

General Winter And The Russo-Ukrainian War

The Russo-Ukrainian War has entered a delicate period. The planned 10-15-day special operation has turned into a war that has lasted for nigh on year and by all projections it shall exceed that time period. As the events have unfolded certain important events have transpired, the general assumption was the collapse of Ukraine in a matter of weeks if not days. Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's PM, has seen his public perception sour after the hero worship he received in the wake of the start of the war last February. The Russian war machine miscalculated the Ukrainian resolve and the loyalty of the Russian speaking Ukrainians. Moscow captured four Russia bordering regions, two of which were later ceded back to Kiev following which the Ukrainian military received a hero's welcome in Kherson.^[i]

Come January 2023, these events have already come to pass. The Winter has set completely in Northern Asia. Russia historically has had the best of its adversaries with the arrival of General Winter. And it must hope so to use the advantages at its disposal.

The war can have two outcomes – i) Russia achieves its goal of capturing Ukraine's region and permanently annexing the region; ii) Russia is unable to continue the war, forcing it to withdraw to the border as it existed pre-war and as a result of which the West is able to put North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) troops on Russia's doorstep.

Winter has come, and for Russia it means a historical advantage in wartime. General Winter is more than just some old wife's tale, it brings a decisive advantage which favours the Russians and they have prepared their infantry and the mechanised infantry accordingly.

Before its commencement comes the season of early winter rains and snowmelt, known as the Rasputitsa.^[ii] The season begins around mid- October and last till the mid to final days of December. Leaving behind a massive amount of mud rendering travel on unpaved and country roads near impossible. This phenomenon is also as "General Mud". The Russian military is heavily reliant upon the tanks and armoured vehicles, both of which when ranked in sheer numbers account for the most and the third most respectively when put up against the other powers in the world.^[iii] The heavy vehicles loose most of their mobility in the mud and become a liability in the field. Hence, Russia's limited withdrawal to preserve strength.

However, with the onset of winter proper, the tables have turned. The self-same mud which serves as death kneel for the armoured vehicles during Rasputitsa now enables them. Come the dismissal of General Mud and the welcome of General Winter, the mud freezes. Creating hard tracts of land excellent for the heavy vehicles favoured by the Russian Forces. Further, the advantage is compounded by the topography of Ukraine. Flat as table top, it tilts the outcome in favour of the one with large amounts of landed mechanised artillery and infantry. The winters in Russia typically last for the first two months of the year, if the Russians are able to press the advantage in this time period, it is highly unlikely that they will be forced to relinquish it ala early November when they were forced to cede captured land.

The US led west, for a change, seems to understands the conflict in which it is knee deep in. It fathoms the advantages the Russian winter confers upon Moscow. It has provided the Ukrainians with half a hundred armoured vehicles geared towards reducing the effectiveness of Russian tanks on hard tract land.^[iv] Further, United Kingdom (UK) and Poland promised more help for the same.^[v]

On the flipside the propaganda war is a losing proposition for the Russians. Where Moscow is not concerned with public perception outside of Russia, the West could legitimately hold degree courses in Ivy League Universities for propaganda. While Vladimir Putin in his addresses to his fellow countrymen makes sensational speeches outlining the Russian spirit and the need for the War in Ukraine, he continually ignores the zeitgeist outside of Russia. On the other hand, Volodymyr Zelenskyy is forever seen being photographed, wearing Kevlar vests, with his troops, on the cover of Vogue, appearing on American award shows and a myriad other place which boost his and Ukraine's moral standing in the conflict.

Generally, such a differing global perception, tilts the pendulum in the favour of the more visible. However, the West, has erred in propaganda this time. The Americans have historically run these campaigns more for the benefit of their own public perception in the eyes of their voters to justify the costs. As far as the geopolitical landscape is concerned, foreign powers do not tie themselves to the morality just rather look for their own benefit. The general populace may have a partisan position between Ukraine and Russia but their governments individually will only look out for their own. And even those nations which sided with the Americans in levying sanctions upon the Russians have begun to tire of American demands. As evidenced by the refusal of Joko Widodo, during Indonesia's presidency of G20, to condemn Russia's starting of belligerence. Further, the G20 Leaders Declaration clearly states that G20 is a forum for Economy not national security.^[vi] The Russian Gas dependent Europe is suffering as a result of sanctions. The Americans might have levied them on the Russians but it is the Europeans who are suffering from the repercussions. After Moscow refused to accept payment in anything but Roubles allowing for the Russian currency to thrive, Europe has been steadily facing worse and worse economic conditions. Having been forced to purchase Natural Gas from the US, the Europeans are now found to be paying nearly three times as much as they did to the Russians.^[vii] As a result, the economy of Europe is steadily declining.^[viii] The European economy is further taking a hit due to a shortage of food grains. Ukraine is known as the "Bread Basket of Europe", due to its flat topography and abundance of wheat fields. Now because of the war, most of Europe is robbed of cheap access to the food grains, further increasing the prices. It is in the best interests of the European powers for a swift conclusion to the hostilities in Ukraine and for the Zelensky and his brood to come out victorious so they can return to pre-war status quo.

Moreover, for the US, an expedited end to the war may also be beneficial. Not in terms of its economy but rather for maintaining American interests and influence in the world. Wars are a costly affair and for Europe, an economy already reeling under the weight of the lockdowns, it is a cause for concern. Especially so because of China. It is a country that salivates for the beleaguered economies. And provides innocent looking incentives which beholden them to the middle Kingdom (see Sri Lanka and Pakistan). And considering that China is already heavily invested in France and England (2 of the Permanent 5 of the UN Security Council). Having non-Russian members who have economic interests in China is not a situation which the Americans would want to look forward to. On the other hand, the longer the war goes on the more Europe becomes dependent upon the US. It is a delicate balance between the pulls of US and China which the Americans are assuredly looking into.

Last but not least, as mentioned earlier, Ukraine's future looks bleak. Irrespective of the result of the war, Ukraine either will come under the Russian thumb or if it "wins" the war it will be under massive debt to the US given all the war aid that has been provided to Ukraine by the Americans.

As Henry Kissinger, Former US Secretary of State, once said, “To be an enemy of America can be dangerous, but to be a friend is fatal.”

Though the advantage conferred upon Russia by the winter is because of the acclimatisation its people have to the Climate as compared to the enemies who have to expeditiously do the same and suffer as a result. It is not an absolute. Defeats have been suffered in the past, most notably at the hands of the Mongolian Golden Horde. The Ukrainian Military might not suffer from the same impediments and have the benefit of the Western arsenal at its disposal.

With the conflict entering a decisive stage General Winter is upon the old Soviet Land. The next two months of its regency are going to be make or break for the Russians and the West.

Endnotes

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