

## Practicalities in addressing autocrats' aggression

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The shock of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that it demonstrated a form of aggression most people thought belonged to an earlier time.

Following the Napoleonic era, a war of conquest against a recognised sovereign state was considered legitimate only if fought in the name of national self-determination.

National self-determination remained a worthy goal in the Wilsonian world of 1918, but its practicalities were always uncertain in the mix of languages and what were deemed to be 'races' that still characterised Europe. Even territorial claims based on national coherence disappeared post-1945, though in certain circles aggression under the cloak of communist ideology remained acceptable. In the post-1990 period, even that pretext disappeared.

Linguistically, Ukrainians largely speak one Slav language in the north and west, and Russian in the south and east. Ukraine is one of Europe's poorest countries with the per capita income levels little more than one-third those of its Polish and Slovak neighbours and a half of Russia's. Perhaps this is due to its well-documented corruption with which Joe Biden, as Vice-President, was well aware.

Unsurprisingly, in search of higher living standards, Ukrainians have sought closer ties with their richer neighbours. The choice of closer ties partly reflects linguistic differences, with those in the west favouring the European Union and those in the east favouring Russia. Elections have echoed these perceived options, with the pro-EU forces presently ascendant.

Militarily, Russia's invasion has clearly underperformed, even with large parts of Ukraine under occupation. Putin's peace offering is that the Ukraine government acknowledge Crimea as Russian territory, recognises the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Lugansk as independent states, and amends its constitution to explicitly state that it will not seek membership of defence pacts such as Nato.

Given that much of the contested Ukrainian territory is already occupied by Russia, these terms are generous compared to those offered by a relatively successful side in yesteryear's conflicts. They may be the terms Russia has long been seeking and Ukrainian President Zelenskyy is indicating that he may [agree](#) to them.

But Putin's offer may also be simply a Hitlerian Czechoslovakia ruse involving slicing off part of the territory as the first step to absorbing it all. Many will point to Putin's claims that Ukraine is not a real country and has always been part of Russia as evidence that he is engaged in such salami tactics. Even so, an international guarantee of the terms would be more credible than the 'scrap of paper' that Neville Chamberlain carried back from Munich in 1938.

Whatever the outcome, dependence on Russian energy supplies has seriously reduced the West's hand in dealing with Russian aggression and highlighted its military impotence. In this respect, it is chilling that the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi says Taiwan and Ukraine situations are fundamentally different, because, he says, China and Taiwan are the same country! This is not an opinion shared by Taiwan.

The West's weakening is self-imposed, stemming from its policies of pursuing the illusion of low-cost reliable wind and solar energy. Not only has this made consumers hostage to loss of gas and electricity, it has destroyed the profitability of much of the energy-intensive industry which is the backbone of prosperity. Nations rejecting these policies have shifted towards dominance: Russia with energy, China and increasingly India with manufacturing.

Under Trump, America resisted this rejection of fossil fuels and American innovation saw it become a net oil and gas exporter for the first time in 70 years. Trump's measures were reversed by Biden on day one, initially by forcing the abandonment of the pipeline from Canada to Texas and then by closing off areas for energy development and impeding further pipeline construction. In the course of a single year, the USA became a net oil energy importer.

Not only does Russia's attitude to the legitimacy of war differ from that of the West but it is also less scrupulous in using economic warfare to undermine rival product suppliers. Russian

funds have been sent to the [Sea Change Foundation](#) which then [moves the money](#) in the form of grants to other nonprofit environmental groups to assist in local opposition to fracking. And a [study](#) by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies reported that the Russian government has invested \$95 million in Non-Government Organisations that seek to persuade EU governments to end shale gas exploration.

Beyond the outrage, the Ukraine war requires a radical change of policy by western nations. Even as a means to dissuade Russian aggression, boycotts of Russian oil and gas in the context of Western national self-imposed shortages will have little effect. Trade will be diverted, at some modest cost, with more Russian oil going to China and Chinese imports from other countries being diverted to the boycotting nations. Policies like these can have only a superficial effect.

Although the Europeans are recognising the price their ideological attachment to renewables has brought, not everyone is on board. The White House Press Secretary [Jan Psaki](#) and John Cassidy in the [New Yorker](#) are among those supporting a doubling down of the 'clean energy' policies that have contributed so much to the West's diminished industrial strength by attacking cheap energy with measures incorporated in Biden's 'Build Back Better' agenda. The Republicans have already written to Biden demanding he rescind the anti-fossil fuel measures he has introduced.

Germany and other European nations have already gone much further down the renewables track, as has Australia, which is locked-in to go further towards Net Zero emissions. Australia has thickets of regulatory barriers to new energy projects and, under an ALP Government, will progressively increase carbon taxes on the 270 most energy-intensive activities. German politicians and those of nations like Japan are pragmatically shifting tack and re-embracing fossil fuels and nuclear power. Unfortunately, at present Australia has just a handful of politicians in the minor parties and the Nationals that are seeking such a change of course.