

Russian President Vladimir Putin talking to the media during the Sixth Caspian Summit in Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabat on Wednesday. It's a huge strategic mistake by the West to get Indonesia, as the host of the G-20 meeting on Nov 15-16, to disinvite President Putin from this meeting, says the writer. And it would be an even bigger mistake for the West to boycott this G-20 meeting if Mr Putin attends.
PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



in low-income countries, where food accounts for a large fraction of household spending... Smaller supplies and higher prices for food mean that the world's poor could be forced to do without."

CALL A CEASEFIRE

So what is the imperfect solution for Ukraine?

The first step is to call for an immediate ceasefire. Why? Each day that the war continues, hundreds are dying. Plus, if Ukraine is going to feed the world again in 2023, it needs to get fertiliser so its farmers can start planting in 2022. More food in 2023 equals less suffering for the global poor.

The second step is to start talking to Russia. There should be two levels of talks. The first should be between Ukraine and Russia. The second should be between the West and Russia. And what would be the outcome of these two steps? Ukrainian lives would be saved. And the whole world would breathe a sigh of relief.

Then comes the hard slog. Given the huge chasm between Western and Russian positions on Ukraine, there will be no immediate long-term solution. But we're more likely to get one if talks begin. And we're more likely to get one if we can get more countries in the world to talk to Russia.

This is why it's a huge strategic mistake by the West to get Indonesia, as the host of the G-20 meeting on Nov 15-16, to disinvite President Putin from this meeting. And it would be an even bigger mistake for the West to boycott this G-20 meeting if Mr Putin attends.

There's one statistic that every Western leader should memorise and repeat each night before going to sleep: the West comprises 12 per cent of the world's population. The rest make up 88 per cent.

If Mr Putin comes to Jakarta in November, as he should, he will hear the views of the West. And he will hear the views of the rest. Mr Putin is not likely to listen to the West since there's zero trust between Russia and the West. But he will listen to the rest. The West is therefore stabbing itself in the foot by calling for Mr Putin to be disinvited.

And why is the West pushing for Mr Putin to be excluded? Here we come back to the main theme of this essay: because the West is pushing for the perfect solution of trying to defeat Russia. But this perfect solution will never come about.

Hence, the West should listen to Indonesia and all the non-Western members of the G-20 (who effectively represent 88 per cent of the world's population) and try to find some kind of a compromise solution for Ukraine. Such a compromise solution will save the lives of Ukrainians. And it will alleviate the sufferings of the hundreds of millions of poor people in the world.

In short, the pragmatic solution is also the ethical solution.

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By Invitation

Ukraine and the West's quest for a perfect solution

There is no perfect solution for the Ukraine situation. So let Putin come to the G-20 meeting in Indonesia, and find a compromise with him.



Kishore Mahbubani

For The Straits Times

Travel is back!

I say this with confidence because I have been to Europe on three separate trips (Davos in May, Venice and Zurich in June). And just before Davos, I was in the United States for three weeks. It was difficult to get seats on flights (and, by the way, this column was written on SQ345 from Zurich to Singapore).

Why do I say all this? Having

visited both the US and Europe in recent weeks, I can say with some confidence that the West is a deeply troubled place. The populations are angry. And the best-educated Western elites, who are supposed to lead their societies in the right direction, are instead leading them in the wrong direction. As a friend of the West, I would like to suggest a wiser course of action.

This wiser course of action is based on a simple principle: the perfect is the enemy of the good. The West should accept imperfect solutions which will make their people happier. Equally importantly, it will also help the billions of poor people in the Third World who are suffering from higher food and energy prices.

Here, I would also like to inject an important point from moral philosophy. At the end of the day, we have to give moral priority to the sufferings of the poor, the bottom 10 or 20 per cent of the world's population. Indeed, it would be cruel and callous to ignore their sufferings.

This is why the greatest American political philosopher of recent times, John Rawls, emphasised that the most just society was the one that took care of the bottom 10 per cent. As he outlined in his seminal work, *A Theory Of Justice*, any social or economic inequalities, if they are to satisfy the principles of justice, "are to be to the greatest

benefit of the least-advantaged members of society".

THREE CRITICAL FACTORS

And why are the very poor suffering? It's the result of three critical factors.

First, the massive stimulus packages post-Covid-19, especially in the US, have unleashed global inflation. As Martin Wolf wrote in the *Financial Times*, "The combination of fiscal and monetary policies implemented in 2020 and 2021 ignited an inflationary fire".

Second, the illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine, followed by the massive Western sanctions on Russia, have led to a massive spike in energy prices.

Ironically, despite (or perhaps, because of) these sanctions, the European Union, has paid more money for Russian gas. Since the war began on Feb 24 this year, the Europeans have paid more than US\$60 billion (S\$83 billion) for Russian oil and gas, while complaining that India and China were buying too much Russian oil. This led to the now famous quip from the Indian Foreign Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, who said "our total purchases for the month would be less than what Europe does in an afternoon".

Third, the Omicron virus, a tricky virus, has broken through the defences of China's zero-Covid

policy. This led to massive shutdowns, including in Shanghai from March. Since China is the factory of the world, supply shocks have also contributed to global inflation. In short, we have had an almost perfect storm.

In short, we have had an almost perfect storm. What should be the rational response? To find a perfect solution? Or to accept an imperfect solution that alleviates the sufferings of many people, including the people of Ukraine and the massive number of poor people in the world? The West has been pushing for a perfect solution. The rest of the world would prefer to see their sufferings decrease from an imperfect solution.

What should be the rational response? To find a perfect solution? Or to accept an imperfect solution that alleviates the sufferings of many people, including the people of Ukraine and the massive number of poor people in the world?

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What's the perfect solution? This is what the West is pursuing in Ukraine: total withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine. No compromise.

Certainly, if the West could accomplish it, it should go for it. But what are the prospects of the West achieving this perfect solution in Ukraine? The answer is zero.

In short, the apparently rational West is pursuing an impossible solution. And in the process, the people of Ukraine are suffering. And, equally importantly, the Western search for a perfect solution is causing enormous suffering for a massive number of poor people.

World Trade Organisation (WTO) director-general Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said: "The war in Ukraine has created immense human suffering, but it has also damaged the global economy at a critical juncture. Its impact will be felt around the world, particularly