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Hard choices: if not now, when?

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The 2023 wartime NATO Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania confirmed what was already known: a yes but not now on the issue of Ukraine's NATO and EU membership; and, in the meantime, renewed pledges to support Kyiv "as much as needed" and "as long as it takes" during and after the war. Why? Because if we do not stand up there and now, we will face a lot worse elsewhere and later, for lack of the institutional order we will have allowed Vladimir Putin to dismantle and China's Xi Jinping to take over as an anti-Western post-Western world.

Yet, even before the NATO Summit, the long-expected Ukrainian spring counteroffensive was falling short of the significant gains anticipated after the massive Western aid provided during the war's first 15 months – \$37.6 billion in U.S. security assistance alone, according to the Pentagon (May 31, 2023). With Kyiv nonetheless insisting in late summer, that "we don't care how long it takes," questions are now raised, morally awkward but strategically valid and likely to spread over the coming months: How much longer before it proves too long, and how much more will be needed before it is too much?

RUSSIA AGAINST THE WEST

Sanctions are known to work slowly, hard to put in place but easy to bypass. Even while the European Union devised ways to break its energy addiction to Russia, Moscow devised ways to re-route its exports, principally to China and India, but also to other countries that ignored the regime put in place by the United States and its allies. With continued high demand at discounted prices still above its production costs, Moscow's earnings in hydrocarbon exports reached a record level in 2022, and the Russian economy grew while its trade balance ended the year at levels close to 2019.

But now, the pain is felt. Oil export revenues have been falling sharply, the budget deficit is

swelling quickly, the weakening ruble lacks a real value, serious bottlenecks are spreading in vital economic sectors, and a double-digit contraction is anticipated in 2023. Good riddance, Putin, even if re-elected in March 2024, forget about your lifetime presidency: think instead about the two years it took for Khrushchev's removal after his Caribbean fiasco. While the country's best and brightest are leaving *en masse* – Russia's third exodus in 100 years – an increasing number of your compatriots are showing their growing displeasure. This is less likely to turn into a people's war on Ukraine than into a civil war on Putin, as previewed by Prigozhin's wild rush to Moscow.

Even with Putin done, however, what of Russia – is it gone? On the war's first anniversary, just six countries joined Russia to oppose a UN resolution advocating for peace and Ukraine's sovereignty, with 32 abstentions – close to the line-up one year earlier, when a similarly small coalition of four states plus Russia opposed a similarly modest Resolution, with 47 abstentions. Yet, the numbers are misleading. With the abstentions representing about two-thirds of the world's population, the war is not about Russia against the Rest, but it is about Russia against most of the West and the West without much of the Rest.

Anticipating Putin's demise is cause for satisfaction, as a post-Putin Russia is said to

signal the coming of a safer and more stable post-Russia Europe. Have we not learned yet that Russian leaders are the way they are because Russia is the way it is? After Putin another Putin, *en pire* – just remember the Soviet tanks in Budapest three-and-a-half years after Stalin's death; or the Brezhnev doctrine first tested in Prague three years after Khrushchev's removal; and even the post-Yeltsin years when Putin was expected to bring "soulful" stability to post-Soviet Russia.

Admittedly, what Russia lost with its criminal invasion of Ukraine will not be regained any time soon. Start with the war itself, lost when the initial assault on Kyiv failed. Clearly, Putin grossly misread Zelensky's leadership, Ukraine's resilience, Biden's leadership, and Europe's resolve. Thinking of himself as Ivan III "the Great" – a gatherer of lands – he was exposed as Ivan IV "the Terrible" who nearly lost his newly established empire with his catastrophic forever Livonian war. Thoughts of a restored Soviet era when, claims Putin, "we lived in a single country" and "were absolutely invincible" – are a fantasy: the war has convincingly shown the limits of Russian power. Warnings of falling dominoes should Ukraine not hold – with Moldova next, and then, through Belarus, on to Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, thereby ending NATO, as well as the U.S. position in Europe and in the world – have lost their credibility. *Basta*. When the war started, Putin appeared to control its escalation, which kept Biden ambivalent and prudent; but it is now Putin's turn to hesitate after 18 months of steady and ever more lethal American and Western arms deliveries.

Also lost by Putin in Ukraine are thoughts of normalcy in his ties with the United States and much of Europe. Before the war, according to Pew Research, one-in-two Americans viewed Russia as "a competitor" but now seven-in-ten Americans view it as "an enemy." Ukraine is not just another Tiananmen Square, when the Chinese government "only" killed its own. Rather, think of the Korean War, when normalization between the United States and China took over two decades; and think, too, of the Czech coup in 1948, which derailed relations with the USSR for a good 25 years.

To be sure, Russia cannot be deleted from Europe any more than Europe can move away from Russia or America and Europe from each other. Instead, in a moment of reported fragmentation, NATO and the EU members showed unexpected unity – America back, Europe steadfast, and NATO-EU relations reset.

As compensation, Moscow aspires to a restructured partnership with China (plus lesser sideshows with Iran and North Korea). But even as Beijing fears an American strategy aimed "to contain, encircle, and suppress" China, who needs whom? Unlike Mao with Stalin after the Korean war, it is Putin who is now the supplicant, while a conflict that exhausts Western resources, isolates Russia, keeps NATO away from Asia and the West apart from the Rest makes China look like the go-to power in an evolving post-Western world order: a mediator in Ukraine, a facilitator in the Gulf, a peacemaker in the Middle East, and a providential, no-questions-asked lender for low-income countries everywhere. Echoes of the Soviet global surge in the 1970s which ended with its collapse 10 years later? With a *daily* level of trade with the U.S. nearly the same as the *yearly* level of U.S. trade with the USSR toward the end of the Cold War, China looks more like a counterfeit in need of America (and the rest of the West) for growth and stability than a counterweight in need of Russia (and some of the Rest) for oil and security.

UKRAINE WITH THE WEST

Ukraine's victory was earned when Putin's march on Kyiv was stopped with the most massive US assistance program since Roosevelt's Lend Lease, 18 months *after* the start of the war in Europe. Mission accomplished? Not quite: 18 months later, Zelensky remains spoon fed with the arms he needs to not lose, one serving at a time – tanks, rocket launchers, defense systems, munitions, F16s. The buzzing of history is deafening, as the ghosts of Verdun already sighted in the senseless battle of Bakhmut now haunt a spring offensive expected to be decisive but clearly contained in the east and the south – who knows how far it will go and how it will end?

In America meantime, domestic politics is once again impacting Ukraine's fate. Making of the war an example of the Democrats' misplaced priorities and out-of-fashion globalism could quickly emerge as a unifying theme for the Republican party, as it was over 100 years ago when the Senate's assault on the League of Nations helped the party regain the White House. Thus, according to the Pew Research Center, the share of Republicans and leaning-Republican who say the U.S. is giving "too much" aid to Kyiv rose from 17% in the spring of 2022 to 44% in the summer 2023. To-date, the skeptics have stayed relatively discreet, as they did at first in 1919, when opposition to the League built up slowly. But as the stalemate persists, making the end game more ambiguous and the costs of the war less acceptable, dissent will take an increasingly partisan turn that may even spill over across party lines – aimed at Biden, for his lack of strategic transparency, and critical of the European allies, for their inability to take ownership of a war alleged to be their own. In April 2023, according to a University of Maryland/Ipsos poll, "staying the course" is limited to "one to two years" by almost one-in-two Americans.

When Putin moved in Ukraine, he counted on Europe's indifference. Instead, he found resolve, not a counterfeit dubbed a Union but a legitimate counterpart of American power, which delivered €54.92 billion of financial, humanitarian, *and* military support during the first year of the war (about 60% from the EU), plus 4.31 billion from the UK, according to the Kiel Institute. "Much more has to be done, much faster," nonetheless urged Josef Borrell in early 2023: is this realistic? In London in June 2023, the EU pledged €40 billion over four years (2024 to 2027), including about 30% in grants, assuming approval by all 27 members – but with each national election turned into a test of Europe's unity on Ukraine, is this likely?

As Europe redirected its gas dependence away from Russia, it avoided the widely predicted big freeze with substitute imports from Norway, Texas, and Qatar in such quantities that prices, which had surged tenfold in the summer, fell below their prewar price levels. But

what if next winter's weather is less mild, with subsidies less available, global demand higher, stocks lower, war refugees less wanted, and public patience exhausted. Already, the EU's East-West fault line is drifting West-West (France-Germany), East-East (Poland-Hungary), and North-South (Baltic-Mediterranean). And even as states that can do least do more, like Poland and the Baltic states, countries that can do more do less than they promise, like Scholtz's Germany, which remains flatfooted, but also like Macron who finds Ukraine's NATO membership unlikely ("*peu vraisemblable*"), a Russian defeat undesirable ("*ne pas l'humilier*"), and a non-response to its use of tactical nuclear weapons certain ("*c'est évident*").

Whatever Putin thought of Zelensky and Europe, for him to not take Biden seriously was a mistake his predecessors made often – Stalin with Truman in Berlin, Khrushchev with Kennedy over Cuba, and Brezhnev with Carter and Reagan in Afghanistan. Like them, Biden was up to the challenge – arguably the most effective leader of the West since Bush-41, and the most risk-conscious manager of escalation since Kennedy. But now, given Putin's "depravity, crimes against humanity [committed] without shame or compunction," dixit Biden in Warsaw in June 2022, to expect him to return to Moscow empty handed would also be a consequential mistake. At war and in peace a test of statesmanship is to remain aware of limits, with the 1991 Gulf War its best recent example and the 2003 war in Iraq its worst. A sense of justice can satisfy our outrage, but it also closes the door on diplomacy – meaning, the organized system of negotiations between sovereign states rather than arrangements between their leaders.

UKRAINE AND THE REST

Whatever the Ukraine war is called – regional, colonial, or even territorial – and whether it is labeled Putin's war, a people's war or a proxy war, there is more to it than Europe, more to Europe than Russia, more to Russia than Putin, more to Putin than his face-off with the West, more to the West than the United States, and more to the world than the West.

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There, in the non-Western world, Ukraine serves as an especially blunt reminder that all wars are not equal and invite different reactions: Wars fought *chez nous*, in a Western or near-Western world whose people are easily recognizable and deemed worthy of unlimited help and compassion – like Ukraine “because it is one of us,” dixit the EU Commission President in June 2022; and wars fought *chez eux*, in the non- or pre-Western world, where their conflicts are more of a drop dead-get lost variety, like Yemen, where the UN places the death toll of its eight-year war at 377,000 dead, including 227,000 as a result of an ongoing famine and lack of healthcare facilities directly attributable to the war. History is moving on, though: The Western idea of global order no longer fits a still-suffering non-Western world, which the Cold War paradoxically helped liberate but which is now stepping up, resentful of past exploitation and eager for reparations. Call this “the Xi factor” not because the new order will be made-in-China, but because it is in reference to China, and no longer Russia, that Western diplomacy will be measured if the post-Western world is to be kept from turning anti-Western.

Added to its separation from the Global South, the West faces its own potential for postwar fragmentation. Just remember past transatlantic crises when moments of unity were followed by years of West-West obfuscation, intra-European confusion, and East-West recalibration: the “agonizing” debate on Germany’s rearmament after the Korean War, the Gaullist challenge after the missile crisis, the so-called “hour of Europe” after the Cold War, and the Chirac-Schroeder coalition of the discontent after 9/11. Yes, Ukraine brought “a brain-dead” NATO back to life; yes, the war reaffirmed the EU as a usable US counterpart; yes, there has been an unprecedented level of Western consultation – between NATO and the EU, as well as with (and among) other Western countries at the periphery; but what is coming next? “If it were my war,” recently confided Zelensky, “I would tell everyone what I think of them.” Pray tell, and let’s have others tell, too, like French president Macron whose preview of Europe’s postwar “strategic autonomy” devalues Taiwan as “a crisis that is not our

own,” promotes “a global strategic partnership” with China, questions a pervasive “Cold War mentality,” and condemns “the extra-territoriality of the US dollar.”

After Trump, Biden was welcomed as the architect of America’s renewed leadership, but he is also its choke point: before Biden, Trump; but after Biden who and, no less importantly, when? Nearing and past November 2024, Biden’s advanced age, his legitimacy (denied by three Republican voters in four), his candidacy (opposed by two democrats in three), his anointed successor (namely, his vice-president), and his republican opponents (and not just Trump) are causes for concern should the war continue while waiting for a post-Putin Russia and a post-Biden America, whichever comes first. Zelensky was right to not end the war too early, but ending it before it is too late will entail hard choices – the kinds of choices that were made when Adenauer chose an amputated but free Federal Republic of Germany over a united but subjugated German state, until Helmut Kohl bet the economy of West Germany to regain the Eastern half which his long-forgotten predecessor had allegedly abandoned.

TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

Every war must end, but “when that is,” insists Biden in this case, “what success looks like, ... and what or when [Kyiv] is or not willing to negotiate with the Russians” will be decided by the Ukrainians. So conceived, who is using who? This is not an American proxy war since it is the reported proxy that is said to decide how long and how far to go, not to just save Ukraine and return it to its 1991 boundaries, but to save democracy and Western civilization. Reminders of another “Great” war 100 years ago, when a conflict that was expected to last a couple of weeks became a five-year carnage from which Europe never quite recovered.

Still the indispensable power, the United States is uniquely positioned to influence whether and how the war turns into a war of attrition, like in the summer of 1914, and how and when it takes a turn to a negotiated stop, as happened in the fall of 1918. But

while there have been many peace plans since the war started, the Biden-Blinken team has remained discreet. With a spreading sense that the time for a dialogue is coming, remember Woodrow Wilson not for his Fourteen Points, which framed a flawed peace 18 months after they were announced in January 1918, but for his “Five Particulars,” which produced an armistice seven weeks after they were proposed in September of that year. Even as the particulars for Ukraine are still being tested on the battlefield, some of them stand out as a future that has already happened.

First, a return to the 1991 boundaries is unlikely, and some small territorial losses can be anticipated with a *statu quo ante bellum* à la Korea, adapted to the map drawn at the close of the current fighting season. Yes, leaving Putin with a little something, like Kennedy did with Khrushchev 60 years ago, is morally distasteful and strategically uncertain. But viewing an outcome short of unconditional surrender as appeasement – Munich time two – does not meet the history test, given the price already imposed on Russia, with little reprieve any time soon. Just remember, for comparison, the deafening silence of the Western democracies while the invasion of Manchuria, the civil war in Spain, Italy’s war in Ethiopia, and the Anschluss were paving the way to Munich at a time when Hitler was not ready for war. Ready or not, Putin was not deterred but he was stopped, and the verdict is in, without room for an appeal by future historians: the aggressor lost, and the victim won. Russia will serve time as it attends to a prompt release of all prisoners, answers to a UN-sponsored investigation of war crimes, commits to the safety of nuclear plants, agrees to new accords on food security, and more. Patience, patience – George Kennan used to plea during the Cold War: History issues no death or even life sentences, and “the next best” can be good enough until the best can come – a whole, united, and free Ukraine, though not now.

Second, there is the matter of postwar security for Ukraine, left without a firm commitment for membership in NATO and the EU by a time certain. Both on his own and with NATO, Biden effectively built a Western coalition that provided Ukraine with

the help it needed for self-defense – admittedly not enough to win on Zelensky’s terms but enough to not lose on Putin’s terms. Now, Ukraine is better trained, equipped, led, motivated, and protected than most NATO members – a non-member member of the alliance and a fast-track applicant for EU membership on its way to integrating a Euro-Atlantic space that regroups all NATO and EU countries. That is no small achievement, but the scale of the Western response to Russia in Europe is also a meaningful warning to China about Taiwan and elsewhere in Asia where Biden has shown an opportunistic sense of the achievable – especially with Japan and South Korea, which he is driving to a historic trilateral alliance with the U.S., but also with the like of Vietnam and even India, which he attempts to move closer to the West.

Third, Ukraine’s reconstruction is a question of conscience for the West, and reparations from Russia are an admission of guilt for its criminal invasion. With the costs of recovery estimated up to \$1 trillion over 10 years, according to the European Investment Bank, a plan à la Marshall will demand a distinctively multilateral commitment – the first global undertaking in the reported post-Western world. As reparations, some of the \$330 billion in Russian assets held in Western banks could be directed to the occupied or contested territories in the east and the south, thus avoiding a de facto neglect of Ukraine’s internationally recognized boundaries, as happened with Germany (West-East) and even Korea (North-South). Expect no miracles, though. Ukraine will be neither Germany-1945 nor South Korea-1953, two different but unrepeatable cases of postwar economic recovery, and Ukraine’s postwar political rehabilitation will demand the war, the same levels of Western commitment to help Kyiv achieve the good governance that it failed to provide since 1991. Remember, too, the fate of heroic wartime leaders who were dismissed within weeks (Churchill), months (de Gaulle) or year (Bush-41) of the war they won.

At the close of his classic book on *Peacemaking in 1919*, Harold Nicolson writes that the main lesson

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he learned from the negotiations was that “the test of our value [as diplomats] was the extent of our dissatisfaction.” The lesson holds: with losing not an option on either side, and with both sides unable to achieve a win on their terms without paying a price neither can afford, there is no happy military solution in sight. Too much time has gone by since the war started, time during which we were wrong too often,

all wrong. As the war’s second year ends, beware of falling too deep into the quagmire of a bigger war for marginal gains that would deny the peace which the Ukrainians won militarily because of the heroic way they fought and which the Russians lost because of the evil ways they act but which we must now help end because of the way we are. If not now, when?

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