In a world going mad with war, **European and US sanctions against Russia** stand out as sane and measured. They will not stop Russia’s **assault on Ukraine** in its tracks, but they will help Kiev to weather the Russian blows. And by answering violence with economics, they can help to rescue the world from the current epidemic of military delusions.

**Vladimir Putin** is not alone in believing that military force can solve Russia’s political problems vis-à-vis Ukraine. Western powers wrongly believed that killing Muammar Gaddafi would resolve problems with Libya; that backing an insurgency to overthrow Bashar al-Assad would resolve political problems with Syria; and that toppling Saddam Hussein would create a stable, pro-western Iraq. Now Israel believes that a mass **bloodletting in Gaza** will make that trapped and desperate population compliant to Israeli might.

These military approaches have failed and will continue to fail. Western-led regime change in Iraq and Libya and attempted regime change in Syria have come to tears. The 13-year US war in Afghanistan also seems set to fail in every objective. Israel’s war on Hamas will lead nowhere except to ratchet up Gaza’s desperation.

Mr Putin too seeks a military solution to a political conundrum. His motives are clear enough, albeit ruthless and ultimately self-defeating. The EU counts its new partnership with Ukraine as a natural geographic extension of the **European economy** and rule of law, while Mr Putin views the European advance in zero-sum terms. To grasp Mr Putin’s mindset, suppose that China enticed Mexico into a political and trade alliance and potentially a military one as well. The US would surely act, perhaps by trying to subvert the Mexican government.

Mr Putin has acted, but in a manner doomed to fail. Rather than a full-fledged war, which would divide Russia and unite the world against it, the Russian president is pursuing classic salami tactics: take Crimea first, grab Ukraine’s eastern districts next
and pursue subversion more generally. All of this is wrapped in fervent Russian nationalism.

Yet to what end? None of this will sway the majority of Ukrainians from looking west; indeed, the opposite is true. The majority of Ukrainians are running west with even greater determination and urgency. So too are the Moldovans and Georgians. The downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, probably a miscalculation of Russia’s proxy forces targeting Ukrainian military planes, has deepened Europe’s determination to bring Ukraine into its economic and political framework.

The west’s new “stage three” sanctions – cutting financial and military linkages with Russia – will not end Moscow’s military actions, though they will sound alarm bells among Russia’s economic elite. Nor will they bring down Mr Putin, whose popularity has temporarily soared in nationalist fervour (as did George Bush’s with the launch of the 2003 war on Iraq and Benjamin Netanyahu’s with the current bombing of Gaza). The importance of sanctions lies mainly elsewhere: they ensure that Russia’s encroachments on Ukrainian sovereignty will never become an acceptable status quo. And they do so peacefully, without provoking a violent upward spiral of war.

The sanctions policy is not appeasement as is charged by the US right. A policy of appeasement would accept Mr Putin’s demands on Ukraine in the interest of “peace in our time”. Sanctions do the opposite: they declare Russia’s grab for territory and power in Ukraine to be entirely illegitimate and unacceptable.

Nor are sanctions the limit of the western response. The US is already providing logistical support to Ukraine’s self-defence. Further Russian attacks on Ukraine would lead to further US military support, in intelligence sharing and perhaps in arms. Ukraine has every right to self-defence under international law, and it is currently using that right effectively.

The only true answer for Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Gaza and elsewhere is at the negotiating table, preferably under UN auspices. Russia has real interests in Ukraine – markets,
military bases, military supplies and access to the Black Sea – that could be secured through negotiations that preserve its neighbour’s territorial integrity while ensuring that Moscow’s legitimate interests are neither trampled nor threatened by a provocative expansion of Nato to Ukraine.

Symmetrically, the US and its Middle East allies should stop trying to overthrow the Syrian regime and instead support a UN-brokered ceasefire that is not linked by the US to regime change. Israel too should obviously come to the negotiating table, even with its bitter foe Hamas, to find a way out of a bloody stalemate caused in no small part by Israel’s arrogant encroachment on Palestinian land and rights.

In 1909, five years before the first world war, whose centenary we mark this month, the author Norman Angell proclaimed the *Great Illusion* of war. His argument was not that wars had ended, but that wars in the modern, interconnected age could not achieve their purported economic or political aims. One would think that after two world wars, the nuclear precipice and the repeated failures of war in our own time, we might rouse ourselves from such illusions. Sanctions against military force offer a glimmer of hope for breaking the spiral of violence, disdaining force and pressing political foes back to the negotiating table.

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