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Ukraine War May Bring More Trouble for the U.S. than Commonly Assumed

What is the U.S. endgame in Ukraine? There needn't be One Big Thing. There may be multiple, flexible, ambigous, nebulous objectives, perhaps some of them contradictory, ill-defined and may be ill-thought-out. For instance, a) Bleed Russia,b) beat Russia militarily, c) isolate Moscow, d) roll-back Russian advances, e) change Russian behavior, calculations, f) bring down/weaken Putin (regime), g) display leadership, initiative, indispensability, h) cut or at least weaken Russian-European (esp. German) ties, i) rally allies under the Western-American flag, j) indirectly deter China by demonstrating how difficult and costly conquest is. As an aside, k) sell some American weapons, l) show their superiority compared to Russian and other alternatives and m) sell US LNG to Europeans. Formidable list, isn't it?

Yet the fact that no Americans are dying in Ukraine is probably lulling Washington into a false belief that fighting there is cost- and risk-free for the US. Well, it probably is not. War is, 1) pushing Russia into China' arms, 2) weakening the economies of Europe seriously and perhaps permanently, 3) destroying Ukraine in so many ways,, 4) sending millions of Ukrainans to the west, 5) whose welcome there may soon diminish, 6) costing the American taxpayer dozens of billions of dollars, 7) the war also reveals the limited extent of support of non-Western countries (including India) for the U.S. (against Russia). 8) Russia may end up controlling the northern shores of the Black Sea, though of course this is far from a certainty. Less certain and more difficult to quantify is 9) the increasing antipathy of some European polities against America due to the increased energy/food scarcity and inflation and possible recession in the region. This may take some time to 10) translate into the ballot box and and impact actual policies but that does not make it less significant. Those German workers who will lose their jobs due to the impact of the war (and US policy) in Ukraine, for instance, will not be sympathetic to Washington in the long-run.

War could have been avoided, at least be delayed, with a more creative and nuanced US policy. This remark should not be seen as an exoneration of Russian expansionism and irredentism, or imply that Washington is solely responsible for what had transpired. Of course, “the burglar” is the main culprit. Yet, the US did not devote enough time and care to the formulas that may avert war. Neutrality for Ukraine, some territorial concessions, ironclad guarantees for its security could (could!) indeed work, though needless to say it will be much more difficult than saying it in a breath. Even if it could not stop Russia, such bargainng positions would have isolated it even more, made the war much less popular in Russia, hence more difficult to sustain.

Dollar hegemony: If one day the dollar hegemony crumbles, war in Ukraine will be an important fat footnote or possibly a chapter in that “book.” We can at least be sure that many influential, powerful and rich people in the world took notice when the US had frozen almost 300 bn USD Russian reserves with the proverbial “stroke of a pen.” Alternative currencies, payment systems, monetary blocs may borne out of that thing. Certainly “not in a day”, and it may “never” happen at all, there are still important obstacles in front of them but suddenly they may look much less formidable to many eyes because many may seriously begin to think that it may well happen to them in the future.

Nuclear escalation: If Russia begins to think that it is losing the war then it will likely escalate first in conventional military terms, and then perhaps later in the nuclear ladder. It may start i) hinting using nuclear weapons, then it may ii) say it loudly, and later iii) mobilise her nukes etc. Needless to say in a tit-for-tat dynamic parties may easily lose the control of the escalation. İv) Using tactical nuclear weapons, v) throwing a nuclear weapon to “somewhere in the ocean,” these may sound like science-fiction now, but there are very limited number of steps between the current situation and those kinds of scenarios. A world where a nuclear weapon is used will be an altogther different place militarily, strategically,

economically, psychologically, ecologically. People like to say that “we’ve entered an entirely different era.” Well, different eras should not come about every 15 minutes. But in this case we may make an exception. For starters, one nuclear weapon use may be followed by others. Current ecological, financial and food crises will be dwarfed by what will likely to follow. Perhaps a dozen possibly many more countries will “immediately” look for ways to have their own nukes (Iran, Japan, Germany, Turkey, S. Korea, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, South Africa, and, why not, UAE anyone?).

Weakening European-Russian connection may not be the designed objective but an indirect result of the current US policy in Ukraine. But even if that was not the intended objective before the war, the US policymakers must have realized early in the process that some kind of rupture is happening. We do not yet know the duration of this. How much do the Americans care that, say, the Germans will suffer greatly from this? Do they? Well, even if they don’t now, they may sometime in the future if Euro populism and hidden anti-Americanism thrives in the future due to the Ukraine war and the resultant economic troubles. “Should we really blindly follow the US lead and pressure, or could we resist it?” Questions like this may be asked more frequently especially if the economic crisis persists.

On Ukraine a surprising portion of the global South mostly sided with Russia, or remained neutral, or remained oblivious to the US pressure. They don’t buy, understand or care much about the US arguments. Why Ukraine is really so different than, say, Iraq, Vietnam, Suez or what Israel seems sometimes to be doing the every other week? Why indeed? Most of these countries have real or imaginary sufferings under direct and indirect Western rule, hypocricies, slights, double standards and outright bullying. Some of them may still change sides under pressure, or after they received some goodies. But one can confidently claim that the US didn’t get as much support from the South as it expected and perhaps needed.

If the US aim was to bleed Russia of money, reputation, slf-confidence, diplomatic capital, allies, connections, prestige, domestic support and cohesion, at the 6 months mark the results are mixed at best. Russian military performance was wanting in many respects and even if it prevals in the end Russia will most probably be weakened as a result of this war. It will likely to lose her bravura, adventurist and expansionist ambitions, at lest for sometime.. Beating Russia militarily and roll-back her new posessions is possible but not likely. Changing Russia, changing its regime, its self-definition and outward posture will probably require a much greater trauma than the current conflict will provide. Bringing down Putin? Such a thing is never impossible in Russia theoretically but by whom exactly?

And lastly China, supposedly the country which will preoccupy the US most in this century. US hopes making Ukraine adventure costly for Russia would make China hesitate to move on Taiwan. There are similarities but they are different conflicts. Unlike Russia in Ukraine, China may try and succeed to blockade the island. China may deny US even to approach Taiwan in a war. Chinese weapons are newer and more numerous than Russia's, and in terms of ships even from the US. But Chinese army lacks one important thing: experience. Chine's economy is much more integrated with its Asian neighbors than Russia's economy with the the Europeans. Taiwenese army and people may be less willing to fight than the Ukrainians. Also looking at Ukraine they may easily think that a war will devastate their economy, infrstructure, foreign trade and even the way of life. Hence a peaceful (though perhaps grudging) integration of the two countries is still possible. Every war scare and crisis will frighten foreign investors and export markets of Taiwan. The may look for other sources.

US-Chinese competition is complex, intense, multifaceted, long-term and even the Russan angle may not be easily summarised here without sacrificing many of its important aspects. But Ukraine war will likely to make Russia and China closer. Russia is no longer a

theoretical swing player between China and the West. Russo-Chinese trade, solidarity, cooperation, coordination, intelligence and perhaps technology sharing, the sense of being allied for the long-term will likely increase with the war. Probably only a regime change in Russia may change that. And if that's the case it points to the fundamental mistake of the American decision-makers regarding the road to the war. They seem not to try to recruit or at least calm and satisfy Russia, they did not explore avenues and possibilities of a compromise solution that will prevent the burning of the bridges. In the long run everything is possible but for the foreseeable future Russia will tilt toward China on many matters. Bidenites couldn't do with Russia what Nixon-Kissinger did with China. Circumstances, isues, balances are certainly not identical, but the similarities are not superficial either.