

POLICY BRIEF

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The Russia-Ukraine War: Is a Diplomatic Solution Possible?

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia made global headlines as it launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which is ongoing. This was not Russia's first invasion of Ukraine, as on February 20, 2014 it annexed Crimea. However, unlike the 2014 invasion, the 2022 invasion garnered global attention leading to a resolution that deplored the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. The resolution also deplored Russia's decision of 21 February 2022 to recognize the separatist pro-Russian authorities of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, which it said violated the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. Countries such as China, India, and South Africa abstained stating that all parties should seek a diplomatic solution.

Diplomacy is the management of international relations by means of negotiations; the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys is the business or art of the diplomats, according to

Sir Harold George Nicholson in his book titled *Diplomacy*. In essence, he argues that protection of interests is the "bedrock of the practice of diplomacy".¹ On the other hand, G.R. Berridge, emeritus professor of international politics at the University of Leicester, UK, argues that diplomacy "can produce the advantages obtainable from the cooperative pursuit of common interests; and it is only this activity that can prevent violence from being employed to settle remaining arguments over conflicting ones."²

To date, a diplomatic solution to the Russia-Ukraine war does not appear to be on the cards, as a few months ago the European Union announced a partial ban on Russian oil, banks and military officials, which is a strong indication that the West will apply the hard line approach that Russia will either have to toe the line or remain an international pariah. Suffice to say, the Russian invasion has split the global community into two schools of thought: there are those who argue that Russian President

1 Harold Nicholson. January 2017. *Diplomacy*. Oxford University Press. Available on [www. https://archive.org/](https://archive.org/)

2 Berridge, G. R. *Diplomatic Theory From Machiavelli to Kissinger*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Putin has gone rogue by not complying with Western standards, should be isolated through severe sanctions, and Ukrainians should be equipped with ammunition to fight Russia, promoting the hawkish approach. Others, including scholars such as Mearsheimer, maintain that the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for President Vladimir Putin's aggressive position toward Ukraine through provocative statements of Ukraine becoming a NATO member, while the Russians have made it unequivocally clear that they view the NATO position as an existential threat,³ to its regional hemisphere.

Given the dynamics surrounding the invasion, in particular the role of the West and its decision to include Ukraine in NATO, diplomacy talks will have to go beyond Russia and Ukraine and also include the West, in particular, the United States. Suffice to say, any diplomacy talks just between the two warring parties, Russia and Ukraine, would be futile. This paper then proposes the following key issues necessary for Russia-Ukraine diplomacy: whether the United States will be willing to accept Russia's Brezhnev Doctrine of resurgence on hemispheric influence. Secondly, whether US politicians, particularly Democrats, will be willing to reconsider their hard line foreign policy approach towards Russia, stemming from allegations of electoral meddling by Putin. Thirdly, whether Biden's strategic interests and hawkish influence would be inclined towards a diplomatic approach. The paper is divided into four sections and the Western focus of this paper will be on the US, which has played a key role in shaping global foreign policy towards Russia.

US Acceptance of the Brezhnev Doctrine for Diplomatic Purposes

The politics of hemispheric regional influence through policies such as the Brezhnev Doctrine are not new. During the Cuban Missile Crisis period, the US invoked the Monroe Doctrine, first laid out on December 2, 1823, which was an assertion of American dominance in the Western Hemisphere. US politicians stated the doctrine gave them a free hand to prevent foreign influence in the Americas.⁴ It held that any intervention in the political affairs of the Americas by foreign powers was a potentially hostile act against the US.⁵ Consequently, Russia also

pronounced the Brezhnev Doctrine, which was a Soviet foreign policy that proclaimed any threat to socialist rule in any state of the Soviet bloc in Central and Eastern Europe was a threat to them all, and therefore justified the intervention of fellow socialist states. The doctrine was proclaimed in order to justify the Soviet-led occupation of Czechoslovakia earlier in 1968, with the overthrow of the reform government there. The references to "socialism" meant control by the communist parties loyal to the Kremlin.⁶ Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev repudiated the doctrine in the late 1980s, as the Kremlin accepted the peaceful overthrow of communist rule in all its satellite countries in Eastern Europe.

Putin has not only revived the Brezhnev Doctrine and made it a cornerstone of his foreign policy, but on February 4, 2022, announced a new Brezhnev Doctrine with President Xi of China stating:

"Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext, oppose colour revolutions, and will increase cooperation in the aforementioned areas⁸."

The previous Brezhnev Doctrine stated that no country could leave the Soviet camp, while the Russia-China doctrine asserts that no dictatorship anywhere near their borders can free itself or join the democratic, pro-US camp.⁹

Furthermore, according to US Senator Bernie Sanders, when Ukraine became independent after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russian leaders made clear their concerns about the prospect of former Soviet states becoming part of NATO and positioning hostile military forces along Russia's border.¹⁰ These NATO expansion concerns were premised on the Brezhnev Doctrine. US leaders recognized these concerns as legitimate at the time,¹¹ but started changing their approach over the years by proposing that Ukraine should join NATO, sowing seeds of distrust by the Russians. To date, Russians view the West as having one set of standards for itself, and another for countries like Russia.¹² Russian notions of western

3 Isaac Choniner. March 2022. Why John Mearsheimer Blames the U.S. for the Crisis in Ukraine. Available on <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/>

4 Alexander Hill. February 24, 2022. Why Vladimir Putin Won't Back Down in Ukraine. <https://theconversation.com/>

5 The Monroe Doctrine. National archives, <https://www.archives.gov/>

6 Stephen G. Glazer, "The Brezhnev Doctrine." "International Lawyer" Vol. 5#1. 1971 pp 169-179

7 Bruce W. Jentleson and Thomas G. Paterson, eds. *Encyclopedia of US foreign relations*. (1997) 1: 180-81

8 Elliot Abrams. March 3, 2022. The New Cold War. Council for Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/>

9 Ibid

10 Bernie Sanders; February 8, 2022. We Must Do Everything to Avoid an enormously destructive War. *The Guardian*, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/op-eds/>

11 Ibid

12 Alexander Hill. February 24, 2022. Why Vladimir Putin Won't Back Down in Ukraine. <https://theconversation.com/>

hypocrisy have a long history going back well into the period of the Soviet Union and the Cold War. A particularly pivotal event was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. During that crisis, the United States questioned whether it was reasonable for the Soviet Union to place nuclear weapons in Cuba, while at the same time putting its own weapons close to the Soviet Union in Turkey.¹³

It seems unlikely that the US will accept Putin's recent invoking application of the Brezhnev Doctrine. Particularly since some of its officials consider the Doctrine to be "dead" as it applied to the Soviet Union which is no more. Secondly, despite Russia's request to desist from linking Ukraine with NATO, the US has consistently provoked Russia's insecurities in regional matters. For example, in 1998, the US Senate ratified NATO's expansion up to Russia's borders. Former Counsellor of the United States Department of State George Keenan's reaction to the Senate's ratification of NATO was as follows: "I think it is the beginning of a new Cold War, I think the Russians will react adversely,¹⁴" which they have with their invasions. It is indeed amazing that Keenan's views were completely ignored despite being a key statesman behind the long-standing US foreign policy containment concept that prevailed during the Cold War. The fact is, despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia remains a hegemon in the region, which requires it to use the same toolbox to protect its security interests. Indeed, for diplomacy to work, US and Western acceptance of their role in fanning the fire and Russia's hemispheric influence is essential. Suffice to say, based on the US perceived diplomatic approach to Russia and other powers that aren't "one of us" has played a role in bringing the Russian-Ukraine crisis to its current tragic point.¹⁵

The Impact of US Domestic Politics on its Russia Position

Russia became a controversial theme in US domestic politics when Trump won the elections, contributing to a negative sentiment towards Putin and Russian foreign policy. Needless to say, the issue of Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 US presidential election intensified an already deep and bitter partisan divide in US domestic politics. During the 2016 campaign itself, Clinton asserted that Donald Trump would be "Putin's Puppet."¹⁶ Democrats and the broader progressive community argued that a hostile nation worked to defeat

Hillary Clinton and install a president that Moscow could influence, perhaps even control. By March 2017 in a House Homeland Security Committee session, Democrat Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman accused Russia of engaging in outright warfare against the United States¹⁷. These allegations became increasingly shrill and over the top during Trump's presidency. In the process, the afore-mentioned views chilled debate on US policy toward Russia and created an atmosphere of intolerance and guilt by association disturbingly reminiscent of the McCarthy era in the 1950s.¹⁸

Trump on the other hand, accused the intelligence community's assessment of Russia's 2016 interference as the work of a "deep state" conspiracy intent on undermining the validity of his election.¹⁹ Moreover, President Trump also came into office determined to improve diplomatic ties with Russia, which fuelled more suspicion. Trump talked about bringing Putin closer, for example by inviting him back into the G-8 fold in order to minimise Russia's relationship with China. However, the rest of the US executive branch and the US Congress continued pursuing tough policies towards Russia, imposing rafts of sanctions and expelling diplomats. Instead, the US National Security Strategy declared Russia and China the two top threats to US national security.²⁰

To date, it does not look like the US Democratic anti-Russia rhetoric has subsided and has instead become entrenched in US domestic thinking making any diplomatic overtures by Biden result in political suicide as he would alienate his Washington allies, and voters. Interestingly enough, Russia does not seem to be that much of a threat to the US compared to China, which is positioning itself to become a first world economy through its Belt and Road initiative, and become the world's leader. Meashmier has argued that given the current US-Russia obsession, the US is not balancing its power politics carefully, as it should be allies to Russia in order to isolate China, the actual peer competitor.²¹ In fact, Russia seems to mainly seek US recognition for its right to a sphere of influence, which no US administration since the Soviet collapse has been willing to accept.²²

Ukraine currently dominates how the US now views Russia. Regardless of how or when the war ends, Washington and Moscow are headed for a lengthy period of grim and frosty relations, which are unlikely to promote diplomacy²³ unless Biden and the Democrats re-shift

13 Ibid

14 Robert Wade. March 5, 2022. A "diplomatic solution" to win the war on Ukraine. Available on <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2022>

15 Alexander Hill. February 24, 2022. Why Vladimir Putin Won't Back Down in Ukraine. <https://theconversation.com/>

16 Ted Galen Carpenter. January 28, 2020. The Democratic Obsession with Russia Explained. Available on <https://www.cato.org/commentary/>

17 Ibid

18 Ibid

19 Adam Goldman, Julian Barnes, Maggie Haberman and Nicholas Fandos. Feb. 20, 2020. Lawmakers are warned that Russia is meddling to re-elect Trump. New York Times. Available on <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/>

20 Angela Stent. April 27, 2020. Why are US-Russia relations so challenging. Available on <https://www.brookings.edu/policy>

21 Isaac Chotiner. March 1, 2022. Why John Mearsheimer Blames the US for the Crisis in Ukraine. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/>

22 Angela Stent. April 27, 2020. Why are US-Russia relations so challenging. Available on <https://www.brookings.edu/policy>

23 Williams Danvers. June 6, 2022. Biden Chooses "lesser of two evils" in navigating tough foreign policy. The Hill. Available on <http://thehill.com/>

their foreign policy view of Russia as a political threat that refuses to play by their rules. Suffice to say, diplomacy in the US and G-20 is now about deflecting blame, a strong element of US domestic policy, rather than coming together to solve a problem.²⁴

Joe Biden's Hawkish Approach?

Militarising Ukraine is reminiscent of US proxy wars with Russia during the Cold War, and demonstrates limited appetite by Americans to become fully involved in it. The only difference between this proxy war and the Cold War era is that Russia does not have a proxy. Biden who is militaristic in his thinking, comes with a long political career of supporting the wars of the United States and its allies, from the 2003 invasion of Iraq, to Israel's aggression against Palestinians, to the protracted occupation of Afghanistan. Hence over the years, Biden has been considered a hawk. A "hawk" is a person who advocates a hard-line or warlike policy and a "dove" refers to a person who advocates negotiations as a means of terminating or preventing a military conflict.²⁵ The US foreign policy position from a hawk's perspective is based on their tendency to favour coercive action, as they are more willing to use military force, and are more likely to doubt the value of offering concessions. When hawks look at adversaries overseas, they often see unremittingly hostile regimes who only understand the language of force.²⁶

Biden has also always insisted that he will take a more hawkish stance with Russia as he did during the Obama Administration, when he was vice president, by imposing harsh sanctions on Moscow over its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.²⁷ To date, Biden emphasizes the need to impose real costs on Russia for its violations of international norms through its invasion. Biden believes that strengthening the military capabilities of NATO will be necessary to confront Russian aggression.²⁸

In regard to the Russia-Ukraine war, Biden is viewed as borrowing more than a few pages from President Ronald Reagan's 1980s playbook. Biden hopes to restore the pride Americans lost in Afghanistan, without further sacrifices in faraway military entanglements.²⁹ Towards that end, like Reagan, Biden is supporting US allies in Europe and expanding its military bases, while arming

clients' fighting proxy wars by supporting Ukraine in its fight against the Russian invaders. However, unlike Reagan, who pursued diplomacy and arms control in his dealings with Moscow rather successfully, Biden seems to have all but abandoned diplomacy and arms control,³⁰ and the main focus currently is to ensure that the global community supports the West against Russia. Suffice to say, Biden also seems bent on applying the "With us versus them" approach which was strongly emphasized during former President George Bush Junior's administration. The Bush Doctrine, which, among other things, affirmed the legitimacy of an American preventive strike and emphasized the notion that "If you are not with us, you are against us."³¹

One could argue that with Biden's hawkish approach, diplomacy may not be a priority in understanding Russia-Ukraine politics. In 2014, Henry Kissinger, the personification of the American foreign policy establishment, argued, "The West must understand that, to Russia, Ukraine can never be just a foreign country." If "Ukraine is to survive and thrive," he insisted, "it must not be either side's outpost against the other — it should function as a bridge between them"³² South African President Ramaphosa also stated that US President Joe Biden should have agreed to an unconditional meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin to avert war, and called for dialogue,³³ which is subject to interrogation if Biden was pushing for multilateralism, which he campaigned on during his presidential campaign against Trump. Unlike Biden, French President Macron seems to have already started the journey of global cooperation and dialogue with Russia as he has kept the doors of communication open and spoken several times to Putin, and travelled to Moscow prior to the war, with an aim to end Russia's aggression in Ukraine.³⁴ Biden may have to reconsider the current US position by undertaking diplomacy given the current challenges such as high petrol costs and global governance. A dove approach of dialogue and peace seem to be the best recipe for the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

Conclusion

The United States' relationship with Russia is today the worst that it has been since 1985. Yet, as the world's two nuclear superpowers, Russia and the United States bear

24 Pratap Bhanu Mehta. July 12, 2022. Obstacles to a diplomatic solution in Ukraine. Available on: <https://indianexpress.com/>

25 Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon. October 13, 2009. Why Hawks Win. Available on <http://www.Foreignpolicy.org>

26 Ibid

27 Unit for Political Studies. Jan 6, 2021. The Biden Administration Foreign Policy: Key Features and Likely Changes. <https://arabcenterdc.org/>

28 Ibid

29 Marwan Bishara. Bidens Bluster: Strategy, vanity or gamble. 26 May 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/>

30 Ibid

31 The Carnegie Endowment. October 7, 2002. The Bush Doctrine. Front Page Magazine. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2002/10/07/>

32 The Carnegie Endowment. October 7, 2002. The Bush Doctrine. Front Page Magazine. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2002/10/07/>

33 Bloomberg. March 5, 2022. US and EU push South Africa to pick a side in Russia-Ukraine crisis. Available on <https://businesstech.co.za/>

34 Deborah de Lange. May 6, 2022. Why Emmanuel Macrons peace efforts with Vladimir are probably pointless.

Available on <https://theconversation.com/>.

a unique responsibility to keep the peace and discourage the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons around the globe.³⁵ Diplomacy as proposed by the BRICS countries, China, India, and South Africa seem to be the only solution. The challenge is to find an acceptable balance between cooperation and competition and to compartmentalize the relationship in a more effective way than at present.

As this paper has established, for diplomacy to work between Russia and Ukraine, the US will need to embrace Russia's regional interests. Sanders argues that though Putin may be a liar and a demagogue, it is hypocritical for the United States to insist that they do not accept the principle of "spheres of influence" when over the last 200 years the US has operated under the Monroe Doctrine, embracing the premise that as the dominant power in the western hemisphere, it has the right to intervene against any country that might threaten its alleged interests. In other words, the US has to apply the same concept of sovereignty to the Ukraine crisis as it applies in its own backyard and rule out Ukraine joining Nato. Ukraine has been part of Russia for centuries, and their histories were intertwined before then."³⁶

Secondly, US domestic policy needs to become more practical and realistic about its political rhetoric regarding Russia. Humiliating and alienating Russia just makes for a dangerous, isolated Putin, who has increasingly become more depended on China, which is what should concern the US more. Macron has also maintained that the West should not humiliate Russia, so that it can keep its doors open for a solution to be reached through diplomacy. Interestingly, his stance has been repeatedly criticized by some Baltic partners in Europe who see it as undermining

efforts to pressure Putin to come to the negotiating table³⁷.

Last month, at a post Summit press conference, both Biden and the Kremlin expressed a desire to resume the US-Russia dialogue on strategic stability at some point.³⁸ However, Biden took a hard line approach as he indicated how he informed Putin that their bilateral relationship needed some "basic rules of the road," raising issues such as cyber-attacks that originated in Russia, and reiterated US support for Ukraine. It is important that the basic rules of the road during diplomatic speak are crafted by all parties, the US, Russia and Ukraine.³⁹ The rules cannot be one-sided. As Sanders has said, a simplistic refusal to recognize the complex roots of the tensions in the region undermines the ability of negotiators to ever reach a peaceful resolution.⁴⁰

In conclusion, for diplomacy to work in resolving the Russia-Ukraine quagmire, the US will have to accept its role in stirring up the drums of war by dangling a NATO carrot to Ukraine, thereby threatening Russia's security interests. Secondly, the US needs to address its domestic obsession in vilifying and punishing "truant" Russia and Putin in particular. The current obsession is working in China's favour instead of the US. Finally, Bidens hawkishness is demonstrated in his unwillingness to engage in bilateral talks with Russia unless Russia toes the line with the Western dictates. The US needs to try and create a diplomatic solution that is based on the dove approach of terminating conflict and establishing a win-win approach for all affected parties. We acknowledge the financial support received from the Office of the Chief Executive Officer, Human Sciences Research Council, for the research informing this policy brief.



35 Angela Stent. April 27, 2020. Why are US-Russia relations so challenging. Available on <https://www.brookings.edu/policy>

36 Author Unknown. A Diplomatic Solution to the War in Ukraine <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/>

37 Reuters Staff. June 4, 2022. Russia must not be humiliated despite Putin's Historic mistake – Macron. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/>

38 Williams Danvers. June 6, 2022. Biden Chooses "lesser of two evils" in navigating tough foreign policy. Available at www.whitehousebriefing.gov

39 Williams Danvers. June 6, 2022. Biden Chooses "lesser of two evils" in navigating tough foreign policy. Available at www.whitehousebriefing.gov

40 Bernie Sanders; February 8, 2022. We Must Do Everything to Avoid an enormously destructive War. The Guardian, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/op-eds/>