



Ukraine: A devil's advocate view

Text presented at the 2022 Annual Belgian Foreign Policy Conference, Celebrating 75 Years of the Egmont Institute, under the heading Ukraine and the World – War and Peace, December 21, 2022

Tanguy Struye de Swielande

Professor of International Relations, UCLouvain

I will address 4 key points which are crucial to understand the situation and to move forward in a constructive manner: 1) First, I will argue that the European incoherence that has prevailed has prevented us from not only understanding, but also effectively dealing with the situation 2) Second, I will propose possible future scenarios 3) Third, I will speak about the future negotiation 4) And finally, I close my presentation with some challenges, which are too easily dismissed and ignored.

1) The European incoherence and ineptitude

Belgium and EU policy can be compared to the Belgium-Canada soccer match during the World Cup: we won but we were very lucky! Indeed, if the Russian army had not made so many operational, tactical and strategic mistakes in the first weeks of the invasion, the situation in Ukraine would probably be very different today. The conflict erupted, and even though it was foreseeable, we had no entry strategy and we have no exit strategy. In other words, we improvise a lot. The way the Russia-Ukraine - Energy triangle was handled since 2008, or even 2014, amounts to dereliction of duty.

For many Belgian and European politicians and diplomats, the war in Ukraine was a surprise. Yet, it was by no means a black swan, but rather a grey rhinoceros:

we knew the risk, but we did nothing. This war was clearly a possible scenario and therefore a potential threat, yet Europe, and Belgium more specifically, were not ready. In June 2021, we presented the report on the security environment to the Defence Committee of the Belgian Parliament; on this occasion, many politicians criticized the content of the report because we mentioned Russia and the Eastern Front as a threat. Six months later, Russia invaded the rest of Ukraine. Believing that Putin would not attack Ukraine highlighted this naivety and blindness, as well as our lack of knowledge of, inability and refusal to understand the Kremlin leader's vision of the world. The European reaction was very revealing, since neither the EU as a whole, nor its Member States, were able to anticipate, or even consider as a possibility, the scenario of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. The consequence: disjointed statements, lack of coordination, lack of preparation.

We have certainly managed to impose sanctions (7 packages of sanctions), but if we look a little more closely, we can see that the sanctions are only imposed by about thirty countries, mainly in the West: in other words, the vast majority of countries are not participating, including India, Turkey, China, Israel, Mexico, and many others, and in those that are indeed participating, this participation is selective, such as

Belgium and the diamond industry. Moreover, the sanctions have not brought the expected results in the short term; they are even circumvented. This obviously complicates any possibility of exerting pressure on the Russian regime, knowing that we ourselves are economically and socially heavily impacted (this crisis in terms of energy alone has cost us 570 billion euros) and the winter of 2023-2024 promises to be hot (1). Economic sanctions can only work if they are multilateral and largely followed, aimed at the medium or long term in a globalized world. Studies also show that authoritarian countries are more resilient because there is little or no internal pressure to change behavior as there is often neither opposition nor free media. Contrary to the Belgian and European narrative, there is no single and united international society against Russia, but a very divided one. And when we dig into the EU, we observe a division about the objectives in Ukraine between Eastern and Central Europe (ex° Hungary) on the one hand, and Western Europe on the other.

Our foreign policy also continues to be characterized by double standards. In Belgium, we were ready to welcome 200,000 Ukrainian refugees, but hosting 1,500 Afghans was considered a problem. The discourse of the Belgian Prime Minister at the UN in September was all about Russia, not a word on China or Iran. Today European politicians are scandalized by the behavior of the Russian military, but they did nothing when the same military bombarded Syria. We sanction Russia, but not China concerning its Crimes against humanity in Xinxiang or cyberattacks on our soil.

Moreover, the EU has traditionally adopted a policy of differentiating the regime from its population. It has not been the case this time, making "track two approach" more complicated while reinforcing the Russian unity.

These contradictions and incoherencies, based on emotions, values, wishful thinking, short-term gains and a touch of realpolitik give a very negative image of the EU in other parts of the world.

At the Belgian and the European levels, the lack of strategy is blatant; we navigate blindly, without compass. Moreover, didn't the Roman philosopher Seneca say that "there is no favorable wind for him who does not know where he wants to go"?

2) Future possible scenarios

Faced with an ill-prepared and inconsistent Europe, how can we think future relations with Ukraine and Russia? It is not very promising, not the least because there are many possible scenarios and we are not ready to handle this diversity of possible futures.

For the relations with Russia, several scenarios must be taken into account:

- Popular or Palace revolution

I think it is premature to talk about a popular uprising. A significant part of the population continues to support the regime. And although we are seeing criticism, I do not see the regime being overthrown in the short-term. The scenario of a palace revolution seems more likely in the current situation. A palace revolution would lead to much uncertainty: who, if anyone, would be the new leader, a moderate or a more radical person than Putin? The risk of a destabilized Kremlin cannot be ignored either.

- Putin stays in power

In this scenario, we can also envisage the idea that Putin will step aside in 2024 to make way for a protégé, keeping control of the country behind the scenes.

- Dissolution of Russia

The dissolution of Russia would bring more instability and question marks: civil wars, wars between societies, warlords, control over the nuclear arsenal. The EU and NATO would be on the front line.

Based on what I have already said, it seems to me that in the current circumstances and given the possible scenarios, the scenario where Putin remains in power is "the most preferable". In any case we need to be prepared for one of these scenarios and how we will act and react.

Concerning Ukraine, there are also several possible scenarios but these will depend on which Ukraine we talk about, within which borders.

- EU membership

Even if EU membership is a possibility, let's not forget that Ukraine does not meet, among others, the Copenhagen criteria. What message would we be sending to countries like the Balkan states or Turkey, which have been trying to join the EU for many years or even decades, and which are subject to rules?

In a broader context, one can also ask the question of EU enlargement: will it not affect the effectiveness of the EU? Wouldn't an EU including Ukraine eventually reinforce a rivalry between Eastern and Western European countries (Poland-Ukraine / France-Germany), impacting the internal balance? Would it not make the EU weaker?

- NATO membership

Ukraine's membership to NATO would lead to a direct delimitation, a new iron curtain, between Russia and NATO. We should at least reflect on the question: is it better to have a direct confrontation or a buffer zone? Moreover, how would we deal with integrating a country that is at war with NATO's main identified adversary?

- Neutrality

The scenario of neutrality, that was clearly not encouraged enough since 2014 or even before, has become today very complex, improbable and not achievable anymore. That being said, we should reflect on the possibility of an intermediate stage of neutrality of, for example, 10 to 15 years, to ensure a certain stability and that negotiations with Putin's Russia are effective.

- Bosnia-Herzegovina scenario

Another (imperfect) scenario we could consider in the future is a Bosnian type scenario, with two autonomous entities, Ukraine and Donbass(-Crimea), and potentially some districts (as the district of Brčko).

- Failed state

Lastly, we cannot exclude Ukraine as a failed state. It will depend on many factors: management of internal divisions, reconstruction efforts, the fight against corruption...

While these scenarios are possible in the future, the (geo)political conditions are not in place today. And will they ever be? Are we not rather heading for a frozen conflict, such as in Moldova or Georgia, which would de facto exclude Ukraine from becoming a NATO or EU member?

3) The future negotiations

Our future relations with Ukraine and Russia will also depend on negotiations. I have heard many politicians and diplomats say that we should not negotiate with the Russian regime. It is doubtful that imposing peace or settlement on Russia will work without Russia having a say: after all, it does take two to tango. Furthermore, Russia's military setbacks do not mean that Russia as a nuclear power has become less dangerous or threatening.

In this context, I wonder if some have forgotten that war is a dialectic of wills (as general Beaufre wrote in the sixties). It is the same for diplomacy and thus for negotiations.

The parties must be brought to the negotiating table. The EU has failed to make progress on the substance of the issue and has focused on the form: community managers have taken over: a lot of communication - buzz diplomacy and tweet diplomacy. But as Desportes and Kerdellant explain: "The tweet civilisation is inadequate in the face of empires awakening and the long term. We produce excellent tacticians, but fewer and fewer strategists, we don't have the time..." Reinforcing this argument, H. Kissinger notes that the current era is "very responsive to the emotion of the moment", in which negotiations are established following a "missionary logic instead of a psychological one" seeking to "convert or condemn the(ir) interlocutors rather than to penetrate their thinking"(2).

Negotiation, let us remember, does not mean appeasement. In a 1961 speech, president Kennedy talked about people defending appeasement and the ones defending War: "The essential fact that both of these groups fail to grasp is that diplomacy and defense are not substitutes for one another. Either alone would fail.

A willingness to resist force, unaccompanied by a willingness to talk, could provoke belligerence-- while a willingness to talk, unaccompanied by a willingness to resist force, could invite disaster (...) But as long as we know what comprises our vital interests and our long-range goals, we have nothing to fear from negotiations at the appropriate time, and nothing to gain by refusing to take part in them. At a time when a single clash could escalate overnight into a holocaust of mushroom clouds, a great power does not prove its firmness by leaving the task of exploring the other's intentions to sentries or those without full responsibility. Nor can ultimate weapons rightfully be employed, or the ultimate sacrifice rightfully demanded of our citizens, until every reasonable solution has been explored".

As H. Kissinger wrote a few days ago "The quest for peace and order has two components that are sometimes treated as contradictory: the pursuit of elements of security and the requirement for acts of reconciliation. If we cannot achieve both, we will not be able to reach either. The road of diplomacy may appear complicated and frustrating. But progress to it requires both the vision and the courage to undertake the journey"(3). Diabolizing our opponents, stigmatizing them, is counterproductive and only complicates things: an effective and productive diplomat tries to find a solution to the situation and does not judge who he is facing. The danger is to analyze the situation through dispositional behavior instead of situational behavior, two notions developed and differentiated by F. Heider in 1958 in his attribution theory. According to Heider, by observing somebody's behavior one will be inclined to attribute (actor-observer effect) its cause to either dispositional (internal, specific, unchanging characteristics of actor) or situational (external, circumstances, environment) factors(4). As Roland Dumas, former Minister of Foreign Affairs under Mitterrand, noted: "Refusing contempt is the key to international relations". This also means that we will probably need to seek peace instead of justice, at least in the short- to middle-term. Indeed, either we move towards peace while ignoring Putin's war crimes, or we move towards a negotiation that takes justice into account, with Putin having to

answer for his misdeeds on Ukrainian territory. This second option of course makes any negotiation with the Russian regime impossible. We will therefore have to decide, in a first moment, between peace or justice.

4) Challenges

Before concluding, I would like to review some elements in the form of questions that seem to have been so far ignored, for the post-conflict period, and that will nevertheless have direct consequences on the EU and therefore on Belgium:

that will nevertheless have direct consequences on the EU and therefore on Belgium:

- Are we ready to deal with a Ukrainian military and civilian "lost generation" (due to post traumatic stress disorder)?
- What will happen to the foreign legions present on Ukrainian soil (Belarusians, Chechens, Georgians...)? We ought to keep in mind the concept of "blowback effect" and thus future instabilities.
- What about the weapons delivered? Is there not a danger of a black market (corruption-mafias) benefitting from these weapons that have been made available?
- Have we measured the role of multinationals in the war effort and the potential future dangers? (Microsoft, Starlink...) Just imagine if they changed side or if tomorrow these multinationals would be Russian or Chinese?

Conclusion

We should not question the fact that we needed to help Ukraine, but we should be a little more critical about how we did provide such help, why we did not consider Ukraine a vital interest in 2014, but only on February 24, 2022, with all the negative outcomes (social, economic, political, military, energetic) as a consequence. The EU comes out of these ten months economically, politically (energy) and militarily weakened.

- Are EU members really on the same page concerning the future relations with Ukraine and Russia? I doubt it. There are clear divisions, so how are we going, as the EU, negotiate with the Russians if we are so divided internally?
- A strong transatlantic relation and a strong NATO is the cornerstone of our security, so the enlargement to Finland and Sweden is a positive process; yet, I do not think it will make an independent or autonomous EU defense policy more likely.
- As far as the energy sector is concerned, we are less dependent on Russia but more dependent on other states, not always democracies (e.g., Qatar). Potentially we will also increase our dependence on China concerning renewable energy, simply to mention this one yet crucial example.
- The costs of war will have an impact on future investments in the military, disruptive technology and other affiliated sectors: the economic situation in Belgium is catastrophic. Likewise, the Germans, after announcing massive investments in their military ten months ago, seem to partially come back on their promises.

In fine, the Ukrainian crisis should make us aware that we are in a world where we are no longer the center of the world. We need, in Belgium and Europe, to reinvent our approach towards and in relation with the world... As Smith and Lewis explain, "the real power lies in moving from a label to an approach"(5) ... It is time for Belgium and Europe to wake up: to speak and to act: talk the talk, and walk the walk.

References

1) Moreover, if the sanctions start to work, it does not mean that Russia will collapse. One cannot rely solely on material economic determinants to predict the fall of a regime but also on the resilience of a society. Let's not forget that countries that were subject to major sanctions regimes in the past, such as Iran, North Korea, Cuba and Iraq, not to mention South Africa (apartheid regime), survived the sanctions and adapted. The Russian economy has also turned into a war economy. We can also ask the question of our own resilience; I doubt it because we entered this war unprepared (the energy issue being the best example) and the street is increasingly rumbling about bills, inflation, future bankruptcies and political non-decisions.

(2) Laura Secor, Henry Kissinger Is Worried About 'Disequilibrium', Aug. 12, 2022

(3) Henry Kissinger, "How to avoid another world war", The Spectator, December 17, 2022.

(4) Fritz Heider, The psychology of interpersonal relations, New York, Wiley, 1958.

(5) Wendy Smith & Marianne W. Lewis, Both/and Thinking: Embracing Creative Tensions to Solve Your Toughest Problems, Harvard Business Review Series, 2022, Boston, p.13.