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UKRAINE DEBATE in *Krasno Analysis:*
RESPONSES to Gardner and Larres
by **Pasuth Thothaveesansuk** and **Pascal Lottaz**

**Denying Ukraine's Right to Exist:
Putin's Attack on the International Order** (1060 words)

Pasuth Thothaveesansuk

In his lengthy monologue on February 21, 2022, only a few days before his full invasion of Ukraine, **Vladimir Putin** made clear that his revisionist understanding of history contains no space for a legitimate and independent Ukrainian state.¹ When denying that Ukraine is a "real" nation in his speech, Putin expressed his **opposition to Ukraine's very existence**.

Putin's grievances resemble something far more rudimentary than the international implications of any past or future expansion of NATO. By rejecting Ukrainian nationhood and describing his Russian state in a chauvinistic fashion, he makes the world believe that **Russia has an**

inalienable right to determine the destiny of Ukraine in blatant disregard of the postwar international order.

After the Second World War, the international community chose to organize itself as a collection of sovereign nation-states. Although historians are divided about the centrality of human rights in the immediate postwar moment, the international community agreed that **sovereign states do not have a right of aggression against another state.**

What is at stake in the current crisis provoked by Moscow, therefore is the fundamental principle that all nation-states deserve to have **their sovereignty respected by the international community.**

Another key development in the postwar international system lies in the **principle of national self-determination.** The rise of newly independent nations in the second half of the twentieth century marked a turn away from the world of formal empires. At the same time, the experience of postcolonial states also highlighted the importance of another principle, that of territorial integrity, that ensures the viability and success of newly independent states.

The two principles did not always coexist in harmony, especially when postcolonial states inherited arbitrarily drawn imperial borders that made no sense. Yet, as Kenya's Ambassador to the United Nations explained in response to Russia's aggression, **the norm in the postwar world is to resolve these issues peacefully and not by force.**²

False Accusations

In addition to denying Ukraine's right to existence, Putin attempted to justify Russia's actions in Ukraine with false accusations of "**genocide**" and claims that Ukraine perpetrated violence against Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine. Indeed, he is trying to compare Russia's aggression against Ukraine

with NATO's operation in **Kosovo** and western recognition of the independence of Kosovo.

Yet, this makes no sense. While NATO acted as a multinational coalition to stop Serbian aggression against Kosovar Albanians in 1999, Russia seeks to **act unilaterally based purely on geopolitical calculations**. Moreover, the NATO operation in Kosovo had no initial intention of regime change. An independent Kosovo only came onto the agenda after Serbia failed to show restraint. Western recognition of Kosovar independence also only happened **after lengthy negotiations lasting a decade** and not overnight as seems to be Russia's objective in Ukraine.

In their book *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World*, Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro distinguish the "**new world order**" - in which aggressive war has been outlawed as a tool of international policy - from the "**old world order**" in which "might makes right."³ While the postwar international order describes the former, Putin lives in the world of the latter and wishes to drag the rest of us with him.

Putin's false claims of "genocide" in the Donbas region and Russia's argument to militarily protect its brethren in the separatist areas merely constitute a thinly veiled attempt at coming up with a *casus belli* based on an "old world" understanding that **sovereign states had an absolute right to go to war**.

Concessions Do Not Work

Therefore, there is little reason to believe that geopolitical concessions will incentivize Russia to cease its military invasion. Putin is committed to denying Ukraine's sovereign rights to a territorially integral state and to determine its own policy. Even the Russian interpretation of the now-abandoned **Minsk Protocol** insisted that Kyiv had to create a **federalist structure** to satisfy the Kremlin's demands.

Short of signing away Kyiv's right to self-determination, there was **nothing that the international community could have given Moscow to deter it from seeking to achieve its goals by military means.**

With the beginning of operations to "demilitarize" Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the situation has passed a point of no return. If western allies continue to insist **on only imposing economic sanctions** and **denying direct military support** – airstrikes or boots on the ground - NATO states realize that they should at least continue providing material and other means for Ukraine to be able to defend itself.

NATO states have also invoked **Article 4** of the North Atlantic Treaty, to enable member states to consult with one another within the NATO framework and discuss the Ukraine issue at the North Atlantic Council. After all, war on NATO's doorstep most certainly threatens the collective security of the entire bloc.

The international community has also embarked on a **humanitarian response**, including the acceptance of refugees, to the misery and destruction that this war is bringing to Ukraine. While, unfortunately we are no longer in a position to discuss the prevention of an expanded war, **we can still prevent a protracted war**, which may well be accompanied by humanitarian catastrophes.

In the wake of the full Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States and its NATO and EU partners have fallen back on the only option they are willing to use in their toolbox: economic sanctions. If this is the only meaningful weapon with which the West is willing to directly strike Russia, then the West must not waver to implement the **harshest economic sanctions possible**. This includes denying Russia access to SWIFT and expanding current sanctions to cover the energy sector.

Cutting much of the Russian economy off from international finance will affect the global economy, but there is a need to show that, even if the West is not willing to militarily confront this invasion, the **blatant violation of international law comes with severe consequences**. Nevertheless, we have to concede an inconvenient truth, that the “economic weapon,” as historian Nicholas Mulder writes, has once again proven no match for actual weapons.⁴

We must also **consider if anything remains of the postwar international order**, one that has outlawed aggressive war as a legitimate tool of policy and one in which the West has unilaterally renounced military intervention as deterrence. After all, we are faced with a powerful state armed with nuclear weapons that wishes to follow other rules, or rather, none at all.

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Ukraine will either be Permanently Neutral or Permanently Divided⁵

(1160 words)

Pascal Lottaz

Yes, yes, and yes. Yes to [Hall Gardner's](#) analysis of the necessity for a neutral solution to Ukraine. Yes to that of [Klaus Larres](#). And yes to that of the many others, including [Steve Walt](#), [Anatol Lieven](#), [Henry Kissinger](#), and the many European colleagues like [Heinz Gärtner](#) and others in the [neutrality studies network](#) who have been calling for a neutral status for Ukraine for years.

And no, it is not cynicism to call again for a neutral solution to what has morphed from a crisis into a serious war. **This war could have been avoided** had leaders in the West and in Kyiv not misinterpreted Russia's demands for security guarantees, a common security architecture, and the cessation of NATO expansion as hubris.

It doesn't matter whether NATO is "really" a threat to Russia or not, the only thing **that matters is what Putin believes it is**. And we are seeing now that the Kremlin is willing to even go to war to make it absolutely impossible for Ukraine to ever dream again of NATO membership.

Don't get me wrong. **Vladimir Putin is a gangster**. The invasion of Ukraine is a blatant infringement of international law and the norms of the Post-WWII international order. The war is unprovoked and simply unjustifiable. I would never justify a war of aggression, which this is.

The **annexation of Crimea was also a crime**, as it broke the Budapest Memorandum. Russia attacking Ukraine makes as much sense as Sweden attacking Norway, or the US attacking Canada. It is a tragedy and would only happen if something was seriously out of whack.

Western Mistakes

Offering Ukraine and Georgia NATO membership back in 2008 was a tremendous mistake. It hardened the political fronts inside the countries, leading Georgia to believe that NATO would help bring back South Ossetia and Abkhazia, creating the ground for the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.

We are seeing the replay of that now in Ukraine. The **West's rhetorical support for the Maidan uprising was another mistake**. It immediately led to the annexation of Crimea, the most strategic place in the Black Sea, with a Russian naval base which it simply could not risk ever becoming a NATO outpost.

The **West failing for 7 years to pressure Ukraine to implement the Minsk II agreements** and start a federalization process was the third mistake.

Putin did not recognize the two Ukrainian breakaway regions until a few days ago because Minsk II would have been a way forward for Russia to receive what it wanted without a war and international backlash. But this chance again was squandered. **Western leaders only started remembering Minsk II**

this week, when Russia threw it in the garbage bin after demanding for so many years that it be implemented.

Russia behaves utterly rationally, like a crook, but like a **rational crook**. And let me be clear, Russia is not even doing something new here. The West has given Moscow all it needs to do what it is doing now.

Fabricated pretext to illegally invade a country with false claims—like “Weapons of Mass Destruction” in Iraq—check. Change of territorial status without consent from the internationally recognized sovereign nation it is part of—like Kosovo—check. Military action without UN mandate—like the Iraq War again—check. Unilateral recognition of border changes that came about through war—like US recognition of the Golan Heights—check. **Russia is ruthless in using the West’s playbook for its own purposes.** It’s just less skilled at controlling the narrative.

Even the **pretext of intervening for “humanitarian purposes”** is there. This was the very argument with which NATO implemented a UN-mandated No-fly zone over **Libya**. But western countries then went on to bombard strategic military positions leading to the downfall of the Gaddafi regime. It will take years to sort out in the current war how many Donbas citizens were killed by Ukrainian forces, how many by Russian forces, who did the shelling, and if there is anything true at all about Russian claims of mass atrocities in the Donbas.

The tragedy is that this is **another nail in the coffin of the OSCE standards and the norms of international law** that we hoped would secure peace on the Eurasian continent.

The Solution: a Neutral Ukraine with a Federal Structure

Ukrainian neutrality with a federal structure would have been **a solution that could have defused the whole situation many years ago**. Even just months ago.

Putin's draft treaties of December 17 last year were basically a demand for Ukrainian neutrality. The treaties just did not name the policy, probably to avoid giving the West a pretext to refuse the neutralization of Ukraine. Now Russia has attacked and is putting its cards on the table. Putin suggested that Ukraine should reintroduce the neutrality article it had in its constitution before 2014 on Tuesday, February 22, 2022. He said so again in a televised speech on Wednesday and there were reports on Thursday, February 24, about his offer to discuss with the Ukrainian leadership the neutralization and demilitarization of the country.

Neutrality works. We know Russia wants it, and we know it accepts it. Just look east. Mongolia declared its neutrality in 2015. Russia and China both accepted that. Why? Because it makes sense. **Neutrals are buffer states** that put physical space between real adversaries and thereby deescalate the security dilemma.

We are all students of international relations and know the security dilemma. Propping up one party with weapons for "defense" will of course lead to insecurities in the other party and to their propping up their fire power in turn. **Neutral states that are armed but no serious threat are perfect buffers** and that's exactly what Putin seems to want. Buffers between Russia's heartland and NATO.

Russia also accepts the neutrality of Moldova and accepts that of Turkmenistan. **Putin wants a neutral Ukraine**, and that would make sense for all parties involved. And by now, there is also no more alternative. It's

either going to be **permanent neutrality or permanent division** or, in the worst case, even **permanent occupation** for Ukraine.

A federal, demilitarized, and neutral Ukraine is the only way forward into peace with some chances for the Donbas to be returned to Ukraine. This would perhaps require a Belgium-style federalization with the individual regions receiving strong powers also over foreign policy matters.

And I will close with this: **permanent neutrality is not even a bad solution**. It's a very European solution for a very European problem; constant geopolitical mutual threats.

Switzerland was neutralized in 1815 to keep Austria and France apart, **Belgium and Luxemburg** put space between France and Germany, and **Austria**, in 1955, was neutralized to regain its independence without becoming a threat in NATO to the USSR. And it worked.

It can work again for Ukraine because it is so obviously exactly the compromise that Russia wants, if just the West and Ukraine can accept it, too.

If Ukraine declares its permanent neutrality and its security partners sign off on that, peace will return.

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Website: <https://www.waseda.jp/inst/wias/other-en/2019/04/01/6123/>

¹ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” 21 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

² The transcript of Kenya’s Ambassador to the United Nations Martin Kimani’s at the UN Security Council meeting on 21 February can be found here: <https://twitter.com/KenyaMissionUN/status/1495963864004976645>.

³ Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

⁴ Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

⁵ [Heinz Gärtner](#) coined the title of this essay.



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