**Ukraine: A Tragedy on Steroids**

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Tragedy has almost as many definitions and meanings as it has actual examples. In terms of foreign policy, tragedy can mean a collision of two seemingly valid principles that come into conflict. In Vietnam, the noble aim of bringing some measure of peace, stability and justice to a war-ravaged country was unachievable under the guise of preventing the spread of “Godless, monolithic communism.”

The tragedy is also inevitable when the obvious best outcome has no chance of surviving the brutal realities and harsh conditions required to end a conflict or war. Ukraine is the clearest example as this tragedy continues to devastate that country and take too many lives of both its citizens and Russian occupiers. The reasons are self-evident.

Ukraine wants its sovereignty and territory restored and Russian invaders expelled. For that to happen, at least one miracle is needed. Ukraine could shatter Russia’s defenses forcing its army to surrender or leave. For the time being, that outcome does not seem likely. Of course, Russian morale could collapse and its army could disintegrate.

Russian President Vladimir Putin could change his mind or be replaced with a leader who is prepared to abandon this “special military operation.” As the German generals failed to assassinate or arrest Adolph Hitler, Putin seemed very secure. Further, to the degree polls are reliable in Russia, Putin enjoys support from a majority of his citizens. Despite Western naysayers, unless or until Putin does leave his post, this possibility must be considered very unlikely.

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NATO, or a coalition of willing members, could conclude that Putin’s invasion of Ukraine is such a danger to the West and the rule of law, that military intervention is justified. NATO has the capability to eviscerate Russian forces inside Ukraine if it chooses. But President Joe Biden has exercised an absolute veto on that option; stating he has no intention of provoking World War III or deploying US forces to fight in Ukraine.

Finally, external parties such as China, India or Saudi Arabia could broker some sort of a deal if one were remotely acceptable to the two warring states. The outline of such a deal is vague although one possible option has been floated. Ukraine would be invited to join NATO in exchange for permitting Russia to maintain control of part of its territory in Donbas and Crimea with further negotiations to discuss boundaries and means to end this war.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has repeatedly rejected exchanging peace and NATO membership for land. Yet, realistically, what options does he have? While the US and NATO have promised support “for as long as it takes,” how long is that? In the US, the public consensus is eroding. Two Republican presidential aspirants have already stated each would end that war once elected.

In a perfect world, Ukraine deserves an outcome that reverses Russia’s illegitimate aggression, assures reparations and brings war criminals to account. The tragedy is that, barring some very unlikely event, this outcome is improbable if not impossible to achieve. Ukraine may have no choice except to continue to wage a war it may not be able to win risking a Pyrrhic victory that could disintegrate the country.

Analogies do not always fit. This is not China in 1937; Munich in 1938; Korea in 1953; or Kuwait in 1990. Those who fear that a Russian victory in Ukraine will make Putin more eager to move further West do not understand that NATO possesses an overwhelming conventional military advantage over a very weakened Russian army. Hence, what is the least bad outcome for Ukraine that somehow leaves open a path for neutralizing hostile Russian intent and aspirations may prove to be the only viable one.

The vital and currently unanswerable question is what would Kyiv accept as the least worst outcome? And is Putin open to any negotiation? To prevent further tragedy, the US must confront these questions. But will it?

In today’s highly toxic political environment, where even a scratch can become life-threatening, Democrats and Republicans of goodwill–and there must be a few left-have to come together and agree on a strategy for Ukraine that reflects these tragic realities and possible outcomes, good or bad. More of the same simply defers making tough choices while Ukrainians pay the price.

As distasteful as it sounds, thinking the heretofore unthinkable may be the only way to end this tragedy that at least gives Ukraine a fighting chance to survive. And that itself is a further tragedy.

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