Toda Peace Institute

Policy Brief No. 147 **January 2023**

Ukraine as a Proxy War:
Issues, Parties, Possible Outcomes, and Lessons

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The dominant international story last year was Ukraine. For several decades after the Second World War, the belief in the transformative potential of the new order in diminishing the role of force in shaping great power relations—and world affairs more generally—seemed to have been validated. The last great power war was in Korea in the 1950s. There has been a long-term shift from the power end of the spectrum towards the normative end as the pivot on which history turns, with a steady reduction in societal, national and international violence based on the 'better angels' of human nature as argued by Steven Pinker. This was accompanied by a geographical shift from Europe to Asia and the Pacific as the new cockpit of world affairs. Bucking these twin trends, Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked the return of Europe to the centre of world affairs, and the return to Europe of geopolitics, territorial disputes and large-scale force and ground wars not experienced since 1945.

This article looks back on the crisis in a longer-term and broader reflective analysis of four intertwined threads: the core issues at dispute, the conflict parties, the possible different endings to the war, and the principal lessons to be drawn from the conflict. It concludes with the question: Where to next?

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. Great powers rise and fall on the tide of history but we lack the analytical tools to be able to map power transitions with any degree of confidence while they are actually occurring. The process of transition is not always peaceful and linear, but often jagged with points of friction. As the old and new powers cross each other on the way down and up, they create potential zones of tension that may lead to armed conflict through different pathways. A declining power may fail to recognise or refuse to accept its fading economic dominance, military might and diplomatic clout; persist in expecting and demanding respect due to its former status; and try to make the rising power pay for the perceived lack of respect. Conversely, the rising but not-yet-fully-risen power may exaggerate the scale and pace of its declining rival's fall or its own ascent, miscalculate the point of transition and provoke a premature confrontation.

Thus, wars may result from misperceived slights by the fading power or miscalculation of relative strengths by the falling-rising pair of powers. Either way, particularly as the march of history does not respect the prevailing political correctness of the day, economic dynamism and military might remain basic arbiters of the destiny of nations and determine the very definition of who is a great power and who are the also-ran and never-will-be great-power countries.

As noted in a previous article in *Global Outlook*, Russian leaders from Mikhail Gorbachev to Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin 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. Or, to put it more provocatively, the problem with NATO's expansion was not that it expanded eastwards, but that it did not expand far enough east. It stopped at Russia's borders instead of bringing Russia inside the tent of a fundamentally transformed NATO.

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 the first third of the twentieth century was 'solved' by two world wars followed by the division of Germany on either side of the Iron Curtain. During the 'Long Peace' of the Cold War, in the North Atlantic theatre the rigid military, political and economic division under US and Soviet imperial umbrellas ran along the spine of Europe.

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. The ongoing Pacific power contest is also more complex, where all four have to readjust to:

- The fall from great power status of Japan after World War II;
- The fall from great power status of Russia after the Cold War;
- The return of China to the historical norm of great power status and its continued rapid rise on all dimensions of power; and
- First the absolute dominance and then the relative waning of the US and the regional order constructed around its primacy.

Initially, while Russia was militarily ascendant, many analysts rightly worried about China copying Russia's Ukraine template. With Russia now 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, President Vladimir 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 President Joe Biden as a cognitively challenged weakling. It took two world wars to make the transition from the UK to the US as the global hegemon, with the Soviet Union as a pretend peer power to contest US hegemony after 1945. 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.

Gareth Evans recalls that, shortly after leaving office, former president Bill Clinton said, as the top dog in the world, the US faced a fundamental choice. 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. The same argument was expressed less crisply in a speech at Yale University in 2003: "we should be trying to create a world with rules and partnerships and habits of behaviour that we would like to live in when we're no longer the military, political, economic superpower in the world." Unfortunately, the US—including Clinton's own administration in the Balkans—failed to heed the wisdom of this analysis, and the rest is living history in which we are still trapped. It is a truth, albeit not one universally acknowledged, that behaviour by others inconsistent with social norms and professed

values is condemned as immoral and hypocritical, but similar discrepancies in our own conduct are rationalised as understandable prioritisation in the face of multiple goals.

In 1999, sickened by Serb strongman Slobodan Milosevic's record of brutality in the Balkans and evasions and deceit in dealings with the Europeans and the UN, the US decided on 'humanitarian intervention' in Kosovo. Following the Serb rejection of an ultimatum not crafted for acceptance, NATO began bombing Serb military facilities throughout Kosovo and Yugoslavia on 24 March 1999. Belgrade bitterly denounced NATO strikes as illegal aggression. Its traditional ally Russia strongly opposed NATO's war against Yugoslavia while China was deeply wounded by the 'accidental' NATO bombing of its embassy in Belgrade. The UN was essentially sidelined and the demonstration of Russian impotence as Serbia surrendered on 9 June 1999 was an international public humiliation that scarred that generation of Russian leaders. 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, and echoed by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who in 1999 was Russia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1994–2004). 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 this analyst 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. The price of NATO excesses in Libya was paid by Syrians as China and Russia resumed the double veto of several draft resolutions. China and Russia remained adamantly opposed to authorisation of any international action without host state consent and to any resolution that could set in train a sequence of events leading to a Security Council Resolution 1973-type authorisation for outside military operations in Syria. As well as a civil war, the Syrian crisis was also about relations with Iran, Russia and China. With Russian economic interests in Libya ignored in the post-Gaddafi years, Syria was the last remaining Russian sphere of interest and influence in the Arab world that intersected also with the Sunni-Shia divide in the region.

The strategic and economic imperatives behind Russia's Syrian policy included Russian arms sales to Syria, the reopening of a Russian naval supply base at Tartus, fears of a loss of international credibility if an ally was abandoned under pressure from abroad and a sense of frustration and humiliation at how Resolution 1973 was abused to effect regime change in Libya. In addition, Moscow's opposition also reflected a rejection of armed domestic confrontation backed by international enablers and a conflict of political approaches, with Russia and China holding that the Security Council is not in the business of imposing the parameters of an internal political settlement on member states and dictating to them who stays in power and who must go.

The bitter dispute over NATO enlargement to include an expanding number of former Warsaw Pact countries is best understood in the context of the structural factors at play after the Cold War ended. To the leading Western powers, NATO enlargement was a natural

adjustment to the realities of the post-Cold War balance of power and 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 in nearby Cuba. More recently, the British columnist Peter Hitchens, who was witness to the collapse of the Soviet empire as a foreign correspondent based in Moscow, sketches an analogy with a hypothetical scenario involving Canada. Imagine 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 second question is who are the conflict parties. The immediate 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 Russia and the West 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.

A study published on 20 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. The 38-page study spanned 137 countries representing 97 per cent of the world's population. 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 towards China and 66 per cent towards Russia. On Russia, positive perceptions range from 62 to 68 to 75 per cent in Southeast Asia, Francophone Africa and South Asia, respectively (p. 2). How can a democratic government in India not reflect such perceptions? 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. Just 15 countries hold a favourable view of Russia and China which is at least a 15 percentage points higher than their view of the US, compared to 64 countries (including India, Australia, Japan, South

Korea – but not New Zealand) that hold the same minimum margin of favourable views of the US (pp. 8–9).

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 2014. Nor would a US with Ronald Reagan or Richard Nixon in the White House, instead of a wimpish Barack Obama (as caricatured by American hawks), have confronted a heavily nuclear-armed Russia's move to retake Crimea ('gifted' to Ukraine voluntarily by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1954). Yet, in December 2021, NATO brusquely rejected Russia's call for the 2008 declaration on NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine to be rescinded. "NATO's relationship with Ukraine is going to be decided by the 30 NATO allies and Ukraine, no one else," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said.

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, betraying Moscow's understandings on the terms of its acquiescence to Cold War defeat. Even so, the 2014 crisis did not portend a new Cold War. There was no prospect of Russia re-emerging as a global military challenger to the US any time soon, nor posing an ideological challenge to democracy, nor resurrecting the command model of socialist economics to counter the dominant market principles. 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. Yet, American impotence neither reflected its true power nor was it an authentic test of US credibility or will to act when its vital interests are under threat.

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. Speaking at the Valdai Club in Sochi on 24 October 2014, Putin delivered an extraordinarily tough diatribe against Washington. 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."

Moreover, 'unilateral diktat and imposing one's own models' leads to conflict escalation and the growing spread of chaos with the authority vacuum quickly filled by neo-fascists and Islamic radicals. The "period of unipolar domination has convincingly demonstrated that having only one power centre does not make global processes more manageable." 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

The third question is the likely trajectories of the conflict in the new year and beyond. In his influential book, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (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. If Russia should ultimately prevail in its key war aims in Ukraine and reassert its great power status, NATO as well as Ukraine will be the big losers. If Russia is defeated and permanently weakened, Ukraine and eastern and northern Europeans will rejoice, Ukraine will recover and prosper with substantial Western assistance and NATO will emerge as unchallengeable in the North Atlantic.

The exact course, costs and battlefield ebbs and flows of the war are impossible to work out for independent observers. As always, all conflict parties are deeply involved in propaganda, highlighting their own successes and exaggerating enemy setbacks, casualties and alleged atrocities while reversing the equation in the other direction. 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 has suffered substantial reverses in recent months as Ukraine has regrouped with more lethal and substantial Western military assistance and training. Yet, it is hard to say with any confidence if one side is clearly winning or if the war has entered an attrition phase. Retired British Lt.-Gen. Jonathon Riley notes that Russia committed under ten per cent of its available combat troops to Ukraine, indicating firstly, that its war aims were always limited and secondly that it retains the ability to regroup and go on the offensive against selected targets. 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.

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, as Gideon Rachman put it in the *Financial Times* on 28 March. 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. Moreover, after the experience of Western sanctions in 2014 when Crimea was annexed, Russia had already built its own parallel payments systems to work around the global Visa and Mastercard credit card dominance. With aroused nationalism on both sides—fuelled in Ukraine by naked Russian aggression and in Russia by the conviction that the West's real goal is not to protect Ukraine but to destroy Russia as a functioning country—and Ukraine winning battles but defeat of Russia still a long way off, a slow and gradual escalation is still the more likely short- and medium-term trajectory. Indeed, as winter set in this had already started happening, with intensified Russian attacks on critical Ukrainian infrastructure and strikes by Ukraine ever deeper into Russia proper. And 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.

The US has managed to bleed Russia heavily by arming Ukraine without putting its troops into battle on land, sea or air. But the scale and speed of Ukraine's military successes in turn means that Kyiv is less amenable to US pressure to compromise on its absolutist war aims of pushing Russia out of every corner of Ukraine's pre-2014 borders. 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. Portrayals of Russia as a threat to Europe more broadly will be laughed out of court after this. The Ukraine war has highlighted flaws and shortcomings in Russian arms, technological sophistication, doctrine, training, logistics and integration of land, air and sea capabilities; that is, in its combat worthiness on the battlefield.

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. One of the perennial puzzles of sanctions as a tool of coercive diplomacy is how the morally righteous countries ignore the fundamental reality that every economic transaction has a buyer as well as a seller and criminalising the transaction for political reasons inflicts pain on buyers as well, including innocent third parties outside the conflict parties. This is why Western sanctions on Russia in effected pitted the West just as much against the rest, an unintended but predictable outcome. 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. 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. In other words: Physician, heal thyself first. Second, he insisted that India's primary moral duty is to its own consumers. That is, where 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.

All that said, the risk is if the West pursues outright defeat and humiliation of Russia, Putin might yet resort to the use of nuclear weapons that will end in catastrophe for everyone. 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 is hard to see Russia giving up Crimea: it is too important from a purely strategic point of view. For the present, though, both the timing of when to commence serious negotiations as well as the terms of a settlement that is 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

Meanwhile the fourth and final question is: 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 (5,977 warheads compared to 5,428 held by the US), Ukraine has none. Despite this, and contrary to everyone's expectations, Ukraine refused to be cowed by Putin's nuclear-tipped bellicose rhetoric and fought back with great skill and grim determination. In recent months it has gained the battlefield momentum. Nor has the nuclear reality prevented the West from supplying Ukraine with extremely lethal and highly effective armaments. To date, political, economic and reputational costs to Russia of serial threats exceed initial battlefield gains. A good example of reputational damage is the UN General Assembly Resolution of 12 October, passed with a 143-5 majority (with 35 abstentions), demanding that Russia reverse course on 'attempted illegal annexation' and urging countries not to recognise this. This was the biggest anti-Russian vote in the UN last year and captured widespread anger at the attempt to change international borders through the use of military force.

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 firmer 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. 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. The changing contours of the Ukraine war have likely concentrated President Putin's mind on the leadership costs of failure. The threat to his hold on power and possibly to his freedom and life is greater from nationalist hardliners than from liberal Russians.

Recent Russian military reverses confirm that greater numbers are of little consequence against technological superiority, training, leadership and morale. In addition, the year has also demonstrated the limited utility of war itself in modern conditions and reconfirmed 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.

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 Yanukovych administration in Ukraine in 2014—why would Putin trust any assurances of peaceful intent behind NATO troops and missiles based inside Ukraine? Even though the quid pro quo was deliberately buried at the time, the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis was made possible because the US agreed to withdraw its Jupiter missiles from NATO ally Turkey. This long-standing belief among many analysts including the present author was confirmed on 28 October 2022 with the release of 12 documents at the National Security Archive at the George Washington University.

Conclusion: Where to Next?

On 6 November, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan had been in periodic contact with top Russian officials to keep channels of communications open and to reduce the risks of escalation and a wider Russia–NATO conflict. Sullivan then flew to Kyiv to assess Ukraine's readiness to explore a diplomatic solution. This was followed by a meeting in Turkey on 14 November between CIA Director William Burns, himself a former US ambassador to Russia, and Sergei Naryshkin, head of Russia's foreign intelligence agency. The White House said they discussed the use of nuclear weapons. Ukraine was briefed in advance of the meeting. Two days later, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, cautioned that full Ukrainian victory over Russia remained unlikely because Moscow still retained significant combat power. This helps to explain why the US had called on Russia and Ukraine, right after Russia's retreat from Kherson under Ukrainian assault, to enter into peace negotiations.

On 10 November, General Milley 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. But 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 and limit the military and civilian casualties? Despite the unassailable logic of this argument, there's been little indication that the conflict parties have been seriously exploring off-ramps.

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. According to a report from the Congressional Research Service on 8 March 2022, between 1798 and February 2022, the US has deployed force overseas a total of nearly 500 times, with more than half of these occurring after the end of the Cold War. The brutal reality that very few Western commentators and analysts are prepared to voice is that no other country comes even remotely close to the United States for the number of military bases and troops stationed overseas, the frequency and intensity of its engagement in foreign military conflicts, so much so that Richard Cullen suggests the Department of Defense should be renamed the Department of Attack as a cost-free means to elevating the intimidation level; 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.

Many countries in the rest of the world now also perceive the willingness of Western powers to weaponise the dominance of international finance and governance structures as a potential threat to their own sovereignty and security. Interest in the transition to a multipolar currency system by developing countries and emerging markets has been spurred by the addictive weaponisation of the dollar to pursue US foreign policy objectives. It is in their long-term interest to reduce exposure to egregious US monetary policy through efforts to de-dollarise trade, sign bilateral currency swap agreements and diversify investments into alternative currencies. Sachchidanand Shukla, chief economist with the Mahindra & Mahindra group, wrote in *The Indian Express* in March: 'The "de-dollarisation" by several central banks is imminent, driven by the desire to insulate them from geopolitical risks, where the status of the US dollar as a reserve currency can be used as an offensive weapon'. However, while there will be renewed interest in the de-dollarisation of global trade and finance, the practicality of the efforts is yet to be determined. In the long term, we may experience a new world of currency disorder regardless of the military and political outcomes of the Ukraine war. The impressive Western unity therefore stands in stark contrast to the sharp divide from the rest.

The Author

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