**The Putin enigma and the Zelensky trap**

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Last week, Vladimir Putin’s pre-recorded address to his nation threatened the West with the veiled reference to using “all available means” to defend Russia. Clearly, that warning was meant to include nuclear, as well as energy, denial to Europe among Russian threats. Over the weekend, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan went on talk shows; repeatedly informing Russia that any use of nuclear weapons would have “catastrophic” consequences. He did not elaborate.

One critical question is that what is driving Putin? No one in the administration seems to have been able to answer that question. If history matters, one of the critical reasons why the US lost in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq after 2003 was an almost complete lack of knowledge and understanding of the enemy. Are we repeating this tragic failure especially if Putin regards this war as existential to Russia.

Many Putin commentators have never met him or only under antiseptic conditions. Of knowledgeable Americans, certainly, three have had many interactions: former Secretaries of State John Kerry and Henry Kissinger and former US ambassador to Russia, CIA Director Bill Burns. One hopes the White House has sought their advice. But given the peculiar nature of the White House, that may not have happened.

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About Putin, despite his KGB service before briefly being made its head, it is Russian culture and upbringing in post-war Leningrad where his brother was killed by the Nazis that are more relevant. Running deep in Russian DNA and history was a well-understood sense of paranoia and insecurity based on centuries of foreign invasion and cultural inferiority. To counterbalance both, Russians have an almost neuralgic psychological need for respect while demanding treatment with dignity.

Putin has often been emotional in responding to what he believes about how he and Russia have been disrespected and slighted by the West and the US. He witnessed this after the Soviet Union imploded and the decade of chaos Russia experienced after Mikhail Gorbachev was replaced as president. And in 2008 at the NATO Bucharest Summit, Putin was infuriated by George W. Bush’s unexpected and ad-libbed commitment to alliance membership for Ukraine and Georgia.

Indeed, Putin told Bush that this promise “will not stand,” referring to the Senior Bush’s response to Saddam Hussein’s assault on Kuwait. Several months later, Russia provoked Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili. Georgia foolishly took the bait and attacked Russian forces giving Putin the excuse to occupy South Ossetia.

The Biden administration may have made another profound error in the run-up to the war by repeatedly predicting that Putin would invade Ukraine. One could argue that such statements taunt Putin, possibly choking off any prospects that the situation could be resolved peacefully by literally daring him to invade. Of course, that is unknowable.

But was Putin’s speech a typically Russian way of seeking a way out of the war by threats that will coerce or compel negotiations or a ceasefire? Here, the Biden administration may be making another major error by not having an off-ramp or diplomatic initiative. The White House and Congress assert that President Volodymyr Zelensky should have all control over diplomacy and negotiations given the price Ukraine has paid in blood and treasure.

To a realist or someone who reads history, that policy is naive and even dangerous. During the Korean War, the US and the UN negotiated for months with the Red Chinese. South Korea never had a say and that country paid a steep price.

Similarly in Vietnam, Saigon had no role in the Paris Peace talks during the war. And to bring this record up to date, the Trump administration negotiated the Doha Accords with the Taliban without the Kabul government. Why should Ukraine be any different given the strategic significance of the outcome? We must not be trapped by giving Zelensky the sole vote.

How does this war end if Putin is determined to win? Should we not be at least considering acceptable terms for all parties to end the war? Understanding Putin’s thinking is vital. But, as the US failed in the past to understand the adversary, is this recurring?

Clemenceau observed that “war is too important to be left to the generals.” In this case, is Ukraine too important to be left to Zelensky? The US needs a strategy with an off-ramp to seek an end to the violence and the war. Until then, the US does not have a strategy.

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