



A BLACK SEA HUMANITARIAN FOOD CORRIDOR TO ODESSA

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One of the many tragic consequences of the war in Ukraine has been its impact on world food supplies and prices, and since this is a lag effect, it will only become worse over the next few months. David Beasley, former governor of South Carolina and current head of the World Food Program (WFP), has sought to spotlight this looming crisis. On CBS' *60 Minutes* this past week, he noted that Ukraine is a breadbasket that helps feeds some 400 million people globally and called for world leaders to open a sea lane for food from Odessa. Although he avoided suggesting how, it is a timely idea that should be pursued, especially by those countries and organizations most affected.

Ukraine is the world's largest producer and exporter of sunflower seeds used for edible cooking oil and the fifth-largest exporter of wheat. It also is a significant supplier of corn. The Rome-based WFP buys from Ukraine about half the grain it supplies to the world's neediest. Ukraine is also among the largest suppliers of foodstuffs to the volatile Middle East, as is Russia. Thus, the stakes involved in a food corridor are not just about protecting people from hardship and starvation, but also maintaining political stability across the Islamic world and beyond.

Since Ukrainian exports are prevented by the Russian blockade, a proposal for a Black Sea humanitarian

food corridor seeks to carve out a workable exception for agricultural exports as humanitarian goods. Ironically, as Ukrainians trapped in cities or fleeing in the war-torn eastern part of the country desperately search for food, the storage facilities elsewhere in Ukraine are stuffed to capacity from last year's bumper harvest that farmers cannot bring to market today.

Some supplies trickle out through ports in Rumania and Bulgaria, but this is an expensive and logistically difficult route and can hardly substitute for the long-established direct route from Odessa. Moreover, Russia has repeatedly been striking at the Zatoka bridge carrying rail tracks over the Dniester Estuary on the coastal route to Rumania south of Odessa.

In the meantime, food prices in the Middle East are reaching record highs. Inventories of Ukrainian supplies exported before the war are now running low, and the outlook for next year would be bleak even in the unlikely event that the war soon ends. With fertilizers, fuels, and manpower in short supply and export markets mostly blocked, there are few incentives for Ukrainian farmers to plant new crops. Moreover, food shocks are reverberating around the world as other agricultural surplus countries are now husbanding supplies to protect domestic customers. For example, rising prices for vegetable oils have caused Indonesia to ban exports of palm oil, of which it is the world's largest supplier. Droughts in other world food producing areas have also tightened markets. International initiatives to bring more food onto the market are urgently needed.

As a practical measure, Russia's agreement would be required, just as it is for humanitarian corridors within Ukraine. Commercial shippers and, importantly, their insurers, must be convinced that ships, crews, and cargoes can move safely within a war zone. But since the purpose of Russia's blockade is to cripple the Ukrainian economy and since high food prices benefit Russian exporters, why should Russia agree?

Russia should be challenged. It is, of course, heavily invested in Syria, where the WFP has forecast food price inflation could reach 100-200% in the coming year. Russia also seeks to cultivate ties elsewhere in

the Middle East and Africa, which it needs today more than ever. Enough pressure from these regions may give Vladimir Putin some incentive to accept the humanitarian food corridor concept. If he does, Russian farmers will still enjoy high prices. Moreover, if Russia chooses to resist heightened pressure, it will suffer public relations and diplomatic consequences, providing more evidence of its callousness toward the world in its quest to revive its former empire.

The corridor would require largely symbolic naval escorts from perhaps Turkey, Egypt, or some other Middle East buying countries to assure shippers and insurers that it is for real. Russia would likely insist on inspections to ensure that military supplies were not reaching Ukraine through the route. Russia might also demand a funding mechanism to prevent Ukrainian foreign exchange earnings from going to its military effort. It could negotiate such details forever to give the appearance of cooperation, while in truth preventing agreement. The United Nations or other acceptable sponsoring entity, then, must strongly and visibly advocate the scheme with tight deadlines and efficient safeguards, forthrightly calling out petty delaying tactics.

The humanitarian food corridor should be a priority for developing countries, and it is they, not NATO, who must lead the initiative. Unfortunately, there has been a tendency for many such countries to see the war as a European or East-West conflict distant from their direct interests. Yet aside from the flagrant disregard for UN Charter principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity that help protect smaller nations, international food as well as energy prices are among the many ways the war is relevant to their needs and futures.

A food corridor, of course, would provide no solution to the many other global challenges that Putin's aggression has caused or aggravated. Small steps, however, can sometimes lead to larger actions. The international community should not just react to Russia. It should proactively and urgently act on proposals that ameliorate the consequences of the conflict and bring it to an early and acceptable conclusion. A food corridor is a proposal worth pursuing.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.