

THE NEED FOR THE REST

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The announcement by Russian President Putin regarding his annexation of four regions of Ukraine is the latest escalation in an unnecessary war. As the war rages on, Putin believes he can now justify his invasion by “protecting Russian territory”. More worryingly Russian officials are increasingly mentioning the possible use of nuclear weapons. They could not do so without Putin’s blessing. Whether subtle or not, the fact that this possibility is being mentioned raises a dire specter. There is a need for a powerful global response before the situation spirals out of control.

The discussion for a new political order has been going on for some time. Ever since the Cold War ended and the bipolar international system gave way to the dominance of the United States and then to an emerging multipolar system, history has been flowing rapidly. No one has been able to describe this new era yet. That will be up for future historians. The reckless acts of the US in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ambivalence of President Obama and the irrational decisions of President Trump have harmed Washington’s reputation. President Biden has made efforts to go back to a responsible stance but whether this will continue after the next presidential elections in 2024 is debatable.

The so-called ‘decline of the West’ has been questioned and scrutinized due to these developments and the rise of China as well as other regional powers. It has become more difficult for the West to assert itself, although significant mechanisms still exist such as international financial institutions. Nevertheless, the world has changed dramatically in political, economic, social, technological, environmental ways and certain levels of power among states are materializing. Not only global players but regional powers are also imposing themselves on others (mostly neighbors). As the world is getting smaller due to the digital revolution, the only difference between states is the capacity and intent of using power.

The West has been galvanized albeit unexpectedly by President Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. The European Union has shown dexterity in uniting to support Kiev. The developments in Ukraine have not gone the way Putin envisaged as we go beyond eight months of war. Ukraine has not collapsed, President Zelensky has not run away but stayed and roused the country, the country has defended itself valiantly and even

gained back some of its territory. This unexpected situation has put Putin in a dire situation, thus the partial conscription which even that has demonstrated that not all of Russia is convinced of the necessity of the war.

British historian Orlando Figes points out in his latest book “The Story of Russia” that Moscow felt isolated by a lack of understanding and goodwill from the West. Figes argues that “Russia wanted to be part of Europe, to be treated with respect.” However according to the Russian interpretation of developments, Russia was not accepted by the West. It is true that when the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia was treated with some condescension as it was not seen as a threat anymore. Whether promises were made not to enlarge NATO to the East or not, there can be no justification to invade Ukraine. Now despite Russia’s losses and failures Putin is raising up the ante.

Sanctions have never been an effective tool in changing policies. The decades long restrictions imposed by the United States against Cuba only hurt the people but the regime survives to this day. The embargoes on Iran did not change much. As the EU imposed restrictive measures throughout the years to more than thirty countries, the results are mixed. Most significantly, Putin’s invasion demonstrated that the sanctions imposed against Russia after the annexation of Crimea had no effect. There are always ways to circumvent sanctions and it is no secret that some are done by those that have imposed them.

The votes at the United Nations General Assembly against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have shown divergence among states. More than thirty countries among them China, India, Pakistan and Iran have refrained from condemning the Russian invasion. Similarly, Brazil, China and India abstained on the recent UN Security Council resolution condemning the annexation of Ukraine’s four regions. Those countries may not have supported Russia but they shy away from denouncing Moscow as well. They may have their particular interests and reasons to act in this manner. This however provides Putin a channel to demonstrate that he is not alone. Nevertheless, we are reaching a threshold that no country should even contemplate to cross and it will be time for all to take a stand.

We are now on the verge of coming face to face with the use of nuclear weapons. I have heard from many experts that this is a bluff and that not even Putin would dare to use them. Really? Can we be certain? I do not expect any nuclear attack on a NATO member as it would call for a response, but there is always a possibility of such an attack on Ukraine itself which is not covered by any international guarantee. Whether low-yield or not, whether used on a non-populated area or not, any use of such a weapon would be historically consequential. Should this happen, it cannot go unpunished but how would the international community react? More harsh criticism and further sanctions? Does anybody believe that this would work?

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There should be a clear warning from the West and 'the Rest' that any use of nuclear weapons in any capacity is unacceptable and that the price to be paid would be very high. The rest of the world cannot and should not remain idle. There should be an effort to come together and address this impending threat with an appropriate warning. We cannot guess at President Putin's mindset, other than surmise that there seems to be nothing that holds him back. The only message that could have an effect is one that is clear, unvarnished and where the global community is united. This is one challenge where no country can remain on the sidelines. The sooner this message is given, the quicker it may have an effect and thus prevent a potential catastrophe.