

Ukraine crisis: Economic sanctions and arming Ukrainians won't end the violence. Diplomacy remains the last, best option

Криза в Україні: Економічні санкції та озброєння українців не покладуть край насильству. Найкращий варіант – це дипломатія, яка залишилася в минулому

В статті розкривається думка про те, що двоїстий характер підтримки України Заходом у її конфлікті з проросійськими сепаратистами (економічні санкції плюс надання військової допомоги українській армії) не буде ефективним кроком у вирішенні конфліктної ситуації. Західні санкції та падіння цін на нафту дійсно боляче вдарили по російській економіці, проте Путін зміг інтерпретувати ці події так, що громадськість в його державі всю провину за це покладає лише на західні держави. При безпосередньому озброєнні української армії конфронтація між США та Росією буде набирати все більших обертів. Підхід до вирішення кризи в Україні має бути інший. По-перше, це фінансова допомога слабкій українській економіці, по-друге, необхідно надати свіжий імпульс дипломатичним намаганням вирішити ситуацію. Тим паче, що унікальна особистість вже зголосилася бути посередником у дипломатичних переговорах між Заходом та Росією для вирішення конфлікту. Мова йде про Михайла Горбачова.

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It is in the nature of modern diplomacy that successes, being regular, capture less public attention than failures, which are not. But that doesn't mean the failures should escape censure; and of all the failures in recent diplomacy, the current breakdown in relations between the West and Russia must count among the most unforgivable. At every stage of the Ukraine crisis, the main players on both sides have done an excellent job of misreading each other, so that, nearly a year on from the start of the biggest crisis in European security since the end of the Cold War, the prospects for peace look further away than ever.

Russian aggression is the main cause of this conflict. But not far behind that is the post-1989 delusion of Europe's political elites, who thought that after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia would want to embrace ever-closer ties with the West. For the past two decades, they have consistently mishandled Russia without realising it. Western leaders have been slow to grasp the extent to which losing the Cold War was a blow to Russian pride. Nato's eastward expansion offended Moscow, coming after repeated reassurances that it would not happen. A UN resolution on a no-fly zone above Libya soured relations even more.

Now things have got much worse. Last week, Russian-backed separatists attacked the industrial city of Mariupol in southern Ukraine, largely because of its strategic location between Crimea and Donetsk. This week, they say they will mobilise 100,000 men in this territory, a figure so unlikely that it can only imply their ranks will be swollen by men sent directly by Moscow. As a result of this escalation, there is now fevered talk in Washington and European capitals about the need to arm

Ukraine's battered army. Western strategy is now a twin approach: economic sanctions coupled with military support for Ukraine. Neither is likely to be effective.

Economic sanctions, and the fall in oil prices, have indeed hurt Russia's economy. But in doing so they may have strengthened Vladimir Putin, who has used state media to blame the country's pain on Western meddling. As for arming Ukraine, it is fraught with difficulty. The chances of direct military confrontation between the US and Russia will increase. Then there are countless practical obstacles. Matching the weaponry sent with the skills of the Ukrainian military would not be straightforward. Moreover, given the weakness of Ukrainian forces and the volatility of the region, there is a considerable chance that such weaponry could fall into the hands of private militias.

Western policy does need a twin approach – but a different one. First, it must support Ukraine's economy with tens of billions in aid rather than the much smaller amounts so far pledged. Second, it must give diplomacy a fresh, urgent boost. For, despite all its failures in the past two decades, never mind the past year, the idea that diplomacy has run its course is itself a terrible admission of defeat, which cannot be allowed to linger.

One man who is known to both sides, and has a record in reconciling Russia with the West, is Mikhail Gorbachev. He is understood to want to play a role in a reconciliation – and to be willing to coax other distinguished elder statesmen to do the same. That would be a very worthwhile initiative. Gorbachev is a unique and exceptional figure who has long since proven his ability to bring enemies to the same table.

But he cannot do it alone. A burst of diplomatic vigour from Western leaders, coupled with huge economic support for Ukraine, is likely in the short term to be our last, best hope of avoiding a sharp escalation in this conflict.