



Russia's attack on Ukraine is an act of war

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By any standard, Russia's attack upon Ukrainian vessels in the Black Sea is an act of war.

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the Nov. 25 incident that occurred in the Black Sea (not in the Russian-held Kerch Strait, as Moscow claims). This operation also climaxed a long series of Russian abuses: seizure of Crimea and energy facilities of its coast, claiming that Crimea, the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait are exclusively Russian waters, building a bridge over the strait deliberately to impede Ukrainian commerce in the Sea of Azov, forcibly inspecting and boarding Ukrainian ships, blockading the Ukrainian coast — and now ramming, firing upon and taking prisoners off of Ukrainian ships in international waters.

Indeed, this action not only is an act of war it also violates the Freedom of the Sea enshrined in international law and foundational UN documents like UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

This operation also follows a long series of Russian setbacks regarding Ukraine. Ukraine has won the right to an independent church, free of the Russian church which is nothing more than an arm of Russia's government and intelligence services. That alone shattered the spurious narrative upon which Russia bases its occupation of Crimea and the Donbass.

Beyond that Ukraine is holding presidential elections in 2019 and has not yielded to Russian force, economic warfare and sponsorship of terror against Ukraine. Domestic economic pressures are undermining Putin's steadily falling popularity and socio-economic protest over the consequences of a decade of economic stagnation with no end in sight is growing.

Whatever Putin's motives, Russia has a dwindling deck of cards at its disposal. The main card is the threat or actual use of force. But, as in previous instances, the interception of radio communications and vigilant Ukrainian reporting have already reduced the impact of Putin's narrative.

However, it is essential to deprive Putin of opportunities to threaten force against the U.S., its NATO allies and partner states like Ukraine. It is our strategic imperative to bring home the costs of this war to Putin, his entourage and the Russian people. Therefore the Western response must not be proportionate. Instead, the punishment must visibly exceed the crime to deter Russia from similar operations in the future.

Therefore the response must go beyond more sanctions, although they should be included. A proportionate response should provide more weapons and training to Ukraine. A response must also step up an information campaign across Russia, exposing how Putin's lust for wealth and power has driven Russia into a dead end with no prospects other than stagnation for years to come. However, the real strategic change must prevent Putin from thinking that he can undertake further such operations at minimal cost to himself and Russia. Our reply must undermine not only Moscow's global ambitions and capabilities but also its strategy.

Beyond imposing more sanctions, waging a robust informational campaign and transferring more arms to Ukraine we can and must do something more innovative and decisive. We have the means and precedent for doing so.

In the 1940s, FDR devised the Lend-Lease program to rescue first Great Britain and then the USSR from Nazism. The Lend-Lease evolved into a program that fed the Red Army throughout the war, to a considerable degree. We should do the same thing now with Ukraine on a full-fledged basis.

Ukraine could lease ports on the Black Sea and even in the Sea of Azov to the U.S. while we lend them military equipment they need for air, naval, and ground warfare. The U.S. or NATO naval vessels could then stay at those ports for as long as necessary without bringing Ukraine formally into NATO. It would greatly diminish the chance of Russian attack if those forces patrolled the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

Not only do these forces deter future Russian attacks they show everyone, not least in Moscow, that Putin's reckless adventurism has merely brought NATO into Ukraine to stay, the exact opposite of his goals.

Some will object that this needlessly provokes Russia — but it is Russia that provoked Ukraine and the West. The cost of war and Putin's ploy would be demonstrated to everyone in Moscow in ways that would very likely force Putin to negotiate.

After all, aggression unchecked is aggression rewarded.

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