

The Pressure Is On: Biden Has a Year To Pull Out a Success in Ukraine



by Conrad Black

Some commentators have accused President Biden of invoking “the lessons of Munich,” in reference to the Ukraine War, and particularly of citing those lessons erroneously in his address to the United Nations last week. Meticulous scrutiny of his text discloses no reference to Munich or to the practice of “appeasement” in international relations.

Mr. Biden did say that if the world had not reacted to the unprovoked attack upon Ukraine by Russia, then no country would be secure against such an attack by some other country. This may be hyperbole, but it is a reasonable formulation: if the international community does absolutely nothing when large

countries attack smaller countries without any resemblance of a *casus belli*.

That means international security is undermined, and where there is no deterrence whatever against such acts of aggression, such acts will occur with increasing frequency. The specific facts of the Ukraine war are more complicated: distasteful though it is to acknowledge it, Ukraine was a failed state which had never operated as a successful independent country.

Plus, Russia does have some historic legitimate rights in Ukraine; about a sixth of Ukrainians speak Russian. However, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, like the other 14 non-Russian, so-called republics of the USSR, declared its independence.

It had every right to do this and has been recognized by the whole world as an independent country for more than 30 years. The fact that the Russian government has not acknowledged the legitimacy of all these provinces of the Tsarist Russian Empire and the Soviet Union does not compromise Ukraine's right to exist and to try to make a go of it as an independent country.

There is a credibility gap in the president's claim to be manning the battlements of the universal rights of nations, since he implied just before the outbreak of war that he would not be overly concerned if Russia simply wished to seize some of the Russian-speaking areas of Ukraine, which is almost precisely what it has done and is evidently prepared to make peace on the basis of its retention of them.

American credibility was also squandered in a deterrent role by the statement of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Milley, at the outset that Russia would take Kyiv within a few days and the whole country within a few weeks. There was not a hint of reprisal in his remarks nor at the

outset any such assertion of the inviolable rights of all countries as the president made at the United Nations.

It is commendable that, on the heels of the heroic and successful resistance of the Ukrainians, the president has adopted this view. If Russia had conquered all of Ukraine, it would have successfully portrayed the West, as China and Russia were both describing the West at that time, as a paper tiger, and it would have won back the largest single piece in the West's total and almost bloodless strategic victory in the Cold War that caused the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of international communism. President George W. Bush was more explicit on June 15, 2001, when he exclaimed in Warsaw: "No more Munichs; no more Yaltas!" This sort of histrionics, like inaccurate imputations to Mr. Biden of invoking the Munich Conference of 1938, illustrate the dangers of an inadequate knowledge of history.

Czechoslovakia was a country cobbled together at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 out of the carcass of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Slovakia, Bohemia, and Moravia were thrown together into a single country in which there were large pockets of Germans, Hungarians, and Poles.

As part of his destruction of the Treaty of Versailles, Adolf Hitler identified neighboring German-speaking communities which preferred to be German rather than the nationality given them by the victorious Allies in that treaty. First, he reoccupied the Rhineland, then Austria, and then came the turn of the Sudeten Germans, who were Czechoslovakians.

Britain and France could not possibly have gone to war to prevent the Sudetenlanders from becoming citizens of Germany and as soon as Hitler had annexed Sudetenland, Poland and Hungary occupied the kindred parts of Czechoslovakia also.

The errors of the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain and the French premier, Eduard Daladier, were that they should

never have allowed the crisis to worsen as it did, given that they had no ability whatever to prevent the Czech Germans from becoming German; and Chamberlain should not have ignored the efforts of both Roosevelt and Stalin to create a common front against Nazi aggression.

Then, Chamberlain had absolutely no right to claim Munich was a triumph reminiscent of Disraeli's *tour de force* at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. When Daladier returned to Paris from Munich and saw that the crowds at the airport were cheering, he said to an aide: "the bloody fools."

When Hitler occupied all of Bohemia and Moravia three months later, convinced by Munich that the British and French were weaklings, Chamberlain committed the crowning insanity of a unilateral guarantee of Poland, which Britain had no ability to assist when Hitler and Stalin invaded it in September 1939.

Britain and France should have decided what they would fight for and done all they could to attract the support of Roosevelt and Stalin, who were amenable. Instead, they bluffed, backed down, called it victory, cold-shouldered Moscow and Washington, and paid undue attention to the mountebank Mussolini.

Similarly, the argument that Roosevelt and Churchill gave Eastern Europe to Stalin at Yalta is a complete fraud. It is something disgruntled Republican office seekers, grumpy British imperialists, posturing French Gaullists, and Cold War appeasers of the USSR such as Germany's Willy Brandt and Canada's Pierre Trudeau, could all, for different reasons, agree upon.

At Yalta, the United States, the USSR, and the United Kingdom all agreed that all liberated countries would hold absolutely free democratic elections and the victorious Allies would withdraw from them. There was a special occupation regime for Germany. The British and Americans withdrew from the countries

they liberated and free elections were held in them.

That was while the Russians maintained their military presence, installed the local communist parties, and conducted fraudulent elections. The Cold War began, the containment strategy worked, the Soviet Union fell like a soufflé, and the Eastern European countries achieved independence and most of them are today passably democratic.

We are now waiting to see if the long-promised Ukrainian offensive can make any significant reductions in the Russian-occupied area of Ukraine, which Moscow claims to have annexed and in which it professes to have held free elections, which are, of course, a complete mockery of free elections.

An American president with greater stature in the world could broker the agreement that awaits: retention by Russia of most of what it has occupied, with the right of all Ukrainians to relocate to Ukraine or to Russia, and with absolute guarantees from Russia, Belarus, and all of NATO of Ukraine's independence within its new borders.

It would be necessary to assure that these were real guarantees and not the false assurances of no value that were given to Ukraine as well as Belarus and Kazakhstan when they voluntarily gave up their post-Soviet and nuclear arsenals. With NATO's ironclad guarantee, Ukraine could remain outside NATO.

Military assistance should then be transformed into economic assistance to rebuild from the war damage and prepare Ukraine for membership in the European Union. Everyone knows this is the outline of a reasonable compromise but there's no evidence that anyone is at this point trying to negotiate it. President Biden still has a year to try to produce a success for his administration.

First published in the [*New York Sun*](#).