

Ukraine war a year on

# Why Putin must not be allowed to succeed in his act of aggression

It is not a proxy war or 'distant' war in Europe. Every country's right to independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity is at stake.



Tommy Koh

On Feb 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a "special military operation" against Ukraine which, in truth, has resembled a full-scale war against a neighbour for the past 12 months. The war has been conducted with great brutality and in total disregard of the law governing warfare.

It is time to take stock of the conflict: on the battlefield, at the United Nations, in law and in the court of public opinion.

Mr Putin is an ultra-nationalist leader. He has described the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century. In other words, he regretted the loss of the Russian empire.

His agenda is to build a Russian sphere of influence, consisting of Russia's neighbours and the countries that once belonged to the Soviet Union and its satellite states in the Warsaw Pact. Ukraine's refusal to abide by his wishes led him to decide to use force to accomplish his objective.

## ANY JUSTIFICATION FOR THE INVASION?

Some people have blamed the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) for the war. This is an argument without merit.

The former members of the Russian empire are independent countries. They have every right to determine their destiny, including whether to join Nato and the European Union.

The reason why countries like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined Nato is because they feared Russia and they wanted Nato's protection.

Their fear has proven to be well-founded. Russia's invasion and war against Ukraine is an act of aggression and a serious violation of the principles of the



A house destroyed in Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the village of Terny in Donetsk. The war is relevant to all of us, no matter where we are located, because it is about every country's right to independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, says the writer. What has happened to Ukraine can happen to us. PHOTO: AFP

UN Charter and of international law.

## BROKEN PROMISES

Furthermore, by invading Ukraine, Russia has broken its promises to its neighbour.

In 1991, in the Belovezha Accord, which created the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Russia recognised the territorial integrity and the inviolability of the borders of all CIS member states, including Ukraine.

In 1994, Ukraine agreed to give up its nuclear weapons. In return, Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom signed the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurance. The three major powers pledged to protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

## PUTIN'S PLANS

Mr Putin's Plan A was a quick military victory and the replacement of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's government with a new one appointed by the Kremlin. Plan A failed.

Mr Putin's Plan B is to seize Ukrainian territory and incorporate it into Russia. According to this plan, Crimea, the so-called republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and the regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson will all come under

Russian control.

Since the 13th century, Russia's rulers have attacked its neighbours and acquired their territories. Mr Putin's behaviour is consistent with this history of territorial expansion.

## SITUATION ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Using its ground forces as well as air power, missiles and drones, Russia is seeking to destroy Ukraine's infrastructure and intimidate the population. The objective is to break the will of the Ukrainian people.

Fighting is now concentrated in the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine. Ukraine has mounted a counter-offensive to regain control of territory occupied by Russian forces. The decisions by Germany and the US to give Ukraine their Leopard 2 and M1 Abrams tanks, respectively, will be a great help to Ukraine.

Russia has killed between 8,000 (UN estimate) and 9,000 (Ukrainian estimate) civilians, including 450 children.

Russia has destroyed 72,000 pieces of civilian infrastructure, including 54,000 residential buildings, 2,000 educational buildings, 400 medical facilities and about 4,000 water and electricity networks.

Winter is very severe in Ukraine. Many Ukrainians are living without electricity and water. Isn't this a crime against humanity?

## SITUATION IN THE U.N.

The diplomatic battle between Russia and Ukraine is being fought at the UN. Ukraine has been winning this battle.

- On March 2, 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution deploring Russia's aggression against Ukraine – 141 countries voted for this resolution.
- On March 24, 2022, 140 countries supported another resolution demanding civilian protection and humanitarian access.
- On Oct 12, 2022, 143 countries supported a resolution calling on states not to recognise the four regions – Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia – which Russia had seized and sought to incorporate into its territory.
- On Nov 14, 2022, 94 countries voted for a resolution calling on Russia to pay reparations to Ukraine.
- On Feb 24, 2023, the UN General Assembly will vote on a new resolution calling for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine, based on the principles of the UN Charter.

## SITUATION IN LAW

Ukraine has sought the protection of international law, bringing a case against Russia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) alleging that it has violated the Genocide Convention.

In its provisional measure, the court ruled that Russia must "immediately suspend the military activities" in Ukraine. Remarkably, 33 countries have filed applications at the ICJ to intervene in the case. ICJ prosecutor Karim Khan has opened an investigation into the situation in Ukraine. He will examine whether Russia has committed war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

## COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION

Here, Ukraine has clearly won the battle.

According to a poll by Blackbox in mid-2022, 95 per cent of Singaporeans supported the Singapore Government's condemnation of the Russian invasion. Only 4 per cent of Singaporeans supported Russia.

In the 2023 State of South-east Asia survey report by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, the people of Asean were asked whether they were concerned about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It found that 47.9 per cent were very concerned and 35 per cent were concerned.

When asked whether they approved of their government's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 32.7 per cent of the respondents from Singapore strongly approved and 35.6 per cent approved of their government's response. Only 1.9 per cent strongly disapproved

and 6.3 per cent disapproved of their government's response.

A Gallup Web survey conducted in January found that support among Americans for Ukraine was holding nearly a year on – 65 per cent of adults in the US said they preferred that Washington support Ukraine in reclaiming its territory, even if that results in a prolonged conflict. In contrast, 31 per cent said they would rather see the US work to end the war quickly, even if this allowed Russia to keep its territory.

A Eurobarometer poll of more than 26,000 people from all member countries of the EU in late 2022 asked the respondents if they approved of the bloc's position of support for Ukraine. Seventy-four per cent answered yes, with a third saying they "strongly" approved.

## PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

Most people in the world would like to see an end to the war. When asked whether there are any prospects for peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said not at present. I agree with his assessment.

The gap between the two sides is too great. Russia wants to retain Crimea and the four regions in eastern Ukraine. Ukraine wants Russia to leave and give back all the territory it has illegally occupied. I don't think either side would accept a compromise now.

I hope Mr Guterres will convene peace talks between them when the moment is ripe. Peace talks will succeed only when both sides are ready to compromise and seek a peaceful solution.

## WHY IT MATTERS TO ALL OF US

Russia's so-called special military operation against Ukraine is a clear case of aggression by a powerful state against its neighbour. There is no justification for Mr Putin's war.

The world should not allow Russia to succeed in its objective to acquire Ukrainian territory. The world should also hold Russia to account for aggression, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The war between Russia and Ukraine is not a European war. It is not a proxy war between Russia and the West. It is not a war between democracy and autocracy.

The reason is that Ukraine is nobody's proxy. It is fighting for its right to exist.

Some have said that it is a distant war and has nothing to do with us. This view is wrong.

The war is relevant to all of us, no matter where we are located, because the war is about every country's right to independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. What has happened to Ukraine can happen to us. This is why Singapore, along with the great majority of the UN's members, has condemned Russia and supported Ukraine.

• Professor Tommy Koh served as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy, in 1993, to make peace between Russia, on the one side, and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, on the other. The mission was successful.