

Angela Stent
What Happens Next – 4.15.2022

Angela Stent:

I have four questions and answers about Putin. Question one, why did Putin invade Ukraine now? He believed that Zelenskyy was moving against Russian interests *and* was mad that Zelensky hadn't been willing to make peace on Putin's terms.

Secondly, he thought the US was weak. He looked at the disastrous exit from Afghanistan, our polarized politics and thought that the US was too distracted. Thirdly, he thought the Europeans were too distracted. The Germans were going through a new coalition, the French were in the lead up to the election, Britain was pre-occupied with Brexit. He did not believe that the Western alliance would impose really tough sanctions on him that there would be no unity on that.

His invasion was based on a number of serious miscalculations. Number one, the Russian army isn't as strong as he thought it was. Secondly, the Ukrainians fought back instead of collapsing in 72 hours. They're well trained and are fighting for a cause, whereas Russian teenage recruits don't even know why they're there.

Another miscalculation was Transatlantic unity. The Europeans stepped up to the plate. They joined the United States in presenting a united front against Russia. And the Japanese, South Koreans, and other Asian countries did as well. And they imposed very tough sanctions on Russia.

Where are we now? The Russians were unable to take Kiev, which they thought they were gonna take in 72 hours. They've now retreated and focusing on the Southeastern Donbas region.

They've completely decimated Mariupol, the port city where allegedly they used some chemical weapons. And they have managed to cut off Odessa from the rest of Ukraine. The Ukrainians cannot export their grain, not because of sanctions, but because the Russians have cut them off.

Putin would like to announce on the ninth of May, Victory Day, that he has had a major success in Ukraine and that they've taken back the Donbas. Let's see whether he is able to do that. We have a united West. Yes, the US, Europe, and our Asian allies are together on imposing sanctions, but the rest of the world is not; it's not only China. India has refused to condemn Russia *or* to join sanctions.

Other major countries: South Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Mexico, Brazil, countries in Southeast Asia, in Africa, none of them are willing to condemn Russia. And those countries, if you look at the UN votes, represent more than half of world's population.

The best outcome would be a negotiated settlement, however, I do not believe the Russians are interested in a negotiated settlement, but if they were, the Ukrainians have said that they would give up trying to join NATO, but they would want security guarantees from the West. They've said that they're willing to discuss the status of Crimea and of the Donbas with Russia. But the condition for making these concessions is for Russia to withdraw at least those troops that invaded on the 24th of February. We have had no sign from the Russians of any concessions that they would make.

If there isn't a negotiated settlement, this war can continue for a long time. It can be a low level war of attrition. It could also escalate, we've had signs of a possible use of a chemical agent. Putin has also threatened to use nuclear weapons. They're not off the table.

Once the US and NATO will have permanent troops on the Eastern front-line states. Putin's also achieved what he (laughs) always wanted to prevent, Finland and Sweden are now apparently poised to join NATO, something that they refused to do for the past 70 years.

Larry Bernstein:

Why is China supporting Russia in this war?

Angela Stent:

The Chinese have very significant economic interests in their relationship with the West, with Europe and the US, and not with Russia. They won't join in condemnation. They still *want* an authoritarian Russia as their partner pushing back against US and Western hegemony.

Larry Bernstein:

I am confused by India's neutrality. India lately has joined Team USA, what happened?

Angela Stent:

India *has* their own concerns about China and Chinese-Pakistani relations, and so they see Russia as an important balancer against China. They have a tradition during the Cold War of being neutral and a lot of suspicion of the United States.

In large parts of the rest of the world, a lot of this is determined not because of Russia's great, it's their resentment against the United States and hypocrisy. They will point to Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, et cetera.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think Israel's more neutral policy relates to the large Russian Jewish population in Israel, the risk that Israel may need to evacuate the Ukrainian Jewish population, and its desire to work with Russia in Syria and Iran?

Angela Stent:

Israel did vote to oust Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council, and it has condemned Russia but it's not joining the sanctions. Their major concern is Iranian activities in Syria, and without cooperation from Russia, they can't fight back against Hezbollah.

The domestic population is extremely complicated. Natan Sharansky, the famous Soviet dissident, has condemned his government for not doing more, because he's always been very anti-Putin. Avidgor Liberman, who comes from Moldova has had a very cozy relationship with Putin and he won't criticize Russia.

There's three million former Soviet Jews that live in Israel, there's no unanimity on this. And then, there are the business ties. These wealthy Russian Jewish oligarchs have ties with Israel *and* with the Putin regime as well.

Memories of the way that Ukrainians treated Jews in the past isn't very good. As the Israelis say, Russia's like a neighbor. It has enabled Israel to carry out all kinds of strikes against Hezbollah and Iranian-backed forces in Syria that are threatening to Israel.

Larry Bernstein:

What about the developing world?

Angela Stent:

None of the BRICS countries have condemned Russia: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

Mexico. Do you know that after the war broke out, the Mexican parliament formed a Russia-Mexico friendship caucus?

Brazil: Bolsonaro feels that they've been neglected by the Biden Administration. The attitude towards the United States is clearly not what it used to be.

Larry Bernstein:

Why did Western analysts and their political leaders underestimate the risk of war in Ukraine?

Angela Stent:

Most Western analysts, and I would include myself, looked at Putin's previous behavior. The grievances he's had against Ukraine, against the West, they've been on display since 2007 when he made his infamous speech at the Munich Security Conference. And he's always said Ukraine *is* not a real country.

In 2008, Russia went to war with Georgia, but they didn't go to Tbilisi, they didn't take out President Zourabichvili, whom they loathed.

In 2014, they took Crimea in a bloodless coup, and then they started the war in the Donbas region, but it was limited. Most people thought that what Putin was going to do was to take more of the Donbas, what the Russians are trying to do now.

Most of us realize that Putin is now a much greater risk taker than he was eight years ago and doesn't have a pragmatic sense of where to stop.

Larry Bernstein:

Putin made a speech at the outset of the war in Ukraine. What do you make of Putin's justification of the invasion?

Angela Stent:

Putin's seized on this Nazi trope because that dehumanizes the Ukrainians.

It's just like World War II, we're gonna get rid of those Nazis.

The other part of his speech was it's the United States and NATO that's backing these Nazis, and it's using Nazi Ukraine as a platform to either invade Russia *or* to threaten it. And the foreign minister, Lavrov, said, "This isn't really a war about Ukraine, we're at war with the West, with the United States." Which is the way that they see it.

Larry Bernstein:

Why is Putin's popularity increasing during the war?

Angela Stent:

For most Russians, it's becoming increasingly difficult to have access to other sources of information, they're seeing state-run TV 24/7. We're fighting the Nazis, we're winning. The massacre in Bucha, it's done by the Ukrainians themselves or fake actors.

Russia is only targeting military targets and everything else is fake.

A lot of the recruits come from rural parts of Russia, and they're particularly badly informed.

Larry Bernstein:

You have explained how the war in Ukraine is in Russia's interest, but why does it make sense for Putin personally?

Angela Stent:

Putin's done pretty well out of the collapse of the Soviet Union (laughing), if you look at how much wealth he and his comrades have accumulated.

He would show up to world meetings, and he's an impressive, strong man. He rebuilt the Russian economy, he seemed to create stability there. And everyone thought he's an autocrat *that* we can do business with.

Larry Bernstein:

How did Putin miscalculate the extent of the sanctions?

Angela Stent:

He thought that the sanctions that would be imposed on Russia would be similar to those in 2014. There'd be sanctions on banks *and* on individuals. But he did not believe that the Europeans would agree to these full frontal financial sanctions. The export controls are affecting their ability to get spare parts, to fly their planes, for their entire industrial base. He was an intent on this invasion and he thinks that Russia can weather these sanctions, but it's gonna be hard to see in the longer run how they do.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you agree with John Mearsheimer that it was US actions to expand NATO and encourage Ukraine to join the EU that set off the war?

Angela Stent:

I don't give very much credence to it. NATO expansion is not what has caused this. The West is not responsible for this.

Putin's desire to get back these lands has existed from the time that the Soviet Union collapsed and he lost his job as a KGB case officer. Before 2014, a majority of Ukrainians did not want to join NATO. Ukraine had neutrality in its constitution.

In the last year since the annexation of Crimea the Ukrainians changed their mind on this. Where I would fault the West is in 2008, when there was a NATO summit and the Bush administration did push a membership action plan for Ukraine, and the Germans and French were adamantly against it. They had a compromised communique which said Ukraine and Georgia will join NATO. Ukraine was not on any track for NATO membership that communique was a mistake because it's provided something for the Russians to seize on.

Larry Bernstein:

On May 9th, Putin will celebrate Victory Day for the war in Ukraine. What will Putin say he won?

Angela Stent:

Maybe by May 9th, they can say, "We took Mariupol, more of the Donbas," and cut off Ukraine from the Black Sea. "We've won." He can't go back and say, "We denazified the country," because Zelenskyy's still in power, and denazification was a code word for a regime change, Kiev. But he could present a territorial gain.

Larry Bernstein:

What insight do you have on the Ukrainian refugee crisis?

Angela Stent:

Putin thought that creating refugees would destabilize Europe *like* the Syrian refugees.

If you have large numbers of Ukrainian refugees living in different parts of Europe and integrating into Europe, you could get a European body politic that becomes even harder in its views of Russia.

Larry Bernstein:

What happens next with China and the Ukraine war?

Angela Stent:

The Chinese have continued to back Russia. They repeat all of the Russian tropes, including what happened at Bucha was either done by the Ukrainians or actors.

China used to say, "We don't believe in solving things through violence and military means," and they're not saying that very much anymore.

Major Chinese banks are complying with the sanctions. We'll have to see how much the Chinese help the Russians evade sanctions going forward. For Xi Jinping, the relationship with Vladimir Putin is very important. He's a fellow authoritarian leader who's increasingly dependent on China. If China really wants to push against an American dominated world order, he needs Putin.

The February the 4th declaration that was signed between Putin and Xi Jinping in Beijing said it's a partnership that knows no limits, it's better than an alliance.

Larry Bernstein

What are you optimistic about?

Angela Stent:

I'm optimistic, about the way that Europe and Asian allies have responded to this. We hope that as the sanctions continue to affect you that we can keep that unity.

Larry Bernstein:

Putin will demand an end to sanctions as part of any settlement. What happens next?

Angela Stent:

Well, he's only going to get sanctions lifted if the Russians do what they promised to do. It's incredibly difficult to lift US sanctions, particularly if the US Congress has anything to do with it.

Larry Bernstein:

Since you predict that neither side wants to negotiate, do you see a long war?

Angela Stent:

Yes. It's going to going to continue for a long time or at least as long as Putin's in the Kremlin.
We don't know how long he'll be President.