

Calling Putin's Bluff



by Michael Curtis

The Secretary- General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg declared on March 4, 2022, that a no fly zone over Ukraine is not an option being considered, “we have agreed that we should not have NATO planes operating over Ukrainian airspace or NATO troops on Ukrainian territory.” It is evident that NATO does not want to be directly involved in the fighting in Ukraine. It understands Ukraine desperation, and recognizes Russia’s actions as an invasion of a sovereign nation, but it does not want to take any action that might be regarded as a direct act of war against Russia or risk escalation in the fighting. He repeated “NATO is not a party to the conflict. It is a defensive alliance.” We have, Stoltenberg said, a responsibility to prevent this war from escalating beyond Ukraine.

Stoltenberg said that the allies agreed that NATO planes should not operate over Ukrainian airspace nor should NATO troops be on Ukrainian territory, while he indicated that NATO forces have increased in the eastern part of the alliance.

Most military analysts as well as the NATO countries have accepted the argument that imposing a no fly zone , NFZ, could lead to a full-fledged war in Europe and to a potential nuclear confrontation between NATO and Russia. They argue It would potentially bring NATO into direct conflict with Russia.

Moreover, logistically it would require several hundred planes to patrol the area and shoot down Russian planes, and to deploy refueling tankers and electronic-surveillance aircraft for support. A compromise is to provide more advanced air-defense capabilities to Ukraine. NATO has ruled out direct intervention in Ukraine, but it has imposed sanctions against Russia, its financial system, banks, and individuals including President Vladimir Putin.

Threats of nuclear war are to be taken seriously but this refusal to impose a NFZ is worth examining. For NATO, the U.S., and the sane world this is a moment of truth in assessing Putin. It is the Russian aggressor Putin, with his sense of grandeur and entitlement, who has repeated emphatically that declaration of a NFZ would mean participation in war. He has already threatened the West with tough retaliatory measures because of the imposition of sanctions against Russia. His bravado may be examined.

A no fly zone policy, barring all unauthorized aircraft from flying over a country, is usually intended to prevent a hostile country using military aircraft in the region, a modern phenomenon established in the 1990s. Western nations have imposed this on a number of occasions: over parts of Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, during the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1993-95, during the Libyan civil war in 2011 and in 2018. However, in the present case, a number of arguments have been made. The imposition of NFZ might lead to a wider European war with a nuclear armed superpower. Moreover, it is argued that NATO forces are not prepared to launch attacks on Russian positions, and eliminate their rocket artillery.

Although the UN Charter provides for nations to ask for help in self-defense, the West is unlikely to go to war against the Russian army.

Putin has warned on a number of occasions that a NFZ would be considered a hostile act, and that those imposing it would immediately be active participants in the armed conflict. It would lead to catastrophic results not only for Europe but for the whole world.

This seemingly unanimous point of view can be challenged for a number of reasons. First, it has to be seen in the context of Putin's distorted perception of reality, and his posture as the ultimate strong leader in the world. He has threatened the UK and other countries with "tough retaliatory measures" because of their imposition of sanctions against Russia, their supposed cooperation with ultra-nationalist forces, and their supply of weapons to Ukraine. Putin has promoted his prowess at sports and games, ice hockey, horse riding, judo, but he is less skilled in poker and in gambling that his threats will be taken seriously. Putin may imagine he has a full house, a royal flush, but he ignore the reality that the U.S. and NATO have an ace in the hole, held in reserve, to be revealed at the opportune time.

Secondly, the effectiveness of Russian military may be questioned, it is clear that the initial assault on Ukraine started badly, with difficulties of supply lines, of morale, and with damage to tanks, military equipment, and planes, a tactical failure with the stalling of the main assault force.

At this point, the military effort with poor logistical organization cannot be considered a well-organized machine, or a universal threat. Putin probably assumed the invasion forces would be welcomed by Ukrainians but the Russians underestimated the extraordinary resistance of Ukrainian citizens and above all the defiant leadership of Zelensky, the epitome of courage and bravery.

Thirdly, the invasion has been counterproductive, igniting both NATO and the EU, once fractured, to become more unified and establish a cogent policy on this foreign issue, supported by formerly neutral countries, a turning point on European history. There is no appeasement of Russia. Rather it induced a change in attitudes of the U.S. administration, and in other countries, including as a minimum suspending Russian banks from Swift, preventing Russian access to international reserves. President Barack Obama foolishly asked in September 2014, "will someone tell me, what is the American stake in Ukraine?" President Joe Biden now declares the U.S. will defend every inch of NATO territory with the full force of American power. However, the limit is that "our forces are not and will not be engaged in the conflict with Russia in Ukraine."

Central to the supposed reason for Putin's aggression is whether Ukraine can and will be a member of NATO. Zelensky has already asked for Ukraine to be granted immediate membership of the EU, using a new special procedure.

These requests may be related to the new Strategic Document issued by the EU, defending the European security order. It condemns Russian aggression as unprovoked and unjustified, a policy to expand its sphere of influence. It recalls that Russia is challenging fundamental international agreements, the UN Charter, the founding documents of OSCE, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, including Helsinki Final Act and Charter of Paris, which call for territorial integrity and for states to refrain from threats or use of force. It also speaks of a strategic partnership with NATO and the collective defense it provides. It is now prepared to supply lethal weapons to a third country. The Ukrainian requests for membership of both NATO and EU should be approved. The doors should be open to this European democracy.

A clear statement of NATO principles, values, and objectives

was made in the 2010 strategic concept. It describes three main tasks of NATO; collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. Recognizing political and security development in the world, it suggests that NATO will partner with other countries and other international organizations on issues.

NATO was founded in 1949 to serve as a political and military alliance among member countries; it was conceived largely because of threat of the Soviet Union.

Its political function is to promote democratic values, human rights, rule of law, and provide for members to consult and cooperate to solve problems and prevent conflict.

Militarily, it is a multilateral defense organization, seeking a peaceful resolution of disputes and the use of military power to deal with crises. An integrated military structure, SHAPE, supreme headquarters allied powers, was formed in 1951, as a result of the Korean war. The central factor is contained in Article 5 of the North Atlantic treaty, which states that an armed attack against one or more of member in Europe or north America shall be considered an attack against them all. Consequently, NATO exercising the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by article 51 of the charter of the UN will assist the part or parties attacked, after a consensus NATO decision. Article 5 was invoked for the first time after the 9/11 terrorist attack on the U.S.

If Ukraine is admitted to NATO, Article 5 would overcome any threat from the war criminal Putin, and the risk of genocide against Ukraine, and help to end his artificially created international crises and his view of the weakness of the West. NATO should accept a Ukrainian application.