Perspective

- Student Activity: Washington Post Live | World Stage: Ukraine
- KidsPost Reprint: “What is NATO? War in Ukraine raises profile of the alliance.”
- Post Sports Reprint: “Knocking his teams off the stage exposes Putin to his own people”
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- Student Activity: Words to Explain and to Inspire
'What for? What for?'

As to be expected organizations such as NATO, the United Nations and the European Union turned their attention to Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine President Zelensky sent real-time video messages to Ukrainians and appeals to governments as he remained in Kyiv. As shelling intensified public buildings and squares, a television tower and residential areas were assaulted. Civilians struggled to survive. Others died.

Some of the articles in this resource guide are evergreen. From KidsPost: “What is NATO? War in Ukraine raises profile of the alliance.” From the Business and World sections: “What are economic sanctions, and how did they become Washington’s foreign policy tool of choice?” and “What is SWIFT, and why does it matter in the Russia-Ukraine war?”

The Post covered businesses that are suspending service or withdrawing from Russia, including IKEA, UPS, FedEx and BP. Sports columnist Sally Jenkins gave her perspective in “Knocking his teams off the stage exposes Putin to his own people.”

A bigger picture is found in “To understand the Ukraine-Russia conflict, look to colonialism.” And the potential horror of intended or misguided missile attacks on one or more of Ukraine’s nuclear facilities are explained by scientists in “The Ukraine power plant fire was contained. But nuclear experts fear what’s to come in Russia’s war.”

From press releases, speeches, interviews and social media, in Words to Explain and to Inspire we gain insight into current thinking.

In World Stage: Ukraine watch the podcasts and read the transcripts of early interviews with world leaders and others knowledgeable of Ukraine, its past, present and uncertain future. Visit Washington Post Live for more recent interviews.

We can provide some explanations of terms and share perspectives of experts. Yet we have more unanswered questions. As the Ukrainian lady who was leaving her home for safety responded to a reporter’s questions, she asked, “What for? What for?”

On the cover: Ukrainians brave the snow and freezing temperature as they wait their turn to cross a damaged bridge in Irpin, Ukraine, on March 8, 2022. HEIDI LEVINE/ FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Ukrainians crossing into Poland at the border crossing in Kroscienko. Most are women and children. KASIA STREK/ FOR THE WASHINGTON POST
WORLD STAGE: Ukraine

Washington Post Live is the newsroom’s live journalism platform. Top-level government and business leaders, emerging voices and newsmakers discuss the most pressing national and global issues of the day. The Washington Post directs all editorial content including speakers, topics and moderators. Our programs are an extension of our journalism and offer a balanced viewpoint and a diversity of speakers. The conversations are on-the-record, open to all media and have multiple sponsors.

Washington Post LIVE has held a series of interviews focused on Ukraine from different perspectives. You can listen to the podcasts and read the transcripts. In the podcasts, listen for tone and expressions, watch body language and observe possible interactions. In the transcripts take a closer look at word choice, examples and personal anecdotes.

1. Review the list of speakers. In what ways do they bring a diversity of perspectives? Would you consider them reliable sources based on their titles or experience?
2. For two of the interviews, you are provided a quotation. What do these quotations tell you about the individuals’ perspectives?
3. Where is Lithuania? What has been that country’s relation with Russia? How might history and current relations influence the Lithuanian prime minister?
4. Four of the World Stage: Ukraine interviews do not have quotations. Read the transcripts (or listen to the podcasts). Select quotations that you find interesting and revealing.
   a. What new perspective is provided?
   b. Or what point of view is supported with an interesting example?
5. Which question(s) of The Post interviewer did you think was/were the best?
   a. Did the interviewer give enough of the situation to make the question stronger?
   b. Was the question(s) meant to get personal or professional information?
6. Who would you invite to address the current situation in Ukraine?
   Explain why you think this individual or group would provide another dimension to understanding Ukraine today.
Lithuania Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte

“Ukrainians are fighting like lions and I think this is the true spirit of people who fight for their land because contrary to Russian troops who are trying to occupy the country, they are fighting for their lives and their freedom. Their strength is unbelievable. I mean, I pray every day for them to hold on and be able to combat this brutal aggression.”

— Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte (Washington Post Live, Feb. 28, 2022)

Dame Karen Pierce, British Ambassador to the United States

“I worry very much about the Balkan countries where there is already Russian meddling, and I worry about the Baltic countries in this respect. The ‘Balts’ of course are part of NATO and an article five guarantee would apply if Russia tried to attack them. … But I think Russian meddling in the Balkans is something we can’t afford to take our eye off at the moment.”

— Ambassador Karen Pierce (Washington Post Live, Feb. 24, 2022)

John Bolton, Former U.S. National Security Advisor

— John Bolton (Washington Post Live, March 4, 2022)

Philippe Étienne, French Ambassador to the United States


Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.)

— Senator Mark Warner (Washington Post Live, Feb. 28, 2022)

William B. Taylor, Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine

If you have been paying attention to the news lately, you probably know that Russia has invaded Ukraine, its western neighbor. Ukraine (pronounced you-CRANE) had been part of the Soviet Union since 1922 but became an independent country when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991.

Russian President Vladimir Putin (VLAD-uh-meer POO-tin) claims that Ukraine isn’t a real country and that its land and people are historically Russian. He says it should be part of Russia again. Ukraine’s pro-Western government defends its right to exist and is fighting the invasion, which is the latest in a series of assaults by Russia over the past decade. Although the invasion is in its first week, some people fear that it could become the worst conflict in Europe in more than 75 years.

A key player in the struggle is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). NATO is a political and military alliance of 30 mostly European nations. The United States and Canada belong to NATO. Ukraine and Russia do not.

The heart of the NATO alliance is Article 5, an agreement that an armed attack on one member will be viewed as an attack on all, and that they will defend one another.

Ukraine has made a bid to join NATO, which Putin opposes. He doesn’t want a sixth NATO country bordering Russia or its separate Kaliningrad territory and threatening his hold on power. He has demanded that NATO agree to never admit Ukraine, which the alliance has refused to do.

NATO’s top official called Russia’s invasion a “brutal act of war” and and deployed in nearby Belarus, the risk for NATO has increased “enormously,” said Ian Lesser, a NATO expert with the German Marshall Fund of the United States. He said the situation could make it harder for the alliance to defend its eastern edge.

Here is a look at NATO in a changing world:

- NATO was founded in 1949 by 12 countries concerned that the Soviet Union would expand its political and economic system, called communism, beyond Eastern Europe. This was during a time called the Cold War, which ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

- NATO now has 30 members. Although its membership is almost entirely European, Article 5 (the all-for-one
defense pledge) has been invoked just once — after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. NATO also supported the United States in the war in Afghanistan.

- NATO’s headquarters is in Belgium. Funding for its operations comes from members based on their national incomes. The United States, one of the world’s richest economies, pays more than other NATO countries.

- NATO does not have its own armed forces. Instead it has a military command structure that works with the militaries of member countries in peacekeeping operations.

- Countries wanting to join NATO must meet political, economic and military goals proving that they can contribute to NATO’s security as well as benefit from it. No country that has joined NATO has ever left it. Meanwhile, Ukraine’s bid for membership is not likely to advance while the country is at war, analysts say.

Some people confuse NATO with the United Nations. Both organizations focus on peacekeeping, but the United Nations, with 193 member countries, seeks cooperation in areas such as international law, human rights, the environment and social progress.

Questions for Reading and Discussion

1. Before reading the article about NATO, review the meaning of these words.

   Alliance, Brutal, Invade/invasion, Assault/assaults, Conflict, Sanctions

2. NATO is an acronym for what organization?
   a. When was it founded?
   b. Find Belgium on a map.
   c. Name five current NATO member countries.

3. What are NATO’s goals?

4. Explain what Article 5 means to a NATO member country.

5. How does NATO pay for its staff and work?

6. Without its own armed forces, how does NATO defend its members and perform peacekeeping operations?

7. Why is 1991 an important year for Ukrainians?

8. Why has Ukraine sought NATO membership?
There is nothing trivial about wiping Vladimir Putin’s musky perspirations from the international sports stage. Sanctions against Putin in the sphere of games have a reach unlike any other because they leave him sweatingly exposed to the only audience he really fears or courts: the Russians in the street. His brand of shirtless belligerent patriotism — his macho nationalism — has been a long con, and it’s no small thing to knock him off medal podiums and expose the lifts in his shoes, or to rip off his judo belt and show the softening of his belly and, in turn, weaken his influence.

“This could have a tremendous impact on minds of many Russians,” says Garry Kasparov, the former chess world champion-turned-activist. It was an act of “moral capitulation” to award Putin prestige via sports events in the first place, as Kasparov observes. It stemmed from a fundamental misconception: that this odious strongman trifled with events such as the World Cup and the Olympics because he wished to play nice with the international audience and had a diplomatic side. Wrong.

Knocking his teams off the stage exposes Putin to his own people

*Originally Published March 1, 2022*
Putin’s games always have been about his dead-serious, murderous consolidation of power at home. They are tools to awe and blinker, to intimidate and cow, with displays of superiority. FIFA’s decision to suspend Russia from World Cup play and all other soccer competition for the bloody invasion of Ukraine is thus merely remedial, and now it’s the International Olympic Committee’s turn to make up for the unpardonable 2014 Sochi Games, which so encouraged his flexing and strengthened him.

It’s an open question whether Putin is truly after the restoration of a triumphalist, imperialistic Russian identity in Ukraine, or whether he needs another bloodstained nationalistic surge to cover for the criminality of his regime, or whether he just has come egotistically unmoored. In any case, sports matter greatly to the narrative he’s trying to push. If he’s hellbent on reversing what he saw as the humiliations of the 1990s by decadent Westerners, then gold medals give him credibility. Or if he’s simply out to shore up his “mystique” in the face of rising discontent at home and to “inoculate Russians against revelations about his malfeasance” by whipping up Russian competitiveness against meddling outsiders, as political scientist M. Steven Fish powerfully suggested in 2014, then trophy hunting is a fine way to do that, too.

Kasparov, for one, believes Putin’s power plays through sports engagement have been more essential to him than most analysts have recognized. When one of his confidants, Roman Abramovich, bought into in the English Premier League via Chelsea, it made the stunted Russian economy seem more global-sized. Sports for Putin have long offered cover “for some operations that are not directly related to the games,” Kasparov observes. They are “an important part in his campaign of gaining influence.”

There was no better instance than the Sochi Games, Putin’s personal enterprise, with colossally scaled buildings that promised massive rebuilt infrastructure in a “new” Russia, with facades that dwarfed individuals into specks and projected the fearsome power of a literal rainmaker.

Sochi wasn’t just a vanity project or an excuse to build palaces for Putin. You can thank the IOC for boosting Putin’s flagging domestic approval ratings, which apparently went from 54 percent in 2013 to an all-time high near 90 percent after the Olympics and bolstered his Ukraine strategy.

Russia analyst David Satter — the author of the book “The Less You Know, The Better You Sleep” about Putin’s rise and who examined his regime closely for years before he was expelled — believes all of Putin’s wars are strategic attempts to placate Russians for his kleptocracy by “consolidating the population around various military adventures.”

Barring Russian teams from sports arenas will break through and speak to the Russian population in a uniquely powerful, if regrettable, way. It leaves Putin uncovered, reminding Russians of his genuine unsavoriness in the eyes of the world. The most angering thing about strongmen is that they blot out culture and replace it with personal cult, and Putin has blotted his country’s glorious culture, from its fine arts to its ballet-based athleticism, with his emphasis on brute strength. Look again at those absurd videos of Putin practicing judo — the aging, chill-faced little man taking an ungraceful roll. See how heavily he breathes and how he unstably struggles to rise. Understand how much sports exhibitions matter to Putin — as long as no one looks too closely.

Declarations like FIFA’s will penetrate his total control of the media and cause Russians to look more closely at him. There is no propagandizing this playing field ostracism, no explaining away the sports world’s recoil from him. “Most ordinary Russians have a very limited and distorted picture of what’s happening in Ukraine,” Kasparov says. “But things like FIFA banning Russia will make them look around.” Banking sanctions are one kind of check, but there is deep emotion in a ban from the world’s largest arenas that will reach not just oligarchs but ordinary people as a statement of universally revolted sensibilities. It takes a special rage to refuse to play with someone at all.

“Sport organizations are absolutely important as a form of isolation,” Kasparov says, “to show Putin and the people who support him that there are consequences for his actions, that he cannot define the battlefield.”
To understand the Ukraine-Russia conflict, look to colonialism

Ukrainians have been fighting Russian imperialism for hundreds of years

BY LINDA KINSTLER

• Originally Published February 27, 2022

“I come today with an appeal to all citizens of Russia,” Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in a televised address, just hours before Russian forces launched a full-scale assault on his nation’s major cities. He said he wished to talk to the Russian people not as the leader of a nation but as a citizen of Ukraine. He wanted to tell them, in their shared language, that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s excuses for invading his country were mere fantasies. He wanted to remind the Russian people of all that they share with their Ukrainian neighbors, and to underscore that it was up to them to speak out to stop war.

“You are being told that we are Nazis,” Zelensky said. But 8 million Ukrainians died fighting with the Soviet army in World War II. Zelensky’s grandfather served in the Soviet infantry; my grandfather, born and raised outside Kyiv, spent the war running radio cables between the front line and Moscow.

“You are told that we hate Russian culture,” Zelensky said. “But how can you hate culture? Any culture? Neighbors always enrich each other’s cultures, but that does not make them one entity,” he said. “We are different, but that does not make us enemies. We want to build our own history, peaceful, calm and fair.”

Zelensky’s address was both an appeal and a prayer, a clearheaded response to Russian justifications for war. His voice was calm and forceful, but you could hear the anger behind his words. He underscored that though Russians and Ukrainians may share kin and culture, that does not mean their relationship can forever be that of colonizer and colonized. He addressed his remarks to the Russian people, but he was also speaking to their president, who had claimed only a few days earlier that “Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space.” Putin prefers to think of Ukraine as a southern province of Russia, a territory that was mistakenly “gifted” lands by his predecessors. It is these supposed mistakes that this invasion aims to correct.

It is no accident that one of the most authoritative responses to the Kremlin’s rhetoric has come not from the United States or European powers, but from Martin Kimani, the Kenyan ambassador to the United Nations, who explicitly linked the colonial history of his own country to that of Ukraine in a speech to the Security Council on Monday. Kimani’s countrymen, he said, “share deep historical, cultural and linguistic bonds” with people across their borders — borders that they had no role in drawing. The same is true of Ukrainians. Many families, including my own, have been split across the Russia-Ukraine border. These separations are largely accidents of history, one of the lasting effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union. But this sense of kinship, Kimani said, cannot justify invasion: “We must complete our recovery from the embers of dead empires in a way that does not plunge us back into new forms

Mykola Medynsky, a Ukrainian army chaplain, arrives to comfort villagers after a suspected Russian airstrike destroyed homes in Markhalivka, Ukraine, on March 6.
of domination and oppression.”

On Wednesday evening in Kyiv, Zelensky echoed this sentiment as he warned that at any moment the embers of the former Soviet empire could burst into a catastrophic flame. Shortly after he addressed the nation, that is precisely what occurred: Russian missiles began targeting Ukrainian military sites, not just in the occupied territories in the east but also in the metropolises of Kyiv, Odessa and Kharkiv. Smoke rose over cityscapes. Civilians descended into bomb shelters.

Outside the halls of academia, the former Soviet states are rarely referred to as “post-colonial.” Instead, they are usually called “post-Soviet,” a term which suggests that the collapse of the Soviet Union passively gave birth to liberated nations, each with their own unique language, history, literature and traditions. In reality, the former Soviet countries — Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus among them — nurtured national movements for hundreds of years before finally getting to experience independence.

The very idea of the modern nation, and the concept of nationalism, emerged in the Baltic countryside in the 18th century, when the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder rode his horse between Latvian villages collecting peasant folk songs. The songs — poems, really — seemed to Herder to bind the people to the land and to each other. Reading through them, he began to develop his romantic theory of what makes a nation. He determined that it is not history or even blood that does it, but rather the lilt of a shared language, the verses of common songs and stories.

Ukraine’s national poet, the 19th-century bard Taras Shevchenko, helped build national identity through his verse, which he composed in both Russian and Ukrainian. (A statue of him stands near Washington’s diplomatic corridor.) In one of his most-cited poems, “The Caucasus,” written in 1845, he ridicules Russian expansionism and mourns the immense loss of life it had already wrought. “We groan beneath the yoke of hangmen / While drunken justice sodden sleeps,” he writes. He describes, with a telltale twinge of irony, how Russian assimilation swallowed up the voices of the empire’s dominated lands: “From the Moldovian to the Finn, / all are silent in their languages, / because they’re blessed!” His poetry salutes the warriors who battle colonial forces, urging them on: “Keep fighting — you are sure to win! / God helps you in your fight / For fame and freedom march with you, / And right is on your side!” These words were emblazoned on banners in Kyiv’s Independence Square in 2014, when protesters took to the streets in the Revolution of Dignity. On Thursday morning, I woke up to read them on the Instagram feeds of my friends in Ukraine. They quoted Shevchenko to declare their support for their country and its soldiers as the first casualty counts came in.

On Russian state television, a map showing territorial “gifts” to Ukraine from Russian and Soviet rulers aired this past week. It showed Ukraine divided into pieces, and claimed that the eastern region had been “given” to Ukraine by Vladimir Lenin in 1922; that Crimea was “given” to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954; that a large swath of the nation’s northern territory had been a “gift” from Russian czars. What this map really shows is different periods of subjugation, moments when, as Kimani described, Ukraine’s borders were redrawn by outside forces. In a beautiful piece in the online news outlet Meduza, the historian Victoria Smolkin argues that this imagination of Ukraine is a fantasy of a fallen empire, a fever dream of imperial restoration. In his remarks Tuesday, Zelensky took pains to emphasize the similarities between Russians and Ukrainians because that is what the moment called for. But Ukraine is not Russia. Its people have been fighting Russian imperialism and colonial domination for hundreds of years.

In the chamber of the U.N. Security Council on Tuesday night, Ukrainian Ambassador Sergiy Kyslytsya invoked Soviet colonial history in an effort to challenge Russia’s status on the council. He repeated an outstanding request to the secretariat to produce the reasoning for why the Russian Federation had been allowed to inherit the Soviet Union’s permanent seat, which had previously represented all of the Soviet Union’s constituent republics. He also asked the Russian ambassador to confirm that Ukrainian cities would not be targeted, a request that was rendered obsolete minutes after it was issued. “It’s too late, my dear colleagues, to speak of de-escalation,” Kyslytsya said. “It is the responsibility of this body to stop the war.” The Russian ambassador corrected him: It was not a war, he claimed, but a “special military operation.”

On their way into the chamber, they and their fellow ambassadors would have walked by the newly restored and reinstalled tapestry of Pablo Picasso’s “Guernica” that has adorned the U.N. halls since 1984, a warning of the grotesque horror of war. Perhaps the Russian ambassador glanced at it, or maybe he just stared straight ahead.

Linda Kinstler has covered Ukrainian politics and culture since 2014. Her first book, “Come to This Court and Cry,” will be published in August.
The Biden administration imposed what it said was the first tranche of sanctions targeting Russia for its actions against Ukraine.

The measures include freezing the assets of two state-owned banks that service the Kremlin and Russia’s military as well as comprehensive sanctions on Moscow’s sovereign debt, effectively cutting the government off from Western financing.

“Russia will pay an even steeper price if it continues its aggression, including additional sanctions,” President Biden said in a televised address.

From Cuba to Myanmar to China to Iran, Washington has long used sanctions as a favored foreign policy tool, wielding the global economic power of the United States to punish adversaries, respond to rights abuses or corruption, or gain leverage in negotiations.

Here’s what to know about sanctions and how they became a crucial part of U.S. foreign policy.

What are economic sanctions?
Sanctions are punitive or coercive measures taken by one or more nations against another to enforce compliance with international norms or laws. Economic
sanctions typically include a ban on trade. They can be broad and aimed at an entire country or economy, such as the decades-long embargo against Cuba, or target specific sectors, institutions, individuals or other entities.

When the United States issues sanctions against a person or entity, U.S. individuals and companies are generally barred from conducting transactions with the designee. In some cases, sanctions can go even further and prohibit Americans from doing business with third parties linked with the target.

U.S. sanctions can be imposed unilaterally or in concert with allies or organizations such as the European Union or United Nations.

Why have they become popular in Washington?

Both the U.S. president and Congress have the power to issue sanctions. The International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977 allows a president to do so with relative ease.

Because world trade is conducted almost exclusively in U.S. dollars, and flows through U.S.-based financial institutions, Washington is uniquely positioned to use sanctions and impose “an enormous amount of economic pain” by restricting access to global markets, said Ali Vaez, director of the Iran Project at the Washington office of the International Crisis Group.

How have U.S. sanctions evolved?

In recent decades, sanctions have transformed from “old-style, countrywide embargoes,” such as those against apartheid South Africa, to “targeted” ones focused on individual actors, said John E. Smith, former director of the U.S. Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which enforces trade and economic sanctions.

This shift began after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, when Washington started to focus on international financing in counterterrorism efforts, said Brian O’Toole, a nonresident senior fellow at the Washington-based Atlantic Council’s GeoEconomics Center.

Those efforts benefited from the growing U.S. dominance in international finance, which along with technical and legal changes made it difficult to “move money around the world without interacting with the United States,” O’Toole said.

Over the past decade, the United States has also begun to rely on secondary or extraterritorial sanctions, which penalize third parties that conduct business with a designee, effectively forcing others to adhere to U.S. policies.

What about the new sanctions on Russia?

The Biden administration for weeks has threatened Russia with “severe economic consequences” if its troops invaded Ukraine. U.S. officials have considered everything including blocking Russia’s access to electronic supplies made with U.S. technology and cutting Moscow off from the SWIFT banking system that handles the flow of money worldwide.

The administration even warned Russian President Vladimir Putin that they could target him with sanctions personally.

Biden announced the first round of sanctions against Russia on Tuesday. The measures included “blocking sanctions” on Vnesheconombank and Promsvyazbank and their subsidiaries, which together hold more than $80 billion in assets, the White House said in a statement. Blocking sanctions immediately impose an across-the-board prohibition against transfers or transactions of any kind.

The two banks are involved in financing the Kremlin and Russia’s military, the statement said, adding that the measures will “shut them out of the global financial system, and foreclose access to the U.S. dollar.”

“There’s action constrains Russia’s ability to finance defense-related contracts and raise new funds to finance its campaign against Ukraine,” the Treasury Department said in a separate release outlining the measures.

The administration also imposed sanctions on several members of Putin’s inner circle, including the head of Russia’s Federal Security Service and his son, as well as a senior member of the presidential administration.

What are some other key countries to watch?

Previous administrations have relied on sanctions to help guide U.S. policy toward Venezuela and North Korea. Sanctions are also a major part of the United States’ policy toward Iran.

When former president Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, he reimposed a range of sanctions that had been lifted as part of the agreement.

Iran and the United States are now engaged in indirect negotiations in Vienna to resurrect the deal, with Tehran urging the Biden administration to scrap the economic sanctions imposed by Trump.

What changes to sanctions are under discussion in Washington?

Some experts say that a fundamental overhaul of U.S. sanctions policy is needed. Vaez said that in practice, U.S. sanctions have rarely achieved their stated foreign policy goals.

This is in part because Washington has no clear framework for evaluating the effectiveness of sanctions and whether the foreign policy aims were achieved, he said. It also does not have a mechanism for following through on the promise of sanctions relief if the target does indeed change its behavior.

OFAC “is a wheel that only moves in one direction,” said Vaez. “It does not have the mandate to make sure that once the sanctions are limited that the target country can normalize relations with the outside world.”

Miriam Berger is a staff writer reporting on foreign news for The Washington Post from Washington, D.C. Before joining The Post in 2019 she was based in Jerusalem and Cairo and freelance reported around the Middle East, as well as parts of Africa and Central Asia.
What is SWIFT, and why does it matter in the Russia-Ukraine war?

BY KIMBERLY KINDY, RICK NOACK AND TORY NEWMYER

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As the United States, Canada and European allies prepared to step up pressure on Russian financial institutions this weekend, they vowed to cut some banks off from the SWIFT messaging system, a network that connects banks around the world and is considered the backbone of international finance.

Whether to target Russia through SWIFT was an initial point of division among Western nations on sanctions in the Ukraine crisis, with the French finance minister calling a move to cut Russia off from the mechanism a “financial nuclear weapon.”

Here’s what you need to know about SWIFT and the debate about whether to pressure the network to exclude Russian financial institutions.

What is SWIFT, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication?

It is a messaging network that connects banks around the world and is considered the backbone of international finance. The Belgian-based consortium links more than 11,000 financial institutions...
operating in more than 200 countries and territories, acting as a critical hub to enable international payments. Last year, the system averaged 42 million messages a day, including orders and confirmations for payments, trades and currency exchanges. More than 1 percent of those messages are thought to involve Russian payments.

**What role might SWIFT play in the Russian invasion of Ukraine?**

Eastern European countries and France were among the early advocates of economic sanctions that would cut Russia off from SWIFT. Depending on how many banks the European Union and the United States plan to target through SWIFT, they could make it more difficult for Russian entities to process transactions and could hobble the Russian economy’s ability to do business beyond its borders. When Western nations threatened to use this sanction against Russia in 2014, after it annexed Crimea, the country’s former finance minister Alexei Kudrin said it could reduce the country’s gross domestic product by 5 percent within a year. Russia’s gross domestic product was about $1.7 trillion last year, making it the 12th-largest economy in the world.

“Our diplomats fought days-long and inspiring, so that all European countries agreed to this very strong and just decision, to cut off Russia from the international interbank network,” Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said [Feb. 26] night.

**Are all 27 E.U. nations that have supported other sanctions against Russia backing the proposal to cut Russia off from SWIFT to the same extent?**

No. Some nations have called for Russia to be cut off completely, but the German government said Saturday that it supports using the mechanism in a “targeted and functional” way. The sanctions that were announced later Saturday night were more in line with the limited approach supported by Germany than with the broader targeting advocated by other countries.

Under those current plans, Russia is expected to remain able to export gas to Europe. U.S. Treasury officials have said that a broader targeting of Russia through SWIFT could damage Western businesses, especially major oil companies. Banks in the United States and Germany are the most frequent users of SWIFT to communicate with Russian banks, making the two countries especially vulnerable to a fallout.

**If Russian banks are cut off from SWIFT, are there alternative networks they can use?**

Yes. Russia created an alternative network, the System for Transfer of Financial Messages, but financial experts say it is an inadequate replacement. By the end of 2020, the system included only 400 participants from 23 countries. There is also China’s Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, which would allow both countries to bypass SWIFT. This is a greater concern, since China is the second-largest economy in the world, and any strengthening of this alternative system could erode the current dollar-dominated global financial system, undermining Western power.

**Can Russia use cryptocurrency to evade sanctions if it loses access to the SWIFT network?**

Because there is no central controller that has the power to act as a gatekeeper, crypto could be used for things such as crowdfunding for the Ukrainian army or helping Russia evade sanctions. However, Russian cryptocurrency activity has historically paled in comparison with the transactions processed by its traditional financial institutions, so experts do not believe it could be used to fully replace SWIFT. Also, countries and their banking institutions that choose to help Russia evade this potential sanction could face negative consequences from dozens of nations across the world.

**Who regulates SWIFT?**

SWIFT is a consortium that is run by officials from its member banks, including the National Bank of Belgium, the U.S. Federal Reserve System, the Bank of England, the European Central Bank and the Bank of Japan.

**If Russia is cut off from SWIFT, would it be the first country to face this sanction?**

No. Iranian financial institutions lost their access in 2012, after the European Union imposed sanctions on the nation over its nuclear program. As a result, Iran lost 30 percent of foreign trade. Iranian banks regained access after the country signed onto a 2015 agreement to limit its nuclear activities. They were cut off again in 2018 after the Trump administration killed the deal and pressured SWIFT to follow suit. ■

Razzan Nakhlawi contributed to this report.
The Ukraine power plant fire was contained. But nuclear experts fear what’s to come in Russia’s war.

BY MICHAEL BIRNBAUM

*Originally Published March 4, 2022*

For a small tribe of veteran atomic experts who helped secure the Soviet Union’s nuclear energy and missiles as it started to fall apart in the late 1980s, the grainy images of the fighting around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant in Ukraine, Europe’s largest, were like something out of a frightening alternative reality.

That smoke. Those tracers. That fire. They, more than most others, knew the precise mechanics of how an accident could quickly turn into disaster.

Although the damage appears to have been contained — and Europe spared a nuclear disaster on the level of Fukushima — nuclear experts said they were still fearful as Russia’s military battles its way across Ukraine. The country has four active nuclear power plants and one failed one, Chernobyl, whose radiation still requires constant upkeep.

“This morning I thought about the Cuban missile crisis,” said Frank von Hippel, a theoretical physicist at Princeton University, who tracked loose nuclear weapons on behalf of the Clinton White House and helped lead efforts to calm the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union.

“This is the first time we’ve had a war among nuclear reactors,” von Hippel said. “That was not a scenario we considered.”

Nuclear fears already shot up last week in the opening phases of the invasion, as Russian troops took control of the Chernobyl nuclear site as they swept south toward Kyiv from Belarus. And as they battled along a key stretch of the Dnieper River on Thursday near the industrial city of Zaporizhzhia, they swung into position around the vast nuclear power plant and eventually captured it. Ukrainian officials warned that the South Ukraine Nuclear Power Plant in Mykolaiv province could be next, with fighting underway about 19 miles from the site.

The risks to the plants amid the fighting are multiple and compounding, since a swift fix to any mounting problem depends on the quick and energetic work of the highly trained personnel who work inside each facility, experts said. Nuclear engineers who are forced to work multiple shifts at gunpoint — or who may be worrying about family and friends who are dead or at risk — are going to be less effective than if they were to face the same technical challenges under peacetime conditions.

“This morning there were a lot of people who were really freaked out,” said Mycle Schneider, a Paris-based consultant and a member of the International Panel on Fissile Materials, who said he traded emails early Friday with other experts around the world who were deeply concerned by what they had seen of the incident at the Zaporizhzhia plant.

“When you see fire on a nuclear power site that’s always bad,” Schneider said. “To see the images of fighting on a power plant site is horrible. For everyone that knows Ukraine’s reactors supplied 51 percent of the country’s electricity in 2020, according to the IAEA.
what that means or could mean, it’s very bad news.”

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Rafael Grossi, warned in a statement Friday, “It is high time to stop an armed conflict from putting nuclear facilities at severe risk, potentially endangering the safety of people and the environment in Ukraine and beyond.” He declared his willingness to travel personally to Chernobyl to arrange for the plant’s safety.

The battle for control of the power facilities had Ukrainian leaders speculating that Russian forces might be using them as a form of nuclear blackmail, to intimidate Ukrainians and the world at the same time. Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his country’s nuclear forces to be put on alert.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called it “nuclear terrorism” and asked the United Nations Security Council to declare a no-fly zone over his country in response — a step that NATO rejected on the grounds that it would risk drawing Western forces directly into combat with Russian warplanes.

But experts interviewed by The Washington Post suggested that the plants may have limited appeal as strategic targets.

To start, taking a nuclear power plant offline wouldn’t shut off the lights in Ukraine. The country’s grid operators could probably increase power production elsewhere, especially because overall power consumption is lower than normal because of the wartime conditions.

Turning off the power plants would be difficult, and probably not appetizing for the Russian forces that captured them, said Alex Riabchyn, a former Ukrainian deputy energy minister.

“If you disconnect, okay, you shut everything down. There are a huge amount of processes there. It will be a technological catastrophe for everybody,” he said.

At Zaporizhzhia, at least part of motivation for taking the plant could have been control of territory as Russian forces push northward, Riabchyn said: “It’s controlling the riverbank, it’s controlling the territory. It’s very strategic.”

**Reactors, not designed to weather military attacks, are at ‘severe risk’**

That also may have been why Russia took Chernobyl, since it is located at a key site that Russian forces needed to pass through as they rushed toward Kyiv from Belarus.

Other experts on Russia’s nuclear forces said they suspected that the power plants were incidental in the broader assault on the country.

“I would guess that Russia would rather those stations wouldn’t be there, but it cannot avoid them,” Pavel Podvig, the Geneva-based director of the Russian Nuclear Forces Project, wrote in an email. “On the other hand, Russia probably had a choice of not going there at all — there is no particular military value in taking control over these facilities. And that choice was not made. I would say it’s rather irresponsible.”

Russia’s ambassador to the United Nations, Vasily Nebenzya, told the Security Council on Friday that the discussion about the Zaporizhzhia plant was “a false information attack, as if Russia had fired against the power plant.” The “plant and the surrounding areas have been placed under the protection of the Russian military,” he added.

But Schneider said any fighting near the power plants was a tremendous risk.

“I don’t think we have ever seen anything of this sort that could be called comparable,” he said. “The largest risk is an accident, is a misguided missile, is somebody who points the tank cannon in the wrong direction. It is somebody shooting a helicopter or a plane from the sky and it falls on some vulnerable, crucial parts of the facility.”

“A nuclear reactor is designed for peacetime and is very much regulated in detail,” he said. “We have a situation where there’s no rules anymore, none.”

He said the complexity of the plants meant there were many things that could go wrong. Several experts noted the potential unreliability of the backup diesel-fired generators that help cool the reactors and spent fuel when electricity from the grid is cut. A similar failure helped contribute to the Fukushima nuclear meltdown in 2011.

“Every single issue you look at is cumulative with other issues,” Schneider said.

One nuclear expert said there needs to be a negotiated agreement under which workers can have shift changes and undertake maintenance unimpeded if there is an extended conflict.

“These plants are now in a situation that few people ever seriously contem- plated when they were originally built, and that is the potential they’d be in the middle of a war zone,” said Edwin Lyman, director of the nuclear safety project at the Union of Concerned Scientists. “No nuclear plant has been designed to protect against a full-scale military attack.”

Asked if Russia could sabotage or weaponize the nuclear facilities as part of its offensive, Lyman said he certainly hopes that scenario never comes to pass.

“I don’t think there’s much strategic value in this context for Russia to contaminate the very land it is trying to control,” he said. ■

Brady Dennis contributed to this report.
Words to Explain and to Inspire

In times of war, political upheaval and natural disasters we look to our leaders for guidance. The guidance may be practical – which roads can lead us out of town safely, where we can find shelter and when we can return home. The guidance may be motivational. World leaders, politicians, journalists and speechwriters understand the power of words better than most. Words can convey misinformation and obscure facts. Words can provide essential information to protect the environment, homes and businesses and lives. Words can inspire action and calm citizens during a crisis.

From history we know that words that are crafted well can leave a lasting impact on the world.

But what is it that creates expressions that survive generations? For example, can you identify the speaker or context of the following words that are often quoted?

- Government of the people, by the people, for the people
- The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself.
- Speak softly and carry a big stick.
- Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.
- Mr. Gorbachev, … tear down this wall!
- I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you.

At the moment these words were delivered they were quick hitting, impactful and memorable. They may have been written for a formal speech or were spontaneously spoken. We could analyze their elements in literature: skillful use of repetition, metaphors, parallel construction and poetic prose. What about these words and their delivery make them so memorable?

Our 21st century doesn’t need to wait for a newspaper to be released or a television broadcast to be viewed. We live in an age of tweets, Facebook, Instagram and Tik-Tok. Anyone with a smart phone today can post messages to the world. But the importance of words in social media are as important now as it was in the past, especially if you are trying to rally followers and influence others.

Read the following quotations. They were captured in the news or on social media since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Answer the following questions on your own paper.

1. What makes the speaker/writer significant? Why listen to him or her?
2. Who is the audience?
3. What is the intent of the person? To inform, to inspire, to persuade? Other?
4. Are those that are succinct (280 characters, for example) as persuasive or informative as the longer statements?
5. After reading all of the quoted statements,
   a. Which one(s) do you think has/have the most immediate impact? Why?
   b. Which do you think will be remembered longest? Why?
As you attack, it will be our faces you see, not our backs. — Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine

You are using a typical Western media question method of using the word invasion. China is closely monitoring the latest situation. We call on all sides to exercise restraint to prevent the situation from getting out of control. — Hua Chunying, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson

National University of Kyiv Mohyla-Academy suspended all lectures. My students now are joining Ukrainian army. — Ukrainian literary scholar Mariia Shuvalova (twitter)

I have decided to conduct a special military operation ... to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide ... for the last eight years. ... And for this we will strive for the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine. And to bring to court those who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation. — Vladimir Putin, President of Russia

President Putin has chosen a premeditated war that will bring a catastrophic loss of life and human suffering ... I will be meeting with the leaders of the G7 and the U.S. and our allies and partners will be imposing severe sanctions on Russia. — Joe Biden, President of the United States

These are among the darkest hours of Europe since the Second World War. The EU will respond in the strongest possible terms and agree on the harshest package of sanctions we have ever implemented. — Josep Borrell, European Commission foreign policy chief

For the first time ever, the European Union will finance the purchase and delivery of weapons and other equipment to a country that is under attack. ... This is a watershed moment. — European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen

What has happened in the last few days has been a serious wake-up call for Europe, a serious wake-up call for the NATO alliance and, tragically and very sadly for Ukraine, a wake-up call too late in the day. — Richard Dannatt, retired general and former British army chief

We Ukrainians are a peaceful nation. But if we remain silent today, we will be gone tomorrow!” — Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine

We will not surrender, we will not lose, we will go to the end. We will fight at sea, we will fight in the air, we will protect our land. We will fight everywhere... and we will not surrender. — Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine