

Russian-Ukraine Conflict: Understanding the Role of Mediation

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ABSTRACT

The thrust of this paper is on the Russia-Ukraine conflict: Understanding the role of mediation. The paper focuses on how mediation presents itself as a promising path to peace for Russia and Ukraine. Findings revealed mediation and diplomacy continue with several world leaders having visited Moscow for talks to avoid escalating the problem at hand which was seen as a quest for autonomy as a Nation State. Various objectives were drawn to give the paper a direction in getting to the root cause of the conflict. This study is anchored on the structural realism theory as postulated by German psychologist, Wilhelm Wund in 1979 which asserts that the nature of the international structure is defined by its ordering principle, anarchy, and by the distribution of capabilities which rigmaroles on powerful allies protecting their blocks. The theory further claims that international anarchy creates conditions for states trumping international variables such as norms, multilateralism, economic interdependence, and morality. The paper concluded among others that the approved path of mediation will depend on the identity of the mediator.

Keywords: War, Mediation, Independence, Diplomacy, Military.

Introduction

Behind every severe conflict lies a series of misperceptions, fears, grievances, and interests that aggressors have chosen to pursue in an acrimonious manner. When transposing this principle to the context of war, such behavior holds the potential to cripple entire economies, shatter public order, and, above all, give rise to heart-breaking losses of life. However, more powerful than any army or weapons arsenal will always is our ability to open the minds and soften the hearts of our counter-parties through constructive, interest-based communication and collaboration. It is in this respect that mediation presents itself as a promising path to peace for Russia and Ukraine. Accordingly,

this piece will begin by discussing the value that mediation affords in resolving tensions between the two nations before assessing its feasibility and how it should be carried out. Addressing the subjective viewpoints of the conflict parties helps to grasp their interpretations of a very complicated scenario in which 'objective' measures of success are strongly contested. Comparing the perspectives allows the researcher to see how divergent interpretations of the issue might stymie EU– Ukraine cooperation and impede conflict settlement (Götz, 2016).

Following a review of relevant international mediation literature, it has zeroed in on four characteristics that are widely regarded as key predictors of mediation efficacy. Three of them are related to mediator qualities, while the fourth is related to mediator behavior. The February 2022 Russian and Ukrainian crisis presented Western nations to make clear their support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty and its right to choose its security partnerships. They have warned Russia that any military escalation will have significant economic consequences. Among the measures being discussed are sanctions against Russia's financial institutions, the energy sector, and individuals close to the Kremlin (NEU, 2022). Russia's controversial Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Europe could be halted as part of any sanctions package. Military assistance from the UK, US, NATO, and the EU is also being provided to Ukraine (NEU, 2022). The Normandy framework, which included Germany and France as mediators, provided proof of this. Mediation and diplomacy continue with several world leaders having visited Moscow for talks. At the time of writing, it is unclear whether the Kremlin will agree to NATO's proposal for more substantive security talks in the longer term (Little, 2007). A Russian response to the US's counter proposals on legally binding security guarantees was received by the US administration on 17 February 2022 and is currently being considered (NEU, 2022).

Statement of the problem

Given the internationalized high-intensity nature of the Russia-Ukraine war, mediation by an international organization such as the UN could be more effective where it can apply force, pressure, and directive strategies (Lavrov, 2014). However, the fact that the Russia-Ukraine is turning into a systemic war between Russia and the United States, who are also permanent members of the UN Security Council, makes it difficult for the UN to resolve this conflict since these countries have the power to veto any resolutions offered by the UN. The resolution could be more of an option had it catered to the interests of the US. However, in this case, it seems like the US is more interested in continuing the war until Russia is driven well into the corner. In a similar vein, Russia's willingness to sit around the table seems more like a play for time than a sincere attempt to resolve the conflict. In this case, perhaps the international community could act more prudently and use the war as an opportunity for self-reflection and the revision of the malfunctioning international system. The Russian-Ukrainian crisis, which has periodically devolved into an armed war between Russia and Ukraine, has remained one of the most significant causes of stress in Europe, if not the whole globe (Dawson, and

Smith. 2022). The possibility of bringing Ukraine into NATO has been on the table in recent weeks, raising the potential for military confrontation and war.

Why is it that the UN is unable to take a more active role in this crisis? The answer to this issue derives from the fact that Russia which is one of the UN Security Council's permanent members, is at the core of the conflict, and the People's Republic of China, another permanent member, has sided with Russia. Because Russia and China have the authority to veto decisions made by the UN Security Council, the UN is unable to play a proactive role in this problem (Fisher, 2022). As a result, the researchers were compelled to investigate the role of mediation in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This research will tend to answer the following questions; what are the factors that led to the Russian –Ukrainian war? What has been the role of mediators in trying to calm the tension? What is the role of the United Nations in resolving the crisis?

Objective of the study

The general objective of the study is Russian- Ukraine conflict: understanding the role of mediation, while the specific objectives are to:

- i. Determine the factors that led to the Russian –Ukrainian war.
- ii. Identify the role of mediators in trying to calm the Russian –Ukrainian tension.
- iii. Ascertain the role of the United Nations in resolving the Russian –Ukrainian crisis.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the structural realism theory as postulated by a German psychologist, Wilhelm Wund in 1979 In his book “Theory of International Politics, structural realism”, Structural realism holds that the nature of the international structure is defined by its ordering principle, anarchy, and by the distribution of capabilities (measured by the number of great powers within the international system) (Donnelly, 2004). The structural realist explanation for the Ukraine war has some obvious strength. As Tang, (2008) argues, “because structural realism emphasizes the anarchic nature of international relations, it suggests the war is unsurprising, a reminder that states still compete for security, sometimes violently, and the prudent will prepare for it with tools for self-preservation”. According to Tang (2009), “offensive realism holds that states should (and do) assume the worst over others’ intentions. Offensive realism asserts that this worst-case assumption over others’ intentions is necessary because states are inherently aggressive due to anarchy.” Thus, the inherent pessimism of structural realists gave them a head start in considering the potential for Russia to escalate its action. Furthermore, Posen (2022) expands upon, the strength of structural realism is its assumption that the conditions international anarchy creates for states trump other international variables such as norms, multilateralism, economic interdependence, and morality.

Therefore, it is fair to say that structural realist fears about the changing power structure of Eastern Europe and how this would lead to greater instability and even conflict in Ukraine were quite prescient in the context of the onset of the Ukraine crisis in

2014. Furthermore, the structural realist warning of the threat of the West not taking on board the systemic feedback and altering its policies towards Ukraine might help explain why many were caught off guard by Russia's eventual decision to invade Ukraine in 2022 (Tooze, 2022). Though various studies have been done on Russia –Ukraine war none has captured the core reasons the United Nations backed down during the heat period of both countries until the war started in 2022.

Review of Relevant Literature

Factors responsible for the Russia-Ukraine War.

Mearsheimer (2014) first gained significant attention in the context of Ukraine with his 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault', which argued that the 'United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis'. For Mearsheimer (2014), the root cause of Russia's decision to annex Crimea and destabilize the Donbas region was the expansion eastwards of NATO and, to a lesser extent, the European Union (EU)—along with its democracy promotion—which threatened Russia's "core strategic interests, a point Putin made emphatically and repeatedly". Mearsheimer (2014) also warned that it "would be an even greater mistake" for the West to continue a policy of "attempting to turn Ukraine into a Western stronghold on Russia's border". This last point has led many to proclaim that Mearsheimer predicted the war in Ukraine (Douthat 2022) and, as such, his arguments and prognostications need to be taken seriously. As (Brubaker, 2017) has observed with the growing populist movements in Northern and Western Europe, these movements are 'distinctive in construing the opposition between self and other not in narrowly national but in broader civilizational terms'. While in the context of Northern and Western Europe, such civilizations are built on the back of Islam as the 'other', in the case of Russia, the other is Europe and, more broadly, the 'West' (Malinova 2020).

Ukraine, naturally became an integral part of Russia's civilizational turn because, in part, history is an inextricable aspect of civilizations, and Russia and Ukraine have a lot of 'history'. Indeed, intertwined with the increased use of civilizational thinking, Putin has increasingly used history to justify his decisions such as evoking the glory of the Soviet Union (especially its 'victory' in WWII) (Wood 2011), attempting to rehabilitate Stalin (Satter 2011), and using the post-Crimean war (1853–56) rebound of the Russian Empire under the stewardship of Prince Gorchakov as an allegory for Russia's contemporary trials and tribulations (Petro, 2018). In the context of Ukraine, what started as Russian action framed on the pretense that it wanted to "help the Ukrainian brothers to agree on how they should build and develop their country" has morphed into questioning the very future of Ukraine as an independent nation Using history is dangerous as those invoking it often unleash forces that they cannot control (Putin, 2022).

Role of Mediators in calming Russia-Ukraine tension

Mediation as a process is flexible and can have different goals. Mediators can be more facilitative or evaluative, the process can take place in joint sessions or private

meetings, and the aim can be to settle or just provide a neutral space for constructive communication. The key is 'fitting the forum to the fuss'. As the lives of millions are in grave danger during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the immediate goal of a mediation process would be to install safe corridors and achieve a ceasefire (Lavrov, 2014). Simultaneously, stopping further escalation to a nuclear disaster and establishing a safe communication channel to do so should be an aim of the initial mediation design. Other issues regarding the future of Ukraine, its territorial integrity, and, more generally, its status under public international law would need to be introduced after these priority goals have been met (Averre, 2010).

Turkey's foreign policy has been highly securitized in the last decade. It would not be an exaggeration to describe its mediation attempt in the Russia-Ukraine conflict as one of the 'course correction' steps that have been witnessed in Turkey's foreign policy recently (Barkin, 2009). Mediation came to the fore as one of the instruments of the 'zero problems with neighbors' policy largely designed by former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, which aimed at stability and cooperation in the region. It also became one of the important pillars of Türkiye's policy of 'Humanitarian Diplomacy' by presenting it as the only actor that can sit with both Western and non-Western actors. Subsequently, Türkiye has played a mediator role in conflicts across the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Africa, and Asia. Especially with its roles in the Syria-Israel peace talks and nuclear negotiations between Iran and the West, Türkiye started to promote itself as an 'impartial' and 'insider' mediator in the international arena (Barkin, 2009).

When considered within the framework of its balancing act policy, Türkiye's mediation can be seen as a smart diplomatic move. However, its potential success is a question mark for now. According to a study conducted by Jacob Bercovitch and Scott Sigmund Gartner, international organizations may be more effective in resolving internationalized high-intensity conflicts with their extensive resources, high prestige, and wide range of strategies. By analyzing the 2000 International Conflict Management data set, which lists more than 3500 cases of international mediation efforts since 1945, Jacob Bercovitch and Scott Sigmund Gartner argued that states can be more effective in resolving low-intensity conflicts with their geographical and cultural proximity and their ability to be informal when necessary (Brubaker, 2017).

Türkiye has also received coverage during the war for being the only state to mediate the talks between Russia and Ukraine and lately as the only state to block Sweden and Finland's accession into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Irony has it that Finland and Türkiye are the two countries that spearheaded the creation of the 'Mediation for Peace' initiative within the United Nations (UN) on September 24, 2010. Subsequently, in June 2012, the first resolution on mediation was adopted at the UN and the 'Effective Mediation Guide' was published by the UN Secretariat. The shift from co-founding a landmark peace initiative to discussing the accession of Finland -long known for its peacemaker identity- into the most ambitious military alliance in history may be seen as a portrayal of the securitization trend in the agendas of the two countries (Cashman, 2013).

UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan meets Russia's President Vladimir Putin, in St Petersburg, Russia October 11, 2022. The Emirati-Russian summit meeting held on Tuesday in St Petersburg, between the UAE's President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan and Russia's President Vladimir Putin signaled the launch of Emirati mediation in the Ukraine war with the immediate objective of ensuring de-escalation in the conflict as a step towards a durable diplomatic solution. Analysts say Emirati mediation is likely to be perceived as credible especially since Abu Dhabi has avoided till now any form of alignment with any of the warring camps (Posen, 2022). They noted that Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, has maintained good relations with the warring parties and is willing to become involved personally in the mediation bid.

The Emirati initiative is also likely to be welcomed by world capitals as the conflict seems to spin out of the control threatening civilians and nuclear installations. Sheikh Mohammed said on Twitter after meeting Putin: "We discussed several issues of mutual concern, including the Ukraine crisis and the importance of engaging in dialogue to reduce tensions and arrive at a diplomatic solution." Before the meeting, the UAE's foreign ministry said the visit aimed to help reach "effective political solutions" to the Ukrainian crisis. It pointed out that the UAE sought to "achieve positive results for military de-escalation, reduce humanitarian repercussions and reach a political settlement to achieve global peace and security," the ministry added. Putin lauded Sheikh Mohammed's mediation efforts, which, he said, helped solve some "really sensitive humanitarian issues" in the Ukraine crisis (Waltz, 2000).

The role of the United Nations in resolving Russia-Ukraine

"To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" are among the first very words of the UN Charter (in its Preamble), and those words were the main motivation for creating the United Nations, whose founders had lived through the devastation of two world wars by 1945. Since the UN's creation on 24 October 1945 (the date its Charter came into force), the United Nations has often been called upon to prevent disputes from escalating into war or to help restore peace following the outbreak of armed conflict, and to promote lasting peace in societies emerging from wars (Smith and Yuchshenko. 2021). A global organization like the United Nations (UN) reflects the seminal challenges and achievements of its times. In 2020, on the organization's 75th anniversary, UN Secretary-General António Guterres identified some of the challenges and achievements that currently confront the organization. Averting that the world had a surplus of multilateral challenges and a deficit of multilateral solutions, he regretted that the UN lacked scale, ambition, and teeth. He noted that institutions with authority, such as the UN Security Council (UNSC), do not have the appetite to bite, indicating a lack of political will and unity of purpose among the member states (Smith and Yuchshenko. 2021). Additionally, he urged the member states to strive to preserve the great achievement of having gone so many years without a nuclear conflict or a military confrontation between the major powers.

As the Russia-Ukraine war continues, the UN has been widely criticized for its seeming helplessness in preventing and stopping the conflict. Yet, the UN has not been inert. Guterres and the UN's key intergovernmental institutions, some influential and powerful UN member-states, and stakeholders that the UN convenes and influences (such as the private sector, civil society, academia, and media) have indeed tried to be proactive in confronting Russia on its war in Ukraine. This has, however, been more in the direction of diplomatically isolating, and naming and shaming Russia to complement the Western sanctions against it, rather than cajoling or engaging it before or during the war (Smith and Yuchshenko. 2021). Whether that moves the needle toward constructive diplomacy and peace or irretrievably pushes Russia on a path of no return from an escalation of conflict, including a nuclear one, is the critical question. It is also important to consider whether this undermines or strengthens the UN's credentials as a neutral mediator and peacemaker.

The Way Forward

While, the first view, it may not seem intuitive to use mediation in international armed conflicts, in reality, it has been used as a tool of conflict resolution in these contexts for hundreds of years (see, e.g., the Congress of Berlin 1878, where numerous tensions after the Russo-Turkish war were mediated or, more recently, Jimmy Carter's mediation of the Middle East Conflict at Camp David in 1978). Indeed, in old dictionaries, mediation is often defined as 'assistance by a neutral third party to resolve conflicts between states.' But, is mediation feasible in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as well? And how do we bring the parties to the table?

Although the fighting continues, Russian and Ukrainian delegations are engaged in bilateral negotiations in Belarus right now. Thus, the willingness to talk with each other is there – at least to a limited extent. However, these talks seem to be largely unconstructive, since the parties are mainly focused on the exchange of positions, not on interests. Only recently could we witness first careful steps towards an effective resolution of pressing issues, for example, by attempts to establish humanitarian corridors in Ukraine (Biden, 2022). Building on these first silver linings, mediation of the conflict by a neutral third party could make the decisive difference to lead to more constructive talks. China already offered to act as a mediator, as did Israel.

Next, for mediation to be successful, the mediator must be seen as neutral. Both parties need to trust and accept the process. A possible candidate could be Angela Merkel, who shares languages and history with Putin, is respected in Russia and Ukraine, and has vast experience with the current conflict and negotiations with Russia. Considering the immediate need to install safe corridors and achieve a ceasefire, international organizations such as The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or similar non-governmental organizations could also act as trusted neutrals (Smith and Yuchshenko. 2021). These institutions can convincingly stress that the goal is to save lives for both parties. The ICRC has acted as a successful neutral mediator before. Besides the mediator, the location for mediated talks must also be regarded as neutral, and the parties must be able to reach it in safely. One possibility would be Vienna, considering Austria's long history of neutrality.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the war between Russia and Ukraine, Studies revealed that the UAE has been a center for contacts aimed at containing the crisis, especially when it held the seat of a non-permanent member at the UN Security Council and maintained close ties with Russia, the United States, and European nations. However, before mediation could take place, several factors must be taken into account. First, a crucial precondition of mediation is the approval of the participating parties. Whether they will approve of mediation, in turn, depends on the identity of the mediator, the specific process envisaged as well as the military context. Second, mediation must be practically feasible. This requires opportunities for the safe travel of diplomatic delegates, and possibly also a ceasefire.

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