Putin's Folly and Rethinking the SDGs

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Abstract

The invasion of Ukraine is widely seen as Putin's war, because he has a retrograde obsession to make Russia great again by reclaiming parts of the former Soviet Union. But Russia's autocrat made several huge miscalculations regarding his military efficacy, resistance by Ukraine, military support and strong economic sanctions by the US and other nations, and many corporations withdrawing from Russia. Putin may still "win" at a huge cost, or clearly lose; he may settle for a compromise, or a stalemate could last for many months or more. Overall, it will be a lose-lose war, not only for a devastated Ukraine and its many displaced citizens, but for the Russian economy, and the world, facing food security and energy security concerns, huge refugee problems, inflation, and supply chain problems. This setback, roughly equal to the many disruptions from the ongoing COVID-19 setback, could very well be worse. Putin's foolish and costly military action will lead to greater military spending in NATO countries, at the expense of other forms of security, such as addressing climate change and the necessary energy transition. Attention will focus on military security, at a time when more emphasis should be devoted to the broader concept of human security and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The two broad setbacks to the SDGs are likely to result in little or no progress, and even negative progress for some goals. In response, a forward-looking "war" for human security and sustainability is needed, by ongoing rethinking of the goals and their low visibility. We cannot have sustainability without security, and vice versa. Security aspects of the SDGs should be widely emphasized, as well as the most cost-effective actions for each goal, why investments now are needed to avoid steeply rising costs, and how to best promote the goals as a better and less expensive future for all.

1. Prologue: A Lose-Lose War

At the time of this writing, the vicious and unwarranted Russian invasion of Ukraine is still underway, with no end in sight. The assault is more accurately seen as Putin's War, because the Russian autocrat has a retrograde obsession to make Russia great again by reclaiming nations that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, especially Ukraine.

On the surface, it would seem to be an easy grab, similar to Crimea in 2014, because the Russian army is much larger than that of Ukraine. But Putin has made several huge miscalculations: he assumed that Ukraine would welcome him, he underestimated the fierce

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opposition of the Ukrainian people and the exemplary wartime leadership of Volodymyr Zelensky, and he underestimated American financial and military support for Ukraine. Moreover, he overestimated the efficacy of Russian forces, which were poorly trained and largely stalled because of poor command structure, corruption, low morale, and logistical problems of fuel and food. NATO has been strengthened as a result of Putin's war, which is quite the opposite of what he desires. Putin also underestimated the economic sanctions undertaken by the US and other nations, and many large corporations, to freeze Russia out of the world economy and to seize assets of Russia's oligarchs. Over 500 corporations have voluntarily left Russia or suspended activities there, including Visa and Mastercard, Coke and Pepsi, Uber, Shell, Dell, UPS, Starbucks, the 834 locations of McDonald's, and Netflix (which has become Nyetflix). Despite the stream of Orwellian misinformation from Moscow, Putin is correct in complaining about "economic war". But it is richly deserved, although still more is needed to force Putin into serious bargaining and withdrawal.

Four basic outcome scenarios suggest the broad range of possibilities: Putin wins, he loses, he settles for a compromise, or a stalemate lasting many months or more. Ukraine is already a huge loser, with tens of thousands of deaths, widespread aimless infrastructure destruction, and more than 4 million refugees and 7 million internally displaced from the 41 million population. But Putin is already a loser, with perhaps 15,000 military casualties (including six Russian Generals), widespread protests in the West and in Russia, despite arrests and threats of prison for the brave citizens who are speaking out, and growing evidence of war crimes and genocide. At present, Russian forces have withdrawn from the Kyiv region and are concentrated in the eastern provinces for what is widely expected to be a bloody struggle.

There is virtually no chance that Ukraine will give up in the short term, absent widespread use of chemical or biological weapons, or the unlikely but still possible detonation of a small nuclear weapon. If Putin somehow succeeds in conquering all or part of Ukraine in months and even years ahead, it will be a Pyrrhic victory at best. He will claim victory, but the world and many Russians will know better about the huge costs. Putin is already widely seen as a war criminal for attacking civilians. If he continues to double down, as he seeks to destroy the Donbas region, he can only descend to the status of "super war criminal"—a 21st century Hitler.

In contrast, Putin could be a big loser, if he is somehow removed from office, or assassinated (very unlikely). He is also reported to be in poor health and may die of natural causes. (But any successor will not necessarily be an improvement.) As Russia suffers more from economic sanctions, if the blanket of Russian misinformation is widely pierced, and if the enhanced attack in eastern Ukraine is thwarted, a huge Putin loss becomes quite possible.

Talks between Russia and Ukraine had been underway (Putin recently said they are "dead"), and a compromise might yet be reached, essentially involving Ukraine not joining NATO, and ceding Crimea and perhaps part of the eastern Donbas region to Russia. Ukraine presently insists it will cede nothing. Huge questions about security guarantees for Ukraine, reparations, and removing sanctions would have to be addressed.

One can go on and on about Putin's motivations, which side is winning and likely to prevail when and where, and whether any compromise and cease-fire can be reached—and maintained. Much has already been written about the war and will continue to be written. But relatively little has been written about the consequences of this *lose-lose* war: energy insecurity and rising worldwide prices for oil and natural gas, inflation, further supply chain problems, cyber-security concerns, food security concerns (especially in Africa and the Middle East), fertilizer concerns (Russia supplies critical components), and huge refugee problems. All of this is on top of many disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 setback.

"Putin's War, whatever the outcome, will be a major setback to the SDGs and Agenda 2030. Instead of this hideous and unwarranted lose-lose war based on unfounded premises and outright lies (e.g. about "de-nazification"), nations should be widely engaged in a forward-looking good war for security and sustainability."

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2. Putin's War, Human Security, and Agenda 2030

Thinking more broadly in space and time, this article considers the impact of the war in Ukraine over the next decade on two umbrella concepts: Human Security and the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, a.k.a. the SDGs and Agenda 2030.

No matter the outcome of Putin's war, there will be a widespread loss in Ukraine, Russia, and the world at large—a setback roughly on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic—and probably worse. If Putin wins or if some compromise is agreed on, it will probably be a setback for democracy. If Putin loses, it will be a victory for freedom and democracy, but still with widespread economic losses. In any event, there already is—and will be—far more thinking about traditional notions of national security.

The Human Security concept has been around for several decades, but with different definitions, as seen in the International Institute for Human Security (2001, Chicago), the Institute for Human Security (2001, Tufts University), the Institute for Human Security (2003, University of Pittsburgh), Human Security Centre (2013, London), Human Security Collective (2013, The Hague), and the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (2003, Bonn). Several other research organizations also seek to broaden the traditional notion of national security and military strength without using the "human security" term. It is virtually certain, however, that Putin's folly and the resulting reinvigoration of NATO will lead to greater military spending, at least in the short term, at the expense of spending on other forms of security such as addressing climate change and the necessary energy transition. Already, Germany plans to increase spending on armed forces by 100 billion euros, while Denmark and The Netherlands will increase national security spending to 2% of their GNP.

Security is not explicitly mentioned in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, although it is suggested in the catch-all aspirations of SDG #16 on "Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions," which include the rule of law and the forlorn hope for a "significant decline" in all forms of violence. Putin's War is an obvious thrust in the opposite direction.

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As for the SDGs, which apply to all nations, they are appreciated more in poorer countries that stand to benefit the most, but little-known in the richer countries which have the resources to help the poorer countries. The lack of SDG visibility in general is puzzling, but here are four possible reasons that keep them from being better-known:

- Complexity: the 17 goals and 169 sub-goals are difficult to grasp as a whole, even when summarized as six necessary transformations, as they sometimes are;

- Climate Dominance: climate change is by far the best-known and arguably most urgent global concern, as underscored in the recent IPCC report. Although recognized as SDG#13 (Climate Action), it is not seen in context as one of the SDGs;

- Thousands of Relevant Organizations Involved: for better and for worse, *The Security & Sustainability Guide* identifies some 2,500 largely international organizations (NGOs, government agencies, academic institutes, businesses, UN agencies and programs) involved with a single SDG (e.g. water, cities, poverty) or perhaps a few goals, but making no reference to the SDGs; these organizations include several hundred alliances, coalitions, consortia, and networks that are likely more effective in securing action, but also duplicative of effort and competing for funding and attention;

- Lack of Publicity: very occasionally, the SDGs get a passing reference at best in *The New York Times, Foreign Affairs, The Economist, Time, The Guardian,* etc., where climate and energy issues are covered extensively.

To repeat, Putin's War, whatever the outcome, will be a major setback to the SDGs and Agenda 2030. Instead of this hideous and unwarranted *lose-lose* war based on unfounded premises and outright lies (e.g. about "de-nazification"), nations should be widely engaged in a forward-looking *good war* for security and sustainability in a troubled world of nearly 8 billion people, likely to grow to 9.7 billion by 2050, absent widespread war or pandemics.

3. Rethinking the Sustainable Development Goals

At a moment of widespread pro-Ukraine solidarity within and among most Western nations, *there will be another major setback to the SDGs*, adding to the slowly waning setback from the COVID-19 pandemic, which is not yet declining in some places as the BA.2 variant and

others appear. Many proposals for SDG action urge "acceleration," but more likely or not there will be little or no progress, and even negative progress for some goals, with poor nations suffering the most. The urgency for action and seriously accelerating progress could—and should—lead to a mid-course rethinking of the goals. To this end, here are 12 suggestions:

- Recognize the Obvious: *we cannot have sustainability without security, or security without sustainability;*

- Disaggregate Human Security: stress the security aspect of eight SDGs: economic security (SDG#1 on poverty & #8 on work), food security (SDG#2), health security (SDG#3), energy security (SDG#7), mobility security for refugees (SDG#10), climate security (SDG#13), and anti-violence security (SDG#16 on peace);

- Prioritize Goals and Solutions: climate is paramount, followed by and interrelated with biodiversity and pollution (SDG#14 on "life below water" and #15 on "life on land"); more emphasis on established and start-up solutions, as well as indicators of progress;

- Prioritize Cost-Effective Actions for Each Goal: but reassess in light of new technology and information (Project Drawdown on reducing carbon emissions is an exemplar);

- Annual Nominations and Awards: for individual organizations and alliances for each goal (5% of the attention given to Hollywood's hyped-up Oscars would be a big step ahead);

- A Better Slogan: for example, "Better Ways to a Better World for All" is arguably better than "17 Goals to Transform Our World" which is idealized, too complex, and perhaps scary to many;

- A Widely Recognizable Logo: similar to the World Wildlife Fund's panda;

- Stress Economics as Well as Ethics: investment now vs. steeply rising costs later;

- Weekly or Monthly Sustainability Sections: in leading newspapers and magazines;

- Several SDG Champions in Each Nation: to speak on TV shows and write op-eds;

- Annual "Top 10" Reports: added to year-end Top 10 lists of books, films, and music;

- Brief and Popularized Versions of the SDGs: explaining their importance and cost-effectiveness to everyone, in every language, attuned to every culture.

Readers of this article are encouraged to seize the moment by adding to this listing and/or explaining why certain proposals are not feasible or desirable. A reset of the SDGs and their presentation is possible. Indeed, a final suggestion is to periodically consider a reset of the goals, and activities for effectively promoting them. We cannot have a positive "war" in the interests of all without frequently updated plans, visible coordinators for each goal, many commentators, widespread conscious participation in the war effort, and hope for winning.

4. Background References

The Security & Sustainability Guide "QuickLook" Series (www.securesustain.org)

- *Human Security: A QuickLook at (12) Leading Organizations*

- *Climate Security: A QuickLook at (10) Leading Organizations*
- *Water Security: A QuickLook at (17) Leading Organizations*
- *Global Security: A QuickLook at (10) Leading Organizations*
- *Cyber Security: A QuickLook at (10) Leading Organizations*
- *Migrants and Refugees: A QuickLook at (16) Leading Organizations*
- *Environmental Peacebuilding: A QuickLook at (12) Organizations*

Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change, Working Group II, Feb 2022, 3,675p; Summary for Policymakers, 35p). *"5 of the Main Findings from the U.N.'s [IPCC] Report"* (*New York Times,* March 1, 2022, A8): 1) Climate hazards have worsened significantly in the past decade; 2) If warming isn't slowed, the dangers will multiply; 3) Societies have not done enough to adapt and stay safe; 4) As warming continues, it will become harder and harder to cope; 5) Poor countries face much bigger challenges than rich ones… "3.3 billion to 3.6 billion people are highly vulnerable to climate change today."

"World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency," by William J. Ripple et al., *BioScience,* 70:1, Jan 2020, 8-12. (More than 11,000 signatories from around the world declare, "clearly and unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency.")

"A Message to All UN Member States and Leaders of the UN," Jeffrey Sachs and 36 signatories, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, April 14, 2022 (warns that "the war in Ukraine threatens not only sustainable development, but the survival of humanity" and proposes UN revival of peace talks). Also see "Nobel Laureates Support Ukraine," *New York Times,* March 10, 2022, A7 (full-page advertisement from 170 Nobelists, condemning Russia's military actions and denial of Ukraine's legitimate existence), and "A Time for Solidarity! Statement of the World Academy of Art & Science" (March 2, 2022), condemning Russia's military invasion that places "the security of the entire world at risk."

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"Conflict Is Cutting Off Food Supplies, Raising Specter of Global Crisis," *New York Times,* March 21, 2022, A1. Also see "War in Ukraine Worsens Hunger in East Africa: Severe Drought Sets In as Food Prices Rise," *NYT,* April 2, A1.

Sustainable Development Report 2021: The Decade of Action for the Sustainable Development Goals by Jeffrey D. Sachs and four others (Bertelsmann Stiftung, Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and Cambridge University Press, June 2021, 518p). Includes

the SDG Index and Dashboards for 165 countries, and the six "SDG Transformations" scorecards.

Sustainable Development Outlook 2021: From Anguish to Determination (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sept 2021, 150p). On SDGs 1 (poverty), 2 (hunger), 3 (health and well-being), 8 (growth and employment), and 10 (reducing inequality). The Executive Summary begins: "The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted significant setbacks upon the progress made towards achieving the SDGs, leading to a profound shared distress in the international community. However, despite these setbacks, it is possible to convert anguish into determination…in the remaining years of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." It also notes "about half (45%) of the world's population living in countries where inequality increased during 2010-2019. The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation."

New Threats to Human Security in the Anthropocene: Demanding Greater Solidarity (UN Development Programme, Feb 2022, 175p). This report builds on the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report on human security, and the Human Security Commission report in 2003. In the Foreword, Secretary-General Guterres warns that "humankind is making the world an increasingly insecure and precarious place." We face a "development paradox" where people are on average living longer, healthier, and wealthier lives, but these advances have not increased their sense of security. "More than 6 in 7 people worldwide perceived feeling moderately or very insecure just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic." The pandemic has increased this uncertainty. It has imperiled every dimension of wellbeing and amplified fear across the globe, in tandem with rising geopolitical tensions, growing inequalities, democratic backsliding, and devastating climate change events. This threatens decades of development gains and throwing progress on the SDGs further off track. The Report argues for expanding the human security frame in the face of new threats, and adding solidarity to the strategies of protection and empowerment proposed in 2003, so that all of us can live "free from want, from fear and anxiety, and from indignity." The SDGs provide an ambitious set of objectives, but efforts remain largely compartmentalized: "tackling them in silos appears insufficient in the Anthropocene context." [NOTE: Although obvious, it deserves emphasis that this Report was issued just before the Ukraine invasion setback.]

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