[**Bludgeoning Ukraine**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1677804/bludgeoning-ukraine)

[Mahir Ali](https://www.dawn.com/authors/322/mahir-ali)Published March 2, 2022 - Updated 2 days ago

Mahir Ali

“EXPANDING Nato would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era,” the former US ambassador to Moscow and foreign policy doyen George F. Kennan wrote in The New York Times 25 years ago. “Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy … and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”

His prescience in 1997 — when Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton, respectively, occupied the Kremlin and the White House — is a sobering reminder of the shortsighted Western triumphalism that accompanied the end of the Cold War. A decade later, the tendency was turbo-charged by Nato’s decision to declare that the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine would eventually be admitted into the Western alliance.

The shades of grey in the recent past obviously do not in any way mitigate, let alone justify, the starkly black-and-white dimensions of last week’s Russian aggression against Ukraine. Vladimir Putin’s grotesque actions and utterances are unequivocally inexcusable.

Most people in Russia and Ukraine did not believe he would go so far. His cold calculations and sporadic outbursts of controlled violence are hardly a novelty. Yet there was the impression that he would stop short of absolute irrationality. The occupation of Crimea in 2014 made at least convoluted sense in the context of guaranteeing Black Sea access for Russia’s naval fleet.

Don’t overlook the context behind Putin’s atrocities.

The semi-occupation of largely Russian-speaking Donetsk and Luhansk, last week recognised as ‘independent’ republics, was even more outrageous. The government in Kyiv might have averted that outcome by acceding to those regions’ demands for autonomy. It may now be too late to win them back — and from Moscow’s point of view the tactic has the added advantage of denying Ukraine membership of Nato, which does not welcome states with ongoing border disputes.

It has to be acknowledged, though, that however much one might broadly empathise with Russian resentment over Nato’s expansionist lust in its direct neighbourhood, Moscow’s actions in the past few days will only enhance Nato’s appeal: Finland and Sweden have already expressed an interest, and even Switzerland might not be far behind. It would take a miracle for the Ukrainian-Russian talks that opened on Monday to yield any positive result. If formally disavowing Nato membership for Ukraine would halt the Russian assault, it may still be worthwhile. The immediate task for one and all must be to end the violence that has already claimed hundreds of civilian and military lives.

The fog of war meanwhile clouds events on the ground, even in the cybersphere. On the one hand, the internet and social media enable real-time access to unfolding developments. On the other, fake images, or deceptive captions attached to genuinely fresh photographs, spur delusions. Rival networks of disinformation somewhat diminish the worth of what is purported to be breaking news.

But the highlights are usually visible even through that fog, and at the centre of the ugly picture that comes into focus is the Russian president. Western commentators love to cite his description of the demise of the USSR as the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century before excoriating his ambition to resurrect the Soviet Union. They tend to ignore his follow-up comment that it’s heartless not to mourn the late Soviet state, but it’s mindless to seek its resurrection. No one could seriously have suspected Putin of having much of a heart, but he has lately also given us cause to doubt whether he has much of a mind. His nostalgia is directed more towards the previous tsardom of “all the Russias” than the USSR.

Perhaps the least depressing aspect of the present picture are the demonstrations for peace that spontaneously erupted in St Petersburg, Moscow and dozens of other cities, despite the participants knowing all too well what kind of repression lay in store. There are many grounds for rejecting the aggression, not least Putin’s claim that Ukrainians are actually the same as Russians — can there be any logic, in that case, for proceeding to kill them?

At the same time, it’s impossible to ignore the Western angst over the ultimate horror of a war in Europe — distinct from wars in the Middle East, Africa or anywhere else, simply because the victims are mostly blond and blue-eyed. The potential occupation of Ukraine is somehow a catastrophe superior to the 55-year occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the bombardment of Kyiv or Kharkiv is more atrocious than the Western-backed destruction of Yemen. References to Iraq or Afghanistan are generally unwelcome.

Putin’s atrocities are inexcusable, but they might have been easier to avoid had his leading adversaries been less dedicated to their often racist hypocrisies.

[**mahir.dawn@gmail.com**](http://mailto:mahir.dawn@gmail.com)

*Published in Dawn, March 2nd, 2022*