Will cooperation be fit for the job in Ukraine?

By Bariş Çelik, PhD Topic: EU and NATO crisis management operations

Twitter: @fbarisceli

Both critical policy circles[1] and academics[2] suggest that the Russian aggression is partly a result of major Western powers' past decisions, such as the 2003 intervention in Iraq, the US deployment of ballistic missile shields to Poland and the Czech Republic in 2007, as well as giving Georgia a NATO membership vision in 2008. The underlying assumption behind this argument is that in gaining a hold in Eastern Europe, US and its European partners tapped on Kremlin's anxieties about NATO expansion into the countries with deep cultural and economic ties with Russia. Others would argue that the bulk of former Soviet countries wilfully chose to partner with the West instead of the Russian Federation, because NATO and the EU offered them a more equal footing in their alliances. On the contrary, the argument goes, Russia offered these former Soviet countries a more vulnerable position in an asymmetrical alliance based on Russia's dominance in size, economy and military[3].

Whichever position one finds more sensible, the events leading up to the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the conflict itself show a disregard for procedural rules and seek hard power-based outcomes. States and international organisations have so far sought to respond to the Russian aggression by using a myriad of methods. Some states have come together in regional and international organisations, while some have chosen to act unilaterally. Outside of formal inter-state organisations, some states have used temporary coalitions or groups of

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[1] Stop the War Coalition (2022). Stop The War Statement on Ukraine – 24/02/22 [online]. Available at: https://www.stopwar.org.uk/article/stop-the-war-statement-on-ukraine-24-02-22/ [Accessed: 28.02.2022].

[2] Alcaro, R. (2022). Europe's Post-Cold War Order Is No More, JOINT Brief, available at: https://www.jointproject.eu/2022/02/23/europes-post-cold-war-order-is-no-more/ [Accessed: 28.02.2022].

[3] Ke, C. et al. (2016). Too big to prevail: Coalition formations in the presence of a superpower, QuBE Working Papers 044, QUT Business School.

likeminded partners. Despite leaving the EU, for instance, the UK has been active through mini-lateral formats to work with other European countries in Ukraine[4].

This menu of choices available for states intuitively suggests some advantages. First, it can serve as a 'force multiplier': the more constellations of states respond to Russia, the more decisive will be the response. Second, the existence of various forms of cooperation can give the states flexibility by enabling them to pick and choose cooperation agreements that are most favourable for their interests.

At the same time, states' ability to select from a variety of cooperation methods can also lead to a decentralised and complex network of actors and groupings, all aimed at resolving the same problem[5]. As a result, collective responses to common problems yield disparate lines of effort. Some analysts warn that this disparity is more worrying than the problems themselves[6]. In the area of security and defence, the existence of more actors without clear and effective partitions of work does not translate into more effective cooperation. When investigating major European countries' collective efforts to resolve the crisis in Afghanistan, for instance, I found that the involvement of too many actors (NATO, the EU, UN, various NGOs and individual states) has led these countries to think of Afghanistan as a 'chessboard': they have often made their policies by not considering the needs of the Afghan people, but by calculating the implications of their policies in one venue for the other. In Afghanistan, political reasons that have little to do with the field led states to intentionally limit some multilateral efforts that could otherwise contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Interestingly, some states did so by taking part in these efforts: when France objected NATO's involvement in areas of what it deemed as EU expertise, for instance, it used its key contributions to NATO efforts to limit NATO's involvement[7].

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[4] Rogers, J. and Whitman, R. (2022). 'Global Britain': The European security activist [online]. Available at: https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/global-britain-the-european-security-activist/ [Accessed: 28.02.2022].

[5] Alter, K. J. and Raustiala, K. (2018). The Rise of International Regime Complexity. Annual Review of Law and Social Science, 14(329), 329-349.

[6] Alter, K. J. (2020). Comprehending global governance: International regime complexity vs. global constitutionalism. Global Constitutionalism, 9(2), 413-423.

[7] Çelik, F. B. (2021). The "5,000-kilometre screwdriver": German and French police training in Afghanistan through the EU and NATO, Global Affairs, 7(1), 27-42.

The same risks apply to international efforts responding to the Russian aggression in Ukraine. When the US, NATO, the UN and other actors launch their attempts, they enter into an existing network of efforts – partly formed by these actors' very own previous attempts. This begs the question of how such complexity will affect international cooperation to retaliate against the Russian aggression: will there be complementarity and division of labour, or will there be too much unnecessary duplication? In any scenario, complexity is risky because states that seek to resolve the conflict in Ukraine can escape those obligations that are inconvenient to them. They might, for instance, choose to commit to a collective response under NATO, but this might be incompatible with that of the EU. In an area like security and defence, where states are reluctant to relinquish their authorities, there are no substantial constraints for states to opportunistically use their institutional positions in this way – to undermine other institutions. Furthermore, if existing state-based solutions do not work, non-state actors will be less likely to step in to resolve such deadlocks: they cannot always work out their own solutions because states, and their interests, remain the essential components in international security and defence.

Until now, international response to Russia's intervention in Ukraine seemed to be more or less consistent partly because of the immediacy of the issue and the wide consensus behind the humanitarian dimension of the conflict. But contested multilateralism –the use and creation of various disparate cooperation methods without clear partition of work between them– will be more likely to occur as the conflict and invasion unfold. This is important because the events in Ukraine seem to enter into a more protracted phase with enduring problems, ranging from the issues of Ukrainian refugees to the reconstruction of West's relationships with Russia. In this context, actors involved in ending the conflict and the Russian invasion should start thinking beyond business as usual, and craft their individual and collective efforts with clear tasks and rules between them.