

War in Ukraine: Separating truth from falsehood

Look at the facts to see that the Russians are using a false narrative to excuse their invasion of a sovereign country.



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For *The Straits Times*

On Feb 24, Russia began a "special military operation" against its neighbour Ukraine. Since then, we have been witnesses to two wars: a war on the battlefield and a war in the media.

The Russians, supported by China, have launched a effective propaganda campaign to convince the people of the world that Russia is not the aggressor and that the culprit is Nato. I am sorry to say that many Singaporeans have fallen for the Russian narrative.

I believe that there is a difference between facts and lies. I believe there is a difference between truth and falsehood. I acknowledge that everyone is entitled to his opinion but not to his facts.

I agree that there are different views about the war in Ukraine but not all views are equally valid. There are views which are supported by facts and the law, and other views which are not. There is no moral equivalence between right and wrong.

IS UKRAINE A SOVEREIGN, INDEPENDENT COUNTRY?

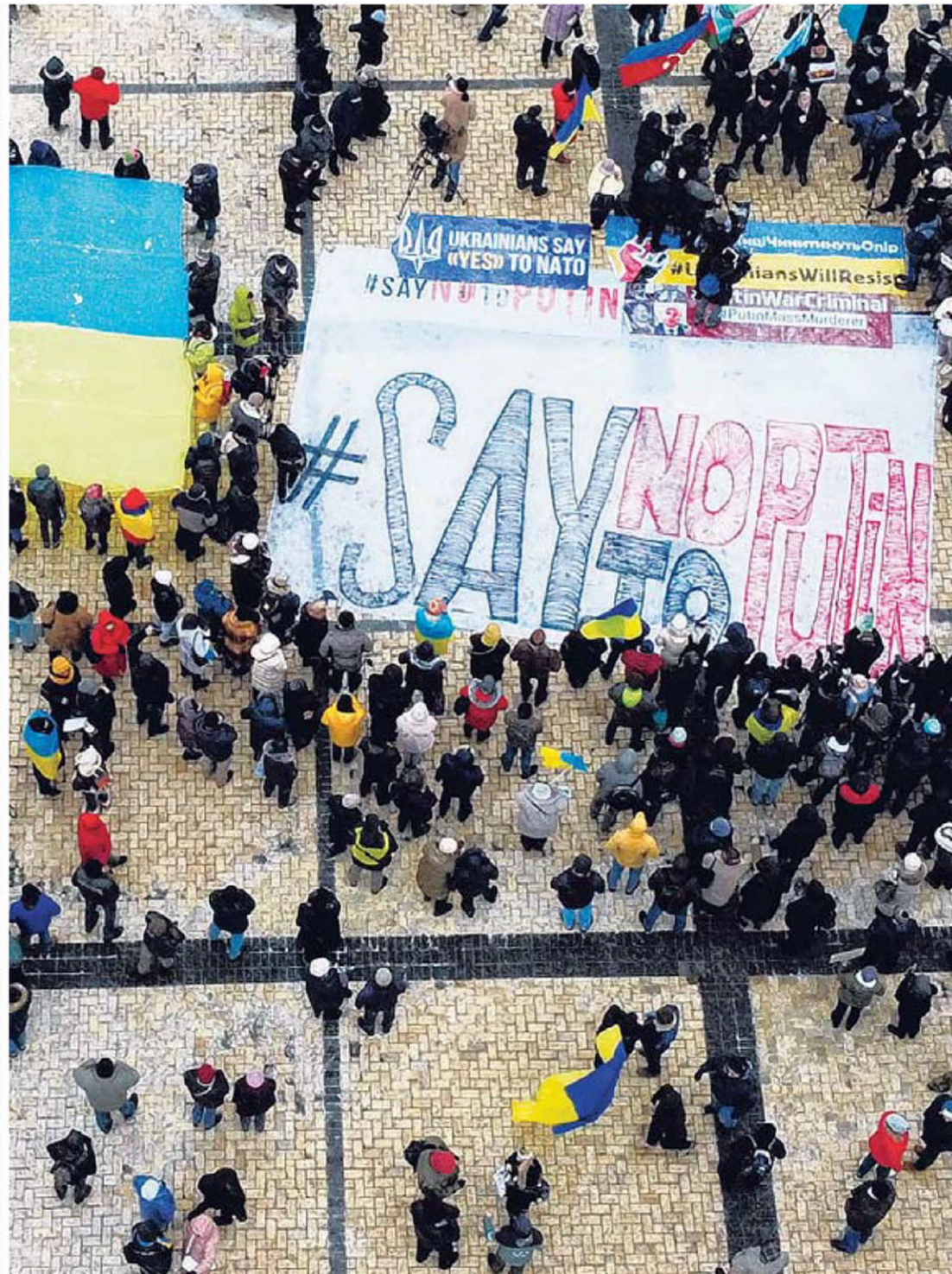
The Russian narrative is that Ukraine is not a sovereign and independent country. Russian President Vladimir Putin said: "Ukraine has never had its authentic statehood. There has never been a sustainable statehood in Ukraine."

The fact is that Ukraine became an independent country on Aug 24, 1991. Russia recognised Ukraine's independence and supported Ukraine's application to join the United Nations.

In 1994, Russia signed the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurance. Russia, together with the United Kingdom and the United States, assured Ukraine that it would protect it from any threats to its territorial integrity.

RUSSIA'S 'SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION'

Russia has called its invasion of Ukraine "a special military



Demonstrators in Kyiv, some holding the Ukrainian national flag, protesting in January against Russian President Vladimir Putin's policies, prior to the Russian invasion on Feb 24. While Mr Putin asserted that "there has never been a sustainable statehood in Ukraine", the fact is that Russia recognised Ukraine's independence and supported Ukraine's application to join the United Nations, says the writer.
PHOTO: REUTERS

operation". I have noticed that several Asian countries have refused to call it an invasion or a war.

The truth is that the term "special military operation" is a semantic trick. In reality, it is an invasion and a war. The war is being fought with great brutality and in clear violation of international humanitarian law.

The International Criminal Court has begun an investigation to determine whether Russia has

committed crimes of aggression, war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

IS NATO TO BLAME?

The Russian and Chinese narrative is that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation is the culprit. The argument is that Nato should not have expanded its membership after the end of the Cold War. Russia feels threatened by the expansion. If Ukraine had not

applied to join Nato, Russia would not have carried out the "special military operation" to safeguard its own security.

The Russian and Chinese narrative blaming Nato for the war in Ukraine is not supported by the facts.

Nato is a collective security alliance whose primary objective is collective self-defence. Under Article 5 of the Atlantic Treaty, an attack on one is an attack on all.

Countries which used to be ruled

by Russia, in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, want to join Nato in order to safeguard their security. They fear that Russia may attack them.

Is there any law or principle which forbids Russia's neighbours from joining Nato? The answer is no. As sovereign and independent countries, they are free to determine their own destinies. Just because they were once ruled by Russia does not mean that they will have to live forever under the

Russian yoke.

In the case of Ukraine, Russia actually signed a document, in 1999, acknowledging Ukraine's right to choose or change its security arrangements. This was contained in the Istanbul Document of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

In 1993, I served as the UN secretary-general's special envoy to Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. I advised the three Baltic states to apply to join the European Union for their economic well-being and join Nato for their security. Was I wrong to have given them such advice? Should I have consulted Moscow first?

I think the bottom line is this: Russia's neighbours, including Ukraine and Georgia, are sovereign and independent countries. They are free to determine their own destinies and Russia has no right to interfere in their decisions.

The truth is that Nato is free from blame. The crux of the problem is that Russia has not come to terms with the fact that it has lost its empire. President Putin wants his neighbours to join his club and not those of the West. If a neighbour cannot be persuaded, he is prepared to use force to impose his will.

SHOULD SMALL COUNTRIES BE NEUTRAL?

I want to deal with another argument which enjoys some support on social media by Singaporeans. The argument is that, as a small country, Singapore should not take sides. It should be neutral. It should not have imposed sanctions against Russia.

There are two points in this argument which I want to respond to. The first point is about the role of small countries. Small countries need the protection of the UN, the UN Charter principle and international law more than big countries.

Small countries must therefore speak up whenever those principles are violated. Singapore has been quite consistent in condemning Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the US invasion of Grenada.

The second point is about neutrality. Here I want to quote something said by our first foreign minister, Mr S. Rajaratnam, in his speech to the UN on Sept 21, 1965.

Mr Rajaratnam said: "Non-alignment is only in regard to narrow power bloc interests and not in regard to the basic principles embodied in the UN Charter. To be non-aligned in regard to the basic tenets of the Charter is to destroy the integrity and effectiveness of the United Nations in which small countries like mine place our hopes."

To sum up, small countries cannot keep silent when the basic principles of the UN Charter are violated. We have to defend those principles. We have to speak up whenever they are violated.

Our policy is to be close to all the great powers. However, this does not mean that we can be neutral when any of them violates the basic principles of the UN Charter. As Mr Rajaratnam said, we cannot be neutral in regard to the basic tenets of the Charter.

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