[**UN and Ukraine**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1690770/un-and-ukraine)

[A.G. Noorani](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1277/a-g-noorani)

May 21, 2022

The writer is an author and a lawyer based in Mumbai.

“WHEN the ambivalence of one’s virtue is recognised, the total iniquity of one’s opponent is also irreparably impaired,” wrote George F. Kennan, who was the American ambassador to the Soviet Union several decades ago, in his book Russia and the West. His words carry much weight, for it is he who sounded the alarm over Nato’s expansion eastwards. It brought no gains to the West. Instead, it sowed the seeds of strife.

Over the years, Russia has voiced its concerns. For instance, in 2008, Russia’s foreign ministry complained that the Ukrainian government was “infringing on the rights of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine and deliberately eliminating the Russian language from the country’s public life”. Russia’s actions this year have only heightened global fears.

Quoting the ministry, the New York Times had gone to comment that it was “difficult to find a clearer example of interference in a neighbour’s internal affairs. It would appear that even the organisation of the Ukrainian education system can constitute a sphere of ‘privileged interests’ for Moscow”.

This does not imply that the West should recognise what is regarded as Russia’s ‘sphere of influence’ in Eastern Europe. But it certainly ought to have recognised its ‘sphere of interest’. Nothing can justify the Russian Federation’s President Vladimir Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine and pursue a war against its hapless people. And this is not the first time that Russia has had to face a licking from a weakened neighbour.

Diplomacy is needed as conflict will not solve the problem.

In 1939, the Soviet Union launched a war against Finland which fought back bravely. Historian William R. Trotter quoted in A Frozen Hell: the Russo-Finnish Winter War 1939-1940 a Soviet general’s bitter reminder that “we have won just about enough ground to bury the dead”. Stalin did triumph and imposed a treaty on Finland extracting some territory. The League of Nations expelled the Soviet Union from its membership. Stalin was furious.

Could the Ukraine crisis have been tackled differently? Perhaps. Early in the war, US President Joe Biden offered to talk to President Putin. But this was not pressed.

Instead, the recourse was to the United Nations to pull up Russia, with the UN Security Council issuing a statement that did not bring in any direct war terminology, and instead, referred to the invasion as a dispute.

According to the UNSC statement, “The Security Council expresses deep concern regarding the maintenance of peace and security of Ukraine. The Security Council recalls that all member states have undertaken, under the Charter of the United Nations, the obligation to settle their international disputes by peaceful means.” It said: “The Security Council expresses strong support for the efforts of the secretary general in the search for a peaceful solution.”

The wording, of course, reflected a compromise of sorts after long negotiations, as a presidential statement is reached through consensus; hence it lost much of its bite as conceded by one diplomat. Moscow had vetoed an earlier resolution.

The UN chief has visited areas of Russian bombardment in Ukraine, including Kyiv’s suburbs from where images of dead people and improvised graves led to allegations of war crimes. Reflecting on the absurdity of war, he said, “I imagined my family in one of those houses that is now destroyed and black.”

He managed to bring about an agreement for evacuating citizens from Mariupol where Ukrainian troops are now ceding control to the Russians after holding out for weeks.

According to media reports, “The language of the resolution is in sharp contrast to earlier ones passed at the UN. For example, on March 2, the UN General Assembly had voted 141-5 with 35 abstentions in favour of a resolution demanding an immediate Russian ceasefire, withdrawal of all its forces and protection for all civilians.”

Similarly, it has been pointed out that later in the month, the UN General Assembly “approved a resolution 140-5 with 38 abstentions blaming Russia for the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and urging an immediate cease-fire and protection for millions of civilians and the homes, schools and hospitals critical to their survival.”

War is indeed evil and an absurdity in the 21st century, as asserted by the UN secretary general.

By its very Charter, the United Nations was not intended, from the very outset, to use force against a veto-wielding Great Power. Of what use is denunciation in diplomacy whether delivered in Biden’s speech or the UN General Assembly’s resolution? This was the classic principle accepted at the outset. Stalin was humiliated by the Soviet Union’s expulsion from the League of Nations. Hence the veto power in the United Nations. The war in the Ukraine can be ended only through diplomacy.

*The writer is an author and a lawyer based in Mumbai.*

*Published in Dawn, May 21st, 2022*