

Opinion: Australia treats world's most important conflict with indifference



George Brandis

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The attention of the world is consumed by events in Gaza and southern Lebanon, as Israel ruthlessly prosecutes its defensive war against Hamas and Hezbollah.

Yet despite its undoubted significance in geopolitics – and the passions it arouses domestically – this is not the world's most important conflict. The war being fought in Ukraine has far wider global dimensions.



President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky and Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong. *Credit: Illustration: Aresna Villanueva*

It is already, in some senses, a global war, insofar as Ukraine is being supported by Western arms and intelligence, while Russia's war effort is enabled by Iranian and North Korean weapons, and sanctioned by its "no limits' partnership" with China.

Were Putin to succeed, it would be a massive blow to the order which has kept the world from global war for 80 years. Were that success due to the withdrawal of

American support if Donald Trump is elected in November, it would send Putin an unmissable signal that aggression will not be resisted. Other autocrats – including in our hemisphere – would adjust their plans accordingly.

It is profoundly misguided for Australia to see the Ukraine war as a faraway conflict in which we do not have a direct interest. In an increasingly joined-up world, in which cyberspace will potentially be as important as the physical battle space, the very idea of proximity is of ever-decreasing relevance.

In 1938, Neville Chamberlain infamously described events in Central Europe as “a quarrel in a faraway country, between people of whom we know nothing”. As military capabilities and reach evolve at astonishing speed, distance matters much less. In the case of cyber warfare, it literally does not exist. The implications of a Russian victory in Ukraine are closer to home for Australians than were developments in Central Europe to Britain in 1938.

Yet like Chamberlain, Albanese and his ministers increasingly treat Ukraine as “a quarrel in a faraway country,” not a war in which Australian interests are threatened.

That indifference was evident on three occasions last week.

First, it was revealed by [this masthead](#) that the Department of Defence has chosen to dispose of hundreds of military drones by auctioning them on the market for second-hand materiel, rather than gifting them to Ukraine, where they would be immediately useful. Defence’s response was bureaucratic boilerplate: “Australia is working closely with the government of Ukraine to ensure that we are providing practical assistance that is making a difference.”

When earlier this year Defence decided to junk its decommissioned [Taipan helicopters](#), its justification for not gifting them to Ukraine was that they were operationally unsafe. No such pretext exists here. Since the cost of the equipment would already be written off, it would have been a cost-free exercise. What is the higher priority? Making a barely noticeable improvement in the bottom line of the bloated Defence budget, or helping a democracy fighting for its life? Do the accountants in Russell Offices know more about what Ukraine needs on the battlefield than the Ukrainians themselves?

A second case of how bureaucratic preferences have smothered our commitment was apparent in Penny Wong's response to Shadow Foreign Minister Simon Birmingham's call for Australia to re-open our embassy in Kyiv. Wong cited "[workplace health and safety](#)" concerns.

Australia can't just operate embassies in safe places. In 2017, our embassy in Kabul came under rocket attack from the Taliban. We didn't close it; it remained open until shortly before American forces withdrew in 2021. A generation earlier, the Australian embassy remained open throughout the Vietnam War, until the very last days before the fall of Saigon.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, Western intelligence predicted the imminent fall of Kyiv. In those circumstances, most (although not all) nations evacuated their diplomatic staff. But when Kyiv withstood the Russian advance, and the fighting refocused on the east of the country, embassies reopened. Australia is virtually the only country which has not returned. Our embassy was co-located with Canada's, which returned its diplomats more than a year ago. Why is it safe for the Canadians, but not for us?

In the past 12 months, there have been three Russian missile or drone attacks on Kyiv. (In the first year of the war there were 30.) Today, an Australian diplomat would be at much greater risk of being killed by a firearm in Washington DC (which has the highest rate of gun crime in the US) than from a missile or drone in Kyiv.

As I well know from the four years I was an employee of the Department of Foreign Affairs, "WH and S" is its go-to excuse for not doing anything it doesn't want to do. I suppose the argument plays well to a Cabinet dominated by former trade union officials, but it is a disgraceful cop-out.

A third revealing moment was when Wong told [ABC Radio](#) that Australia is "the largest non-NATO donor to Ukraine". That is untrue. Certainly, we were in the early days of the war, but our proportionate contribution – like our interest – has dwindled. As the authoritative "Ukraine Support Tracker" published and updated quarterly by Germany's [Kiel Institute](#) reveals, Australia has slipped to be the second-lowest contributor, in per capita terms, of any donor nation in the Indo-Pacific. Only New Zealand gives less.

Either Wong was lying, or (more likely) she simply didn't care enough to get her facts right.

One of the most revealing moments in the recent US presidential debate was when Donald Trump was asked, twice, who he wanted to win: Ukraine or Russia. Both times, he declined to say. At least, unlike Anthony Albanese and Penny Wong, he wasn't trying to conceal his indifference.

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