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# Between Realism and Idealism: Issues, Parties, Outcomes and Lessons of the Ukraine War

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The dominant international story since last year has been Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It marked the return of Europe to the centre of world affairs, and the return to Europe of geopolitics, territorial disputes and largescale force and ground wars not experienced since 1945. My talk looks back on the crisis in a longer-term and broader reflective analysis of seven intertwined threads:

1. The tension between geopolitical realism and normative idealism;
2. Different framings of the Ukraine war;
3. The core issues at dispute;
4. The conflict parties;
5. The possible different endings to the war;
6. The principal lessons to be drawn from the conflict; and
7. What happens next?

## Interplay between Geopolitical Realism and Normative Idealism

In the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides recounts the stern admonition from Athens to Melos that questions of right and justice apply only to relations among equals in power.<sup>1)</sup> For others, ‘the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’. A matching Russian proverb holds that ‘rules are for servants, not masters’.<sup>2)</sup> ‘Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states’, wrote Hans J. Morgenthau. I rephrase his mantra thus: International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for normative ascendancy: the establishment and maintenance of the dominant normative architecture of international order created and maintained by the interplay of power, principles and ideas for the common good.

History is written by the victors. As an African proverb puts it: ‘Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter’.<sup>3)</sup> For reasons of geography and history (think of invasions of Russia by Napoleon and Hitler), Russians regard the prospect of NATO troops in Ukraine as an existential threat to their security. From Mikhail Gorbachev through Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin, there is unbroken continuity in the Russian grievance about NATO’s eastward expansion. Ukraine is not a core strategic interest for the US and its European allies but it is so for Russia’s security elite, not just for Putin.

After the US Senate ratified the decision to enlarge NATO in May 1998, George Kennan, the architect of the Cold War containment doctrine, said: ‘I think it is the beginning of a new cold war ... Of course, there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are – but this is just wrong’. In the 1999–2020 period, 14 countries from central and eastern Europe, seeking security against future Russian threats, joined NATO,

taking the alliance ever closer to Russia's own borders and heightening their paranoia. As Kennan foreshadowed, they reacted in Ukraine in 2014 and again last year. And, as Kennan predicted, pro-NATO enlargement enthusiasts describe Russia's actions as *ex post facto* proof of the correctness of the decision to expand NATO.<sup>4)</sup>

## Four Frames

### Democracy vs Autocracy

The MSM and all Western leaders have echoed President Joe Biden's Manichean framing of the war as a 'great battle' between democracy and autocracy, liberty and repression and a rules-based order and 'one governed by brute force'.<sup>5)</sup> President Volodymyr Zelensky has been unexpectedly heroic, courageous and inspirational. But the 'democracy-autocracy' narrative is seriously defective. Ukrainians are fighting for their nation, not for universal freedoms.

The 2014 Maidan revolution was a de facto coup to oust the democratically elected pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, with, as *The Washington Post* put it, 'a deep degree of US involvement' in Ukraine's internal affairs.<sup>6)</sup> David Roman covered the events as a correspondent for the conservative *Wall Street Journal*. He wrote in 2018:<sup>7)</sup>

*... on the last days of February 2014, armed thugs – many, if not most, heavily armed far-right and neo-Nazi activists from western Ukraine – stormed Maidan square, killing and capturing police officers ....*

*... the EU envoy telling her bosses that she was pretty certain that far-right Ukrainians had killed protesters in Maidan while posing as police to get us, the gullible Western media, to hate the Russians even more ...*

*I was struck by the image of a democratically elected president escaping his country in the middle of the night, chased by hooligans holding Waffen-SS banners ....*

*Ukraine remains mired in bankruptcy and corruption, led by a government that is happily commemorating Nazis as heroes of the Second World War, while begging for NATO membership and American cash.*

In the annual report from Freedom House, Ukraine's score of 61/100 put it in the 'partly free' category.<sup>8)</sup> After the 2014 coup, the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion – that's a *Daily Beast* label<sup>9)</sup> from 2019, not part of Putin's current propaganda – was incorporated into President Petro Poroshenko's military and security apparatus and has remained there.<sup>10)</sup> Zelensky seized the opportunity of the war to 'suspend' 11 opposition parties, including the biggest with 44 MPs in the 450-seat Parliament, and to nationalise several media outlets to implement a 'unified information policy'.<sup>11)</sup> In Transparency International's 2021 corruption index,<sup>12)</sup> Ukraine<sup>13)</sup> ranked 122/180 countries, making it Europe's most corrupt country. (Russia is even worse.)

Western countries have themselves witnessed grievous assaults on freedoms and curtailment of civil liberties and democratic practices in the last three years. In a longer timeframe, we have seen the liberal democratic state succumb in successive waves to the national security, administrative, surveillance and biosecurity state.

#### Rule of Law vs Rule by Force

A second framing alleges Russian violations of foundational global norms on state sovereignty, territorial integrity and the use of force. Unfortunately, every charge levelled against Russia applies also to the US. It has used force overseas more often than any other country since 1945, including Iraq in 2003. It rejected the World Court's judgment on aggression against Nicaragua<sup>14)</sup> and threatened the International Criminal Court<sup>15)</sup> with sanctions for daring to investigate possible war crimes by US soldiers in Afghanistan, but backs the two courts vis-à-vis Russia in

Ukraine. The downing of a Malaysian Airline flight over Ukraine in 2014 is comparable to the downing of an Iran Air flight by a US warship in 1988.<sup>16)</sup> Both Moscow and Washington rejected the World Court's 1996 opinion on the legal obligation on nuclear disarmament.<sup>17)</sup> Being a great power means never having to say sorry for your acts of hypocrisy in world affairs.

### **Recalibrating the European Balance of Power**

The first two frames together, in combination with the global dominance of Western media, explain why Westerners conflate their local consensus into a global consensus that simply doesn't exist.<sup>18)</sup> The countries that haven't joined in the sanctions on Russia, starting with China and India, represent more than half the world's population. Much of the non-Western world views the Ukraine conflict within a third frame of an ongoing recalibration of the European balance of power since the Cold War ended.

A continual readjustment of geopolitical frontiers along historical fault lines and buffer states is part of human history. Afflicted by hubris, the US and NATO effectively treated Russia as a permanently defeated enemy instead of one in temporary retreat. As NATO kept incorporating former Warsaw Pact members in a steady eastward expansion to Russia's borders, the repeated proclamation of redlines over Georgia and Ukraine were contemptuously brushed aside.

- According to declassified documents from the US National Security Archive published in 2017, there were multiple assurances to Soviet leaders from US, UK, French and German leaders against NATO expansion, that were then serially violated.
- The current CIA director William Burns was posted in Moscow when he wrote a memo in 1995: 'Hostility to NATO expansion

is almost universally felt across the domestic political spectrum here'.<sup>19)</sup>

- Burns returned to Moscow as ambassador. On 1 February 2008 he sent a cable to Washington entitled: 'NYET MEANS NYET: RUSSIA'S NATO ENLARGEMENT REDLINES'.<sup>20)</sup>
- Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned Burns that the issue of NATO membership for Ukraine 'could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene'.
- Despite the blunt warning, on 3 April 2008, NATO's Bucharest Summit Declaration affirmed that Ukraine and Georgia 'will become members of NATO'.<sup>21)</sup>

Americans also ignore their own history of breaches of international law and principles: rejection of the World Court's adverse verdict for the destabilization of Nicaragua in 1986, invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, exit from the Iran nuclear deal. There *are* parallels between NATO actions in Kosovo in 1999 and Russian actions in Crimea in 2014; and between US rejection of Cuba's sovereign right to enter into a security alliance with the Soviet Union and station Soviet missiles in 1962, and Russian rejections of comparable rights asserted for Ukraine.

In a speech to the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 that filled many listeners with foreboding, Putin accused the west of breaking assurances on NATO expansion.<sup>22)</sup> In 2008 in Georgia and again in 2014 in Ukraine, he made it clear that Russia had red lines that he would not allow NATO and the EU to cross. In his address to the nation on 24 February announcing the military actions against Ukraine, Putin began by highlighting the threat posed by 'the eastward expansion of NATO, which is moving its military infrastructure ever closer to the Russian border'.<sup>23)</sup>

In the event, NATO policy on Ukraine provoked but did not deter

Russia. In the cable sent home on 1 February 2008, Burns, concluded: ‘While Russian opposition to the first round of NATO enlargement in the mid-1990s was strong, Russia now feels itself able to respond more forcefully to what it perceives as actions contrary to its national interests’.<sup>24)</sup> South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa said on 17 March 2022: ‘The war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from amongst its own leaders and officials over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region’.<sup>25)</sup>

### Russia’s Place in Europe

The final frame is to examine the war as contestations over Russia’s place in the European security, economic and political orders. Boris Yeltsin was told in October 1993 by Secretary of State Warren Christopher that the US was pursuing, not NATO membership for selected European countries, but rather a Partnership for Peace for *all*. When Yeltsin interrupted to make sure he had understood correctly that all Central and Eastern European countries and Russia would be treated equally in an all-inclusive partnership, Christopher replied, ‘Yes, that is the case’. Yeltsin responded, ‘This is a brilliant idea, a stroke of genius’. Within a year the US changed policy and Russia was frozen out. The rest is living history in which we are still trapped.<sup>26)</sup>

Many Western commentators were quick to condemn India’s balancing act in juggling its interests and values in relations with Russia, Ukraine and the West. Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar pointedly remarked in Washington on 11 April 2022 that since sanctions were imposed by NATO on Russia, India’s monthly oil imports from Russia were probably less than European energy imports in one afternoon.<sup>27)</sup> On 22 April, *The Telegraph* (UK) reported that after the EU imposed an arms embargo

on Russia in retaliation for the annexation of Crimea in 2014, France and Germany had sold €273mn worth of arms to Russia that was likely being used in the current war in Ukraine.<sup>28)</sup> Shivshankar Menon, India's former National Security Adviser (2010–14), wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that the Ukraine war will transform Europe's geopolitical landscape but is not a transcendental conflict between autocracies and democracies, will not reshape the global order and has only limited relevance for the Indo-Pacific.<sup>29)</sup> China's rise is far more consequential for reconfiguring the emerging global order on both the geopolitical and normative axes than the protracted death rattles of the Soviet empire that expired in 1990/91.<sup>30)</sup>

## Issues in Dispute

### Post-Cold War European Order

The issues involved in the Ukraine conflict can be broken into structural and proximate. The big-picture structural issue is the post-Cold War order in Europe and the place of a shrunken and much-diminished Russia in the European security order and architecture. History did not end with the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War in 1990–91. Nor was the power status of post-Soviet Russia settled. Wars may result from misperceived slights by the fading power or miscalculation of relative strengths by the falling-rising pair of powers.

As already noted, almost all Russian leaders believed that Russia had consented to the peaceful terms of the ending of the Cold War on two core understandings: NATO would not expand its borders eastwards and Russia would be incorporated into an inclusive pan-European security architecture. Instead, waves of NATO enlargement took it to the very doorstep of Russia in an exclusionary post-Cold War order that in due



course provoked a strong reaction from Moscow. The end result is that the rupture of the Cold War European security order caused by the collapse of Soviet power is a long way from being repaired.

For context, it's worth recalling that the problem of growing German power that had perturbed the existing European balance of power order in early twentieth century was 'solved' by two world wars followed by the division of Germany on either side of the Iron Curtain. By contrast the great power competition in the Pacific, which was primarily maritime unlike the chiefly continental contest in Europe, was not settled by the Second World War. Instead the US, Russia, China and Japan are still jostling in the crowded strategic space.

Initially, while Russia was militarily ascendant, many analysts rightly worried about China copying Russia's Ukraine template. With Russia militarily on the defensive, it might be time to start worrying about the US exporting the template of provoking a military conflict as a means of diplomatically isolating and militarily weakening the only potential strategic rival in the Pacific.

#### **Rubbing Russia's Nose in the Dirt of its Historic Defeat**

The proximate causes of the war are the place of Ukraine between East and West, NATO's eastwards expansion, Putin's lament of Soviet collapse as a catastrophe and Russian revanchism, and his desire to exploit the debacle of US withdrawal from Afghanistan and perceptions of Biden as a cognitively challenged weakling.

The end of the Cold War set in motion the implosion of the Soviet Union with accompanying impoverishment and collapse of Russian power. Russia's unchecked continued decline and loss of power, influence, economic weight, diplomatic heft and status has provided cover to the West's neglect of satisfactory arrangements for Russia's

place in Europe. Instead Russia's nose was rubbed repeatedly in the dirt of its historic defeat with the ignominious retreat from Afghanistan, the contemptuous dismissal of its interests and concerns in Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, Syria and, most consequentially, around its western borders as NATO inched ever closer.

Sweden and Finland joining NATO – not a cause but a direct consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – will only intensify Russian perceptions of growing strategic encirclement by a hostile military alliance. How will Putin react? Doing nothing is not an option. The best proof of this is the fact that he did react to the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO. Another clue comes from his observation to Finland's president in 2016: 'When we look across the border now, we see a Finn on the other side. If Finland joins NATO, we will see an enemy' (President Sauli Niinistö in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, 14 February 2022).<sup>31)</sup>

Sweden and Finland's entry into the alliance doubles the direct Russia-NATO land border from 1,200 to 2,500km. It tightens the strategic encirclement with a ring of steel around the Baltic Sea, complicating access to the Kaliningrad and imposing fresh restrictions on the Russian Navy. It intensifies the threat to St Petersburg, Russia's second city after Moscow. It exposes the strategically important Kola Peninsula which hosts Russia's Northern Fleet, including nuclear submarines armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles (SSBNs) that are critical to a survivable second-strike retaliatory capability. NATO operational-tactical missile complexes located in Finland would represent threats to the military-industrial complex in the Arkhangelsk region and transportation infrastructure.

This is why Russia cannot and will not sit idly by, as well explained by Nicholas Lokker and Heli Hautala (a Finnish career diplomat) on 30 March 2023.<sup>32)</sup> New Russian force posture and deployments are almost

certain, including beefed up surveillance and patrolling operations. Most concerning, it might lead to an increased role of Russian nuclear weapons, including stationing tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus. In turn this will set off a fresh round of NATO countermeasures.<sup>33)</sup>

Where will it all end?

Shortly after leaving office, former president Bill Clinton said that as the top dog in the world, the US faced a fundamental choice.<sup>34)</sup> It could make every effort to stay top dog. Or, it could use its unchallengeable dominance to create a world in which it was comfortable living when no longer top dog. Unfortunately, the US – including Clinton’s own administration in the Balkans with the NATO intervention in Kosovo to territorially dismember Russia’s ally Yugoslavia in 1999 – failed to heed the wisdom of this analysis.

Fifteen years later the Kosovo ‘precedent’ was hurled at US and European criticism of Russia’s actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine by President Putin in March and October 2014,<sup>35)</sup> and echoed by Foreign Minister Lavrov, who in 1999 was Russia’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1994–2004).<sup>36)</sup> The brittleness of international institutional checks on the exercise of American power to attack a sovereign UN member state in violation of international and UN Charter law was brutally demonstrated again in Iraq in 2003. It’s still not clear to me that NATO countries fully grasp the long-term damage these precedents caused to the UN-centric normative architecture of global governance.

In Libya in 2011, all five BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) objected strongly to the shift from the politically neutral posture of civilian protection, to the partial goal of assisting the rebels and pursuing regime change.<sup>37)</sup> The price of NATO excesses in Libya was paid by Syrians as China and Russia resumed the double veto of several

draft resolutions.

To the leading Western powers, NATO enlargement was a natural adjustment to the realities of the post-Cold War balance of power and to the historical antipathy among eastern Europeans towards Russia. To a Russia that does not see itself as a defeated and exhausted great power, it was a threat to core security interests that had to be confronted and checked. The only question was when and where. The prospect of Ukraine joining NATO answered the last question. To a disinterested observer outside the NATO–Russia conflict, it's striking how most Western analysts refuse to concede the direct parallels between Russia's hostility to potential NATO missiles based in Ukraine and the US willingness to risk nuclear war in 1962 because of the threat of Soviet missiles being based in nearby Cuba.

Imagine if you will:

- The province of Quebec has seceded from Canada;
- Its elected government is overthrown in a coup in which Chinese diplomats are actively involved and a pro-Beijing regime is installed instead;
- English-speaking Quebecois are subjected to increasingly repressive discrimination; and
- Quebec's growing commercial relations with China are followed by a military alliance that results in Chinese missiles being sited in Montreal.

The US would no more shrug this off as a matter for China and Quebec as two sovereign states, than Russia could accept what was happening in Ukraine.

## Conflict Parties

The immediate conflict parties are Russia and Ukraine, with neighbouring eastern European states involved to varying degrees in funnelling arms (Poland) and as staging posts (Belarus). But the main conflict parties are Russia and the US-led West. In a very real sense, Ukraine's territory is the battleground for a proxy war between them that reflects the unsettled questions since the end of the Cold War. This explains the ambivalence of most non-Western countries. They are no less offended by Russia's war of aggression. But they also have considerable sympathy for the argument that NATO was insensitively provocative in expanding to Russia's very borders. The Global South has been vocal in saying firstly that Europe's problems are no longer automatically the world's problems, and secondly that while they condemn Russia's aggression, they also sympathise quite heavily with the Russian complaint about NATO provocations in expanding to Russia's borders.

A study published last October from Cambridge University's Bennett Institute for Public Policy provides details on the extent to which the West has become isolated from opinion in the rest of the world on perceptions of China and Russia.<sup>38)</sup> In Western democracies, 75 and 87 per cent of people hold negative views of China and Russia, respectively. But among the 6.3bn people who live outside the West, positive views dominate: 70 per cent of China and 66 per cent of Russia. That said, the survey also shows that the number of countries with more favourable views of the US greatly exceeds those with favourable views of Russia and China. This means that they have not been duped by Putin's propaganda. The Bennett Institute study was broadly replicated in a study from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in February 2023.<sup>39)</sup> In this report, Timothy Garton-Ash, Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard cautioned

Western decision-makers to recognise that ‘in an increasingly divided post-Western world’, emerging powers ‘will act on their own terms and resist being caught in a battle between America and China’.

Given its history and geopolitics, the place of Kyiv in Russia’s cultural and national identity, and the strategic importance of Crimea for Russia’s security, neither a Russia with a ruler other than Putin, nor indeed a democratic Putin and Russia, would have reacted differently to the challenge to core interests posed by Ukrainian developments in and since 2014.

A great power does not retreat forever. Russia is a traditional European great power that was comprehensively defeated in the Cold War. The West has treated it as if it had been militarily defeated and conquered. Instead it reacted like a wounded great power when NATO expanded its borders to the limits of Russia’s territory. In terms of classical realism and balance-of-power politics, Ukraine’s actions were dangerously provocative to its great power neighbour and Russia’s reactions were entirely predictable in its core sphere of influence.

That said, no one can credibly claim that Russia did not warn the West to cease and desist. At the NATO–Russia Council in Bucharest in April 2008, an angry Putin was reported to have warned President George W. Bush that were Ukraine to join NATO, Russia would encourage the separation of eastern Ukraine and Crimea.<sup>40)</sup> Speaking at the Valdai Club in Sochi on 24 October 2014, Putin delivered an extraordinarily tough diatribe against Washington.<sup>41)</sup> In his initial 40-minute address and then in the Q&A that lasted for over an hour, Putin insisted that US policies, not Russia, had torn apart the existing rules of global order and brought chaos and instability by violating international law and ignoring international institutions when inconvenient.

The Ukraine crisis was the result of ‘a coup d’état carried out with the

support' of Western powers. They were also short-sighted in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, such that Americans 'are constantly fighting the consequences of their own policies, throw all their effort into addressing the risks they themselves have created, and pay an ever-greater price'. Rejecting charges of wanting to recreate a Russian empire, Putin insisted: 'While respecting the interests of others, we simply want for our own interests to be taken into account and for our position to be respected'.

### Possible Outcomes

In his influential book, *The Anarchical Society* (1977), Hedley Bull argued that war has traditionally performed certain functions in international relations as the arbiter of the creation, survival, and elimination of actors in the system, especially the major powers; of the ebb and flow of political frontiers; and of the rise and decline of regimes.

The exact course, costs and battlefield ebbs and flows of the war are impossible to work out for independent observers. It seems reasonably safe to infer that Moscow badly miscalculated its initial ability to shock and intimidate Kyiv into submission with a surprise blitzkrieg, did achieve significant military successes in eastern and southern Ukraine in the early period, but then suffered substantial reverses as Ukraine regrouped with more lethal and substantial Western military assistance and training. Yet, it's hard to say with any confidence if one side is clearly winning or if the war has entered an attrition phase. John Mearsheimer is almost certainly right to say that had Putin's goal been to invade, conquer, occupy and incorporate all of Ukraine into a greater Russia, the initial force would have had to be closer to 1.5 million than 190,000.<sup>42)</sup>

If Russia fails to get its preferred outcome of a neutral Ukraine, it might instead aim for a dysfunctional rump state with a wrecked economy

and infrastructure. Putin's political aim might also be to break Europe's political resolve and fracture the North Atlantic community's cohesion and unity with 'rising prices, energy shortages, lost jobs and the social impact of trying to absorb' up to 10 million Ukrainian refugees.<sup>43)</sup> Even so, the asymmetrical equation remains. As the undoubted aggressor with pretensions to great power status, Russia will lose by not winning while Ukraine as the weaker object of aggression will win by not losing.

There's unlikely to be any settlement before a mutually hurting stalemate is reached – the point where each side believes that the cost of continuing with conflict will exceed the pain of a negotiated compromise that meets bottom lines without satisfying all war aims. Russia has imposed heavier costs on Europe by weaponising its dominance of energy supplies than it has suffered from sanctions. A slow and gradual escalation is still the more likely short and medium term trajectory. This is where the probability of a nuclear endgame is non-trivial and why 'realists' like Mearsheimer still fear that the various conflict parties are trapped in a game of nuclear Russian roulette.<sup>44)</sup>

The US has managed to bleed Russia heavily by arming Ukraine without putting its troops into battle on land, sea or air. Ukraine has surprised friends and foe alike by the success of its resistance. Putin has exposed the hollowness of Russia's image as a formidable military power. But NATO military stocks have also been seriously depleted and the weaponisation of trade, finance and energy has on balance thus far proven costlier to Western peoples than to Russians, including a stronger renewed interest in the de-dollarisation of global trade and finance that is analogous to the G-7 pursuit of de-risking *vis-à-vis* China.

Western sanctions on Russia in effect pitted the West just as much against the rest, an unintended but predictable outcome.<sup>45)</sup> Counteracting persistent Western criticisms that India had somehow compromised on



moral principles in sourcing oil imports from Russia, India's Petroleum Minister (and former Permanent Representative to the UN) Hardeep Singh Puri made two key arguments in a CNN interview on 31 October.<sup>46)</sup> First, he pointed out that Europe's purchase of Russian energy in one afternoon equated to India's energy imports from Russia in three months. Second, he insisted that India's primary moral duty is to its own consumers.<sup>47)</sup> For high-income populations in the West, rising energy prices impose an inconvenience. Amidst widespread poverty in India they can have life and death consequences.

For all the criticisms of fence-sitting levelled at India since the start of the war, this has arguably been the most successful exercise of an independent foreign policy on a major global crisis in decades by India. Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar even neatly turned the fence-sitting criticism on its head by retorting a year ago that 'I am sitting on my ground' and feeling quite comfortable there.<sup>48)</sup> His dexterity in explaining India's policy firmly and unapologetically, but without stridency and criticism of other countries, has drawn widespread praise, even from Chinese netizens.<sup>49)</sup>

All sides have been extremely careful thus far to avoid any direct Russia–NATO clash. But will NATO be seduced by the temptation of regime change in Moscow, or by Ukraine's call for this, into rejecting opportunities for an end to the conflict before costs begin to exceed gains? Even short of that, it's hard to see Russia giving up Crimea: it's too important from a purely strategic point of view. Both the timing of when to commence serious negotiations, as well as the terms of a settlement that's minimally acceptable to all the main conflict parties, will depend on the course of the war. Typically, negotiated ceasefires and peace agreements are preceded by intensified fighting as all sides seek to create facts on the ground to strengthen their bargaining positions when talks

begin around the conference table.

## The Lessons to be Drawn So Far

What lessons can be drawn from the war so far already? Among the most important is the limited utility of nuclear weapons as tools of coercion and blackmail. Russia has the world's biggest nuclear arsenal (5,889 warheads compared to 5,244 held by the US in March 2023), Ukraine has none.<sup>50</sup> Despite this, Ukraine refused to be cowed by Putin's nuclear-tipped bellicose rhetoric and fought back with great skill and grim determination. Nor has the nuclear reality prevented the West from supplying Ukraine with extremely lethal and highly effective armaments. Instead, here have been heavy political, economic and reputational costs to Russia.

In an interview with US public broadcaster PBS, CIA Director William Burns said that in his view, Russia's nuclear 'sabre-rattling is meant to intimidate', but: 'We don't see any clear evidence today of plans to use tactical nuclear weapons'. He added that in addition to the US communicating its concerns, China's President Xi Jinping and India's PM Narendra Modi had also raised concerns with President Putin about the use of nuclear weapons and this 'is also having an impact on the Russians'.<sup>51</sup>

Items up for negotiation whenever talks begin will include: NATO enlargement; Ukraine's sovereignty and security; Crimea; and the status of the Donbas region (eastern Ukraine) dominated by ethnic Russians. Both Ukraine and Russia have justifiable interests and grievances tied up in all four issues. Russia's overriding goal most likely remains the recreation of Ukraine as a hard geopolitical buffer state between NATO and Russia. But the incorporation of eastern Ukraine (east of the Dnieper

River) into greater Russia means that any future war with NATO will be fought on Ukrainian territory and not Russian.<sup>52)</sup> Absent a decisive defeat of a heavily nuclear-armed Russia this goalpost will not shift. This is not a matter of 'face' but of hard strategic logic. Given Washington's well-known addiction to regime change stretching back several decades – from the Mossadegh government in Iran in 1953 to the pro-Russian Yanukovich administration in Ukraine in 2014 – why would Putin trust any assurances of peaceful intent behind NATO troops and missiles based inside Ukraine?

Russian military reverses confirm that greater numbers are of little consequence against technological superiority, training, leadership and morale. In addition, Ukraine has also demonstrated the limited utility of war itself in modern conditions and reconfirmed (1) the continuing power of nationalism in defending the homeland against an external attacker, and (2) the extreme unpredictability of the course of conflict and the outcome of war. The demonstration of the poor performance of Russian arms on the battlefield will almost certainly cost Moscow dear in falling arms exports. The worry is that Ukraine might have become a profitable testing ground for Western weapons manufacturers.

### **Where to Next?**

On 6 November, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, gave an estimate of about 100,000 Russian and 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers killed and wounded in the war, with another 40,000 civilian deaths.<sup>53)</sup> If both sides have come to the conclusion that the other cannot be defeated on the battlefield, then demanding de facto surrender as the condition for a peace agreement makes no sense. Instead they need to find opportunities and sites for diplomatic overtures.

If negotiations is the most sensible and perhaps the only way to bring the war to a close, then is it not better to begin talks sooner rather than later, begin to seriously explore off-ramps, and limit the military and civilian casualties? Just as prudent nations under wise leaders prepare for war while at peace, so too they must prepare for peace even in the midst of armed conflict.

Battles won and lost – hard military facts on the ground – will determine the cartographic maps that delineate Russia’s and Ukraine’s new borders, perhaps with some tweaking in post-ceasefire negotiations to take into account demographic and other factors. That will still leave open other big questions to be addressed:

- The nature and political orientation of the regime in Kyiv;
- The status of Crimea;
- The place of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine;
- Ukraine’s relations with Russia, NATO and the EU;
- The identity of guarantors and nature of guarantees, if any, for Ukraine;
- The timing of exit from sanctions for Russia.

The most sobering thought of all is this: For genuine and lasting peace in Europe instead of another armed truce pending a fresh flare-up of hostilities, either Russia must be decisively defeated on the battlefield and finished as a great power for the foreseeable future, or else Europe and the US must experience once again the horrors of war on their own soil. The brutal reality that very few Westerners are prepared to voice is that no other country comes even remotely close to the United States on the number of military bases and troops stationed overseas and the frequency and intensity of its engagement in foreign military conflicts; the readiness with which it weaponises trade, finance and the role of the dollar as the international currency; and its history of regime change by means fair

and foul.

#### Notes

- 1 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0200%3Abook%3D5%3Achapter%3D89%3Asection%3D1>
- 2 <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-obama-driving-russia-china-together-10735>
- 3 <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1720/the-art-of-fiction-no-139-chinua-achebe>
- 4 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/opinion/putin-ukraine-nato.html>
- 5 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/26/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-efforts-of-the-free-world-to-support-the-people-of-ukraine/>
- 6 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-purported-recording-of-us-diplomat-blunt-talk-on-ukraine/2014/02/06/518240a4-8f4b-11e3-84e1-27626c5ef5fb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-purported-recording-of-us-diplomat-blunt-talk-on-ukraine/2014/02/06/518240a4-8f4b-11e3-84e1-27626c5ef5fb_story.html)
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