crisis. India has avoided taking a definitive stance as of now. This has been explained through "diplomatic balancing", "strategic partnership with Russia", "primary interest in the Indo-Pacific region" and similar evasive and ambiguous language. India also abstained from voting on a resolution at the UN Security Council. As an emerging global power, however, India's reputation and foreign policy principles are as much important – if not more – than its narrow strategic interests. India can and should take a global role in joining the anti-Russia coalition. India's position must change especially in view of the fact that its own citizens have become innocent targets of Putin's aggression in the cities of Kharkiv and Kyiv.

To promote such a principled and moral outlook, upon evacuating its citizens to safety India ought to stand up in solidarity with Ukraine. The stance must be unequivocal:

- 1) Russia has invaded the sovereign state of Ukraine;
- 2) It has breached the UN-based international order;
- 3) It is threatening to dismantle it through continued military aggression in Ukraine.

By joining the UN in condemning Russia's aggression, India will become one of the moral leaders of the still existing rules-based order. By keeping silent, it will contribute to world disorder.

Let me conclude with a defiant motto that has united so many Ukrainians and can future anti-war struggles.

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Russian warship, go f*ck yourself!

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