

War with Ukraine will not benefit Russia one iota – whatever the outcome- Published in The House Magazine- 16.12.21

Are Russia and Ukraine on the brink of war again? Certainly all the ingredients are there. Fostered by Vladimir Putin's remarkable and unusually blunt statements about Russia's concerns in the region, Moscow has wound itself up into a pitch of frustration about the matter.

Russia's mindset seems to be that Ukraine is on the precipice of being turned into a bridgehead of Western interests and presence. If not actually by NATO then as good as – and right up against the Russian border which they say is unacceptable.

Behind this attitude, which may well fit in with Putin's need to keep up a strongman political stance when his popularity is waning, lies a long history of affinity between the two states. Some of it eulogized, and possibly a hard-faced "chess game" judgement that now is a good time to put Western readiness to react to the test.

American weakness over the Afghan debacle must also come into the calculation, as well as the fraught situation over the now fully constructed Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which has yet to open partly due to pressure on Germany from the US to delay its commissioning.

All in all, this must seem from Moscow's viewpoint as a good time to move large numbers of troops to the Ukrainian border and bring Russia into a sort of top-nation status with a one-to-one virtual meeting between Presidents Putin and Biden – which proved more or less fruitless but must have satisfied Russian egos.

Sanctions could drive Russia and China still closer, which goes against UK foreign policy

The question now is what, if anything, can be done to avert open hostilities and border violence from escalating, and whether the UK has any particular role to play.

The Foreign Secretary has certainly taken a robust stance in aligning the UK with American threats of "consequences" if the Russians do anything so silly as to invade, but what would those consequences be?

Outright military involvement is not attractive, although British arms sales to Ukraine have been discussed recently, there is plenty of scope through trade sanctions to make Russia's life noticeably less comfortable in the short term.

The downside to this is that sanctions could drive Russia and China still closer, which goes against another strand of UK foreign policy; to keep these two countries from cosyng up together.

A better course of action might be to make Russia pause through an all-out diplomatic and communications assault.

First, spelling out through every communication channel available (and here the West has the advantage it does not always use) how pointless and of little value to modern Russia this kind of territorial annexation will prove to be – far more difficult and costly than snatching the Crimea seven year ago.

Second, on a sort of soft-cop hard-cop analogy, for the UK to bring home to Moscow what the potential gains could be of winding down Russian troops and engaging in regular dialogue with the West.

The benefits for Russia are quite tempting; re-joining the G7 to become the G8 again, easing existing sanctions, opening the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (which would help us with our horrendous gas prices right now), and generally joining in the spread of trade and investment deals that the world is ready to make as we struggle out of the pandemic and the pattern of world trade evolves.

Who knows, this might be a better path for Putin himself, at his comfortable old age - lucrative memoirs rather than the present rocky prospect.

Surely this option is far better than a dirty, miserable war which nobody wants, and will not benefit Russia one iota – whatever the outcome.

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