

In a war being waged for all humanity, the West is paying a shamefully small price

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In a speech earlier this week, Finance Minister and deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland put into focus what was at stake in the battle for Ukraine.

“There are moments in history when the great struggle between freedom and tyranny comes down to one fight, in one place, which is waged for all of humanity,” Ms. Freeland said.

Indeed, she did not understate the gravity of the situation.

Which is perhaps why I’m likely not the only Canadian feeling somewhat sheepish about our response in the West to the reckless, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces.

Yes, the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, members of the European Union and other countries have backed devastating sanctions and other measures designed to cripple the Russian economy, which are already having a debilitating effect. We have offered weapons to be used by Ukrainian soldiers. In their totality, these initiatives certainly help a country that is witnessing the indiscriminate murder of its citizens, including children, under the direction of a ruthless dictator who apparently has fanciful visions of an expansive empire on his mind.

Why is Russia invading Ukraine? What Putin’s troops have done so far in Kherson, Kyiv and beyond

But they also allow us not to get our hands dirty. War is bloody, brutal, ugly stuff, as this one is again demonstrating. And the fact is, the West wants no part of it.

I still have a hard time understanding how the West can say that it would go to war for any NATO country that was invaded by Russia – which would include Estonia, with its population of 1.3 million, one presumes – but not the democratically held Ukraine, population 44 million. The issues at stake in the battle being waged now are the same as they would be if Mr. Putin decided to appropriate Estonia or Albania or Croatia: the expansion of authoritarianism. But those countries would get boots on the ground and planes in the air – while Ukraine only gets sanctions and donations of weaponry?

Not that anyone wants to see the young men and women of their country going off to fight a war on foreign land. But if this conflict in Ukraine is as important as Ms. Freeland says it is, then you would think it would be important enough for the free world to get behind it in the fullest means possible.

But that is not the case.

I suppose the least we can do in Canada then is not complain when the consequences of the sanctions put in place to strangle the Russian economy begin to affect us here – because they will.

Ms. Freeland has warned of this herself. The sanctions have already led to an increase in energy prices, which will mean higher prices at the pumps. So when you’re filling up, just remember: right now, this is the small sacrifice we are making to try and bring a ruthless despot to his knees.

Russia and Ukraine are also large exporters of essential metals such as palladium, aluminum and nickel. Those are already grinding to a halt. There will be other supply chain issues that will cause other commodities to increase in price. Transport costs globally for ocean and air could double or triple in the coming months, according to some consulting companies. It could all create another round of inflationary pressures.

If Ukraine falls to the Russians – and it well may – then these sanctions may be in place for a long time. In fact, secondary sanctions could be added. If China decides to bankroll its economically ailing friend, sanctions could be aimed at that country, too. That would undoubtedly incite reprisals, and the economic fallout here and elsewhere would likely be substantial. (Although you have to ask yourself why China would do this when its trade with Russia is one-tenth the volume of its business with the U.S. and the E.U., which it would be risking by supporting the ruthless killer in the Kremlin.)

But again, our small sacrifices seem to be the least we can do to help a country seeing the blood of its people being spilled every day in the name of freedom and the defence of democratic ideals. After all, Ukrainians have been asked to be on the front lines of a horrific physical confrontation pitting good versus evil – a war that will have long-lasting geopolitical repercussions.

On Wednesday, Canada joined 140 other countries at the United Nations General Assembly in support of a resolution calling on Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine. “The world stands united in condemning President Putin’s war of aggression and in solidarity with the Ukrainian people,” Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly said on Twitter after the vote.

But that support comes with an asterisk, one that makes clear that this backing comes with limitations – ones that should make us all feel just a little bit uncomfortable.