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Rising Apprehensions

**Simon SERFATY**

To the end, Samuel Beckett insisted that he did not know who Godot was, nor what his two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, were waiting for. That was not the least absurdity of his play, which he wrote in French, the Irish author later explained, because he did not know the language well.

That is where we all are now: confused over what to expect as we stagger into the second and possibly final half of the Biden presidency. In America, momentarily reset as the leader of the Free World, a democracy at risk; in Europe, an alliance recast by an unwanted war; and elsewhere, a global mutation told in languages we understand poorly even when they carry a slight American accent. This is uncharted territory: across the Atlantic, half the people waiting for Trump to return to the White House and the other half waiting for him to go to prison; around the world, half the people welcoming America's restored leadership and the other half celebrating its demotion; and all over, rising apprehensions over a war which neither belligerent can realistically win but which both refuse to end.

Who knows what will come next? "We have not started anything yet," Putin warned at the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, as an unconscious reminder that despite the mounting evidence of failure, Russia still owns the war he started since he controls its escalation beyond anything Ukraine can conceivably bear and the West dare to contemplate. "We have lost nothing and will lose nothing," he asserts, while declaring the current moment one of maximum danger for all; in response to a defiant Ukrainian president's pledge "to force Russia to end this war" after every square inch of his country has been liberated and the Russian president removed from office.

But what if Putin means what he says – like him, are we still deluding ourselves? These are not echoes of the 13-day

Cuban missile gambit: Putin is no Khrushchev, and what is known of him suggests that unlike his predecessor he might choose the worst of all bad options to respond in ways and at a time of his own choosing. And then what?

Time to be real – time, that is, to think through the path we're all on, and apply the brakes before it is too late? Recall the Korean War after the breakthrough in Inchon in September 1950, or the Vietnam War after the removal of Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963, or the Iraq War after Saddam Hussein's capture in December 2003 – all spurned opportunities to end a bad war before it exacted nearly unbearable costs with no prospects of a satisfactory end game. Now, and however agonizing it may be, a strategic reappraisal is very much needed from all, political and diplomatic rather than military in substance, international rather than bilateral in character, regional rather than national in scope – and sooner rather than later. The longer a bad war goes on and the worse it gets on the way to the bad deal that could have come earlier and at a lesser cost.

For those who fear appeasement, a willingness to talk is not a repeat of prewar Munich or postwar Yalta: Ukraine is neither Austria in 1938, when the German invader was still weak and could have been stopped militarily, nor Poland in 1945 when the war in Europe was already won and did not need an overtime face-off with Moscow. For those who wait for a Korea-like status quo ante bellum, this is not a war with mutually accepted red lines behind which its protagonists can wait for the winter to end and an improved position of strength before engaging in serious negotiations. For those who dream of an unconditional withdrawal from Putin, or a precipitous regime change in Russia, this is not the war in Afghanistan, waged by the aged leader of a worn-out Soviet state whose better days, if any, were behind. This is a moment of its own – an existential world crisis the like of

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which has not been seen in Europe since 1945 but threatens to fall into an ever-deeper quagmire potentially filled with nuclear waste.

One day “there will be a dangerous backlash,” then-French president Jacques Chirac said of Russia, a country which Bill Clinton, dismissive of Boris Yeltsin’s own warnings that “Russia is not Haiti,” thought to be finished. Moving into a new century, Vladimir Putin was welcomed by Bush-43 as a soul mate, but his choice between cooperating with or maneuvering against the United States was already made – to reload quickly and go backward in the direction of Cold War belligerence, with enlargement his alibi, rollback his strategy, Russian history his motivation, and Ukraine his battlefield. Remember, unlike the Ukrainians, Russians never voted to leave the USSR, whose breakup they deplored overwhelmingly long after 1991. In the fall 2008, the short war with Georgia was all the evidence needed to confirm Putin’s intentions, but it was ignored by Obama who was dismissive of both the Russian president and his country, let alone by Trump who looked up to Putin and down on Russia. For the most part then, Putin did not fool the West, but he did fool himself – about his army, about Ukraine’s character, and about Biden resolve and Western unity. In late 2021, U.S. warnings about a full-scale Russian assault on Kyiv were not heard by Putin, aware of Biden’s reluctance to use force; were ignored by the Ukrainians, skeptical of Putin’s preparedness for such a strategic gamble; and doubted by most European allies, mindful of their senior partner’s most recent intelligence debacle in Afghanistan.

That this war would be short was anticipated not only by Moscow but also in Washington and in nearly all capitals with a stake in the conflict. This was to be the Putin-directed version of the deceptive shock and awe made-for-television war in Iraq. Maybe we should have known better about both countries, each somewhat unfamiliar in its new incarnation – Ukraine no longer a Soviet republic and Russia a superpower no more. But as our shared expectations of a quick and limited war have receded, a prolonged stalemate is cause for concerns on its direction and consequences, whether intended or not.

Better jaw-jaw than war-war, Churchill used to say about Four-Power conferences which many of his interlocutors across the Atlantic found futile at the time. Calling Putin names while awaiting his exit from Ukraine empty-handed and head down

is a risky strategy. As Henry Kissinger wrote most recently – and not for the first time – the test of leadership “is to temper vision with wariness, entertaining a sense of limits” – which includes an understanding of achievable war aims. A sense of justice can satisfy our anger and outrage, but it also closes the door on diplomacy as a sacrifice that reduces the conflict into a dehumanizing body count for the sake of territory that appears to be lost but can be regained later at a lesser cost. Kissinger knows history well, some of which he composed himself in response to the circumstances he faced, both as an individual and as a statesman. “When you read a work of history,” wrote historian E. H. Carr, “always listen out for the buzzing” – now muted by the *déjà entendu* of angry calls to arms and the *déjà dit* of another Marshall or Marshall-inspired Plan.

Russia stands as the main loser of the war – that much is clear and unlikely to be reversed: ten months into the war, Russia lies deflated, humiliated, and isolated – its military defeated, its economy unhinged, and its governance astray. Rarely have U.S. weapons been used as well over the past 75 years. Reduced to a small cohort of coerced, bribed, and marginal allies or partners, Russia is now heard by China and other non-Western states as a global supplicant shopping for security assistance, trade partners, financial shelter, and strategic rehabilitation. But beware, crippling coercive pressures and open-ended punitive sanctions will divert public anger from Putin to the West. Putin is who he is because Russia is what it is: its history is addictive and conditions the outlook of its leaders and its people, no matter who and no matter when – as was learned after both World Wars and since the Cold War.

Russia is not gone but Putin is likely done, with approval rates set to fall and critics ready to be heard. Keeping the war going is not enough without organizing the table where its end can be negotiated. With appreciation for the war Zelensky fought and won and without indulgence for the war Putin started and lost. With Kennedy opening the door to détente within six months of the missile crisis, Khrushchev’s removal after his fiasco took a mere two years, and it will not be long before the alleged President-for-life runs out of time – as early as March 2024 when another run for the presidency may prove problematic: not running would at least give him the influence he wants to choose his successor – as he did one before with Medvedev.

How much of a difference that would make, however, is not evident, as was shown by Brezhnev who, past Khrushchev, presided over two decades of increasingly global confrontation (or, earlier, with the Soviet tanks that entered Budapest three-and-a-half years after Stalin's death). Yes, there was Gorbachev, the Kremlin's ultimate misfit. But now, the political bench in Moscow is mostly composed of critics who demand more war not less, and fewer red lines not more: after Putin, another Putin, possibly *en pire*? As was learned on three major occasions in the twentieth century, the legacy issue in Moscow is not only how the Russians are ruled at home – from Stalin to Brezhnev to Putin – but how far Europe is governed from Russia, whatever its representation – white, red, or blurred.

As Putin dug his strategic hole ever more deeply, his pre-nuclear escalation ladder has become too short to get him out – partial mobilization, provocative annexation, pipeline degradation, a bit of cyber, terror bombing, and, last rung, the threat of one or more dirty bombs after the preventive evacuation of the newly annexed territories. Next, come the MAD steps of a nuclear ladder, with the first, first use of nuclear weapons since August 1945: and then what, will there be any room left for Russia to not lose without dying and for the West to not die without losing?

That, too, is the untold truth which the war serves as a reminder: not only for Ukraine relative to West, but also for NATO allies who still believe that any American president will risk a nuclear war on their behalf in every circumstance. Even in the case of the Soviet deployment in Cuba, no one knows to this day how President Kennedy would have reacted had Khrushchev not blinked and taken the exit ramp he was offered by his counterpart. And Biden is no Kennedy, less confrontational by temperament as well as more prudent by position.

In the West, there is cause for celebration: Russia down, America in, and Europe up. Thank you, Putin, you have served us well – NATO enlarged, with its identity and relevance restored; America's leadership back, with its authority and resolve renewed; and the EU's complementary role reset, which even perennial Euro-skeptics applaud. Can it last, though? To speak up for and arm Kyiv is one thing, but to freeze and die for it is another. Would it be otherwise there would now be NATO forces in Ukraine and an evenly shared EU gas embargo on Russia.

As the war lingers and escalates far beyond the initial Western goal to limit Ukraine's losses, will the more ambitious objectives – a defanged Putin out, a crippled Russia down, and a triumphant Ukraine whole – justify the costs? Expectations differ on either side of the Atlantic, in every EU or non-EU country, and in or near Ukraine and its battlefield. The war's little and sadly immoral secret is that whatever is said about it, we are not all Ukrainians. And while applauding the West's determined stand to Russia's aggression, do not overlook the dissenting questions ahead: for over a decade, did the United States deter the Russian aggression – no, which reinforces the case for strategic autonomy; in anticipation of the war, did it respond to Ukraine's increasingly urgent arms requests – no, which calls for more defense spending; having failed to deter and defend, did it join the fight – no, which encourages the search for complementary alliances; having left the fighting to others while engineering a strategy that has kept the war going, does it have a strategy to stop or end it – no, which renews the need for Europe's own strategic concept.

That similar questions will be asked from the states of Europe and their union is no less certain: no to more defense spending within NATO, no to energy independence from Russia, no to earlier calls for Ukraine's membership in NATO and the EU – and many other pointed reminders that make the forthcoming transatlantic and intra-European debate likely. Past the war, remember the Cuban missile crisis again, which left the Alliance "troubled" during two decades of West-West obfuscation, intra-European confusion, East-West recalibration, and even North-South recrimination – until Reagan, past Carter, restored enough strategic clarity to keep the allies in and force the adversaries out.

In short, yes, NATO is back but where is the Alliance going; yes, the EU is proving itself as an effective follower of American leadership, but how is Europe's march to its ever-closer union proceeding; yes, the war in Ukraine was met with an unprecedented level of consultation in NATO and with the EU – the best management of alliance relations since the Gulf War – but what is to be expected next of the repositioning of the United States and Europe relative to each other not only in Ukraine and with Biden but also past the aging U.S. president and in the world?

With the durability of the Biden moment of renewal at the mercy of the next election, and with the American idea as a

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reliable democratic example openly questioned, the reset of the Alliance is fragile. And, more immediately, what is the end game in Ukraine?

"If and when [Ukraine] comes to the table," insists the Biden administration, will be determined by Zelensky, who also "gets to determine when that is, ... what success looks like, ... and what or what he is or not willing to negotiate with the Russians." How long a wait then before we can make our own determination short of as long as it takes? With the notable exception of Macron, a worried but historically intimidated Europe remains relatively silent despite its growing misgivings over its partner's increasingly self-centered policies and on the eve of its most economically demanding and politically restless winter in 50 years. With the support of two Americans in three, the war did not play much of a role in the last midterm elections, but despite that support nearly one in two wants it to be ended as soon as possible, according to a post-midterm survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, with many focused on its cost even before paying attention to a projected \$750 billion bill for a multiyear Marshall-like plan for Ukraine's reconstruction – three times more (in constant dollars) than what it took to rebuild the better half of Europe after more than five years of total war.

In the Global Rest, the Western blank check – whatever and however long it takes – is cause for some resentment. If anything, the post-Cold War decades had helped confirm that priorities set by and for the West do not define a world order as their most drastic consequences fall on the states that are least responsible for setting these priorities but most affected in case of failure. Moving ahead, the list of fence-sitting countries reads like a who's who of the "new influentials" who will populate the variable geometry of the uni-bi-multipolar world order ahead.

Now, however, Ukraine also suggests that every war does not count equally as human suffering gets a different billing depending on its victims and location. "Ukraine must win because it is one of us," awkwardly declared the President of the EU Commission in Devos in June 2022 – a war *chez nous*, so to speak, whose people are easily recognizable and worthy of protection and help. This civilizational divide underlines a perceived Western indifference to the more customary wars *chez eux*, when the reaction is more of a drop dead-get lost variety – whether wars in the Sahel and the Tigray regions,

reconstruction in Syria and Afghanistan, and many more elsewhere and everywhere.

Double standards that echo Sam Huntington? After 300 days of war, the U.S. military, economic, and humanitarian aid to Ukraine totals \$68 billion, and the November 2022 request by the Biden administration for 37.7 billion for the next Fiscal Year could bring the total over 105 billion (and more should the funds be exhausted early) – plus the \$41.4 billion contributed by a group of over 50 countries led by Europe, bilaterally and through the EU. But who is counting if the blank check is used "over here" in and by the wide white world? Elsewhere, every initiative and every concession demand endless begging. Thus, it took 30 years of mostly meaningless debates to agree to the idea of a loss and damage fund to compensate the world's smallest, poorest, and most vulnerable countries – up to 130 of them – for irreversible climate harm: the idea, mind you, with the details of this unfunded fund – like who pays and who receives how much and how – to be worked out later.

As Secretary Antony Blinken keeps saying, confidence is back but humility remains *de rigueur*. Admittedly, like Jimmy Carter after Nixon, Biden is softening the nation's image, hosting for example a Summit with the African Union countries for the first time since the Obama administration. But although long overdue and now welcomed, his steps are viewed less like a new mindset on North-South relations than a *mea culpa* for past neglect or worse: like proposing the African Union as a permanent member of G-20; or pledging \$55 billion over the next three years in economic, health, and humanitarian support. That, of course, will hardly close the door on China's growing influence in what promises to be the world's most populated continent by 2050 – an influence bought with a thick check book available for the assets it covets, extended with commercial exchanges four times superior to the U.S. in 2021, and, if needed, protected by the military boots eventually available for protecting the territories it might adopt. As to Taiwan specifically, while Moscow's failure is a lesson in how not to proceed, the Western reaction is also a lesson in what the United States and its allies will not do, notwithstanding Biden's doubtful pledge to fight a hypothetical Chinese invasion of a province it claims to be its own.

To ease China's second long march to its blind date with History, in 2049, Russia is an ideally located gas station that

can now be had on the cheap, with an ample arms warehouse as a complementary bonus. In a moment which President Xi describes as one of “abrupt changes, high winds and dangerous storms,” who more readily available than Russia to answer China’s need for willing, capable, and compatible allies? That prospect alone would make the risks of another Cold War waged over a widening North-South divide more dangerous than the first, as a newly embittered Russia would carry China’s own heavy baggage of historical revendications and territorial ambitions?

Biden’s performance in Ukraine has been second to none – arguably the best since Truman in Berlin in 1948 in terms of escalation management, and the best since Bush-41 in 1991 in terms of alliance management. Similarly, Europe’s followership had been the most resolute and constructive since these two landmarks of its postwar history. That said, apprehensions are raising with the old-fashioned fear of total war, which was said to be forever ended, and, worse yet, loose talk of nuclear war, which was thought to be unthinkable but is now discussed like-a-war-like-any-other, with a me-Tarzan-you-Jane script of a jungle where survival is the main thing. Faded memories of the stalemate between Austria-Hungary, the holder of a blank check from Imperial Germany, and Serbia, equally confident of Russia’s (and France’s) unlimited support – with consequences that are known but seemingly neglected.

Can Zelensky’s end game be set aside – the return to Ukraine’s 1991 borders and Putin’s demise – and accommodate, at least momentarily, enough territorial fudging of the prewar lines to open the exit ramp needed to mask his defeat? Can Putin be brought to the negotiating table now that the future of Ukraine has been guaranteed by a de facto NATO membership

that gives Kyiv the security it sought, while the EU pledge of membership gives it the identity to which it aspired? Can the certainty of reparations help launch the process, including the use of the ample Russian funds frozen in Western banks for the reconstruction of the Russian-occupied or claimed eastern territories – to preserve the idea of a whole Ukraine while forcing the Kremlin to face the same difficult choice as Stalin, when Marshall aid was offered to “his” Eastern European countries?

Admittedly, calls to talk are easier to issue from the sidelines than to answer in the real world where they are heard unevenly in a confusion of national temperaments, political purposes, public moods, economic pressures, and strategic interpretations. But keeping the war going is not enough without organizing the table where its end can be negotiated. with appreciation for the war Zelensky fought and won and without indulgence for the war Putin started and lost. If not now, when; if not America and the European our allies, who; if not with our adversaries, including China, without whom? Hear the buzzing – the sounds you hear are not from Jericho’s trumpet but from the guns of August.

Simon Serfaty,

Professor and Eminent Scholar (emeritus) at Old Dominion University (ODU), and the Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair (emeritus) in Geostategy and Global Security at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). His most recent book is *America in the World from Truman to Biden: Play it Again, Sam* (Palgrave/MacMillan, Fall 2021) and *Un monde nouveau en manque d’Amérique* (Odile Jacob, new edition, 2021).

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