

The solution to the Ukraine crisis lies in Asia

If the West sanctions Russia, Moscow might have a workaround in the East-
David Howell 02.03.22- The Japan Times

Can a hot war be defeated with cooler methods and by new technology away from the gunfire and the shelling?

The question is being posed in acute form as Vladimir Putin pursues his murderous and bloody assault on Ukraine, with solutions being advanced from all sides, some longer term — by which time Ukraine may well have been crushed despite a spirited resistance — and some hopefully more immediate.

Foremost are plans to paralyze Russia's banking system, in particular by expelling Russia from the SWIFT international payments system, an action to which a hesitant Germany has now agreed.

But alongside the financial strategy includes the cutting of trade and supply chains so that Russia loses access to crucial components, services and weaponry, making it more and more difficult to keep a gigantic invasion force in the field.

And then there is the even more ambitious aim of ending the heavy dependence on Russian oil and gas exports by Western Europe (for gas now at 40% and Germany where it is more than 50%). Obviously a shift of this magnitude takes time and alternatives will have to be ramped up, such as with LNG imports from the United States.

But at least this idea got a small boost from the recent German decision to delay the opening of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, although realistically it has to be remembered that the extensive Nord Stream 1 network still keeps pumping up to 55 billion cubic meters of gas into European markets.

Yet all these plans depend on one much bigger factor which gets far less coverage. Sanctions, embargoes, trade squeezes and electronic interventions from the West will count for nothing if they are all offset from the East.

If Russia's customers, clients and allies in Asia, as well as Africa and other areas of the world, simply carry on business as usual, or even agree to special support measures to get around Western restrictions by back door means, all these efforts will be neutered, as Putin no doubt is hoping for.

And he has good reason to have such hope. It is true that Japan has agreed, for the first time ever, to join in sanctions on Russia, but what about China? And what about the other big Asian players, bearing in mind that most of the world's economic growth for the next few decades is likely to take place in this region? These are the areas where the giant new trading networks of the future are taking shape. For Russia, Asian markets for gas and oil could soon eclipse Western Europe.

The Chinese didn't quite have the face to show approval of Russia's bloody aggression at the United Nations, and abstained on the motion to condemn it. But they have plenty of plans to try by-passing dollar dominance with new currency and clearing systems, and plenty of plans to continue as good customers for Russian fossil fuels.

Large new gas pipelines to China have begun operations and more are in the works, and the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline will carry massive volumes of crude oil to Asian and other markets.

The lesson is obvious. Unless solidarity against Russian aggression really is worldwide, and not just Western, European and NATO-based, the pressure on Putin to stop his onslaught is not going to work. He knows that NATO is not going to deploy troops (boots on the ground) in defense of Ukraine. He knows that even NATO air forces are not going to intervene, even though that would provide great relief for Ukrainian resistance fighters. He thinks he can fall back on his powerful Asian friends, and this is where he has to be proved wrong.

The U.K. ought to be in an especially good position to help on this front, thanks to its excellent connections with rising Asian networks and with fellow Commonwealth members with whom it still has much in common.

But it has to continue the groundwork to keep relations with its friends in Asia — both large and small — fresh and friendly to maintain readiness and ensure full cooperation in times of emergency, such as now. Has it helped build up their defenses and modernized their security forces with all the new technologies now available, such as the cheap but lethal military drones that Turkey is exporting and which have been used so successfully in recent conflicts, including in Asia?

The answer to that is doubtful. Small South Asian island nations, long dismissed by British foreign policy "experts" as of no strategic relevance, are now being penetrated and supported all the time by the Chinese, both commercially and militarily. (The same is happening in the Caribbean).

Meanwhile India is reported by Reuters to be exploring new rupee-denominated trade accounts and money transfers with Russia to by-pass Western sanctions. So much for a supposedly great democracy siding, so it appears, not with the other democracies but with a pariah Russian leadership now murdering families and kids in the name of "stabilization and security." One must hope the idea will be swiftly dropped.

And have enough channels been kept open even with China in order to share understanding of what is at stake for them if Russia is not stopped and the conflict in Ukraine lurches on into a wider world war?

The lesson is clear. If nations do not pay constant attention to their friends and allies in a changing world and take them for granted, then when a real crisis presents itself, they cannot expect automatic or solid support.

The unity now needed as a common front to stop Putin has got to be total, worldwide and leakproof. The West that seemed so dominant and powerful in the 20th century can no longer deliver alone. To the question posed here at the beginning of this commentary, the

answer this time, in this century, lies as much in the great centers of power in Asia as in Washington, London or NATO's Headquarters in Brussels.
