

VICTOR RUD

Can the West grow up?

Expert article • 3570

A century ago, Ukraine's integration with the West was refused. Brushing off Ukraine's warning about Russia's impending assault against the West, Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" of freedom and self-determination were myopically denied for the largest country in Europe. The U.S. reneged on contracted aid to Ukraine, and its participation at the Paris Peace talks was forbidden. Western pusillanimity and greed facilitated Moscow's slaughter of millions. And not just in Ukraine. In a generation's time, the West scarcely dared to breath lest an air current waft over The Button.

Today's seeming commitment to Ukraine's integration with the West will fail catastrophically—for Ukraine and the world -- unless (a) the West gets serious and hugely ramps up aid to Ukraine, for the purpose of (b) pulling the "international order" back from the brink. That means (c) Ukraine's recovery of its sovereignty pre- 2014. And that will not happen without (d) a brutally honest self-assessment of Western culpability in the growing cataclysm.

With exceptions, most notably those nations who have experienced the reality of Russian conquest, the West continues to suffer from the naivete and low frustration level of a child. Innocence is endearing for a toddler, but even a child grows up, learning from its experience. But we want none of that. We are self-inoculated against the lessons that that experience teaches us, and our predictive capacity is therefore exactly zero. We also pay no attention to our attention deficit disorder. Add to it glaring hypocrisy, a criminal compulsion to appease, political prostitution, corruption of our institutions and failure of political will. There never has been, nor can there be, any "strategy" under such circumstances.

Too strong?

Ukraine's recouping of independence in 1991, was the tombstone for the USSR, regaining global primacy for the U.S. and the West, generally. Washington adroitly pivoted, taking unabashed credit for something it never sought (the dissolution of the USSR), ensured by something it actively opposed (Ukraine's independence). Where are we today? In 2004, a top U.S. Russia expert argued, "stop criticizing Putin and start helping him." In 2021, seven years after Russia's invasion, occupation and annexation of Ukrainian territory, the Biden administration's Interim Global Security Guidelines mentioned Ukraine exactly zero times.

More fundamentally, the West has neither deterred Russia nor stopped nor reversed its conquests. To the exact contrary, Russia has deterred the West. At issue are not "just" invasion, occupation and annexation, but the destruction of a nation where its genocide has never been so clearly and repeatedly stated and that we are obligated by international law to prevent and punish.

NATO is the greatest military alliance in history, comprising of three nuclear powers, with nearly a billion people and roughly half the world economy. Now add the non-NATO countries that are part of the democratic West and we have almost 2/3 of the global economy. Russia has only half the population of the U.S., and other than energy has nothing to offer, whether in terms of values or principles, or goods, services, human capital, or innovation. It can't produce a frying pan to compete with China. But it has wielded the very "rules-based international order" to shatter that same order and that gives meaning to the very idea of a "democratic West" in the first place. Why can we develop Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram,

Snapchat, etc., but are hopelessly inept in preventing Russia from high jacking it all to implant malware into our cerebral cortex? It's not any lack of technical prowess on our part. Now add the lessons this teaches global tyrants.

The record of Western incoherence and strategic witlessness goes back further. Without even looking at the record prior to 1991, after the USSR imploded why didn't the West seek a demilitarized and de-communized Russia, but instead reinforced its economy and military? Andrei Kovalev was crystal clear: "It was under Yeltsin that the foundations for a new Russian imperialism were constructed." Why didn't we secure the independence of the erstwhile republic that ensured the dissolution of the USSR? We instead stripped Ukraine of its nuclear arsenal to better ensure that Russia would be the sole nuclear power so we would not have a "Yugoslavia with nukes." Someone forgot that it was Moscow that had pushed the world to the brink of nuclear incineration. Today, instead of mutual deterrence we have unilateral nuclear blackmail.

On December 20, 1999, Putin went to Lubyanka, the secret police headquarters, to celebrate the birth of the Cheka. The next day he held a reception in the Kremlin for Stalin's 120th birthday. We yawned. How about a former Gestapo officer heading up a resurgent Germany and reviving Hitler? Instead, Western leaders competed in a stampede of self-induced rapture to pay homage to Putin. This was as he was, with true Stalinist sadism, obliterating Chechnya despite a "Peace Treaty" between the Russian Federation and Chechnya. Putin also repeatedly decried the fall of the USSR. We remained catatonic.

Remember Georgia? Our demand that "Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected" promptly degenerated into happy talk, with a "reset" rewarding Russia's for its dismemberment of the victim. Little wonder Moscow was energized, yet we were now surprised by the resulting 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Again we whistled past the graveyard, endlessly reminding Russia (as if it didn't know) of its obligations, calling upon, warning, condemning, not tolerating, being loud and clear, making clear, clarifying, declaring as unacceptable, demanding, insisting, closely monitoring, taking note, affirming, reaffirming, demonstrating, meeting, conferencing, resolving, being committed, reiterating our conviction, remaining steadfast, sending a message, calling for restraint, standing firm, standing with, standing behind, standing alongside, urging, encouraging, expressing concern, utmost concern, grave concern. In the meantime, the West effectively imposed an arms embargo against Ukraine. It was an enticement for 2022.

Why have we been massaging sanctions for a full decade? Wasn't 2014 enough? Why are Russian ships allowed to continue visiting ports? We reprogram the technology restricting the range of weaponry provided Ukraine. Simultaneously, Russian, and Iranian, Chinese and North Korean war material and weaponry is stuffed with Western technology (no range limitations) and is **increasingly** pulverizing Ukrainian cities and human beings. And it's not as if we don't know. That makes the West an active participant in genocide. (And so much for President Bush sophomore celebration of "working together [with Russia] in Iran and North Korea.") And why do we demand as a precondition for increased -- even continued -- aid to Ukraine the existence of the very circumstances that that support is intended to achieve -- "progress," "winning" -- but then argue the absence of those circumstances as the reason to deny the aid?



Today, we're self-deterred, paralyzed over a possible "war with Russia." (Former U.S. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley said at the time, "Are we prepared to go to war with Russia over Georgia?") We can only imagine the Kremlin's reaction upon learning that sniper training was denied for Ukrainians because it was "lethal" and therefore "provocative."

Western caution (reasonable enough . . . to a point) long ago crossed the line into complicity. Why do we assess the risk and danger of "WWIII" as greater than the certainty and danger of that fear institutionalizing nuclear blackmail globally? Putin is not afraid of escalation, but we are, though he is the aggressor, the war criminal. Our nervous tick today is the same as it was in 1991, when we were paralyzed by the possibility of a "Yugoslavia with nukes." Now is better? Our sagacity on this point competes with our foresight in supporting and elevating communist China a few decades before.

As Ukraine does NATO's job for it, NATO has gutted mutual deterrence and disassembles NATO's credibility about "defending every inch" of territory. Why wouldn't NATO be afraid of WWIII and nukes in defending, say, Luxembourg, but not the largest country in Europe? How can one NATO member, Turkey, block Ukraine's transport into the Black Sea of two minehunter vessels donated by another NATO member, Great Britain? Why has NATO failed to act on its own strategic concept of stopping conflicts threatening the security of its member states? Moreover, why have we ignored the nuclear threats coming from Russia's waging war in a country of 15 nuclear reactors?

The West evidently still has not comprehended how hypocrisy destroys deterrence credibility. We lecture endlessly about the rules-based order but simultaneously endorsed the Minsk Protocols that negated that very order by imposing sovereignty limitations on the victim, not the invader. Today, we increase the same specter . . . that Ukraine surrender territory (and the humanity on it), when it is Russia that is to surrender territory to Ukraine as a security buffer. This is not logic. It's the acme of hypocrisy, converting deterrence into an invitation.

Similarly, we endlessly speak of "imposing costs" on Russia, instead of preventing and reversing Russia's international predation. We simply put a price tag on the "international order." What does that do to credibility? Why do we honor Russia's veto at the UN when its seat on the Security Council was the result of our own disregard of the very rules for admission of new members? Signaling his contempt for it all, Putin bombed Kyiv on April 28, 2022, as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was in Kyiv the day after a meeting in Moscow with Putin.

Where's "deterrence" in our vocabulary? It's not. Business, money, and corruption are. Three successive British Prime ministers looked the other way when Putin murdered a British citizen (Alexander Litvinenko) with a miniature nuclear device, Polonium 210, on British soil. We continue to be awash in Russian petro dollars and money from extortion, murder, drug and arms smuggling, human trafficking, outright theft, corruption and extortion. Our economic and financial universe has been converted into an endowment fund for yacht builders, journalists, lawyers, hedge funds, bankers, stock exchanges, nannies, investment advisers and real estate agents. (It will be a welcome aberration if the West finally attaches Russia's more than \$300 billion in the West and dedicates it for Ukraine aid.)

Russian dirty money, blood money, also buys Western opinion makers, media, think tanks, lobbyists, and academe with the same alacrity as sports teams, condominiums in New York, Florida, London and Dubai, and Maybachs and Bentleys. They are the anointed ones, the witting and unwitting sales agents that Russia uses to occupy our brain. Each is both the target and the legitimizer.

We are in thrall of putative Russia experts who we can thank for yesterday's assurances. One was that "Ukraine's security problem will be solved once Ukraine gives up its nuclear arsenal" Another was "democracy was more likely to come from Moscow than from Kyiv." Now, their dog whistle is "negotiation," "agreement" and "settlement." It's an escape tunnel for scurrying away from professional malpractice and genocide complicity, and to maintain tenure. We continue to refuse to believe, to dismiss the warnings and advice of nations who have the experience that we do not and therefore know better than we. They categorically reject the West's paralyzing fear of "escalation," which is the very provocation that catalyzes Russia's predation. They know better than others that any "agreement" with Russia is a self-anesthetizing, lethal hallucination.

Growing up means the West understanding how its pathologies are reversing "never again" into a chimerical "peace in our time." We either admit Russia's success in hammering apart the international order . . . or we don't. We either admit our failures and frankly admit that our fecklessness has provoked Russia . . . or we don't. We either understand that we are being outplayed, outsmarted and out maneuvered . . . or we don't. We either understand the genesis of our global floundering . . . or we don't. We either understand the existential threat . . . or we don't. We either act on that exigency . . . or we don't.

"Freedom is Our Religion," read the massive banner on the side of a building facing Independence Square in Kyiv a few years ago. "Maybe they [Ukrainians] won't resist, and maybe our problem will be solved," was the valorous declaration of a senior aide to German chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Choose. ■



Victor Rud

Past Chairman
Ukrainian American Bar [Lawyers']
Association
United States

Senior Advisor
Centre for Eastern European Democracy
United States

