

Interview with Ambassador Vesko Garcevic, former Ambassador of Montenegro in Brussels (NATO), Vienna (OSCE), Montenegrin Ambassador to Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

# Deciphering the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Navigating a Multifaceted Geopolitical Puzzle

By Samuel ShengEr Zhou



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## Introductory Context: a Diplomatic Journey Shaped by History

As the echoes of the 2014 annexation of Crimea recede into history, the world's attention is yet again drawn to the convoluted and continuing Russia-Ukraine conflict since the invasion of Ukraine. In an extensive interview with Ambassador Vesko Garcevic, a seasoned diplomat with 26 years of experience, we gain profound insights into the intricate web of geopolitics at play in Europe. Building on the legacy of Crimea's annexation, the invasion since 2022 defies single-dimensional analysis and demands a nuanced understanding rooted in historical context and realpolitik calculus, including the sustainability of conflict, nuclear escalation concerns, and the avenue of diplomacy as a path toward a solution.

Ambassador Garcevic's distinguished diplomatic career is emblematic of the complexities that underpin the Russia-Ukraine conflict. His firsthand experience of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the country of his birth, offers a poignant backdrop. This personal journey underscores the seismic shifts in international relations and the profound impact of such transformations on individuals and nations.

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## Opening Remarks

**Zhou:** Can you give an overview of your background in diplomacy and how it is relevant to analyzing today's geopolitical conflict between Russia and Ukraine. And this is not limited to these countries as it is altering the whole landscape and security environment.

**Garcevic:** I spent 26 years in diplomacy and my career was unique – as I joined the diplomatic service of Yugoslavia, a country that does not exist anymore. During my career, particularly the early years, I experienced the end of a country where I was born and raised, and what this means for people living in the country.

This was a huge crisis in the world that brought major political players to the region including Yasushi Akashi who was in the 1990s a special representative of the UN Secretary General. I then ended up serving my country – Montenegro – in NATO as an ambassador. So more than 10 years of my career was spent dealing with security issues in Europe.



Ambassador Vesko Garcevic

## Introductory Context: Montenegro's Metamorphosis in the Face of Historical Ties

The historical and religious bonds between Montenegro and Russia, nurtured over centuries, form an essential backdrop for comprehending the current conflict. Montenegro's strategic pivot toward Euro-Atlantic foreign policy goals, despite these deep-rooted connections, signifies a seismic shift in the regional political landscape, as Garcevic provides historical context.

**Zhou:** What was Montenegro's relationship with Russia like and how did it evolve following the dissolution of Yugoslavia?

**Garcevic:** Montenegro existed before Yugoslavia as an independent country. During that time, the role of Russia was very important to Montenegro and the two countries had close ties, including religious ties due to orthodox Christianity. Often Montenegrins blindly followed Russian policy goals. During the 1905 Russo-Japanese war, Montenegro also declared war against Japan although it was never directly involved due to its size. When peace was signed in

1905, Montenegro was not mentioned, and these two countries technically remained at war for more than 100 years.

In the 21st century, this strong sentiment towards Russia was still very vivid and is still vivid among many people in Montenegro. In spite of this past, Montenegro decided to pursue Euro-Atlantic foreign policy goals. One of the most important of these was to join NATO and the European Union. The first one particularly did not make Russia happy. There is no clear evidence of anybody's involvement but this happened in October 2016 and coincided with a public statement of senior public officials like the minister of Foreign Affairs who were publicly opposing the path towards NATO membership and warning Montenegro against pursuing this goal.

This was not obvious at first but when Montenegro got close to membership, Russia's reaction was getting more negative, opposing that move. In October 2016, just after the parliamentary elections, several months before Montenegro joined NATO, an alleged coup was thwarted by the Montenegrin police. While Russia strongly denied its alleged involvement in the event, several plotters arrested by the police hinted at two Russian agents as ringleaders of the alleged coup.

So this is a very interesting story about love and hate. While we respect the past and our historical ties with Moscow, Montenegro has been pursuing its own strategic goals. We've harmonized our policy with the EU and introduced sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine.

**Zhou:** You mentioned that there was strong opposition from Russia despite the fact that there is no direct evidence that Russia staged that coup. Do you think this situation is analogous to Russia's opposition to Ukraine joining NATO? Are these situations similar or quite different?

**Secondly, you mentioned this contradictory relationship with Russia but how does this play out domestically and what was your role in improving this?**

**Garcevic:** Ukraine didn't apply for NATO membership before the invasion in 2022. It was not on Ukraine's agenda before the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Indeed, Ukraine has developed over time closer relations with NATO, where a couple of things had happened in the early 20th century – when the NATO-Ukraine Council was created. But there was also a NATO-Russia Council created in 2002, meaning this is nothing unique for Ukraine. Ukraine never got a membership action plan, a mechanism that countries get when they want to become NATO members.

Ukraine had never used this mechanism before the annexation of Crimea; what happened as a result of the annexation and the invasion in 2022 is that the Ukrainian government and leadership

reconsidered this. Now, for the first time in modern history, they publicly say that they want to join NATO. In fact, it seems that Russia prompted them to do this and speeded up the process. Had Russia not invaded Ukraine, Ukraine would never have been invited to join NATO. Germany, France, Denmark, Norway and a couple of others were very cautious about the idea of inviting Ukraine to join. This was not the case with my country; we had a different status and were thousands of miles away from Moscow. We set all the agenda, NATO accepted it, we were given a membership action plan, and so it's different from the case of Ukraine.

### **Introductory Context: Comparative Insights with Ukraine**

To unravel the multi-dimensional nature of the Russia-Ukraine quagmire, Ambassador Garcevic draws insightful comparisons with Ukraine's trajectory. He highlights that Ukraine's pursuit of NATO membership was not a central goal until the annexation of Crimea in 2014 – an event that reshaped Ukraine's strategic calculus. The ambassador's meticulous exploration extends to potential conflict resolutions. His analysis encompasses a spectrum of possibilities, from unstable multipolarity to the construction of a balanced European security framework. These scenarios enrich our analytical framework for comprehension of international conflicts and underscore the intricate nature of the conflict with complex intentions and stakeholders' interests involved.

**Zhou:** There are a lot of conversations about the state of the Ukraine conflict but how do you see it playing out in terms of the regional balance of power? It's an intricate conflict that involves a lot of parties but is diplomacy still the way to go?

**Garcevic:** First of all, diplomacy has an important role to play and the time for diplomacy is about to come. There is no war that doesn't end without diplomacy and negotiation. Every war ends with negotiation but the question here is whether we have reached that point so far or not. Regrettably I don't think we're at that point yet and we should wait for some time for diplomacy to start working. The war has its own rules – every war has its own rules. The sides in a war exchange information continuously and the exchange of information implies the results of the battlefields or how they understand war.

When we are discussing negotiating, we have to ask a couple of questions. First of all, we all know that the parties want a certain solution – but the question is do we need that solution right now? Do they see the end game or the solution in the same way? I think that they don't see the end game in the same way. If we look at what is going on right now, we are seeing a Ukrainian offensive, meaning

that Ukrainians still believe they can reverse the tide, which means regaining their territories and winning the war on the battlefield.

Russians also believe they can keep the land they occupied and illegally annexed – and so both sides still believe that on the battlefield they can increase bargaining power once negotiations begin. Imagine if the Ukrainians suddenly make a breakthrough on the battlefield and start progressing and pushing Russians back; then at one point we can imagine that Russia will accept negotiations because they would try to negotiate to find a face-saving way out.

This is a complex question, but the most important question is what will happen after the war. I see three possible scenarios for Europe. So one of these is unstable multipolarity. This means the war ends at one point because both sides get worn out and tired of war. But it also implies that the sides involved in the war and other interested parties didn't find a lasting solution for the conflict. It means the conflict becomes frozen and we still have big powers siding with one side or the other. I could compare this to the situation on the Korean Peninsula, which means that the war has never ended and a peace treaty has never been signed. That situation can be compared with a never sleeping volcano, simmering away in the background, that may erupt at any time.

Another scenario implies stable multipolarity. This would mean the big powers find a solution to the conflict and Russia agrees with the solution to create a stable postwar environment. This scenario implies that Ukraine should give up part of its territory to facilitate a negotiation process and potential peace deal, which will make Kyiv frustrated. If Kyiv is cooperative, the West may invest in Ukraine. The West may invite Ukraine to join NATO. As a reward, the West may also open the door for Ukraine to become an EU member one day, and so on. They will get some reward whether it be political, financial or economic for this gesture.

The third scenario – which is the least likely in my view – involves the balanced European security architecture (which is based on complex treaties made by different actors including Russia /NATO/ US) to recognize the new reality in Europe. These are the three scenarios that I envisage with #1 being the most likely to happen, followed by #2, but #3 is the least realistic at this point.

## **Introductory Context: Sustainability of Conflict**

Ambassador Garcevic's insights delve into the dynamics of protracted warfare and the labyrinthine road to de-escalation. He emphasizes the role of perceptions and the evolving nature of the conflict, where the trade-offs between strategic escalations and diplomacy remains a balanced endeavor.

**Zhou: Do you think it is sustainable for Ukraine and Russia to make this an ongoing war analogous to the**

## **Korean situation?**

**Garcevic:** Wars have their own logic and dynamics and once you get involved in a war you cannot just simply get out of it as many people believe. Once you are part of the war you set up certain goals. Russia must have set up some very ambitious goals and believed that it could achieve them in a couple of weeks, leading to regime change in Ukraine. They didn't achieve this but they recalibrated their goals and revisited their strategy, and they have gained some territory in the East, which they now present to their citizens as a success.

We are now entering the new, second phase of this war with a different dynamic, and that phase may last a long time. Look at Russian history which is full of protracted conflicts. Often these wars did not begin well, like the war against Napoleon or the invasion by Nazi Germany. These wars started badly for Russia but turned out to be successful after several years. So maybe Russians think that way and they see the situation that way: the war hasn't started well but if we continue long enough then our fortune is going to change.

When it comes to the West, it has found itself in a situation that can be described as escalation paradox. The West cannot stand still when Russia invades Ukraine as Japan cannot stand still watching an invasion taking place in front of its own eyes. The invasion is a striking example of the violation of international legal norms, including the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 or the Helsinki Accords of 1975, that Russia is a member of. Therefore the West, particularly, the UK and the US, the parties obliged by the Budapest Memorandum to provide security assurances to Ukraine, has gradually increased its financial and military support to Kyiv but is concerned about further escalation as the conflict may spiral out of control at one point.

However, the West does not always fulfill what Ukraine is asking for. The F16s fighter jets are an example of what I call the escalation paradox approach. The West will provide older models of the jet, it will train Ukrainian pilots, but will not have their own pilots or troops involved as it could lead to further escalation. The West also listens to how Russia is going to react to that. Russian reactions were negative as you could expect, but in fact what the West wanted to see is whether Russia was going to do something more, whether Moscow would be willing to further escalate the conflict. The escalation paradox approach resembles walking on a tightrope. So this is a very delicate process and for political scientists – it's a once in a lifetime opportunity to observe.

## **Introductory Context: Nuclear Escalation Concerns**

The ambassador candidly acknowledges the potential for nuclear escalation, serving as a chilling reminder of the high-stakes nature of the conflict. The specter of nuclear weapons looms large,

underscoring the urgency to resolve the conflict through diplomatic means while gaining comparative advantage through multiple avenues of economic and political levers pulled.

**Naoyuki Haraoka (Editor-in-chief of Japan SPOTLIGHT): Do you see the possibility of this escalation leading to a nuclear war?**

**Garcevic:** It's a very good question. I belong to those people who don't exclude that possibility, if things don't go well on the battlefield for Russia. Let's imagine a scenario where a Ukrainian offensive becomes so successful that Ukraine is so close to regaining Crimea – because the Crimean peninsula is what matters most in this case, and is not just politically but strategically important for Russia. In that case, I cannot exclude the possibility that somebody in Moscow thinks that it would be acceptable and justifiable for Russia to use nuclear weapons. Their military doctrine allows them to use nuclear weapons if Russian territory is under attack, so we are now entering an ambiguous situation since Russia annexed eastern Ukraine and considers it as part of its territory. Now we don't know where the border is because the border changes every day and we have been in an ambiguous situation since Russia annexed eastern Ukraine and considers it as part of its territory. In fact we don't know exactly where, in the eyes of Moscow, Russia officially borders Ukraine. But if things go wrong, they may also interpret this as an attack on their own territory and then present it as a defensive war to justify the use of nuclear weapons. I'm just discussing or considering this as an option that some people in Moscow are also considering as a possibility.

### **Introductory Context: Diplomacy as the Ultimate Avenue**

Despite the formidable obstacles strewn across the diplomatic path, the ambassador underscores that diplomacy remains the ultimate avenue toward resolution. He emphasizes that no war has ever ended without diplomacy and negotiation, highlighting the imperative of diplomatic efforts in navigating this multifaceted challenge.

**Zhou:** Both sides would presumably hope to decrease this possibility and avoid the nuclear option. Maybe it's wishful thinking but could this lead to negotiations and diplomacy?

**Garcevic:** I agree that negotiation will be the end game and as I mentioned before, no war has ever ended without negotiation. The West needs to reassure Moscow that it does not want further escalation and I think the Americans have made it clear a couple of

times so far that they don't support the frequent drone attacks that Ukraine is executing on Russian territory. Whether this will lead to de-escalation or not, this raises a number of questions.

Question number one is how to negotiate with Russia? Can the West negotiate with Putin after all that has happened? Will the West wait for a new leader, and if that happens who will that new leader be? It is overly optimistic and wishful thinking when I hear some people in the West believing that a new leader may be a Liberal Democrat or an ally of the West. This is not going to happen in Russia. Simply this is not how things work there.

We should not exclude the possibility that somebody who is more hawkish than Putin comes to power after him. It is not impossible if you know how Russian hardliners have become frustrated with the lack of (anticipated) advances on the battlefield. Some of them may consider further options, including the use of tactical weapons if things further deteriorate.

In my view, there are several possible outcomes. It could be someone from Siloviki who are representing the military or it could be a tycoon who is more open to cooperation due to financial advantages. To conclude with the point I began with, I would like to see de-escalation but my impression is that we haven't reached that point yet.

### **Summary**

In summation, the Russia-Ukraine conflict is a dynamic and ever-evolving crucible with profound implications for the global geopolitical landscape. Ambassador Garcevic's interview is a treasure trove of insights in dissecting this complex conflict, reminding us of the unchanging realpolitik played by all parties and the unwavering diplomatic efforts to reshape both the region and the global power structure, until the stability of a new international order emerges and tensions decrease. Just as history is called upon to judge all wars, it is also tasked with understanding and resolving the root causes of contemporary geopolitical challenges but with its solutions always embedded in the application of balance-of-power principles. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Joel Challender who is a translator, interpreter, researcher and writer specializing in Japanese disaster preparedness.

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