

Putin's war exposes the cracks in the world order — can we fix them?

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Ordinary citizens may increase their call for military engagement in defense of Ukraine if continued, escalating sanctions and military support don't stop Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression. Right now, except for those [inside Ukraine](#) and the [Ukrainian diaspora](#), that call is weak. But more citizens around the world, as well as some political leaders, may join in as they watch a people being systematically and brutally ravaged and a living political community being torn apart. The [bombing](#) of the maternity and children's hospital in Mariupol and the continued shelling of evacuation corridors are just the most recent examples that wrench moral sensibilities. A collective conscience may cry out: "No more! Stop this!"

If that cry gets loud enough and broad enough, political leaders will have a choice. Act on that cry or explain why they should not. Either decision has consequences.

If political leaders decide to act, they will turn to their diplomats and generals. NATO may not want to make this decision itself unless its members are attacked. That's understandable. So, diplomats may be asked to secure a United Nations mandate to engage. That's no easy task, given that the nation creating the humanitarian crisis, expanding the suffering, deepening the anguish, ravaging a people, and destroying a nation sits as a permanent member on the Security Council. One hopes that diplomats are already setting the conditions in the U.N. should their political leaders decide to act.

Of the generals, political leaders will ask to create and sustain air superiority over Ukraine and expand military support to Ukrainian forces so that U.N. air forces supporting Ukraine's ground forces can destroy enough Russian military units to compel real negotiations, cause the withdrawal of the Russian military, and restore the territorial integrity and political sovereignty of Ukraine. This military task is not easy and involves two big risks: widening the conventional war to countries neighboring Ukraine and escalating the war to a nuclear level.

But the Russians are vulnerable. The [incompetence](#) of some of their best conventional forces and generals is on display. They have resorted to

brute force because they appear incapable of much else. And their pool of conventional reserves and strategic logistics is shallow. These factors decrease the possibility of widening the conventional war but increase the nuclear risk. Some mitigation steps can be taken, but the possibility of escalation cannot be eliminated. So, political leaders must prepare themselves and their citizens.

Even if the U.N. would authorize conventional intervention in support of repelling Russia's invasion, that couldn't happen overnight. The right military capabilities and equipment must be moved and put in place. All this takes time. One can only hope that the West's political leaders have directed their generals to begin setting the conditions in Europe and elsewhere, should their political leaders decide to act. The [deployment of Patriot missile batteries to Poland](#) may be a step in this direction.

Right now, continuing the current path and not engaging in the fight directly may be the best decision overall, as sad beyond description and morally troubling as that may be. That may change as events on the battlefield and in capitals unfold, but the current path — increasing military aid, [expanding sanctions](#), repositioning NATO forces, and [providing humanitarian assistance](#) — is a complex juggling act that has its own risks.

Poland's offer to send their MIGs to Ukraine is a perfect example. Poland does not want to transfer their jets on their own — even though they have a green light from the U.S. to do so — in part because they don't want fighting to cross their border. The attempt to transfer the fighters through NATO was opposed for the same reason — not wanting to widen the war. And going through the U.S. raises the same issues. The U.S. [doesn't want to be the cause](#) of a wider war in Europe. All this is understandable. Giving Ukraine the jets but widening the war in the process is, in the words of the U.S. defense spokesperson, "not tenable" — at least in its current form. Diplomats and generals are likely tasked to figure out how to do it, if it's possible, while keeping the alliance united and without widening the war. Their challenge is ending the war, not making it bigger, and that doesn't admit to black-and-white solutions and either/or options.

In deciding to stay on the current course political leaders also assume an obligation to set the conditions for "never again," else de facto they will unleash force as an operant principle in international affairs. "The strong will take what they want; the weak, suffer what they must" will not create global stability, peace or prosperity.

Preventing unprovoked aggression against neighbors, as Putin has done in Ukraine, is exactly why the political and military leaders who suffered through two world wars established the international order after 1945. Their lived experiences taught them that it's important to stop bullies like Putin.

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But that order is aging and in need of revision. The pressure to revise and update the world order has been increasing ever since the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the Information Age (or Fourth Industrial Revolution, as some have defined it). The world of 2022 does not resemble the world of 1945. The environment in which people live, economies thrive, and leaders decide and act are significantly and categorically different from that of the mid-20th century.

Now we face an ever-worsening crisis. Looking the other way, pretending what doesn't work anymore is okay, tweaking the margins and ignoring necessary substantial changes — these are no longer satisfactory options. Russia's aggression and barbaric behavior in Ukraine have made it painfully clear that making sure Putin loses is only the beginning of the hard work in store for everyone.

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