

Kluwer Mediation Blog

War, what is it good for....

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Friday, April 8th, 2022

A disaster has unfolded in Ukraine and beyond in the month and a half since Russia invaded. Thousands of dead and injured, reports of horrific brutality, millions of refugees and towns and cities reduced to rubble. Russia is also suffering from economic sanctions, the loss of many of its brightest and best and a pariah status that will take years to recover from. There would appear to be a desperate need for a negotiated agreement to end the war as quickly as possible.

In any negotiation it's important to consider the alternatives to reaching agreement to provide some form of benchmark for assessing possible outcomes. What might these look like at the moment?

From the perspective of Ukraine and its allies the best alternative (BATNA) would probably be something along the lines of a unilateral withdrawal of Russian troops and an end to hostilities (perhaps related to a regime change in Moscow), following which Ukraine's independence would be confirmed and security guaranteed and ensured. This might then provide the basis for the rebuilding of relationships, recognising that this would be very sensitive and take a long time given all that has happened.

A Kremlin BATNA would look very different, probably involving the capitulation of the Ukrainian government and the installation of a more pliant regime that would reject closer ties to the EU and NATO.

As an aside, there is also the interesting question of how closely the BATNAs of those who conduct any negotiations align with those of their citizens – highlighting the important role that outside constituents who are indirect parties to a negotiation can play.

In many cases the worst alternative (WATNA) for each party is often the flip side of their BATNA. However, in this instance the WATNA might be even worse and there may be more agreement here. It could be a long, bloody and destructive war, which spirals out of control into which others are drawn and in which nuclear weapons could be deployed – who knows where this might end?

A realistic alternative (RATNA) could be a continued Russian presence in Ukraine involving thousands of troops and an ongoing Ukrainian resistance with a growing loss of life and destruction. Sanctions would continue and intensify – oil, food and other commodity markets would be severely disrupted – the impact on poorer countries as well as Russia and Ukraine would be devastating, while causing increasing discomfort in more prosperous places.

The parties to any negotiation need to carefully consider the probabilities of each of the

alternatives occurring to give themselves yardsticks with which to measure potential negotiation outcomes. In doing so they need to try and filter out the cognitive biases that may cloud their judgement e.g. optimism bias, loss aversion, sunk cost etc.

Time is also of the essence. The longer the hostilities continue the more entrenched positions will become and the less likely parties will be able to engage creatively in addressing each other's underlying needs and interests. It's certainly difficult to imagine the Ukrainians helping the Russians with their 'victory speech'. This becomes even harder as evidence of possible war crimes emerges.

The underlying issues inherent in the current conflict appear to stretch back over many years to the break-up of the Soviet Union and well beyond. This will have left a lot of 'baggage' that is likely to hamper negotiations. Historical context and the different perspectives and narratives that have developed from it are a vital part of building an understanding of the needs, concerns, hopes and fears of all involved.

A number of commentators have suggested the end of empire as the context for this conflict. As one Ukrainian [historian](#) put it: *"Russia today is following in the footsteps of former imperial powers, from the Ottomans to the French, who lost political, financial and cultural capital the more they clung to their imperial possessions. Attempts to resuscitate a failing empire alienate neighbours – and even potential allies – leading to isolation."*

A Russian perspective would probably be very different, perhaps reflecting feelings of vulnerability based on experience. Mark Galeotti's 'Short History of Russia' helps to provide some insight, he observes that *"Russia is a country with no natural borders...at the crossroads of Europe and Asia ... is everyone's perennial other...Its history has been shaped from without. It has been invaded by outsiders from Vikings to Mongols...to Hitler's Germans..."*

As with any negotiation trying to address the question of what this is really about is crucial. For example, one issue that doesn't seem to have had as much attention as it might is the extent to which Russia's aims might be related to greater control over the significant and under-exploited [energy reserves](#) under Ukraine and Ukrainian waters, which if developed could be a competitive threat to their main source of export income.

Helen Thompson's new book 'Disorder – Hard times in the 21st Century' illustrates how much of the geopolitical turbulence in the world over the last half century or so can be linked back to the supply of and demand for fossil fuels. *"Twentieth and early twenty-first century economic and political history is impenetrable without understanding what has followed from the production, consumption and transportation of oil and gas."* Might this war be one more chapter in this story?

The environmental need for a very rapid and just transition away from fossil fuels has been spelled out in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [report](#). As the co-chair of the working group that prepared it put it: *"It's now or never, if we want to limit global warming to 1.5C. Without immediate and deep emissions reductions across all sectors, it will be impossible."* In addition to the developing climate emergency and the immediate humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, the war has highlighted the important security dimension of this urgent call for action.

Understanding of what's really going on for all parties is a vital part of any negotiation. The purpose of this explanation is not to justify actions but to provide the foundation for exploring

options to end the conflict, which go as far as possible to meeting interests of those concerned. Without this understanding the most realistic alternative to negotiation will be an ongoing war and we know what that is good for!

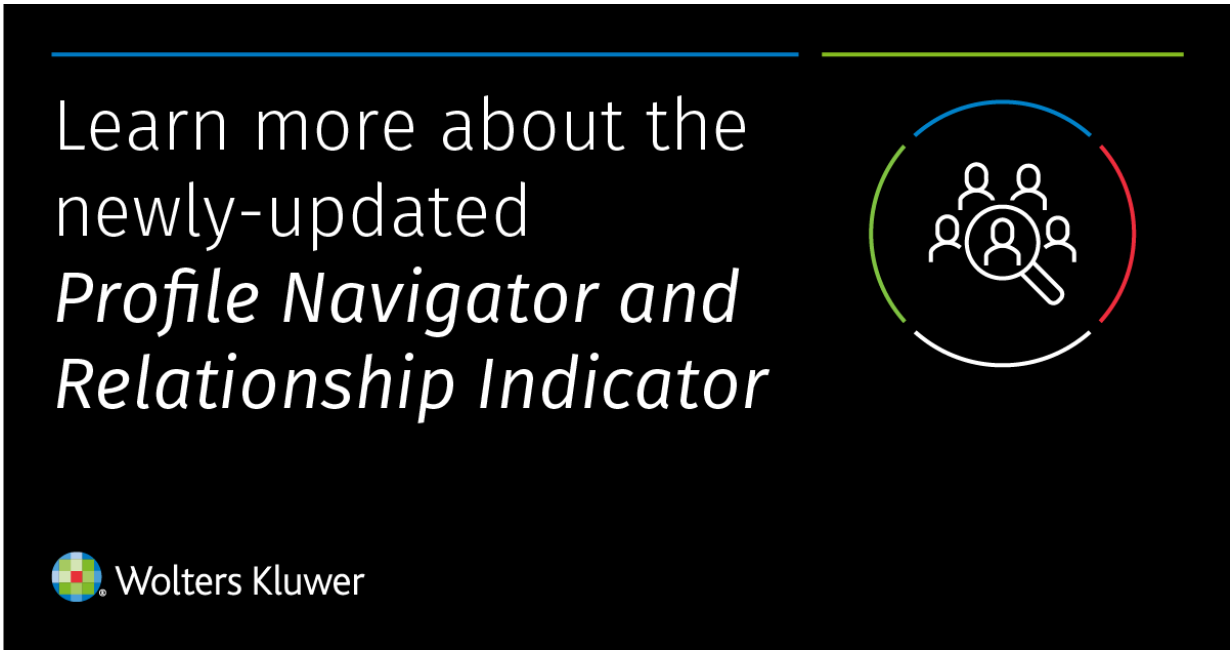
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