

Opinion – The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Between Solidarity and Whataboutism

Written by Ikenna Steve Nweke

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IKENNA STEVE NWEKE, MAR 28 2022

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has generated massive condemnation around the world. Nations, international groups, organizations and private individuals alike have all denounced it as 'unprovoked' aggression against Ukraine; who is broadly seen to be defending the doctrine of the Sovereign Equality of States as enshrined in International Law. Such condemnation has also generated significant support in numerous forms. For instance, we have thus far seen: (a) sanctions against Russia and its oligarchs, (b) support by the G7 countries, the European Union, FIFA and even McDonald's, to lay out a handful of organizations, and (c) the provision of a series of monetary, logistic and arms-based support for Ukraine. There has also been a sense of solidarity with Ukraine in the realm of sports. This has been seen no more so than during football matches in major European leagues, demonstrated in the messages written on banners brought by crowd-members and the wearing of Ukrainian-colored armbands by both players and those on the balconies.

However, there are those, particularly in Muslim countries and in the West, who have demonstrated a certain skepticism about the level of support and solidarity Ukraine has received since the invasion. Their skepticism stems from a certain 'whataboutism' built around a comparison of the invasion of Ukraine with previous invasions led by the US and its allies. They argue the charge of hypocrisy for countries, organizations and individuals who did not condemn previous invasions by the US and its allies to condemn Russia. For them, what is good for the goose is good for the gander. In this short piece, I identify the reasons why Ukraine has received widespread solidarity, and present evidence concerning the shallowness of the whataboutism shadowing such a global display of solidarity with Ukraine.

There are many reasons why Ukraine has received support and solidarity in the wake of Russia's invasion. Firstly, many do not see any justification for the invasion. Russia was neither invited by the Ukrainian government, nor is the invasion justifiable as humanitarian intervention. The blatant charade of the denazification of Ukraine by Russia's President Putin is, in the words of Ukrainian president – Volodymyr Zelenskyy – 'a laughable statement'. Even Russians themselves are not buying this line of argumentation, explaining why we are seeing daily protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Secondly, the belief that the invasion was to stop Ukraine from joining NATO is perceived by many as a huge encroachment on the principle of sovereignty, which underpins the order of the international system. Therefore, actions taken to discourage such invasion will serve as a deterrent to potential invaders, reminding them that severe consequences await them; especially with China being on the brink of invading Taiwan. As such, if nothing is done, Russia will succeed in setting an erroneous precedent that will serve as a harbinger for many more invasions.

Thirdly, as most people and nations around the world gravitate towards democracy (Pew Research Center 2017), the invasion of Ukraine by authoritarian Russia is seen as an un-condonable aberration. Abdul El-Sayed, an analyst with the American News Agency CNN, called it a 'war between democracy and autocracy, between self-government and fascism.' The saying attributed to the political thinker Edmund Burke that 'the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing' has compelled good people and nations to strive to do something to ensure Ukraine is not defeated. This Manichaeian narrative of 'good versus evil' has helped mobilize support and

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solidarity for Ukraine.

Lastly, the world is going through a global pandemic, which has not only encouraged increased cooperation but has fostered solidarity amongst people and nations. The UN slogan, 'We are all in this Together' is not just a motto but has been demonstrated through monetary support and the donation of vaccines, medical equipment, and food materials from countries, organizations, and individuals to those who are in need. This newfound culture of global solidarism has benefitted Ukraine immensely, with the Russian invasion taking place during a period of solidarity caused by the global pandemic.

'Whataboutism' is a portmanteau of *what* and *about*. It can be defined as: a conversational tactic in which a person responds to an argument or attack by changing the subject to focus on someone else's misconduct, implying that all criticism is invalid because no one is completely blameless. It can be used to draw positive comparison and attract attention to enhance an idea. However, it is often susceptible to abuse by those who want to deflect attention on an issue. Therefore, the shallowness of whataboutism is revealed when its main objective is to shield criminal action by raising questions about other illustrations of criminality. In this case, the shallowness of employing certain whataboutisms is to justify Russia's aggression.

Many people have expressed a skepticism about the support and solidarity shown to Ukraine in the wake of Russia's invasion. Some, broadly, ask: Why did the US-led invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya receive neither the mass-condemnation for invaders nor mass-support for the invaded, as we have seen in the case of Ukraine?

The US-led invasion of Iraq, which began in March 2003, was premised on the weapon-of-mass-destruction narrative of the Bush administration. The US government had accused the Iraqi government led by Saddam Hussein of developing a weapon-of-mass-destruction program, an allegation Hussein vehemently denied. However, by the end of the invasion, which resulted in regime change for Iraq, there were no weapons of mass destruction found. Although there have been many debates about the legality of that invasion, it did not generate widespread support for Iraq because of three reasons. First, the United Nations Security Council, through Resolution 1441, provided a certain pretence for the invasion of Iraq, whilst Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a unilateral decision. Secondly, Iraq had previously invaded Kuwait in 1990 and refused to pay compensation for that internationally repelled invasion, an action that stripped the country of sympathy during the US-led 2003 invasion. Thirdly, the mission to oust Saddam Hussein was seen as morally acceptable by many because of his use of chemical weapons against the Kurdish minority in Iraq during the Anfal campaign, which claimed the lives of more than 100,000 Kurds.

Similarly, the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan did not attract widespread condemnation as the Russian invasion of Ukraine has done, because of the character of the Taliban-led government, which was notorious for its ruthless extremism. Second, the world was sympathetic towards the US after 9/11 and the bombing of the World Trade Centre, so the use of Afghanistan as a haven for Al Qaeda terrorists, especially Osama Bin Laden, ensured the invasion received support rather than condemnation. More so, as countries became increasingly apprehensive about the global jihadist movement, any attempt to wipe them out would rather receive support rather than condemnation.

In the same vein, the 2011 NATO-led invasion of Libya was a humanitarian intervention to stop the government of Muammar Ghaddafi from indiscriminately killing parts of the civilian population of Benghazi during the Libyan Civil War. The authoritarian regime of Ghaddafi had sanctioned mass killing of protesters during the Arab Spring which resulted in the Civil War. In addition, Libya under Ghaddafi was regarded in the West as a notorious sponsor of terrorism. He was fingered to have been the brain behind the 1986 bombing of a West Berlin discotheque, the Lockerbie bombing for which he accepted his role and paid compensation to the families of the victims in 2003, the 1989 bombing of a French airliner in Niger, among others. Ghaddafi also provided sanctuary for terrorists and extremist groups. As such, the image of Ghaddafi as a brutal dictator who had led his country for 42 years and a sponsor of terrorism stripped the regime of sympathy during the invasion. More so, the intervention, although led by NATO, was a spill-over of the humanitarian intervention sanctioned by the UN Security Council's Resolution 1973 of 17 March 2011.

In conclusion, the solidarity Ukraine has enjoyed in the wake of Russia's invasion has been produced by these three factors: (a) the popular perception that the invasion has no justification, (b) the negative image of Putin as an

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authoritarian, and (c) the benefit of time. The attempt to employ such 'Whataboutisms' in defence of Russia by citing intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya exposes the shallowness of such argumentation, as the scenarios are miles apart in regards to legality, motivation, and justifiability.

About the author:

Ikenna Steve Nweke holds a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Tsukuba, Japan. He currently works as a lecturer at the School of Global Studies, Musashi University, Tokyo.