Commentary No. 51
March 24, 2022

Conflict, Control and Consequence around Ukraine

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Summary

In the days after 24 February, several military commentators repeated the adage that "no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy" – a quote that originates with the Prussian field marshal Helmuth von Moltke. This drew attention to the unpredictability of armed conflict and its consequences. But for all the unpredictability, an arguably bigger issue in the long run is the rapidly escalating inability to maintain any control over the course of events outside Ukraine's borders.

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Writing from the UK it's clear that the United States and its NATO allies are striving to avoid any direct involvement in fighting in Ukraine. NATO member states continue to supply weapons to Ukrainian forces, but have been resolute (so far) in resisting calls from Ukraine to establish a no-fly zone over the country. The thinking being that doing so would bring NATO and Russian jets into direct combat engagement, with the strong possibility that this will lead to a continent-wide war.

Whatever happens, short of a peace agreement, the situation in and around Ukraine will become increasingly complex over the coming weeks and months. And the ramifications will become increasingly uncontrollable. Of course, Ukraine itself suffers the most but that is not the focus in this comment which is concerned with the broader picture. Likewise, while the sides involved in military conflict seek to retain the initiative on the battlefield, and that too becomes harder to control as the situation grows more complex, that is not an issue I wish to address here. Rather I want to think about the inability of controlling wider social and economic consequences, primarily in Europe.

Social Stabilities

One immediate effect of the current situation has been the flow of refugees, primarily women and children, out of Ukraine. They have fled the country at a staggering rate. When about one-and-a-half million Syrian refugees headed to the European Union in 2015 it was described as a 'crisis.' In a month of war alone in Ukraine, more than three million people have fled, with well over a million entering Poland. The population of Warsaw swelled by about 15% in a few weeks, with obvious pressures on housing stock, social services and infrastructure. Moldova is feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable on several fronts, while other states are quietly saying they cannot cope with more refugees. Others have left Ukraine and headed to Belarus or Russia. Even if the conflict were to end tomorrow, many of these refugees would not have homes to return to.

This will be more than a humanitarian crisis: the strains created will be increasingly difficult to deal with. The obligations, and desires, of receiving states to ensure the refugees' social and economic rights could foment other problems both for the refugees and the population. Many refugees will find themselves in a sort of limbo – wanting to return home, but reluctantly having to integrate into a new country instead; no doubt wanting to work, but constrained to reliance on state support due to a lack of economic opportunities. Refugees are vulnerable to exploitation and there are warnings of the horrible fates awaiting some.

For the non-refugee population tensions may grow with time; an inconvenient fact, at odds with the current enthusiasm to take in people in need, is that many studies have linked immigration to the rise of far-right populism in Europe; whether in the past that has been a consequence of socioeconomic strains or racism is less clear cut. In fact, though, the evidence is far from simple to interpret – although within the EU there is confidence that the continent learned a lot from 2015.

Economic Stabilities

The west has imposed a severe raft of economic sanctions on Russia, extended also to Belarus, which will also have uncontrollable consequences – for the sanctioning states as well as the sanctioned. Liberal IR theorists, and proponents of globalisation more generally, talk of the vulnerability and sensitivity of states to each other's activities, and the Russian and western economies have become integrated over the past three decades.

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye labelled such a world one of 'complex interdependence'; they saw a situation in which security concerns no longer dominated economics and social policy. In recent weeks the west has taken a big stride towards

reasserting the primacy of security and subordination of economics to it, although there are noticeable gaps in the policy (most obviously that only some Russian banks have been cut off from the SWIFT payments network).

The consequences of such wide-ranging economic sanctions are unforeseeable; there are too many variables involved. As western states, Russia and Belarus adapt their economies to the new trading and financing environment, new relationships and initiatives will emerge – China has already created a series of institutions to rival western ones, which could find renewed impetus if China aligns more squarely behind Russia.

In discussions about cutting Russia off from SWIFT in the past, I thought the long-term consequence would be a weakening of western control over global banking, but then I also thought that western states would never implement the sanction, so I recognise I could be entirely mistaken. In some sense, the world has taken a leap into the dark and there can be no certainty about who will emerge with a more resilient economy as a result in a five-or-ten-year perspective. The short term will surely bring instability for all.

Political Challenges

Armed conflict is unpredictable, but so is politics continued by ordinary means. Humans adapt to deal with events as best they can, and usually we are able to exert enough control to manage our affairs. The real challenge of armed conflict is that the ability to control events dwindles as the situation becomes more complex, and that should worry everyone. The details of a prospective peace deal, even if background conditions are met, become more complex too if the control over territory changes hands and as damage to infrastructure increases, because the deal will be bedevilled by issues around responsibilities for financing rebuilding and restoring order.

While in the absence of a peace deal the risk that the conflict will spread through unexpected ways grows: Russia has pulled out of peace talks with Japan over the Kuril Islands, occupied by the USSR after 1945, and China is being pulled into taking a firmer position; while ever-better air defence equipment is being shipped to Ukraine from the west. Sadly, the notion that conflict can be contained in Ukraine grows weaker by the day.

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