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Great Power Management of the Ukraine Conflict

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MARTIN A. SMITH, JUL 13 2022

The situation in Ukraine today can be seen as a theatre of Great Power management in a manner that would have been recognisable in the context of the 19th Century Concert of Europe. Established in the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat and exile in 1815, this diplomatic arrangement had the laudable goal of preventing tensions and disputes from developing to the level of Great Power conflict through a balance of power mechanism. Self-ascribed Great Powers claimed a right to determine or regulate the borders, territory and sometimes very existence of smaller states, particularly in eastern and south-eastern Europe. The latter thus became objects of Great Power machinations, rather than autonomous or independent agents.

In the current crisis, western leaders have publicly rejected the idea of treating Ukraine as a 'buffer state'. The situation in practice has been more ambiguous, however. Partly this reflects a habitual mindset, previously apparent in the Russo-Georgia War of August 2008. The focus of western diplomacy to end that conflict was directed at pressuring the Georgian government to accept a ceasefire and freeze in place Russia's claim that Abkhazia and South Ossetia were in fact 'independent' states, rather than part of Georgia. In 2014, despite having a declared interest in Ukraine's security and territorial integrity via the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, neither the US nor UK offered military assistance during the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the incitement of separatist uprisings in the Donbas since.

President Joe Biden suggested at a January 2022 press conference, that "a minor incursion" by Russia into Ukraine might not lead to a significant response from the US nor its European partners and allies. Scepticism about Ukrainian agency was evident in the assumptions of western capitals that a Russian invasion would quickly succeed in overwhelming any resistance. Thus, the Biden administration made the offer – now famously rebuffed – to help Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky flee into exile. It is not clear that some NATO and EU members even wanted Ukraine to resist. According to reports in the Ukrainian media, Zelensky had been 'encouraged' not to return home following his address at the Munich Security Conference shortly before the war began, being offered exile in either London or Warsaw. It is to the subsequent credit of NATO allies, specifically the US, UK, and Poland, that after Zelensky made his stance clear, they effectively pivoted to a sustained effort to supply Ukrainian forces with military equipment, with EU members also negotiating six rounds, to date, of economic, commercial and energy sanctions against Russia.

At various moments since February 2022, the impression has been given of tacit western acceptance that ultimately Ukraine does lie within Russia's sphere of interest, and that this places (self-)limits on the actions of outside powers. This was initially evident in the withdrawal of western military training teams and – more precipitously – the closing of western embassies in Kyiv before the Russian invasion. Early in the conflict, President Biden made statements declaring that the US and its allies would defend "every square inch" of NATO territory, whilst being equally clear that there would be no direct NATO military action on behalf of, or alongside, Ukraine. Similar statements have since been made by many European leaders.

By deliberately, clearly, and repeatedly delineating the security of NATO members from that of Ukraine, the impression was thus given that western leaders were tacitly accepting its position within Russia's sphere of interest and self-limiting their actions in response to the Russian invasion. While Ukraine would be helped to respond to the best of its capability, the structural and institutional dividing lines between it and 'the West' were vividly painted up.

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Zelensky quickly grasped the reluctance of NATO (and EU) members to offer any serious prospect of Ukraine being accepted into their collective institutions, and thus the self-defined West. In an interview with the US CNN network in March, Zelensky railed against NATO members in particular who,

just want to see us straddle two worlds, if you want to see us in this dubious position where we do not understand whether you can accept us or not, you cannot place us in this situation. You cannot force us to be in this limbo.

Elsewhere, the Ukrainian president has suggested that some NATO and EU members are “afraid of Russia” and of provoking it by supplying Ukraine with heavy and long-range weaponry. Concerns about ‘escalation’ have certainly been regularly repeated by western leaders since the earliest days of the war. In this way, Russia has imposed de facto imitations on the nature and degree of western military support for Ukraine, initially via statements by President Putin which were taken to suggest the possible use of nuclear weapons if it were provoked. On the other hand, concerns about potential escalation to the level of a direct clash with NATO have cut both ways. Despite the damage being done to their forces in Ukraine, Russian leaders have thus far refrained from sustained and systematic attempts to interdict the supply lines used to funnel weapons from the west, despite the key hubs in this network being both publicly known and discussed.

It is plausible to suggest that the direct communication links known to exist between, among others, the Pentagon and Russian Defence Ministry, the UK MoD and its Russian counterpart, and NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe and Russia’s Chief of General Staff, have been used to help facilitate and manage potential flashpoints (also, perhaps, explaining why Russia has not disrupted the regular visits of NATO and EU leaders to meet Zelensky in Kyiv). Such conflict management has the laudable objective of helping prevent escalation to the level of potential direct clashes between the Great Powers involved. The problem for Ukraine is one of being seen and treated as the object of power-management arrangements, rather than an autonomous agent, ultimately responsible for its own destiny.

There are implications here for settling the conflict. It seems likely that the terms of a settlement will be laid out by external powers, rather than the Ukrainian government. A precedent exists with the Russo-Georgia war, as noted earlier. This concluded with the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia being frozen back into place through a diplomatic process led by the then French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy’s successor, Emmanuel Macron, appears to be positioning himself to play a similar role in relation to Ukraine. Prior to the current conflict, Macron was prominent in arguing that its disputes should be settled on the basis of proposals developed with Russia, Germany, and France within the Normandy-Minsk process. The problem from Ukraine’s perspective is that this would leave frozen conflicts in Donetsk and Luhansk inside Ukraine’s nominally sovereign borders, prompting National Security Adviser Oleksiy Danilov to assert in January 2022 – in response to implicit criticism from Macron and others over Ukrainian foot-dragging – that fulfilling that process would result in “[our] country’s destruction.”

This has not stopped the French president from continuing to stress his diplomatic credentials, claiming to have spent over 100 hours talking with President Putin since December 2021 in pursuing France’s role as “a mediating power”. Macron has also attracted criticism for seeming to prioritise Russian interests, commenting several times that Russia “must not be humiliated” in any outcome.

A potentially significant turning-point occurred in June 2022. First, Macron visited Zelensky in Kyiv, together with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi. This was evidently a response to criticism all three had received for seeming to suggest, or tacitly indicate, that Ukraine should accept a status within the Russian sphere of interest, and a concomitant subordinate object status in any settlement. Their visit was most noteworthy for all three EU leaders publicly pledging support for Ukraine’s “immediate” Candidate status for EU membership; something Macron had previously suggested might take years, or even decades to achieve. This was duly granted at the EU summit shortly after their visit.

Candidate status has the potential to open pathways to increasingly detailed preparation and adaptation on Ukraine’s part to comply with the *Acquis Communautaire* of the EU. This would be the clearest political, economic, diplomatic and institutional indicator since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 that Ukraine is no longer

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considered by the West to sit within Russia's Great Power sphere of interest. In a surprisingly little-noted reaction, Putin appeared to accept this possibility, stating that: "we have nothing against it. It's their sovereign decision to join economic unions or not....It's their business, the business of the Ukrainian people". 'Sovereign' and 'Ukraine' were not terms that the Russian president and his officials were bracketing together in their speeches and statements even a few months earlier. Equally, nor were their statements at that time characterised by recognition and acceptance that there exists a valid and viable 'Ukrainian people'.

There will undoubtedly be many challenges, delays, and pitfalls on Ukraine's road to potential EU membership, with success by no means assured. However, the very fact of Candidate status being granted, and the institutional engagement and preparation that it entails, has the potential to decisively alter power relations in eastern Europe, and between Russia and the West.

About the author:

Martin A. Smith is Senior Lecturer in Defence and International Affairs at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. He is currently writing a book on US policy and attitudes to Palestinian self-determination since 1919.