THE DANGERS OF AN UNDEFEATED RUSSIA

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This article highlights the importance of accuracy in understanding the expectations, judgments and apprehensions of all parties involved in an armed conflict. The author reviews misconceptions that Russia, Ukraine and the West had about each other prior to 24 February and singles out three axioms that arguably need to be kept in the foreground while analyzing the stakes and perils of this war. Five arguments, ranging from issues of geopolitics to matters of economy and security, are then put forward to prove why a failure to defeat Russia will cost Ukraine and the West more than the West’s determination to do what is necessary to enable Ukraine to prevail. The author concludes that if the West’s hesitancy is not replaced by a sense of urgency, the United States and its European allies will face a choice of a different nature: direct intervention with Russia or the loss of Ukraine.

Keywords: Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the West’s response, policy of ambivalence, the calculus of risk.

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НЕБЕЗПЕКИ НЕПЕРЕМОЖЕНОЇ РОСІЇ

Ця стаття підкреслює важливість правильності розуміння очікувань, суджень і побоювань усіх сторін, залучених у збройний конфлікт. Автор подає огляд хибних уявлень, які Росія, Україна та Захід мали одне про одного до 24 лютого, та виокремлює три аксіоми, крізь призму яких, на його думку, варто аналізувати ставки та ризики цієї війни. Наведено п’ять аргументів, що охоплюють аспекти геополітики, економіки та безпеки, з метою доведення того, чому незавдання поразки Росії коштуватиме Україні та Заходу більше, ніж рішучість Заходу зробити все необхідне, аби забезпечити перемогу України. Автор доходить висновку: якщо Захід, усвідомлюючи невідкладність моменту, не позбавиться своєї нерішучості, то Сполучені Штати та їхні європейські союзники постануть перед вибором іншого характеру – пряме зіткнення з Росією або втрата України.

Ключові слова: агресія Росії проти України, відповідь Заходу, політика амбівалентності, розрахунок ризику.
Amongst the many axioms of Sun Tzu of lasting importance, one is especially pertinent:

*If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle* (Sun Tzu, 2006, p. 12).

But what will transpire when neither protagonist understands himself or his adversary? Whether or not Sun Tzu encountered such a conundrum, he never told us how to resolve it.

More than three months into Europe’s most sanguinary conflict since the Second World War, it is here that we find ourselves. Before 24 February, Russia’s state leadership never doubted the capacity of its armed forces to crush Ukraine’s impertinence and its pseudo-identity. About Ukraine, it misjudged everything of importance: its nerve, its resourcefulness and, not least, its determination to live ‘apart from Russia’. It also misjudged itself. The deficiencies of Russian military culture have proved impervious to modernisation, ‘snap exercises’ and battlefield experience. The military establishment has been neither willing nor able to insulate itself from the venality, servility and mendacity that permeate the ‘vertical’ of the state. Whilst disaster is resurrecting strengths of Russian military culture that might yet prove decisive, this wrenching process is secondary to the conviction, now fortified, that the Russian Army’s real antagonist on the battlefield is not NATO’s Ukrainian ‘wards’ but an army built in NATO’s image. Many are certain that if Putin had not acted as he did, this ‘Nazified’ army eventually would have attacked Russia itself.

The United States and its NATO allies have defied their own expectations in the scale of support they have offered Ukraine, yet their fear of escalation and the unknown, including the costs of defeating Russia, still hobbles resolve and action. Moreover, some have yet to accept the inexorable connection between Europe’s security and Ukraine’s own. ‘What is the West?’ Putin famously asked. It is divided between those who empathise with Ukraine and those who merely sympathise with it, between those who share a fond of historical experience and those who have no knowledge of what it means to live inside Russia’s ‘zone of traditional interests’. The brazenness of Russia’s demands (codified in its ‘draft treaties’ of December 2021) and the horrors of Bucha have joined these two Wests together, but as with the horror of MH-17, one is bound to ask, ‘for how long?’

Those who wish to grasp the stakes and the perils of this conflict need to be guided by three axioms.

**’Putin Will Either Subordinate Ukraine or Wreck It’**

The first axiom was formulated by the author in 2015: ‘Putin is determined to subordinate Ukraine or wreck it’ (Sherr, 2015, p. 31). This determination stems from a conviction that long predates him: ‘Kyiv is the mother of Russia’. It is insuperably difficult for those in the West who seek territorial compromise to understand that Russia is not trying to conquer territory but extinguish a nation. The absorption of the identity of other peoples into Russia’s own has been the defining feature of Russian imperialism. The equation between the amorphous civilizational realm of mediaeval ‘Rus’ and the Russia built by Muscovite absolutism is the most emblematic and disturbing example of this tendency. This sanguinary enterprise, which acquired doctrinal formality in the nineteenth century, and has a much earlier origin, once again gives Moscow a presumptive right to tell others who they are and what choices are open to them. In Tsarist times, the ‘unhistorical’ defiance of Ukrainians was routinely ascribed to ‘Polish intrigue’. Today, Russia views Ukraine as an instrument and simulacrum of the ‘collective West’. In Dmitriy Rogozin’s formulation: *What has emerged in place of Ukraine [italics added] is an existential threat to the Russian people, Russian history, the Russian language and Russian civilisation* (Twitter, 2022, June 13).

Putin’s historical apologia in July 2021 for what in essence is a manifesto for war rests on two interconnected propositions. First, Ukraine’s post-Soviet elites – not only ‘official powers but local oligarchs’ – ‘decided to base the independence of their country on the denial of its past’ – a past that, in the eyes of most Ukrainians, Russia has largely invented. Be that as it may, this ‘deviation’, in Putin’s indictment, has obliged these elites to embrace ‘radical and neo-Nazi ambitions’: a ‘coercive change of [Ukraine’s] identity... forced assimilation, the formation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressively orientated to Russia – in its results comparable to the employment against us [Russia] of a weapon of mass destruction’. 

Second, these ambitions are interwoven with those of Western powers who have resurrected ‘the Polish-Austrian ideology of an “anti-Muscovite” Rus’.

Step by step, Ukraine was drawn into a dangerous geopolitical game, the aim of which was to transform Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a bridgehead against Russia. Inescapably, the time arose when the concept of ‘Ukraine is not Russia’ no longer was suitable. An ‘anti-Russia’ was demanded, with which we will never be reconciled (Putin, 2021).
This analysis, whether borne of conviction or utility, has given Russia’s war its distinctive logic. First, the scale of Ukraine’s resistance determines the scale of its ‘denazification’. Those who are ‘zombified’ – those who greet Ukraine’s liberators with arms rather than bread and salt – must be eliminated, recalcitrant inhabitants in ‘nazified’ localities must be deported and their children, like the Uighurs of Xinjiang, must be re-educated, needless to say in the Russian language. Second, the destruction of the ‘anti-Russia’ in Ukraine, which entails not only its ‘denazification’ but its ‘de-militarisation’ and economic ruin, is a precondition for dismantling the ‘anti-Russia’ in the West.

The most salient commonality of Western calls for compromise – whether in the form of the Italian cease-fire proposal of 30 May (which the US Permanent Representative to the UN endorsed), the tireless mediation efforts of Emmanuel Macron (which neither Russia nor Ukraine have solicited) or the endless suggestions floated by assorted experts, venerable and neophyte – is their ignorance of this logic, not to say the cognitive world in which Russia’s objectives and strategy are formed.

They also disregard experience. Not once during Putin’s tenure in office has occupied territory been relinquished, be it South Osetia, Abkhazia, Crimea or the pseudo republics of Donbas. Not a single ‘frozen conflict’ has remained frozen. In South Osetia, the ‘freezing’ of conflict has enabled Russia to gnaw away at Georgia’s new de facto borders. In Donbas, more Ukrainian servicemen died after the Minsk ‘accords’ than during the months before them. Russia’s annexation of Crimea has not only enabled Russia to militarise that peninsula and sustain its forces in Syria; it has substantially advanced its historical aim of transforming the Black Sea into its own maritime territory. The only thing frozen about these conflicts has been the process of conflict resolution. In practice, a cease-fire on newly acquired territory would bring Russia one step closer to another strategic objective: the partitioning of Ukraine, from which the enterprise of wreckage and ruin would continue. Either the proponents of a new ‘frozen conflict’ suffer from an intellectual deficiency – they are ignorant of these precedents – or they are well aware of them, in which case they suffer from intellectual dishonesty.

‘Battalion for battalion, we are superior to the Russians’. This Ukrainian battlefield precept, whilst fully accurate, is of dubious relevance. The logic of destruction dictates that if Russian battalions are unequal to the task, they will be replaced by artillery, which is capable of accomplishing a greater task: the obliteration of the opponent and his surroundings as well. The logic of subordinating Ukraine or wrecking it is a logic of annihilation. It can only be broken by overwhelming force or by agreement to ‘return to friendship’.

‘Victory is Everything’

The second axiom was articulated by Stalin in response to an aggrieved Mao Zedong at the end of 1949: ‘Victory is everything. Victors are not judged. ’ This riposte was not meant to dispute Mao’s charge that the Chinese Communist Party had been ‘squeezed and pressured’ by its Soviet allies for twenty years, just that it no longer mattered. By the same token, the unprecedented human and material costs of the Soviet victory no longer mattered either. The newly restored democracies of Western Europe respected this logic. They did not equate the USSR’s material losses with a diminution of its influence. They were fearful. Today, the logic is the same. Whatever losses Russia suffers, if Ukraine is finally ‘demilitarised’ and ‘de-nazified’, then Russia’s sacrifices will be vindicated and Ukraine’s defeat will be presented as Russia’s greatest triumph since the victory of 1945. The magnitude of the costs will only underscore the magnitude of the victory. The current regime will become stronger. Those in the West who argue that, whatever its outcome, the war in Ukraine has gravely weakened Russia neither understand the mind of their adversary nor the nature of the conflict.

Moreover, Russia’s conflation of the ‘anti-Russia’ in Ukraine and the ‘anti-Russia’ in the West means that this victory will not be final until the West is conclusively defeated. The reasoning behind this judgement is set out in categorical terms in Dmitriy Trenin’s May 2022 article in the journal Russia in Global Affairs [Rossiâ v global’noj politike] (Trenin, 2022).

Russia and the West are in a state of ‘total war (so far hybrid)’. The nature of the enemy rules out ‘serious dialogue, because the possibility of compromise – first and foremost between the USA and Russia – on the basis of a balance of interests is in practical terms absent’. These circumstances ‘completely annul [Rus- sia’s] previous strategy towards the USA and Europe’. ‘The systemic confrontation between the West and Russia will be protracted’.

Russia’s task in this hybrid war is not to turn the ‘America-centric’ international order ‘upside down by any possible means’ but ‘construct the elements of a new system’ in concert with the ‘non-West’ and ‘situational allies’ inside the West, thus – to make use of a range of ‘aggravating’ factors to ‘deflect’
The ‘total economic war’ imposed by the West obliges Russia to proceed beyond reactive measures and take the initiative with respect to the full range of economic means at its disposal (including ‘finance-energy’ and agricultural produce [seľskoye khozyaystvo]).

Success in this ‘complex strategy’ depends upon the ‘use of all possible potentials’ to achieve rapid strategic success in Ukraine and foil those who seek to ‘draw out military operations, inflict losses and diminish the international authority of Russia’. Russia’s success in Ukraine will be a ‘painful blow [chuvsitvitel’nyy udar] to US global hegemony’.

‘Never since the end of the Cold War has the prospect of preventive [predotvrashchenie] nuclear war been more tangible [aktual’no] than now’. After achieving strategic success in Ukraine, Russia’s new tasks will be to force NATO to recognise Russian interests in practice and ensure the security of Russia’s new frontiers [italics added].

‘War represents the toughest and most severe test of a country’s cohesion [prochnost’], endurance and internal strength’. Such ‘moral health’ requires the ‘unification of state and society’ the ‘mobilisation of all available resources’, an elite no longer ‘concentrated on its own enrichment’ and the ‘removal of all obstacles weakening the country internally’.

To those who have studied Russian policy and history, there is nothing new in Trenin’s article. Its merit is that it presents in one place what decision-makers should have known and didn’t.

1. The connection between Russia’s objectives in Ukraine and its global objectives is not conjectural; it is a matter of policy and a reflection of objective reality.

2. The process of forming Russia’s frontiers is not complete. The 1992 borders of the Russian Federation are no longer a baseline, de facto or de jure, of what is deemed legitimate and acceptable by Russia.

3. The emergence of fresh challenges to the West (gas supply cuts, the blockade of Ukraine’s agricultural produce) are not ‘collateral effects’ of the war but dimensions of it.

4. Russia does not view the danger of escalation as an argument for mutual restraint but as added urgency for imposing its terms on the opponent. It will employ ‘all possible potentials’ deemed effective, irrespective of the West’s self-imposed restraints.

5. Material factors are not synonymous with strength. In war it is the ‘moral’ factor (the cohesion, endurance and internal strength of the protagonists) that is decisive1.

6. The regime’s external and internal aims have become inseparable. In the ‘unification of state and society’, the ‘nationalisation of oligarchs’ and the ‘removal of all internal obstacles’, there is no mention of civil society. These are state projects.

‘The West will Make Ukraine Stop Fighting’

The third axiom is articulated by the Ukrainian expert, Hanna Shelest: ‘Ukrainians have no fear that they will stop fighting. They fear that the West will make Ukraine stop fighting’.

The fear is based on one reality and two apprehensions. The reality, which requires no substantiation, is Ukraine’s dependency on the West: first for maintaining the macro-economic conditions that enable its micro-economy to function within an orderly framework; second, for providing Ukraine’s armed forces with the material and training required to wage war effectively. The erosion of this support, even more the abrupt termination of it, would sooner or later transform Ukraine’s national defence into an insurgency.

Hence, the apprehensions. The first is that the patience of Western electorates will be exhausted. The most comprehensive opinion survey in recent weeks (European Council on Foreign Relations, 16 June) provides some evidence of this. Whilst commanding majorities in eight of the ten European countries surveyed blame Russia for the war, a majority have shifted their focus from Ukraine to the costs of supporting it. Moreover, a plurality now see peace as a greater priority than justice, though they view Russia as the principal obstacle to peace (Askew, 2022). Plainly, Russia’s curtailing of European gas supplies aims to deepen these discontents. Rightly, Boris Johnson warns of growing ‘fatigue’ in Europe should the war drag on (Walker, 2022). Paradoxically, Ukraine’s early successes in the war and the

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1 The Western concept of ‘resilience’ [ustoychivost’] is but an approximation of qualities that Trenin expresses in more evocative terms: prochnost’, vynoslivost’ and vnutrennya sila.
enthusiasm they aroused might only sharpen recriminations if public expectations sour. Reconciling electorates to a prolonged war demands reserves of leadership that might not exist.

The second apprehension is that a critical mass of Western governments privately favour a ‘settlement’ with Russia rather than the defeat of it. On the face of it, this sentiment has receded as the character of Russia’s aims and the depth of its cynicism have become apparent. Talk of ‘off ramps’ was quite widespread in the early stages of the war. The expression is rarely heard now. Even Macron calls for Russia’s defeat. The Italian peace plan has died a quick and silent death, and talk of territorial concessions is confined to a coterie of experts and ‘great men’. In Germany, the alliance between psychological complexes and bureaucratic complexity impedes delivery of its most advanced weaponry; nevertheless Germany has become Europe’s second largest weapons supplier to Ukraine (‘Weapons Delays’, 2022). Supporting Ukraine ‘as long as it takes’ is now the policy of the G7.

Nevertheless, President Biden strongly implies that a settlement short of Russia’s defeat is exactly what he is aiming for. The policy he sets out in his New York Times article of 31 May is a study in equivocation. He is strong in support of ‘an independent, sovereign and prosperous Ukraine with the means to deter and defend itself against further aggression’. But the restoration of Ukraine’s internationally recognised borders is not mentioned. To compound the ambiguity, Biden states, ‘I will not pressure the Ukrainian government – in private or public – to make any territorial concessions’. Why not simply say, ‘we firmly support Ukraine’s refusal to make territorial concessions’? Biden’s statements and omissions are unlikely to reassure all Ukrainians (Biden, 2022).

The issue is not how much support is given but whether the West is determined to do what is necessary to enable Ukraine to prevail. NATO rules out any action that might lead to direct confrontation with Russia. So does the United States. The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept adopted at the Madrid summit squarely upholds the indivisibility of security on Alliance territory. But it offers no assurances beyond it. It declares that ‘[a] strong, independent Ukraine is vital for the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area’ – not the security of it, as President Zelensky hoped. The previous 2010 Strategic Concept, a weaker document in many respects, stated: ‘Instability and conflict beyond NATO’s borders can directly affect Alliance security’, and it also stated that the Alliance should use ‘a mixture of political and military tools’ to ‘stop ongoing conflicts’ that did so. The new Concept contains no statements of this kind. Perhaps this is a sign of realism. It certainly is a reflection of changed circumstances. In the past, NATO and ‘NATO-led coalitions’ have conducted ‘humanitarian interventions’ (e.g. Kosovo 1999 and Libya 2011); moreover, NATO Allies (albeit not NATO itself) have gone to war in defence of non-NATO countries (e.g. Kuwait in 1991). Yet the opponents in these conflicts were not nuclear powers. Despite the recent war in Georgia, Russia was not seen as a party to conflicts envisaged in 2010, and war between Russia and NATO was judged to be highly improbable. In 2022 it is far less improbable, and the tighter language of the new Strategic Concept appears to reflect this.

What are the implications if NATO will defend no one from Russia except itself? Will this allow Russia to conclude that it has carte blanche to attack non-NATO countries at will and even wipe them from the map, that it can jeopardise nuclear safety, imperil global food supplies and overturn the Montreux Convention and other pillars of the ‘rules-based order’ without fear of military reprisal? The scale of support to Ukraine and the rigours of the sanctions regime show that this is not the West’s intention; nevertheless, the restraints the West imposes on Ukraine suggest it will go to great lengths to avoid conflict with Russia. In Moscow, Western caution might be read as fear.

The Penalties of Ambivalence

An undefeated Russia will cost Ukraine and the West dearly.

First, it will strengthen the current regime. The defeat of Ukraine – its truncation, fragmentation and enfeeblement – will be presented as the greatest victory of Russian arms over the ‘anti-Russia’ since 1945. ‘Victory is everything’. Victorists are not judged in Russia. There, regime change is the fruit of defeat, not victory.

Second, the economic consequences will be deep and long-lasting. Analogies with the US Marshall Plan (‘European Recovery Programme’) should not draw the wrong lessons from it. The $13 bn transferred to the Programme’s recipients between 1948–51 ($115 bn in 2021 dollars) accounted for three percent of their combined national income. The Programme succeeded because it coupled start-up capital with reforms in the way national economies worked and traded with one another. By doing so, it primed the pump for recovery and investment, which vastly dwarfed the scale of the aid itself. Without political confidence, there would have been no such result.
A Russia ‘defeated and seen to be defeated’ and a Ukraine secure inside secure borders would be able to replicate these conditions and establish a basis for honest and profitable investment, which is not to say that it will. But if it does, Ukraine will become Europe's emerging market overnight. Consigned to Pariah status and possibly beset by political turbulence as well, Russia will become the ‘bad risk’ of Europe. Yet reverse this outcome, and the consequences become diametrically different. An imposed and infirm peace, disrupted as it will be by local insurgencies and other forms of unlicensed war will attract predators and speculators, rather than investors worthy of the name. Ukraine's economy could once again, to become a casino, and ‘candidate membership status’ of the EU another piece of paper. It is hard to see a commanding proportion of Ukraine's refugees – 6.6 million at last count – wishing to return in these circumstances. Those who do not will have to be integrated into European economies already burdened by the collateral effects of war.

Third, the ‘adults’ in Europe will reconvene to argue the merits of ‘facing reality’ and ‘living with Russia’. The recriminations of electorates who have endured higher energy costs, food prices and defence budgets for no discernible gain will amplify these voices. As in the years after 2014, there is serious risk that sanctions will erode and ‘business as usual’ resume. Nevertheless, Russia is unlikely to resist opportunities to remind Europe of the threat that it poses. Its draft treaty of 17 December 2021 (calling inter alia for the withdrawal of all NATO forces deployed after May 1997) will almost certainly resurface. Inevitably NATO’s eastern European members will oppose any return to ‘normalisation’, but the Madrid consensus and NATO’s own cohesion is likely to fray, at least until the next direct threat emerges.

Fourth, whatever the outcome of the war, there will be no return to the pre-2022, let alone pre-2020 status quo in Belarus. If Russia is defeated, the regime of Aleksandr Lukashenko, Europe’s consummate survivor, will be on the skids. If it is victorious, Belarus will find itself transformed, in the words of Andras Racz, into a military district of Russia, with all the added threats this will pose to the Baltic states and Poland (Racz, 2022).

Finally, China will draw its own conclusions, and they will be felt across the Indo-Pacific region. In China’s political map, Russia is consigned to the role of junior partner and economic appendage. But in this capacity, China had been confident before 2022 that Russia would remain a stable and global great power. The opening stage of the war in Ukraine called this confidence into question. Russia’s defeat and its corollary, a rejuvenated West, is a prospect that it would find deeply unsettling. On the other hand, a victorious Russia and a diminished West would embolden China’s methodical efforts to displace the West’s ‘hegemonic’ order with its own. If the West proves unable to defeat its weaker, but more immediate adversary, it can hardly be expected to uphold its interests against China in East Asia or, in the longer term, elsewhere.

The Calculus of Risk

In 1968, in response to the USSR’s deployment of an invasion force against Romania, President Johnson publicly warned Brezhnev not to ‘unleash the dogs of war’. No elaboration was necessary. The forces were withdrawn. In spring 2021, when Russia mobilised an invasion force against Ukraine, President Biden missed an opportunity to warn Putin that the United States was not prepared to witness the destruction of a European state. Such a warning might or might not have had the same effect. In the event, no such warning was issued, and Ukraine was invaded in February 2022.

In deterring war, waging it, or enabling the victim of aggression to wage it, the challenge is to be one step ahead of the threat. In the present war, the United States and its European allies have assisted Ukraine massively, but the assistance has consistently lagged behind the threat presented and the risks posed. Risk-avoidance has augmented risk. At the outset of war, Ukraine’s demand was simple: ‘give us the tools we need, and we will defend ourselves.’ Today, Ukraine is losing the ability to defend itself. Had the West met its needs in the quantities required and at the time they were presented, this would not have been so. Increasingly, a choice is looming that the West need not have faced: direct intervention or the loss of Ukraine.

Some three months ago, we warned that ‘[t]he Alliance needs to be seized by a spirit of urgency’ (Sherr, 2022). If hesitancy is not displaced by urgency, the risks we avoid today are likely to be compounded in the coming years.

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