

The Ukraine War: How the West was Lost

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine is among the defining events of this period which will have a far-reaching impact on the security architecture of the world. This article carries out an analysis of the war in an unbiased and objective manner looking at both geo-strategic and military dimensions. It does not demonise the Russians; it peers through the veil of perception management, and lastly, it brings out that the outcome of the war may not be favourable in the long term to the West.

Introduction

The Russian war with Ukraine arose from a number of factors. These range from Russian expansionist policies with respect to support to ethnic Russian majority breakaway areas of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donetsk and Luhansk and the annexation of Crimea to the Russian need to keep NATO from expanding eastwards. Lastly was the requirement to keep the Black Sea firmly in its control. Apparently, the Putin Plan which was to keep NATO in check has been upended by the fact that NATO has not only regrouped after Ukraine became a theatre of war, but also now Sweden and Finland are queuing up to join NATO in right earnest. Mr. Biden claims a great strategic victory through these pointers against his Russian counterpart.

While the Ukrainian scenario has a NATO perspective that is vehemently anti-Russian, whereas a non-NATO perspective is more neutral. For this side of the world view, Mr. Putin was assessed as always, a pragmatist and realist. His clear-headed approach that NATO was not going anywhere, his entire effort, both in Georgia as well as Ukraine, earlier from 2008 through 2014 to

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now in 2022 has been singular — to thwart the creation of a NATO boundary that would be shared with the motherland. So, the declaration of two autonomous/ independent Republics in the Donbas was firstly a continuation of this defensive approach, to deny NATO common borders with Russia, and now what we are seeing in Phase 2 of the Ukrainian campaign that is more like an aim plus, since Ukrainian leadership under Mr. Zelenskyy is showing a sense of brinkmanship and not pragmatism. Russia is trying to persuade Finland and Sweden, by threats, by arguments of history and other means from entering NATO. It could also supply Turkey and some East European nations like Serbia and Hungary favourable conditions, to oppose the unanimous entry of these two countries that had remained neutral throughout the period of the post-World War 'Cold War' era till date.

Conduct of Military Operations

NATO has repeatedly asserted that Ukraine is winning the war. NATO has justified its arming of Ukraine while asserting that it does not have ground forces in Ukraine and will not militarily intervene in the ongoing conflict, the evidence is that now there is significant presence of special forces operatives including on ground controllers of drones, radar or remote sensing units, special communications, etc., directing operations and offering real time battle field intelligence to Ukrainian commanders. The presence of non-active or veteran combat troops from friendly countries including NATO members in Ukraine is common knowledge. Presently the narrative is how the Ukrainians are throwing back the Russians in Kharkiv Oblast. An unverifiable report like this one creates this narrative of Ukrainian victory being imminent!¹

A non-NATO analyst's view on the conduct of the war by Russia is different. Such analysts would not state that Russians are tired and bungling through their war. After three months of this campaign, we see a military that is far from 'has been', fighting with multiple restraints that are simply humanitarian considerations. This war in Ukraine is unique in how from the start, humanitarian corridors are operational and openly abused by Ukrainian forces to regroup and replenish. Hence operations are witnessing graded escalation, with frequent dial downs, interruptions for cease fires, for evacuation of civilians and more. Overwhelming force from the air superiority that Kremlin enjoys, has been largely used in breach than de rigueur!

From the initial military plan of carving a buffer in Donbas to now making Ukraine a land locked country, the Russian plan has shifted a huge goal post, one which the Western myope is unable to see even at this stage when Russian artillery and aerial bombardment are calling on Odessa's door! CNN finally reported that Azovstal Factory as lost with the caveat that Ukrainian Military HQ had ordered the cessation of operations there. Then Der Spiegel carried a report which you could actually think was all about the Western narrative of heroic Ukrainian resistance until you catch a line just placed without context in this report: "The Russian steamroller may be rolling slowly, but it is still rolling".^{2,3}

These conflicting claims can be best described as 'fog of war'. Since the war began, a campaign of manoeuvres that saw swift incursion of Russian forces to Kyiv's suburbs, has now altered into one where attrition has happened in a clear line along the East and South of Ukraine. This has raised a spectre such that now even the West acknowledges a possible Russian campaign beyond Ukraine, perhaps with the highlight about Transnistria, an enclave of Russian ethnic people within Moldova, another 'non-NATO neutral country' next door to Ukraine. Yet, we can see American government lead by the Secretary State and Secretary Defence arrive at Kyiv, the Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, speaking in a Polish hangar near the Ukrainian border went on to clearly lay down the 'war aim' of the USA stating "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine".⁴

The weeks now of hard-fought battles in Mariupol, Izyum, in Cherniv, Kharkiv and elsewhere suggest that the Russians are not a spent force. That Mariupol Azovstal Factory was supposedly holing out some 400 foreign military personnel and they were condemned to be 'entombed' by the Russian leaders is a distraction at best. The social media chatter, the evidence of Ukrainian military actions, occasional Western media coverage all point to the undeniable presence of American, British, and perhaps even Canadian special forces deep inside Ukraine. In their thousands, they must be either working as target designators, command and control elements, or the key elements of the defence now of Central Ukraine. The Russians have established a clear bridgehead and if they can breach the centre at Dnipro, they will break out. In all probability the Russians are in a consolidation mode these

next few weeks, as they will allow the terrain to become more favourable for tanks and heavy vehicles to pass through, without being hampered by the logistical need to stick to only metaled roads and communication nodes.

Crystal Gazing

Can the Russians be defeated in Ukraine? According to many Western analysts, and a BBC report, the American Administration clearly believes that they can be.⁵ You can see how quickly the 'genocide', 'mass graves', 'war crimes' narrative has changed to one of Ukraine now receiving ample supplies of hardware (howitzers from all over and now tanks from Germany) and munitions and how they are fighting back. In February, few thought that Russians would actually invade, but while on their side then, it was equally clear that if Putin made up his mind to invade, then it would be with a clear goal. Till now the West has not taken a clear-eyed view of what that goal could be like. There are theories, insinuations, historical inputs. Yet militarily, it is baffling that no Western capital saw this as a military campaign to consolidate the first phase that annexed Crimea and kept Sevastopol as the headquarters of the famous Black Sea Fleet in 2014. Now most agree that coastal Ukraine is Putin's key target, besides consolidating the Eastern Ukrainian Donbas. When will they see that Kyiv is also important? After the Russians roll over to the Polish- Moldovan borders in the West?

The Russian brass (Deputy Chief of Central Military District) actually conveyed last week that Transnistria corridor was a campaign aim. Naturally the buzz it generated followed by news of 'terror attack' in Transnistria itself, saw the Rybar media channel on Telegram chatter about Polish plans to place combat brigades in Moldova as a 'peace keeping mission' and to place another special battle group in readiness for neighbouring Odessa against anticipated Russian aggression West. One really doesn't know if Poland is really girdling her loins and preparing for such eventuality, yet exercising near Kaliningrad with Americans last fortnight and refusing to fly MiG-29s to next door Ukraine in March 2022 are not postures of such military perspective or planning.

NATO. This is also the time to look at NATO. We are led to think that the NATO expanded eastward, it is now 30 countries strong. Yet, from Mahabharata, we know, that the fewer allies and fewer

numbers did not deter the majorly *Panchala* forces of the *Pandavas* from repeatedly wresting the initiative from the unwieldy and much allied *Kauravas* who included the invincible *Narayanis* as well as formidable *Samsapathakas*. We can also see the role of Shalya of Madura, whose role as a charioteer derailed Karna, and who ended up falling to *Yudhisthira*'s lance in his turn as Supreme Commander of the Forces under the Kuru banner! One can stride into the Homeric Iliad's 'Trojan Horse' to expand this logic. Are there any scenarios where one NATO or two NATO countries attack a third? Who are the hardcore Russia supporting NATO members? Is Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, Croatia as dyed in wool NATO and anti-Russia belligerently as say the Baltic trio — or Poland?

Borders & Boundaries. When President Zelenskyy passionately argued about 'UN', he should have been taught by history that UN did not create nations, nor did it draw boundaries. Likewise, the decades of peace we have seen relatively, is one where the balance of power was even and the threat of mutually assured destruction under nuclear umbrella perhaps restrained full-fledged wars. Yet, post Ukraine, all these calculations are now out of the window. We now have a nuclear power invading and operating conventionally without escalating the controlled violence beyond a threshold. So, nothing would stop countries from looking afresh at War as an Instrument of State Policy for shifting borders.

Will maps be redrawn? After all, what are they, but lines on cartographic paper, drawn and enforced by military arms? Previously only Alaska was transferred for monetary compensation, that too was preceded by a series of military manoeuvres by both Russia and USA. (UN backed referendums created East Timor and South Sudan as conflict resolution) Europe is full of such concessionaire addition and subtraction of territories, including some de nouveau nations. What we must accept is the new reality post Ukraine, which is that these decades of settled boundaries are gone. Unlike Chinese incrementalism in Vietnam, in South China Sea and along the Himalayan border with India, Russian military operations have led to de facto new identities, in Georgia, in Ukraine, and now more so. From 2014 to 2022, Russia has moved the means and the goal post. Perhaps in 2023, will Russian expansion further westwards beyond Ukraine involve territories that are now in Moldova, in Poland or Baltic States as feared by them?

Cultural Aspect of Ukraine Conflict. By othering Russia, by equating the Russian with barbarian or pagan mindset, key Western interlocutors forget that alienating the enemy is the sure way to intractable enmity and never-ending cycle of conflict. Militarisation of the thawing polar icecap is only going to offer the Russians greater 'lebensraum' with its concomitant logistical leeway. The recent spate of events surrounding World War 2 memorials to the Soviet Fallen in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland etc. is one which opens memories of Russian sacrifices, which consolidates the Russian consensus about Ukraine and 'De Nazification'. Dismantling many of these memorials in Ukraine and other Eastern European states or disregarding Russian in VE Memorials in Europe is not military etiquette, worse it stokes Russian nationalism in more ways than one. Few of today's generation remember the outsized sacrifices that were made by Russians to liberate Europe from Hitler's self-proclaimed 1000 Year Reich. However, such a luxury is not with professional diplomats or military personnel. Then there is another historical but nonmilitary aspect, which is how the Russian Orthodox Church's leader Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis seem to be on the same page in cautioning about ostracization of Russia.^{6,7} Putin offered the religious spin of Kyiv being a seat of the Russian Church on numerous occasions, hence the significance of two tallest Church leaders is not to be lost.

The Western Loss is the Rest's Gain. The assessment that AUKUS is a consolidation of Anglican states against China in the Indo Pacific only indicates that now the AUKCUSZ (Acronym of all Anglican States) must gather, to maintain their sense of primacy over the Global Commons. It also implies that some pact will be needed to assuage the French, to gather the Germans under the same fold. The issue of widening the Anglican compass is important because Finland and Sweden now thinking of joining the NATO club created a ripple in Croatia.⁸ It shows up that the more the diverse the grouping the greater the degree of its impact on cohesion. Ukraine unleashes the proverbial Pandora's Box contents, upending many formulations that served the global commons for the last 50 years.

When Russia meets at BRICS in China or virtually, she will find that these partners are already looking beyond Ukraine. Moscow will find China's theme for 'New Era for Global Development'⁹ is more than spin. The opportunities arising out of

the West's economic and military posture against Russia will be for these countries to exploit. More countries will back Russia in more ways than just violating sanctions or refusing to join them as a result. The failure of the West to carry the 'Global South' is basically a legacy failure. A hundred-year epoch of pernicious colonialism practised by the West has offered this posture of pragmatism, one of a historical 'paybacks' that would placate native populations and electorates.

Conclusion

NATO seems to be succumbing to its own narrative and planning a Victory Parade in Kyiv soon. Ukraine will be a military case study for surprisingly flexible and tenacious higher direction of war by Kremlin. There has been no European conflict of this order in its entire history, where humanitarian corridors and agencies have been involved in mitigating civilians trapped in conflict zone and that remains a great aspect of this conduct. It reveals that the overall discipline and military bearing of Russian combat elements to be of the highest order, not a case that Western analysts would like to admit at all. It is also clear that Russia will not allow the war to escalate beyond Ukraine for now, as it has expertly defused the situation in Transnistria and ensured that Georgia professes peace even now.¹⁰ By allowing Warsaw to throw paint on her ambassador during the V Day celebrations and by orchestrating and highlighting the Soviet efforts of the WWII, Russia has created a neat wedge in countries along the entire of once Nazi occupied Europe, with the scope for further exploiting the sentiments it aroused now in future Psychological Operations against those States.

The way we can see these portends is that Ukraine will get a peace, no doubt, not one that Kyiv wants, but one that will clearly be guaranteed by Russian boots on ground and a realism born after visitation of war by what emerges as Ukraine. The global economy will now be truly more global and stronger, as American or dollar backed hold over it wanes. OPEC, Afro Asian countries refusing to toe the US line today are only going to trust their wisdom that much more going forward. Within EU itself, the narrow French re-election result for President Macron shows how the long-term repercussions of this stoked conflict in Ukraine will play out. There will be back lash against peaceniks, against liberals and possibly a return to ethnic nationalism which democratic

coalition building had papered over. The influx of Ukrainian refugees into Europe will be a significant political input going forward. In America, as the war enters the second half of the year, it will play a great role in weakening the Democrats, who will be blamed for not managing the situation.

So, Ukraine 2022 will be remembered as changing the global dynamics in more ways than one. It shows how humans suffer primacy to man-made war and undermine or offer conditional support to equally threatening but more natural causes like Climate Crises or Pandemic. It is as if humans understand more acutely only what they are inflicted with by other humans! In 2030 we will see the first signs that will connect the dots back to this Ukrainian calendar. It will be redacted heavily and stamped as ‘How the West was Lost’!

Endnotes

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