

Emmanuel Macron and the Ukraine Crisis



by Michael Curtis

In May 1939, as Adolf Hitler was issuing ultimatums to Poland, an article in a Paris newspaper asked the question. "Mourir pour Danzig?" Today, the bellicose language of Vladimir Putin, still dispirited over the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the intensifying Russian military activity close to Ukraine and fear of invasion evokes a similar question.

The Russian bear, symbolizing power and might and also ferocity, in reality is a clumsy and mysterious animal.

Thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when it lost power, the bear ridden by the horseman Vladimir Putin, aiming opportunistically if not clumsily, to be a world power is exhibiting mysteriously puzzling indecision about whether to order military aggression against Ukraine.

Two questions can be raised: will Russia continue to intensify its military activity regarding Ukraine and present a dangerous threat to European security; and is the Western world sleep walking about Russian threats of aggression and brinkmanship concerning Ukraine? Russian acts of aggression have been displayed by cyberattacks on Estonian installations, an attempted coup in Montenegro, assassinations in Bulgaria,

poisonings in England, control of Belarus, invasion of Crimea in 2014, and harassing of shipping off the coast of Ukraine and the Sea of Azov. Vladimir Putin has made no secrets of his general intentions, though they are sometimes couched in different forms, but evoking uncertainty and lack of clarity on specific actions towards Ukraine.

In his essay of 2021, "Historical Unity of Russia and Ukraine," Putin argued the people of Russia and Ukraine are one people and have been separated by outside powers. He espouses historic Russian policy, the unity of Russian lands, the need to control Kiev (Kyiv), the fertile Pontic Steppe on northern shore of the Black Sea, and the deep-water port at Sevastopol. Above all, Putin aims at security in strategic depth at the expense of Western powers, and to restore the super-power status of Russia, a reassembling of the power of the Soviet Union.

Putin's polemic against the West is clear, if ill founded. NATO is to stop eastward expansion, and to stop its military activity in a number of arenas. He is conscious of the February 9, 1990 agreement between of Secretary of State James Baker and Mikhail Gorbachev, that in return for the Soviet's withdrawal from East Germany, the West would not expand NATO "an inch to the east," beyond territory of East Germany. Since 1990, there have been three expansions of NATO. Putin claims that the West broke its promises not to expand.

This helps explain Putin's insistence to prevent Ukraine becoming a member of NATO, and calling for NATO troops to be removed from Poland, Estonia Latvia, and Lithuania. Moscow has demanded that the U.S. and NATO should immediately stop "hostile actions" against it, but the reverse is true: hostile actions have come from Russia with 70,000 troops invading Georgia, which had 10,000 troops, in August 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Russia occupied the regions of Abkhazia and south Ossetia in violation of the ceasefire agreement.

Western policy towards this Russian aggression has been divided and ineffectual, as in 2014 when the U.S. and NATO failed to act when Russia annexed Crimea. One immediate issue is the questionable role of Germany which is dependent on Russian gas and oil in imports. It has been hesitant to play any strong role in international affairs, it has business links with Moscow, has not joined in shipping defensive weapons to Ukraine, and has refused to give a definite answer whether it would freeze the Nord Stream 2 pipeline if Russia invaded Ukraine.

Today, countries of the Western world are trying to defuse the tensions arising over Russia's amassing of military forces near Ukraine, and prevent an invasion, appealing to Russia to de-escalate and remove its forces, and threatening to target Russia by a broad package of economic sanctions and export controls. The Russian bear, in noncommittal fashion, has responded that NATO has failed to meet its demands and consequently refused to comment on any timetable or definite date for troop withdrawal.

The U.S, after initial confusing remarks by President Joe Biden, has stated that Russian aggression against Ukraine will be met with "very severe consequences," and swift, united response from U.S. and allies. Biden has called for American citizens to leave Ukraine immediately while stating no U.S. troops would be sent to rescue them. The U.S. has put 8,500 troops on alert to bolster NATO defenses in eastern Europe. Other NATO countries are sending ships and fighter jets to the region, and providing financial help.

Enter French President Emmanuel Macron, the ambitious would-be savior of Europe, promoting his self-image as a global statesman, while seeking to overcome his humiliation after the AUKUS submarine deal. He has promoted himself to the European center stage, eager to take over the leading role in Europe of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as he prepares for a reelection bid to win the presidential elections in April

2022. Macron's approach to resolve the crisis is different from that of the U.S. and other NATO countries. He holds that Russia is mainly interested in clarifying relations with NATO, its extension and the inclusion in it of countries from the former Soviet Union. The question is whether Macron's participation in discussions about Ukraine has helped a solution, or merely indicated differences among Western countries.

On January 1, 2022, France became president of the European Union, and Macron became head of the European Commission. In a speech on January 19, 2022, to the European Parliament, Macron declared that Europe must make its single, powerful voice heard on issues of strategic and conventional weapons, a Europe as a democratic, cultural. and educational power advocating peace and equilibrium. This entails frank, demanding dialogue with Russia. Macron who in 2019 had declared that NATO was "brain dead" now argues that the EU must play a larger role in defense of Europe, more independent from U.S. influence.

Macron outlined his objectives; avoid war; defend Europe and its allies; protect important principles, respect of the sovereignty of all states; territorial integrity and values; and dialogue with Russia. The Ukraine crisis needs attention and time; "I do not believe it can be resolved by a few hours of deliberation."

The Macron approach means a leadership role for Europe, one not dependent on the U.S. But he is also a French nationalist. France, he held, is Europe's leading power and presence in the Pacific. His aim is to prevent Russian aggression and at the same time to deal with Russia's complaints about NATO expansion eastwards. This policy would use the so called "Normandy format," high level political discussions, which resulted from a meeting of representatives of four countries, France, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, during D Day celebrations in Normandy in 2014, to resolve the war in Donbas and the

annexation of the Crimean peninsula. It led to the 2015 Minsk Protocol, which required Ukraine to grant autonomy to two Russian backed separatist regions in east Ukraine, and achieved a cease fire in Donbas, but was never fully implemented. The new Normandy format would be a meeting of four powers to search for a solution; and to try to de-escalate the Russian military presence. In recent weeks, Russia has massed troops and weapons close to Ukraine borders, and moved troops and weaponry into Belarus.

In February, 2022, Macron embarked on several days of intense international diplomacy. In a six-hour meeting with Vladimir Putin on in Moscow at which the two leaders sat at a 13-foot table, each at opposite ends, apparently because Macron refused to take a Covid test. Macron made proposals without consulting or informing his ministers.

Macron presented ideas to Putin, and later claimed they had reached agreement that Putin would not take new military initiatives, agreed on proposals that would lead to de-escalation of tensions between Russia and Ukraine, and that Russia would withdraw troops from Belarus, and Macron hinted at private promises with Putin. However, these claims were denied and ridiculed by Moscow which asserted that Macron did not have enough influence or authority to negotiate any deal unilaterally.

One Macron proposal is to de-escalate the crisis by "Finlandizing" the Ukraine, a reference to the Finish-Soviet treaty of April 1948 that meant Finland's neutrality in the Cold War, agreement not to join NATO, allowing the Soviet Union to influence Finnish internal and external [policy, with Finland maintaining its own political and economic system. In the present situation , Finlandization would mean Ukraine would remain independent but would refrain from supporting opposition of others to Russia.

Sport may stop play. After a Finlandization meeting on

February 10, 2022, which failed to reach agreement, the efforts of Macron were praised by Russian negotiators. Not all the NATO nations would agree. Yet there is still time. No Russian invasion of Ukraine is likely before the end of the Olympics. Macron should stick to electioneering politics.