**Who will end the war?**

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The Russian war against Ukraine has been going for more than 18 months and has led to over 500,000 casualties, including almost 200,000 killed on both sides. I started to write “it’s almost unbelievable”, but then I thought about the scale of casualties from other recent wars, such as the one fought in Iraq following the U.S. invasion in 2003.

The cost to rebuild Ukraine’s infrastructure was estimated last March at $411 billion and is probably now much higher. The war has pushed seven million Ukrainians into poverty and produced more than six million refugees. 17 million need humanitarian assistance.

Apart from its 100,000 war dead – more than the US suffered in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq combined – Russian has not suffered as much as Ukraine. The war after all, is not being fought on its territory (a few pin-prick drone strikes excepted). Nevertheless, the Russian economy shrunk by 2 per cent last year and will grow by only about 1.5 per cent this year. It has run up enormous budget deficits and been frozen out of much of the global financial system.

The nation has had to mobilize 300,000 unmotivated reservists to fight the war and lost some 900,000 young and educated people to self-exile. Thousands more have been jailed for war resistance, including notable dissidents like Boris Kagarlitsky. Putin may think of the exile and purge as bonuses – he now has fewer critics – but the ranks of the nation’s brightest and most innovative people are now reduced. Protest persists, but it has become surreptitious, a battle of codes and memes.

Russia invaded Ukraine in part to prevent Nato expansion, but the war has had the effect of growing and arguably strengthening the cold-war era organization. Sweden and Finland joined Nato in April. (The latter has a more than 800-mile-long border with Russia.) Russian military strength has been shown to be a paper tiger, unable to quickly defeat a country 28 times smaller in geography, four times smaller in population, and with a military budget 1/10 as large. Putin survived a coup attempt, but not easily, and has become a global pariah, unable for example, to attend the recent BRIC summit in South Africa out of fear of arrest. No matter how it ends, the war will not have been a success for Putin.

Both nations are losing but neither will stop fighting. They are stuck in a bloody stalemate with no clear path to victory and no impetus to negotiate. They have committed too much blood and treasure – and spent too much political capital – to accede to the other’s demands. Major concessions by either side would bring about their leaders’ political downfall.

Russia wants Ukraine to agree to a cease fire, followed by a declaration of neutrality enshrined in its constitution. They also want Ukraine to accept Russian sovereignty over Crimea and recognition of Donetsk and Lugansk (collectively, the Donbas) as independent states, presumably allied with Russia. Ukrainian President Zelensky recently issued a 10-point plan for peace that includes a guarantee of safety for nuclear power plants, withdrawal of Russia forces, return of prisoners of war and abducted children, security guarantees, and the surrender of all seized land, including the Donbas region and presumably Crimea.

Zelensky described that last demand as “not up for negotiations”, which in negotiation-speak means it is. But that’s a thin reed upon which to hang the heavy weight of negotiation. As things now stand, the war is likely to drag on indefinitely, or at least until Ukraine runs out of money, arms, and men. Russia, with its vast reserve of soldiers, armaments, and oil money, will keep fighting until it achieves a semblance of victory, or until the costs become so high that Putin is overthrown and a more temperate leader installed. (If there even is such a person in a position to lead.)

The only entities that can stop the war right now are China and the US. China is like Russia’s big brother or sister. Its economy is four times bigger, its military is much larger in personnel, its agriculture is more productive, and its technological development more advanced. China is by far Russia’s biggest trading partner, and the largest market for its oil and other fossil fuels; the latter has been a lifeline for Putin. If Chinese President Xi Jinping applied pressure on Putin to end the war, or if he cut off or restricted oil imports, the war would end. Unfortunately, he has little motivation to do those things. China is buying Russian oil at a discount and the war is distracting the US from its ‘pivot to Asia’ inaugurated during the first Obama/Biden administration. China may also be hoping to extract trade and other benefits from the US in exchange for a diplomatic intervention in the war. So far, the US has made no overtures, at least not publicly – which is stupid, unless your goal is to prolong the war.

That leaves it to the US. We all know the reasons it has not chosen to stop the war: 1) the happy prospect of destroying a major geopolitical rival in the Eurasian heartland; 2) the massive profits gained by politically connected arms, aerospace, and fossil fuel sectors; 3) a desire to reaffirm US domination over the EU and Nato partners; 4) a demonstration to China that it will pay a high cost if it tries to annex Taiwan like Russia did Ukraine. (The difference here is that Taiwan is, according to international law, part of China – ‘one country, two governments’) and 5) pursuit of the post-Cold War chimera of unipolarity, the idea that there is no alternative to US political and economic hegemony. All these propositions are riven by contradiction and self-delusion. They are deeply ideological, which is why they are so difficult to dismantle.

But there are also good, self-interested reasons for the US to encourage the war’s end, chief among them the desire of Joe Biden and the Democrats to deny Republicans an election year issue: a quagmire of endless war and limitless foreign spending.

Excerpted: ‘Some People Will Hate Me for Writing This: End the War!’

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