FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Out of Alignment

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Non-Western Powers

BY SHIVSHANKAR MENON

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This article is part of an ongoing series examining what a year of war in Ukraine has revealed.

For the past year, many Western analysts have regarded the war in Ukraine as marking a turning point in geopolitics, bringing together not only the United States and its NATO allies but also a broader liberal coalition to counter Russian aggression. In this view, countries around the world should naturally support the West in this defining contest between democracy and autocracy.

Beyond the borders of North America and Europe, however, the past 12 months have looked very different. At the outset of the war, numerous countries in the global South identified with neither the West nor Russia. Several dozen—including such large democracies as India, Indonesia, and South Africa, as well as numerous other countries in Africa—abstained from resolutions condemning Russia at the UN General Assembly and in the UN Human Rights Council. Many of them have also been reluctant to formally adopt the West's economic sanctions against Russia while respecting them in practice, and as the war has unfolded, some of them have sought to maintain relations with Russia as much as with the West.

Moreover, in many parts of the world, the most crucial issues of 2022 had little to do with the war in Ukraine. Emerging from the havoc of the pandemic and confronted by far-reaching challenges ranging from debt crises to a slowing world economy to climate change, many developing countries have been alienated by what they view as the self-absorption of the West and of China and Russia. For them, the war in Ukraine is about the future of Europe, not the future of the world order, and the war has become a distraction from the more pressing global issues of our time.

Yet despite this disillusionment, a coherent third way, a clear alternative to current great-power rivalry, has yet to emerge. Instead, these countries have sought to work with present realities, respecting Western sanctions on Russia, for instance, in an international system that no longer inspires much faith in its relevance to their security and economic concerns. In this sense, for many parts of the globe, a year of war in Ukraine has done less to redefine the world order than to set it further adrift, raising new questions about how urgent transnational challenges can be met.

GREATER RIVALRY, DIMINISHED POWER

A year of war in Ukraine has weakened the world order in two important ways. First, the Russian invasion, combined with the continuing effects of the pandemic and the global economic slowdown, diminished all the great powers in both power and prestige. The diminution was most apparent for Russia itself: in the unanticipated course of the war, in the country's increasing economic and political isolation, and in the acceleration of its decline. It was least evident in the United States, which has managed to respond forcefully to the war without involving its own forces or causing serious escalation while strengthening Western unity and staying focused on the main game in Asia.

Worries remain, however, about the United States being distracted by Ukraine from its roles elsewhere, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. The precipitate withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 also raised questions about U.S. staying power and perseverance, especially now as it enters a new presidential electoral cycle. Nor has its own domestic politics permitted the United States to provide constructive leadership to the international multilateral system. For Europe, the war has limited its ability to play a broader global role, given its preoccupation with European order for the foreseeable future, regardless of whether the war ends in victory for either side or in a protracted frozen conflict.

China, too, has been taxed by the war. Because of its secondary effects on the world economy, on China's own energy and food imports, and on China's virtual alliance with Russia, the war has limited Beijing's influence abroad. Unlike other permanent members of the UN Security Council, China has not played a meaningful political or military role in the Ukraine crisis. Other middle powers outside Europe have experienced similar effects. But in China's case, two additional factors have been at play. One was Beijing's domestic preoccupation through much of the year with its own economic slowdown and its need to project a smooth buildup to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October. The other was

China's "zero COVID" policy, which compounded its inward fixation. Together, these domestic concerns reinforced the effects of China's unproductive "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, which created an inability to find negotiated solutions to bilateral disputes or to play a meaningful role on transnational issues such as climate change and the developing-country debt crisis.

It is not yet certain how China and the other powers will respond to their straitened circumstances. Since the party congress, China seems to be attempting to restore some balance in important relationships with Australia, Europe, and the United States. But Beijing's domestic imperatives to reignite economic growth and to control the social and political fallout of its COVID-19 policies are likely to take precedence and limit meaningful shifts away from its recent assertive actions in maritime Asia and its land border with India.

The second effect of a year of war is that economic policies of major powers such as China, the United States, and Europe are now shaped by politics as much as by economics. Today, in many cases, security of supply and political interests take priority over price considerations in global manufacturing and value chains. "Friend shoring" and onshoring are being driven by political considerations rather than by economic responses to the changing situation. Although globalized markets have limited the extent of decoupling between China and the United States, they have not prevented strong efforts by both countries to reduce mutual dependence in strategic sectors such as semiconductor manufacturing, artificial intelligence, energy, and rare-earth metals.

The response of countries that have hitherto relied on their economic strength for global influence has varied. Japan is now making a transition to stronger defense and security policies that are better suited for today's challenges, giving it a more balanced stance that emphasizes political and military power, too. Germany's government speaks of a *Zeitenwende*, or historic turning point. And China, a global economic power that is militarily and politically constrained in its own neighborhood, has recalibrated both the nature of its engagement abroad and the way that it projects that engagement to its own people and to the world. Meanwhile, Europe and many countries in the global South pay an economic price for the West's unprecedented sanctions against Moscow, and recession looms in some of the world's most important economies.

ALIENATED AND UNALIGNED

As much as the war has affected relations between the major powers, the effect of a weakening world order is also profound on countries outside the West. One year later, these countries seek alternatives to the present order, but a clear third way, whether economically or politically, has yet to emerge. A growing debt crisis has affected over 50 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America since before the pandemic, according to the International Monetary Fund. This limits the developing world's ability to strike out on an independent economic path. Indeed, most countries have respected the sanctions on Russia in practice.

Politically, too, the present situation inhibits the emergence of a single or coherent third way akin to the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. A crucial difference is that today, unlike in the Cold War, there is no bipolar order. For all the talk of autocracies and democracies facing off against each other, economic interdependence between China and the United States and the reality of a globalized economy mean that the world does not have a clear two-part division offering opportunities for traditional balancing. Instead, it is a world in which great-power rivalry is not between two superpowers but among multiple players. As a result, the multisided competition and great-power rivalry have led many countries in the global South to be unaligned rather than nonaligned, dissociated from the present order and seeking their own independent solutions rather than an alternative set of widely held approaches to global issues.

Alienated and resentful, many developing countries see the war in Ukraine and the West's rivalry with China as distracting from urgent issues such as debt, climate change, and the effects of the pandemic. Take South Asia. Three countries in the region—Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—have been in talks with the IMF for more than a year about adjustment packages to deal with their debt. And over the last 18 months, five countries in the region—Afghanistan, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—have also changed governments, and not always smoothly or constitutionally. Sri Lanka defaulted on its international debts in April 2022. During the summer, one-fifth of Pakistan's population was rendered homeless by floods inundating one-third of the country—a devastating consequence of climate change. Neither international institutions, nor the West, nor its Chinese and Russian rivals, have found or offered meaningful solutions to these problems.

Great-power rivalry complicates the task of addressing such issues. In dealing with Sri Lanka's debt, for instance, the West is naturally reluctant to pay for Sri Lanka to settle accounts with China, the country's largest creditor. For its part, Beijing is waiting for the rest of the international community to act, worried that if it moves to reschedule Sri Lanka's debt, it will set a precedent for other countries that have taken on significant loans in China's $1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative, many of which are only marginally more solvent than Sri Lanka. Indeed, the situation in South Asia is paralleled in many other parts of the developing world. Many countries now feel that they have been left to their own devices in the absence of a working multilateral system or international order. But this malaise has yet to produce a coherent or organized response.

INDIA'S OPPORTUNITY?

All in all, the war in Ukraine and the growing rivalry between China and the United States has produced a fluid situation for countries outside the United States and Europe. For some larger and more powerful middle powers, there are new opportunities in this uncertain world. India, for example, can work with neighbors to build the peaceful and more prosperous periphery that its own development demands. It can participate in the remaking of the rules of the international system now underway, particularly in new domains such as cyberspace. And it can reengage economically with the dynamic economies of Asia, participating in global value chains, to further its own transformation.

But many smaller states are more vulnerable than ever. And overall systemic risk is higher than it has been for many decades. That heightened risk is less about the prospect of a direct great-power conflict: as the first year of the war in Ukraine and the aftermath of former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August have shown, the United States and other great powers are capable of avoiding direct conflict among themselves. But their ability to contain local conflicts, or even to get their way in their own neighborhoods, has been constrained by their rivalry and by the demands of a globalized economy. It is also limited in Asia in particular by the fact that power in the region is much more evenly distributed than it was during the Cold War or the subsequent unipolar moment of U.S. dominance.

With India chairing the G-20 in 2023, New Delhi may be tempted to try to mediate between Ukraine and Russia, though that seems unlikely to produce results for now. A more fruitful way ahead would be for India to bring the concerns of the global South to the forefront of the international agenda. For the time being, however, it seems likely that the international system will continue to drift. Amid a prolonged war and continued great-power rivalry, the coming year is unlikely to see more than incremental progress in addressing the urgent issues that preoccupy much of the developing world.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Friends in Need

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Alliances

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This article is part of an ongoing series examining what a year of war in Ukraine has revealed.

NATO was created to prevent a major war in Europe, a task it accomplished well for many decades. Apart from the brief Kosovo war in 1999, its members never had to fight together or coordinate a joint response to aggression—until a year ago, when Russia invaded Ukraine. NATO's response thus offers fresh, real-world evidence about how contemporary alliances work in practice.

The recent behavior of Russia and the West confirms that states form alliances not to balance against power but to balance against threats. The way NATO has done so has also revealed much about both the alliance's virtues and its enduring pathologies. The war may have given NATO a new lease on life and shown the value of its well-established procedures, but it also underscores the degree to which its European members remain dangerously dependent on the United States.

As the world moves toward multipolarity, alliances will only matter more. In an age when no single country stands unchallenged atop the international system, success will depend on rival powers' ability to form a coherent and capable grouping and exercise power collectively. Above all, the invasion of Ukraine and its aftermath show that leaders court disaster if they fail to understand why alliances form and how they work.

STRIKE A BALANCE

The concept of a balance of power—the idea that countries typically join forces to check powerful rivals—has been around for centuries, but in reality, countries more commonly seek allies in response to threats. Powerful states can be more threatening than weaker ones, of course, but where they are located and how their intentions are perceived can be equally important. Strong states are usually more worrisome to their immediate neighbors, especially when they appear willing to use force to change the status quo.

This tendency explains why Moscow saw NATO enlargement as a threat: a powerful alliance of wealthy democracies was inching toward Russian borders. Moreover, the strongest member of that alliance, the United States, was openly committed to spreading liberal institutions and had used force to do so on several recent occasions. Feeling threatened, Moscow responded by drawing closer to China and by trying to stop NATO from moving farther east, but it could not convince Ukraine to abandon the goal of joining the West or persuade NATO to suspend its "open door" policy, whereby any European country meeting its requirements can apply to join.

Unfortunately for Russia, its reaction to NATO enlargement merely reinforced the sense of threat felt by the United States and Europe, leading the West to draw even closer to Ukraine. When Russia seized Crimea after the 2014 Maidan revolution, which ousted Ukraine's pro-Russian president, the United States and its allies imposed new sanctions and began to arm and train Ukraine's military. Russian efforts to interfere in U.S. and European elections and its attempts to poison Russian exiles and other political opponents exacerbated Western concerns. U.S. President Donald Trump's reservations about NATO did not stop the United States from deploying additional troops in Europe, and support for Ukraine increased further under U.S. President Joe Biden.

The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 removed any lingering doubts about Moscow's revisionist aims and prompted a swift and far-reaching reaction. NATO and EU members imposed unprecedented economic sanctions on Russia, and the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries began sending Kyiv sophisticated weapons, military training, financial support, and intelligence. Germany reversed course completely, backing European efforts to curtail energy imports from Russia and committing itself to a major military buildup. Not to be outdone, Sweden and Finland applied for NATO membership.

These reactions should not surprise anyone. Although its military has performed poorly throughout the war, Russia is still a major industrial power with a sizable stockpile of nuclear weapons, a large army, and considerable military potential. It borders several NATO members, including vulnerable Baltic states. Perhaps most important, the invasion of Ukraine showed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is willing to use armed force to alter the European status quo. Were that effort to succeed, other states in the region would have reason to wonder whether they might be next.

From Moscow's perspective, of course, it was the United States and its allies that were trying to alter the status quo in Europe, and in ways inimical to its interests. NATO had done so, however, without resorting to military force. Because Ukraine wanted to join NATO and the alliance still supported this goal in principle, Russia could only hope to halt Ukraine's accession by first threatening to use force and then launching an invasion, which in turn raised Western perceptions of threat to new heights.

PICKING TEAMS

For further evidence that states balance against threats, not power, consider Sweden and Finland's revealing behavior after the invasion. Not only did each state abandon a policy of neutrality that had worked well for decades, and in Sweden's case for centuries, they did so after Russia's invasion had stalled and its military inadequacies had been exposed. Russia in 2022 was significantly weaker than the former Soviet Union, but Putin was more willing to wield military power than Soviet leaders had been, making Russia more threatening to the Swedes and Finns, causing them to seek the additional protection of NATO membership.

The tendency for states to balance against threats also explains why some states have remained on the sidelines. Russia's assault on Ukraine poses no threat to Israel or some prominent members of the global South, including India and Saudi Arabia, and taking a firmer stance against Russia would jeopardize these states' interests. U.S. and NATO leaders have been disappointed by such self-interested behavior, but they should not be surprised.

Putin's failure to recognize that states ally to balance threats—and that violating existing norms against conquest would be particularly alarming to the West—was a major blunder. He appears to have assumed either that Kyiv would fall before NATO could act or that its members would limit their response to verbal protests and sanctions. He was wrong on both counts, and Russia now finds itself fighting an opponent backed by partners with a total GDP of more than $40 trillion (compared with Russia's $1.8 trillion) and whose defense industries produce the world's most lethal weapons. This disparity in overall resources does not guarantee a Ukrainian victory, but it has transformed what Putin expected would be a cinch into a costly war of attrition.

Russia has acted in other ways that helped unify the opposing coalition. Unlike Otto von Bismarck, the first leader of the German empire, who cleverly manipulated France into attacking Prussia in 1870, Putin placed the onus for aggression firmly on his own shoulders. Russia had legitimate reasons to be concerned about efforts to incorporate Ukraine into Western economic and security institutions. But its prewar demand that NATO permanently guarantee Ukrainian neutrality and remove all military forces from the territory of members admitted after 1997 appeared to be a pretext for invasion rather than a serious negotiating position. To be fair, Western officials had done little to address Russia's legitimate concerns, but Moscow's unrealistic demands obscured that failure and made Russia appear uninterested in a political settlement.

Furthermore, although Putin's speeches and writings (including his July 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians") are not as dismissive of Ukrainian independence as his critics contend, his insistence that Russians and Ukrainians were "one people" and that Ukraine was under the sway of outside forces and "Nazis" reinforced suspicions that his true goal was restoring, and maybe expanding, a revived Russian empire. Instead of going to great lengths to persuade others that his aims were limited and defensive—a posture that might have undermined Western unity to some degree—Putin's rhetoric and Russia's defiant diplomatic stance made it much easier to hold the alliance together.

Equally important, the war crimes and atrocities committed by Russian forces during the war itself—including deliberate attacks on civilian targets and infrastructure—have reinforced outside sympathy for Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has also waged a masterful public relations effort to keep Western aid flowing, but Russia's conduct of the war made his task much easier.

NO "I" IN NATO

The war has also underscored that institutions matter. Shared norms and well-established decision-making procedures help allies reach and implement collective decisions more rapidly and effectively. NATO is the most heavily institutionalized alliance in history, and its members have nearly 75 years of experience coordinating responses despite occasional disagreements. If NATO did not exist and its members had to devise a collective response to the war in Ukraine from scratch, it is hard to imagine them reacting as efficiently as they did.

To be sure, NATO's consensus-based procedures can also create problems, as Turkey has illustrated by extracting concessions from Sweden through blocking its entry into NATO. On balance, however, NATO's rapid decision to support Ukraine and its ability to deliver that support confirm that well-institutionalized alliances work better than ad hoc coalitions of the sort that Russia has formed with Iran and North Korea.

Despite NATO's swift response, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated the need for a new transatlantic division of labor. Alliances provide collective goods; if joining forces helps a group of states deter or win a war, all its members benefit regardless of how much each contributed. As a result, the strongest members of an alliance typically bear a disproportionate share of the burdens and make the key decisions, whereas weaker members are prone to free-ride and (mostly) do as they're told. The Ukraine war confirms that pattern: the United States has done more for Ukraine than any other NATO member, and Washington has largely defined NATO's overall strategy toward the conflict.

Having one country in the driver's seat made it easier to orchestrate a rapid response, but the United States' preeminent role has a serious downside. Because Washington has long guaranteed its wealthy allies' security, the latter let their armed forces erode and become dangerously dependent on U.S. protection. Had the United States not responded to Russia's invasion—as it might have done under a different president—there is little that NATO's European members could have done to help Ukraine. Russia's prospects for victory would have been brighter.

Some see this episode as proof that U.S. leadership is still indispensable, but the real lesson of this war is that a new division of labor between the United States and Europe is both feasible and long overdue. Russia may seem threatening now, but it is not as powerful as many experts believed, and it will be even weaker in the future. NATO's European members have more than three times as many people as Russia does and more than ten times Russia's GDP, and they spend three to four times what Russia spends on defense every single year. If properly organized and led, Europe can defend itself against Russia on its own.

It follows that Europe should rebuild its forces and gradually take over primary responsibility for its own defense, while the United States shifts from being Europe's first responder to being its ally of last resort. Sharing burdens within NATO would allow the United States to focus on balancing China in Asia, a task Europe is neither willing nor able to perform. Gradually reducing the U.S. commitment would also ensure that European states do not abandon their pledges to rearm and pass the buck back to Washington when the war in Ukraine is over.

In an emerging multipolar world, states that can attract and retain allies are more likely to succeed than those whose actions cause others to join forces against them. This is not a new lesson: Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and imperial Japan all suffered catastrophic defeats at the hands of powerful balancing coalitions. Aggression sometimes pays, but usually only when a powerful state can arrange to fight its victims one-on-one. The Ukraine war shows that favorable circumstances of this kind are hard to arrange, because overt acts of aggression tend to unite other states in opposition. If any heads of state are pondering whether to launch a war to change the status quo, taking this lesson to heart will spare them a great deal of trouble and make for a more peaceful and prosperous world.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Kremlin's Grand Delusions

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Putin's Regime

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This article is part of an ongoing series examining what a year of war in Ukraine has revealed.

Despite a series of blunders, miscalculations, and battlefield reversals that would have surely seen him thrown out of office in most normal countries, President Vladimir Putin is still at the pinnacle of power in Russia. He continues to define the contours of his country's war against Ukraine. He is micromanaging the invasion even as generals beneath him appear to be in charge of the battlefield. (This deputizing is done to protect him from blowback if something goes badly wrong in the war.) Putin and those immediately around him directly work to mobilize Russians on the home front and manipulate public views of the invasion abroad. He has in some ways succeeded in this information warfare.

The war has revealed the full extent of Putin's personalized political system. After what is now 23 years at the helm of the Russian state, there are no obvious checks on his power. Institutions beyond the Kremlin count for little. "I would never have imagined that I would miss the Politburo," said Rene Nyberg, the former Finnish ambassador to Moscow. "There is no political organization in Russia that has the power to hold the president and commander in chief accountable." Diplomats, policymakers, and analysts are stuck in a doom loop—an endless back-and-forth argument among themselves—to figure out what Putin wants and how the West can shape his behavior.

Determining Putin's actual objectives can be difficult; as an anti-Western autocrat, he has little to gain by publicly disclosing his intentions. But the last year has made some answers clear enough. Since February 2022, the world has learned that Putin wants to create a new version of the Russian empire based on his Soviet-era preoccupations and his interpretations of history. The launching of the invasion itself has shown that his views of past events can provoke him to cause massive human suffering. It has become clear that there is little other states and actors can do to deter Putin from prosecuting a war if he is determined to do so and that the Russian president will adapt old narratives as well as adopt new ones to suit his purposes.

But the events of 2022 and early 2023 have demonstrated that there are ways to constrain Putin, especially if a broad enough coalition of states gets involved. They have also underscored that the West will need to redouble its efforts at strengthening such a diplomatic and military coalition. Because even now, after a year of carnage, Putin is still convinced he can prevail.

BACK IN THE USSR

One year in, the war in Ukraine has shown that Putin and his cohort's beliefs are still rooted in Soviet frames and narratives, overlaid with a thick glaze of Russian imperialism. Soviet-era concepts of geopolitics, spheres of influence, East versus West, and us versus them shape the Kremlin's mindset. To Putin, this war is in effect a struggle with Washington akin to the Korean War and other Cold War–era conflicts. The United States remains Russia's principal opponent, not Ukraine. Putin wants to negotiate directly with Washington to "deliver" Ukraine, with the end goal of getting the U.S. president to sign away the future of the country. He has no desire to meet directly with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. His goal remains the kind of settlement achieved in 1945 at Yalta, when U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill sat across the table from the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and accepted Moscow's post–World War II dominance of Eastern Europe without consulting the countries affected by these decisions.

For Russia, World War II—the Great Fatherland War, as Russians call it—is the touchstone and central theme of the conflict in Ukraine. Putin's emphasis a year ago on ridding Ukraine of Nazis has faded somewhat into the background. This year, the victorious outcome in 1945 is his primary focus. Putin's message to Ukrainians, Russians, and the world is that victory will be Russia's and that Moscow always wins, no matter how high the costs. Indeed, beginning with comments ahead of his 2023 New Year's speech, Putin has cast off the depiction of the war in Ukraine as just a special military operation. According to him, Russia is locked in an existential battle for its survival against the West. He is once more digging deep into old Soviet tactics and practices from the 1940s to rally the Russian economy, political class, and society in support of the invasion.

Putin is capable of learning from setbacks and adapting his tactics in ways that are also reminiscent of Stalin's approach in World War II, when the Soviet Union pushed back Nazi Germany in the epochal battle of Stalingrad. In September 2022, as Russia was clearly losing on the battlefield, Putin ordered the mobilization of 300,000 extra troops. He then declared that Russia had annexed four of Ukraine's most fiercely fought-over territories: Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia, transforming the military and political picture on the ground and creating an artificial redline. Putin has repeatedly made changes in Russia's military leadership at critical junctures, and he has worked fiercely to ensure his country has enough weapons for the war effort. When Russian forces began to run out of armaments, Putin purchased drones from Iran and ammunition from North Korea.

Putin has also shifted his narrative about the war several times to keep his opponents guessing about how far he might still go. He and other Russian officials, including his spokesman and foreign minister, have openly stated that the invasion of Ukraine is an imperial war and that Russia's borders are expanding again. They have asserted that the four annexed Ukrainian territories are Russia's "forever" but then suggested that some borders may still be negotiated with Ukraine. According to newspaper reports, they have pushed for the full conquest of Donetsk and Luhansk by March but also indicated that another assault on Kyiv could be in the offing. At this stage of the conflict, Russia's actual war goals remain unclear.

What is clear is this: after more than two decades in power, Putin is practiced at playing people, groups, and countries against one another and using their weaknesses to his advantage. He understands the weak points of European and international institutions as well as the vulnerabilities of individual leaders. He knows how to exploit NATO's debates and splits over military spending and procurement. He has taken advantage of European and American partisan divides (including the fact that only one third of Republicans think the United States should support Ukraine) to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion.

At home in Russia, Putin has proved willing to allow some hawkish dissent and debate about the war, including the grumbling of pro-war commentators and bloggers who used to serve in the military. He seeks to use these debates to mobilize support for his policies. But although Putin is adept at managing quarrels, he cannot always control the content and tone of these disputes, just as he cannot control the battlefield. Some of the domestic commentary on the war has become shrill and even threatening to Putin's position. There is speculation that Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner paramilitary group, whose forces have been doing some of the war's bloodiest fighting, could even seize power at some point in the future. Russia's wartime casualties appear to be approaching 200,000. As many as one million people are estimated to have left Russia in the past year in response to the war, either because they oppose the invasion or simply to avoid being drafted. In this regard, the world has learned that there are some limits to Putin's coercive capabilities, even if this mass exodus of dissenters seems to leave behind a more quiescent majority.

DISSUADABLE, NOT DETERRABLE

Russian opponents of the war may have had no chance of stopping Putin from invading Ukraine on February 24, 2022. And none of the United

States and Europe's mechanisms and practices for keeping the peace after World War II and the Cold War had much, if any, effect on his decision-making. The West clearly failed to stop Putin from contemplating or starting the invasion. Nevertheless, the United States' release of declassified intelligence before February 24 clarified Russian aims and mobilization and helped the pro-Ukraine Western coalition quickly come together once the war started. Furthermore, this past year has shown that even if he cannot be deterred, Putin can be dissuaded from taking certain actions in specific contexts.

Strategic partners of Russia, such as China and India, have criticized Putin's threats to use nuclear weapons on the battlefield. He allowed grain shipments from Ukraine through the Black Sea after complaints from the United Nations, Turkey, and African countries. Putin and the Kremlin remain committed to maintaining partner countries' support, as was demonstrated during the G-20 meeting in November 2022 in Bali, Indonesia. Russia still seems not to want a full-on fight with NATO. It has avoided expanding its military action outside Ukraine (at least so far), including by not shelling military supply convoys entering the country from Poland or Romania. But Moscow's aggressive rhetoric has risen and ebbed throughout the war. Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, once known as a moderate leader willing to engage with the West, now plays the role of Putin's attack dog, periodically threatening a nuclear Armageddon.

The Kremlin is shameless in its rhetoric, and no one in Putin's circle cares about narrative coherence. This brazenness is matched by domestic ruthlessness. Putin and his colleagues are willing to sacrifice Russian lives, not just Ukrainians'. They have no qualms about the methods Russia uses to enforce participation in the war, from murdering deserters with sledgehammers (and then releasing video footage of the killings) to assassinating recalcitrant businessmen who do not support the invasion. Putin is perfectly fine with imprisoning opposition figures while sweeping through prisons and the most impoverished Russian regions to collect people to use as cannon fodder on the frontlines.

The domestic ruthlessness is in turn exceeded by the brutality against Ukraine. Russia has declared total war on the country and its citizens, young and old. For a year, it has deliberately shelled Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and killed people in their kitchens, bedrooms, hospitals, schools, and shops. Russian forces have tortured, raped, and pillaged in the Ukrainian regions under their control. Putin and the Kremlin still believe they can pummel the country into submission while they wait out the United States and Europe.

The Kremlin is convinced that the West will eventually grow tired of supporting Ukraine. Putin believes, for example, that there will be political changes in the West that could be advantageous for Moscow. He hopes for the return of populists to power in these states who will back away from their countries' support for Ukraine. Putin also remains confident that he can eventually restore Russia's prewar relationship with Europe and that Russia can and will be part of Europe's economic, energy, political, and security structures again if he holds out long enough (as Bashar al-Assad has in the Middle East by staying in power in Syria). This is why Russia is seemingly restrained in some policy arenas. For instance, it has vested interests in working with Norway and other Arctic countries in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard and the Barents Sea, where Moscow has been careful to comply with international agreements and bilateral treaties. Russia does not want its misadventure in Ukraine to embroil and spoil its entire foreign policy.

Putin is convinced that he can compartmentalize Moscow's interests because Russia is not isolated internationally, despite the West's best efforts. Only 34 countries have imposed sanctions on Russia since the war started. Russia still has leverage in its immediate neighborhood with many of the states that were once part of the Soviet Union, even though these countries want to keep their distance from Moscow and the war. Russia continues to build ties in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. China, along with India and other key states in the global South, have abstained on votes in favor of Ukraine at the United Nations even as their leaders have expressed occasional consternation and displeasure with Moscow's behavior. Trade between Russia and these countries has increased—in some cases quite dramatically—since the beginning of the conflict. Similarly, 87 countries still offer Russian citizens visa-free entry, including Argentina, Egypt, Israel, Mexico, Thailand, Turkey, and Venezuela. Russian narratives about the war have gained traction in the global South, where Putin often seems to have more influence than the West has—and certainly more than Ukraine has.

BLURRING THE LINES

One reason the West has had limited success in countering Russia's messaging and influence operations outside Europe is that it has yet to formulate its own coherent narrative about the war—and about why the West is supporting Kyiv. American and European policymakers talk frequently of the risks of stepping over Russia's redlines and provoking Putin, but Russia itself not only overturned the post–Cold War settlement in Europe but also stepped over the world's post-1945 redlines when it invaded Ukraine and annexed territory, attempting to forcibly change global borders. The West failed to state this clearly after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The tepid political response and the limited application of sanctions after that first Russian invasion convinced Moscow that its actions were not, in fact, a serious breach of post–World War II international norms. It made the Kremlin believe it could likely go further in taking Ukrainian territory. Western debates about the need to weaken Russia, the importance of overthrowing Putin to achieve peace, whether democracies should line up against autocracies, and whether other countries must choose sides have muddied what should be a clear message: Russia has violated the territorial integrity of an independent state that has been recognized by the entire international community, including Moscow, for more than 30 years. Russia has also violated the UN Charter and fundamental principles of international law. If it were to succeed in this invasion, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states, be they in the West or the global South, will be imperiled.

Yet the Western debate about the war has shifted little in a year. U.S. and European views still tend to be defined by how individual commentators see the United States and its global role rather than by Russian actions. Antiwar perspectives often reflect cynicism about the United States' motivation and deep skepticism about Ukraine's sovereign rights rather than a clear understanding or objective assessment of Russian actions toward Ukraine and what Putin wants in the neighboring region. When Russia was recognized as the only successor state to the Soviet Union after 1991, other former Soviet republics such as Belarus and Ukraine were left in a gray zone.

Some analysts posit that Russia's security interests trump everyone else's because of its size and historical status. They have argued that Moscow has a right to a recognized sphere of influence, just as the Soviet Union did after 1945. Using this framing, some commentators have suggested that NATO's post–Cold War expansion and Ukraine's reluctance to implement the Minsk agreements—accords brokered with Moscow after it annexed Crimea in 2014 that would have limited Ukraine's sovereignty—are the war's casus belli. They think that Ukraine is ultimately a former Russian region that should be forced to accept the loss of its territory.

In fact, the preoccupation of Russian leaders with bringing Ukraine back into the fold dates to the beginning of the 1990s, when Ukraine started to pull away from the Moscow-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (a loose regional institution that had succeeded the Soviet Union). At that juncture, NATO's enlargement was not even on the table for eastern Europe, and Ukraine's affiliation with the European Union was an even more remote prospect. Since then, Europe has moved beyond the post-1945 concept of spheres of influence for East and West. Indeed, for most Europeans, Ukraine is clearly an independent state, one that is fighting a war for its survival after an unprovoked attack on its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The war is about more than Ukraine. Kyiv is also fighting to protect other countries. Indeed, for states such as Finland, which was attacked by the Soviet Union in 1939 after securing its independence from the Russian empire 20 years earlier, this invasion seems like a rerun of history. (In the so-called Winter War of 1939–40, Finland fought the Soviets without external support and lost nine percent of its territory.) The Ukrainians and countries supporting them understand that if Russia were to prevail in this bloody conflict, Putin's appetite for expansion would not stop at the Ukrainian border. The Baltic states, Finland, Poland, and many other countries that were once part of Russia's empire could be at risk of attack or subversion. Others could see challenges to their sovereignty in the future.

Western governments need to hone this narrative to counter the Kremlin's. They must focus on bolstering Europe's and NATO's resilience alongside Ukraine's to limit Putin's coercive power. They must step up the West's international diplomatic efforts, including at the UN, to dissuade Putin from taking specific actions such as the use of nuclear weapons, attacks on convoys to Ukraine, continued escalation on the battlefield to seize more territory, or a renewed assault on Kyiv. The West needs to make clear that Russia's relations with Europe will soon be irreparable. There will be no return to prior relations if Putin presses ahead. The world cannot always contain Putin, but clear communications and stronger diplomatic measures may help push him to curtail some of his aggression and eventually agree to negotiations.

The events of the last year should also steer everyone away from making big predictions. Few people outside Ukraine, for example, expected the war or believed that Russia would perform so poorly in its invasion. No one knows exactly what 2023 has in store.

That includes Putin. He appears to be in control for now, but the Kremlin could be in for a surprise. Events often unfold in a dramatic fashion. As the war in Ukraine has shown, many things don't go according to plan.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Kyiv and Moscow Are Fighting Two Different Wars

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Contemporary Conflict

BY LAWRENCE FREEDMAN

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This article is part of an ongoing series examining what a year of war in Ukraine has revealed.

Over the course of the war in Ukraine, the strategies of Russia and Ukraine have increasingly diverged. At first, Russia sought to catch Ukraine by surprise using a modern army engaged in some fast-moving maneuvers that would yield a rapid and decisive victory. But over time, its army has been seriously degraded, and it has increasingly been relying on artillery barrages and mass infantry assaults to achieve battlefield breakthroughs while stepping up its attacks on Ukrainian cities. In the areas its forces are occupying, it is seeking to impose "Russification" and has dealt harshly with those suspected of spying and sabotage, or simple dissent.

Ukraine has been more innovative in its tactics and more disciplined in their execution. Aided by a growing supply of Western weapons and an agile command, it has managed to recover some of the areas occupied by Russian forces. But it has also been fighting on its own territory and unable to reach far into Russia. So while Ukraine has limited itself to targeting Russia's military, Russia is targeting Ukraine as a whole: its armed forces, its infrastructure, and its people.

These contrasting approaches—the "classic warfare" pursued by Ukraine and the "total warfare" adopted by Russia—have deep roots in the wars of the twentieth century. As the war in Ukraine reaches its one-year mark, it has begun to offer significant insights into how these two forms of warfare can cope in contemporary conflicts—and how they are likely to shape the contest between Kyiv and Moscow in the coming months.

TWO KINDS OF WAR

The classic way of warfare, which dominated military thought before World War I, was all about battles. Strategy focused on getting an army in a position to fight; tactics concerned the fighting itself. Victory was decided by which army occupied the battlefield, the number of enemy soldiers killed or captured, and the amount of equipment destroyed. In this way, battles determined the outcome of wars. This approach was bolstered by laws of war that covered the treatment of prisoners and noncombatants and assumed that the defeated enemy would accept the verdict of battle.

Even before World War I, there were many reasons to doubt how closely this model of war captured reality, especially because of the way in which it insisted on keeping the civilian and military spheres separate. But the classic model continued to shape expectations in the run-up to World War I. That conflict, however, turned into a long war of attrition, during which underlying economic and industrial strength came to play a far more important role than mere battlefield outcomes. And the ability of aircraft to strike enemy cities called into question the concept of a distinct battlefield separate from civil society. People and property became natural targets.

The rationale for targeting population centers was simple: armies drew on civilian infrastructure to fight. Munitions factories depended on a civilian workforce. When governments needed more troops, they drafted civilians. In other words, when an entire country was on a war footing, there were no innocents. Moreover, the governments that decided on war and peace depended on popular support. Vulnerable citizens, suffering under incessant bombardment, might be turned against the war, even to the point where they demanded their own side's capitulation. To many strategists, bombing cities looked like a far simpler route to victory than winning battles. In this way, war became total, leading to the massive air raids of World War II and the U.S. decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. After that, civilians were spared only in wars that did not last long and were fought away from cities.

But three developments caused Western strategists to change their thinking about total war. First, the logic of total war led to nuclear catastrophe. If that was to be avoided, a way had to be found to keep wars limited. Second, there was a growing awareness that attacks on civilians were counterproductive. This was the conclusion of studies undertaken immediately after World War II on the impact of the Allied strategic bombing campaigns, and then the later experience of the Vietnam War, in which the efforts to seek out and eliminate the communist Viet Cong led to many civilian casualties.

The third development was the advent in the 1970s of precision-guided munitions. In principle, the dramatic improvements in accurate targeting afforded by such technology meant that there was no longer any excuse for collateral damage. Operations could be conducted in ways that would avoid civilians and strike only at military-related targets. With precision-guided weapons, there was an opportunity to revive classic warfare by concentrating on undermining an enemy's military organization through deep strikes and rapid maneuvers. This was the lesson drawn from the United States' decisive defeat of Iraqi forces in the first Gulf War.

Nevertheless, although this doctrinal shift has been evident in the planning of recent Western military interventions, classic warfare strategy has often fallen by the wayside once those wars turn into counterinsurgency campaigns, as in Iraq and Afghanistan. In both conflicts, the United States and its allies made efforts to avoid harming civilians in order to keep their support and avoid fueling the insurgency, but these efforts tended to be relaxed when their own forces were at risk. For Western forces, an additional source of tension was that local communities often regarded them as unwelcome, especially when they were supporting a government that—precisely because it relied on foreign support—lacked popular legitimacy.

RUSSIAN BRUTISHNESS, UKRAINIAN RESTRAINT

For its part, in the decades after the Cold War, Russia never quite abandoned the total-war model. This was the case even when it employed precision-guided munitions. In Syria, for example, Russian forces demonstrated that avoiding civilian targets was a matter of choice and not technology, as they deliberately attacked rebel hospitals. Even close to home, Russia has used unsparing tactics, especially in the Chechen Wars of the 1990s and in the first decade of this century, during which Moscow applied brute force directly to civilian areas and cities.

Now Russia is doing the same in Ukraine. But this time around, it faces an increasingly well-organized and professional army. As the Kremlin has become more frustrated in its campaign to occupy the country, it has resorted to regular attacks on Ukrainian civil society and economy. These have included aiming missiles at Kyiv and other cities, leveling apartment complexes and sometimes whole towns, attacking Ukraine's energy infrastructure, and laying prolonged sieges, such as against Mariupol in the spring, Severodonetsk in the summer, and Bakhmut more recently. These are operations that involve artillery barrages that reduce cities to rubble and force their populations to flee.

Despite Russia's maximal aims in Ukraine, it is possible to argue that it is not pursuing a total war. This is because Russia has refrained from using nuclear weapons—the ultimate symbols of contemporary total warfare. In fact, nuclear weapons have already played a critical role in setting the boundaries to the conflict. At the outset of the war, Russian President Vladimir Putin invoked the nuclear threat to warn NATO countries against direct intervention. At the same time, his desire to avoid a war with the alliance has deterred him from using nuclear weapons on a smaller scale within Ukraine and from ordering attacks on neighboring NATO countries. Nonetheless, in most respects, Russia has followed the total-war approach that it has used in other conflicts since the end of the Cold War.

Meanwhile, Ukraine is following a classic-war approach. In defending their own cities, factories, and energy plants, Ukrainian forces have every reason to avoid unnecessary damage to civilian areas, and they have needed to conserve their scarce ammunition for high-priority Russian military targets. Moreover, Kyiv has also been constrained by the limitations placed on it by its Western suppliers. One area in which this has happened—and another example of the deterrent effect of the threat of total war—is Washington's deliberate restriction of Ukraine's ability to attack Russian territory, at least in ways that involve Western weapons. Ukrainian forces managed some attacks on targets within Russia using drones and sabotage, but these have been few. Notably, the United States has denied Ukraine the long-range artillery and aircraft that would allow it to strike deeper and more often, although the impact of such attacks against a country of Russia's size would be more symbolic than material.

The result of these constraints is that Russia has been fighting a total war on Ukrainian territory without facing a serious risk of anything equivalent on its own. The contrast between the Russian and Ukrainian approaches has become even sharper as the war has progressed.

TOTAL RESISTANCE

Since Ukraine and Russia were both part of the Soviet Union until 1991, their armed forces have a shared history as well as shared experience with Soviet-vintage equipment. Since 2014, however, Ukraine has come progressively under Western military influence. This process accelerated during the buildup to Russia's 2022 invasion, and even more so once the war began. The United States and its allies have provided Ukraine with various forms of assistance, including training, intelligence, and advanced weapons systems. Although Ukraine has employed weapons that enable it to target Russian assets located far behind the frontline (such as command posts, ammunition dumps, and logistic hubs) and areas where Russian troops are concentrated, Russia has had few options other than to rely on its artillery and, following mobilization, infantry assaults designed to render Ukrainian towns and cities indefensible.

Reinforcing the contrast, Russian forces have attempted to "Russify" areas under their control—by imposing language, education, and currency requirements on local populations—and have used torture and executions to inhibit Ukrainian resistance. This is in addition to the widespread war crimes they have committed, including abductions, as well as looting and sexual abuse, which reflect their fear of sabotage and snooping, along with general indiscipline.

So far, the results of the Russian approach have confirmed the standard criticisms of total-war strategy. The onslaught against Ukraine's civil society has made no dent in popular support for the Ukrainian government. Instead, accumulating evidence of egregious Russian behavior has made Ukraine all the more determined to ensure that these territories are liberated and that none is handed over to Russia indefinitely. The humanitarian consequences of Russia's methods have also strengthened Western support for Ukraine. In addition, Russia's total-war aims have reinforced the Ukrainian belief that there is no obvious "compromise peace" available. Nor have Russia's total-war tactics impeded Ukrainian operations.

In recent months, Moscow has provided coercive rationales for its attacks on civilian infrastructure, connected to Ukraine's refusal to accept Russia's annexation of four provinces in eastern Ukraine in September. These attacks have made life extremely difficult for Ukrainians, with civilians regularly killed and injured by random strikes, and frequent blackouts during the winter months. But the Ukrainians have learned to adapt, taking out increasing numbers of missiles and drones with air defenses and finding ways of coping with the civilian hardship. After a year of war, there has been no evident effect on Ukraine's will to fight.

RETURN OF THE TANKS

A year of war in Ukraine has further discredited the total-war approach. But what has it revealed about classic warfare? Here, experience warns that the battlefield victories essential to this approach can prove elusive when the defending forces appear to have inherent advantages over the offense. In such situations, armies can get stuck in long and grueling standoffs. It is possible to overwhelm an outgunned enemy by punching holes in its lines, but this usually requires maneuvering with armored vehicles, surprising the enemy with unexpected advances, achieving success through encirclements, and pushing the enemy into rapid retreats to the point where it is eventually unable to recover.

Such an outcome is not easy to achieve. In Ukraine, the most successful offensives by either side have come in situations where the defenses have been thin on the ground. Russian gains came during the first days of the war when its forces had the advantage of surprise and were able to move fast. In the south, they met little resistance, especially where defenses were poorly organized, notably in Kherson. Yet in the north, they took forward positions that could not be sustained, soon got into trouble against agile Ukrainian defenses, and were forced to withdraw. Then, in the next stage of the war, beginning with the battle for the Donbas, Russian gains were few, covering narrow areas, and they were achieved only at immense costs and over months.

For its part, Ukraine's most impressive offensive came in Kharkiv in September, when its forces took advantage of a weak and poorly prepared defense while the Russian high command was focused on Donetsk and Kherson. Yet in areas where Russian defenses have been prepared, and then bolstered by the extra troops generated by mobilization, Ukraine's progress has been slowed. Ukrainian forces were further limited by the onset of winter, as the ground became boggy. Ukraine's counteroffensive to retake Kherson got off to a slow start in the late summer, and its forces were able to make progress only when they were able to cut off Russian supply lines, thus rendering Kherson City indefensible. It was evacuated in November.

In the coming months, the direction of the war may also be shaped by the changing balance of firepower. When it next gets a chance to go on the offensive, Ukraine will benefit from more armored vehicles, including Challenger, Leopard, and Abrams battle tanks furnished by Europe and the United States, following protracted discussions in January. As important, Kyiv will also be getting infantry vehicles, improved air defenses, and longer-range shells and missiles.

But it will take time for all these weapons to be delivered and to train Ukrainian forces to use them. Meanwhile, Ukraine will have to cope with a new Russian offensive that is essentially attritional in its methods, depending on Russia's readiness to accept high casualties to make its gains. While the weight of numbers may allow them to advance in some areas, Russian forces have yet to demonstrate the ability to exploit any breakthroughs with rapid, forward thrusts. For now, Ukraine is obliged to cope as best it can with this pressure, concerned about the rate at which it is using up ammunition, hoping to hold its line well enough that when and if the new Russian offensive begins to fade, it will have its own opportunity to move onto the offensive.

Ukraine's new capabilities will be geared to maneuver warfare. In the opening months of the war, many Western commentators pronounced tanks obsolete on the basis of the substantial numbers the Russians lost to antitank guided weapons, drones, and artillery fire. In fact, there are explanations for the Russian tank losses, including a failure to follow their own combined-arms doctrine, which left them exposed. (Another reason for the weakness of the Russian offensives was the unexpectedly limited role played by the Russian air force. Instead, the demonstrable vulnerability of Russian aircraft to air defenses seemed to provide added confirmation to what has become a defining feature of contemporary warfare: the use of relatively cheap weapons to disable or even destroy very expensive systems.)

Now, it is tanks, along with more numerous infantry vehicles, that form the central piece of the recent equipment packages the West has agreed to send to Ukraine. If an army needs to move firepower with protective armor over treacherous terrain, then what it needs looks very much like a tank. It is rarely helpful to look at any systems without taking into account the strategic context in which they are being used and the other capabilities available to both sides. A new Ukrainian offensive, against entrenched Russian defenses, will represent a significant test of classic warfare in its purest form.

ELUSIVE ENDINGS

The basic problem with wars is that they are easier to start than to end. Once Russia's initial thrusts were blunted, it found itself caught in a protracted conflict in which it dares not concede defeat even when a path to victory remains elusive. Such wars inevitably become attritional, as stocks of equipment and ammunition are depleted and troop losses mount. The temptation to find an alternative route to victory by attacking the enemy's socioeconomic structure grows. Russia has not abandoned this alternative path even though so far it has only hardened Ukrainian resolve.

Russia has persevered with inefficient and costly strategies, perhaps in the belief that in the end its size and readiness to accept sacrifices will tell. By contrast, Ukraine's route to victory depends on pushing Russian forces back enough to persuade Moscow that it has embarked on a futile war. Since it cannot target the Russian people, it must exploit the accuracy of its longer-range systems to target its military, rendering Russia's supply lines, command networks, and troop concentrations vulnerable. Russia seeks to create circumstances in which the Ukrainian people have had enough. Ukraine seeks to make the position for the Russian military untenable. As the war enters its next, critical phase, these strategies, and the contrasting approaches to war they represent, will face their most severe tests.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Persistence of Great-Power Politics

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Geopolitical Rivalry

BY EMMA ASHFORD

February 20, 2023

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This article is part of an ongoing series examining what a year of war in Ukraine has revealed.

At the Munich Security Conference in February 2022, mere days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Annalena Baerbock, Germany's newly minted foreign minister, argued that Europe faced a stark choice between "Helsinki or Yalta." To one side was the 1975 conference in Finland, where 35 countries signed an agreement that recognized Europe's post–World War II boundaries as final and called for the promotion of international cooperation and human rights; to the other was the 1945 summit in Crimea, where

Western leaders betrayed the countries of eastern Europe by granting Stalin free rein in the region. The choice, Baerbock said, was "between a system of shared responsibility for security and peace" or "a system of power rivalry and spheres of influence." By March, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, was claiming that the West had made the right decision in refusing to discuss the issues of NATO enlargement or of Ukrainian neutrality. "Putin is trying to turn back the clock to another era—an era of brutal use of force, of power politics, of spheres of influence, and internal repression," she argued. "I am confident he will fail."

One year into the war, this view—that spheres of influence are a thing of the past—is more widely held than ever. The first major war on European soil since World War II is seen by many American and European foreign policy elites, paradoxically, not as a sign that the realities of rivalry and international power politics are back, but rather that Western values and security cooperation can triumph over them. For many commentators in the United States, U.S. President Joe Biden's response to the war has been his biggest foreign policy triumph and a clear sign that U.S. foreign policy is on the right track. Indeed, the National Security Strategy that the White House released in October all but took a victory lap, noting, "We are leading a united, principled, and resolute response to Russia's invasion and we have rallied the world to support the Ukrainian people as they bravely defend their country."

Take a step back from the triumphalism, however, and that picture is less clear. The war in Ukraine is—if not precisely a deterrence failure for the United States—then at least a clear failure of U.S. policy decisions over the last few decades to maintain peace in Europe. It is certainly true that the war has shown the West's willingness to confront the return of power politics. But it has also shown the practical limitations of that strategy. The last year has been not a refutation of a world of rivalry, great-power competition, or spheres of influence, as some have described it, but rather a demonstration of what all these look like in practice. It proves that the United States cannot always deter a resolute revisionist state without bearing unacceptably high costs and risks.

This misdiagnosis matters: if policymakers view the war in Ukraine as a triumph of U.S. policy, they will be more likely to make similar mistakes elsewhere. And as the United States enters a period of growing contestation over the borders of the Western sphere of influence, and how it will interact with those of Russia and China, learning the correct lessons from Ukraine could not be more urgent.

POLICY FAILURE

Many assessments published after Biden's tenure hit the two-year mark have glossed over the president's first year in office, praising his response to the invasion of Ukraine without considering his messaging about the impending crisis over the course of 2021. "Biden's Russia policy is arguably the most successful in more than a decade," crowed the scholar Liana Fix. Even critics of the foreign policy status quo have deemed the administration's handling of the crisis adept, with Stephen Wertheim and Matt Duss, for example, contending that "Biden has dealt with Russia adroitly." They are undoubtedly correct. The Biden administration has responded pragmatically and competently to the biggest geopolitical crisis in decades, first warning of the likelihood of war and then providing support for Ukraine, all the while keeping one eye on the risk of escalation.

But few observers commented on the first year of Biden's term in the same way. Most failed to highlight the mismatch between the administration's statements before Russia's invasion and the White House's response afterward. As late as December 2021, for example, administration officials were promising that the United States' commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty was "unwavering"; in November of that year, they privately discussed sending U.S. military advisers to assist the Ukrainians. But by February 24, 2022, the administration's tone had decisively shifted: the United States would not engage directly in the fighting in Ukraine. The U.S. response would be hands-off, participating in the war via sanctions, aid, and intelligence support.

This was quite clearly the correct choice. Direct U.S. involvement in a war with a nuclear-armed Russia would be a disastrous mistake. But it calls into question the administration's strategy for preventing the war in preceding months. By all accounts, Biden had decided weeks or even months in advance of the invasion that the cost of fighting Russia directly would be too high; administration officials openly mused about arming a future Ukrainian insurgency after a widely expected Russian victory. Yet if they knew all along that the odds of preventing conflict were slim—and that the United States would not directly engage—then why did they not consider other policy options, such as offering a moratorium on admitting Ukraine to NATO? Why continue to play such an exceptionally poor hand in the hope it would deter Russian action?

The most likely answer is that they were unwilling to acknowledge what an open admission that the United States wouldn't defend Ukraine would imply more broadly about U.S. power in a period of growing rivalry: that it is limited in what it can achieve. This cognitive dissonance cannot be entirely blamed on the Biden administration. The idea that Ukraine and Georgia would someday join NATO—and that to accept any other course would be to accept limits on U.S. power—has been an underlying assumption of U.S. foreign policy since at least the George W. Bush administration, even as many other member states rejected the idea.

Indeed, particularly after Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, it was commonly understood among foreign policy elites that NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia was more aspirational than practical. As the scholar Michael O'Hanlon put it last February, weeks before the invasion: "To say that Ukraine won't be joining NATO soon (if ever) is not a concession to Putin, but an acknowledgment of reality." Yet even as war loomed, U.S. policymakers were not willing to acknowledge that reality, making clear that they would not discuss NATO's open-door policy with Russia.

It is impossible to know whether offering some compromise on Ukraine's potential membership in NATO would have prevented war. Russian demands for Ukraine to remain nonaligned might also have precluded closer ties to the EU, something many Ukrainians would have been less likely to accept. Others have suggested that the war was the inevitable result of President Vladimir Putin's insatiable revisionist and imperialist impulses. His rhetoric often suggests that he views Ukraine less as a country than as a wayward Russian province. He may have chosen to roll the dice regardless, viewing potential territorial gains as more valuable than Western political concessions.

But it would take a truly blinkered view of the region to argue that the inflexible policies pursued by U.S. policymakers in eastern Europe over the last few decades played no role at all in the run-up to the war. The unwillingness to contemplate any alternative path for Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and other states contributed to a toxic stew of political disputes, security fears, and imperialist ambition that ultimately brought the region to the brink of war. Whatever the final outcome of this war, that it happened at all is a policy failure.

WHY "SPHERES OF INFLUENCE" ARE BACK

In 2017, when the Trump administration's National Security Strategy hailed the return of "great power competition," it kicked off a debate in Washington over the definition of that term. Few suggested that it might mean a return to open conflict on the periphery of Europe. But the war in Ukraine is highlighting the costs that great-power competition can bring if poorly managed. And it shows the potential for catastrophe if U.S. policymakers cannot move past their unipolar mindset.

In a broader geopolitical sense, the war in Ukraine marks the return of contestation over spheres of influence in world politics. At its simplest, a sphere of influence is an area where a great power can shape political or economic outcomes—and attempt to exclude rival states from doing so—even though they don't directly control the territory. Perhaps because "sphere of influence" emerged as a term of art during the heyday of imperial colonialism, or perhaps simply because it has often been put into practice in amoral ways, it has come to have a strong negative connotation. It prompts images of the Yalta conference and the arbitrary divisions of Europe after World War II or of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain appeasing Hitler in Munich in 1938. Detractors contend that spheres of influence are morally indefensible, as the great powers condemn smaller countries to suffer at the hands of their larger neighbors.

Yet this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept. A sphere of influence does not have to be some kind of courtesy offered by one great power to another over the heads of smaller, more vulnerable states. It is more often a mere fact, an assertion of geography and power. A sphere of influence is simply a place where one great power asserts dominance and another is afraid or unwilling to challenge it because the perceived costs are simply too high. Consider the case of Afghanistan: in an 1869 letter, the Russian foreign minister sought to reassure his British counterpart that Afghanistan lay “completely outside the sphere within which Russia might be called upon to exercise her influence.” The two countries would later formalize this arrangement as well as set clear lines over which state would have influence in which parts of Persia, in the 1907 Anglo-Russian Entente. Both reflected a simple reality: the Russians did not believe that the benefits of fighting the British for Afghanistan or for control of all of Persia would be worth the costs.

Some commentators suggest that we cannot accept such arrangements, arguing that the world has moved past these antiquated, colonialist ideas into a more enlightened era. But the truth is more mundane. During the unipolar moment, the period of U.S. global dominance that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States simply did not need to concern itself much with the question of spheres of influence because its power was unchallenged. The political scientist Graham Allison put it succinctly: U.S. policymakers had ceased to recognize spheres of influence “not because the concept had become obsolete" but because "the entire world had become a de facto American sphere.”

Thus when Russia asserted in 1999 during NATO’s Kosovo intervention that the former Yugoslavia fell within its sphere of influence, going so far as to send Russian paratroopers on a quixotic quest to seize Pristina’s airport, the United States was able to largely brush off the complaint. It was clear that Russia, whose paratroopers were forced to beg their NATO counterparts for food and supplies, did not have the power to back up its assertions. Likewise, when China engaged in saber rattling with Taiwan in the mid-1990s, the United States responded with a massive show of military force, sailing a carrier group through the Taiwan Strait and forcing Chinese leaders to back down.

Washington's insistence in recent decades that spheres of influence should not exist was as much a declaration of its own global reach and primacy as anything else. Today, however, the world is entering a period of contestation over the limits of American power, as Russia and China are increasingly capable of asserting their own interests in the areas nearest to their borders.

The United States refused to discuss NATO's open-door policy before the invasion of Ukraine for one key reason: that doing so might deny the agency of states in eastern Europe to make their own foreign policy choices. Just weeks before the invasion, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was asked about the open-door policy. "There will be no change," he said. "There are core principles that we are committed to uphold and defend," he added, including "the right of states to choose their own security arrangements and alliances."

But the last year has demonstrated that this approach is insufficient, in part because it failed to account for Russian agency. Faced with the prospect of Ukraine's slipping out of its orbit and unable to achieve any concessions from Western states, Putin opted to gamble on a risky and costly military expedition instead. And even as the military campaign has experienced significant setbacks, he has been willing to take ever more dramatic steps to try to control Ukraine, from mass mobilization of Russian troops to widespread bombardment of civilian infrastructure.

The results have certainly been catastrophic for Russia: it has achieved almost none of its original aims, Kyiv remains independent, the Russian economy is in decline, and tens of thousands of Russian soldiers are dead.

But the invasion has also imposed immense costs on the people of Ukraine along with significant costs and the risk of escalation for Europe and the United States. If the war in Ukraine is a success story for the Biden administration or for its predecessors, it is a pyrrhic one.

GREAT-POWER COMPETITION DOESN'T MEAN WHAT YOU THINK

In a 2008 speech, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice proclaimed her confidence in a vision of "a world in which great power is defined not by spheres of influence or zero-sum competition, or the strong imposing their will on the weak." Yet 15 years later, all these features are back with a vengeance. Far from refuting the brutal nature of international politics, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated the unpleasant realities of contestation over spheres of influence between the great powers.

It has also forcefully revealed the limits of U.S. power to deter actors in the places nearest and dearest to them through nonmilitary means. Committing the United States to fight directly in these areas would entail unacceptably high risks and costs to the American people, something that Biden himself has acknowledged, telling reporters, "We will not fight the third world war in Ukraine."

At the same time, however, Washington's foreign policy elites show little recognition that the principle of avoiding a great-power war over peripheral interests might apply elsewhere. Take Taiwan: public opinion strongly opposes fighting China directly over Taiwan, and war games suggest that such a choice could be disastrous for the United States. Yet American policymakers continue to toy with the idea of shifting from the U.S. government's long-running policy of strategic ambiguity toward a firmer stance of open military support for Taiwan. Given Beijing's apparent growing determination to achieve "reunification" with the island, such a move by the United States may amount to making the same mistakes it made in Ukraine. Any attempt to clarify that Taiwan is outside Beijing's sphere of influence could end up provoking the very war that the United States wishes to avoid.

No matter what critics may say, accepting that certain countries will be able to exercise more power in the regions closest to them does not necessarily condemn small countries to conquest by their larger neighbors. Consider the last year again: despite accepting that direct intervention would be too costly, for example, the United States has not abandoned Ukraine to its fate. In contrast, the U.S. government has provided substantial military and financial aid, carefully calibrated to remain below the threshold that might lead to broader war. Ukraine may be outside the U.S. sphere of influence, but the United States is helping it resist being incorporated into a Russian sphere.

Such strategies can and should be applied elsewhere. Small states can build up their own military capabilities and receive support from other countries to make themselves an unappetizing meal for their larger neighbors. Rather than performative gestures that suggest support for Taiwanese independence, for example, policymakers should invest now in helping the island defend itself through an appropriately diversified "porcupine" strategy. Not only is it far more effective to conduct such buildups before any potential war, but if executed wisely, this approach may even be able to prevent that war from ever happening.

To adopt these strategies, however, policymakers must learn the right lessons from the war in Ukraine. If policymakers can reject premature triumphalism, acknowledge the practical limits to American power, learn to delegate defense to the states at the pointy end of the spear, and grow more comfortable with the ambiguity needed to navigate the dangerous areas where spheres of influence overlap, they may be able to avoid disaster.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Move Fast and Win Things

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Statecraft

BY ELIOT A. COHEN

February 22, 2023

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This article is part of an ongoing series examining what a year of war in Ukraine has revealed.

The Western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been less a problem of strategy than of tactics and execution. After one year of fighting, the basic idea—support Ukraine and defeat Russia—has held up well; the implementation has not. That holds especially true for the United States.

Successful statecraft has much in common with the concept of aerial combat formulated by twentieth-century U.S. Air Force pilot and military thinker John Boyd. From his experience in the Korean War and later studies, Boyd concluded that fighter pilots engage in combat in a four-stage cycle: a pilot observes what is going on, orients himself to the environment, decides what to do, and acts accordingly. The tighter the loop—the quicker and more efficiently each stage is mastered—the greater the chance of success, and, indeed, survival.

Throughout the war in Ukraine, the West has excelled at the first stage of Boyd's cycle. It has closely tracked the Russian buildup around Ukraine. And beyond the first stage, the West has generally done the right thing—supporting Ukraine and sanctioning Russia. But again and again, it has taken far too long to execute, lacking urgency and agility. The path from observation and understanding to decision and action has been painfully slow. Along the way, there have been many missed opportunities to seriously weaken Russia and enable Ukraine to win. What a year of war has shown, then, are the limits of Western statecraft in the face of the greatest military challenge that Europe, and in some measure the entire free world, has faced since the Cold War.

WESTERN FUMBLES

When Russian forces began preparing for war, in January and February 2022, Boyd's first stage, observation, was not difficult for the West: intelligence agencies and private analysts could see Russian forces deploying around Ukraine's periphery and track Moscow's preparations for war. But it was harder for some analysts to orient themselves to the idea of a full-scale invasion and to understand Russia's reasons for the war. At the time, Western leaders treated Russia as a state with normal security concerns—partly because of the influence of apologists for Russia, who accepted the Kremlin's stance that Russia had somehow been unfairly treated when its own leaders, not Americans or Europeans, destroyed the Soviet Union and dissolved its empire. In 1990, then U.S. Secretary of State James Baker carelessly remarked to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand one inch eastward. Russians have turned the United States' failure to uphold that comment, which was not an official policy or document, into what they see as a legitimate grievance. It is not.

Moreover, few if any Western leaders paid adequate attention to Russian President Vladimir Putin's article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," published in July 2021, more than six months before the Russian invasion. Fewer still saw how seriously Putin took the threat of democratic contagion to his regime. In December 2021, Putin called on Europe to dismantle its security order. Nonetheless, many Western leaders did not accept that they were dealing with a man who aimed at nothing less than restoring a Russian empire based on chauvinism, autocracy, and force. Some of them still struggle to see this.

Furthermore, when an invasion did become increasingly certain, Western officials failed to accurately assess the likely course of the impending war. They let themselves be convinced by experts (whose interpretations have yet to receive the critical examination they deserve) that Russian forces would quickly roll over at least the eastern half, if not all, of Ukraine. Some even doubted that guerrilla resistance could continue. They accepted the view that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky would surrender or flee—indeed, according to the Associated Press, the United States offered Zelensky help to escape—and that most Ukrainians would accept, if unhappily, their reincorporation into the Russian empire.

EARLY BIRD GETS THE WIN

But there was one way in which U.S. leaders displayed exemplary statecraft at the beginning of the war—by exposing the Russian buildup along the Ukrainian border and warning both Ukraine and Western allies of Russian intent. It is no coincidence that this effort was led by William Burns, the director of the CIA and one of the finest diplomats of his generation. By publicly sharing intelligence and alerting the world of Russia's military expansion, the U.S. government created a unified Western response to Russia, restored its own intelligence credibility after the failures of the Iraq War, and established a strong basis for arming Ukraine's defense forces—forces that were, as many were surprised to discover, willing to fight to the death.

Over the course of the 12 months since the invasion, the West has generally taken the right course, but too slowly. Ukraine's backers have repeatedly discovered that Ukrainians could quickly and effectively use the weapons that they were being given. That lesson was first learned with handheld antitank and antiaircraft weapons, which were supplied in small quantities in January 2022; then with U.S. heavy artillery, beginning in April 2022; then with medium-range rocket systems, first sent in June 2022; and finally, with main battle tanks. But in none of these cases were Ukraine's needs adequately anticipated. Instead, the West dragged its feet in providing the necessary tools and training. For example, Germany and the United States did not agree to send tanks to Ukraine until January 2023, meaning that they will not be ready for use until late this spring—possibly too late for them to make a difference in Russia's expected late-winter and early-spring offensives.

In war, sluggish decision-making kills. In every conflict, clocks are ticking in different places and at different paces. There are clocks determined by weather and muddy seasons, by the patience of besieged populations, by elections, by training cycles and mobilization of troops, by the ebbs and flows of public and military morale, and by the supply of weapons and ammunition. In the realm of decision and action, the West has consistently dawdled, undermining not only the Ukrainian cause but also its own.

For example, large-scale programs to train Ukrainian soldiers in Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom of the kind the British began in July 2022 could have been established on a large scale months earlier. The United States could have put High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) into the pipeline to Ukraine as soon as the war began, and Ukrainians, who are remarkably fast learners, could have been trained and ready to use them by the time the war shifted to the east last summer. A military assistance mission under U.S. command could have been stood up last spring, headquartered in eastern Europe. Western main battle tanks could have been delivered in the fall of 2022—when Ukraine was on the move and Russia had not yet assembled more forces—as could have the long-range missiles that Ukraine needs to destroy Russian logistics.

The Ukrainians, by contrast, have been fast and flexible, learning in a matter of weeks to use weapons systems that in peacetime require months of training. In this, as in certain other respects, their military resembles Israel's of an earlier era—ingenious, adaptable, not always the most skilled or best equipped, but able to improvise. Furnished with the right weapons, Ukraine could have further exploited the collapse of Russian units near Kharkiv in September 2022 and weakened the entire Russian position in the south of Ukraine. And today, a Ukrainian military equipped with long-range missile systems could be already dismantling the logistical infrastructure on which the Russian invaders depend. But Ukraine has been held back by its patrons, which, alas, are far less nimble.

THE FEAR FACTOR

Western statecraft has stumbled, in part, because Western leaders have given too much credence to their fears of Russian escalation—and far worse, broadcast them. Since the early months of the war, officials in the United States and western Europe have repeatedly asserted the dangers of possible nuclear escalation by Moscow. These anxieties have been exaggerated. Using nuclear weapons would be illogical and unproductive from Russia's point of view and would violate the core interests of its only real ally, China. By advertising their worries, presidents and prime ministers—including French President Emmanuel Macron and U.S. President Joe Biden—have unintentionally invited Russia to manipulate them.

Western strategists have also failed to accurately assess Russia's future. Even Henry Kissinger, the former national security adviser and secretary of state, asserted in 2022 that despite Russia's "propensity to violence," the country has contributed "to the global equilibrium and to the balance of power for over half a millennium." To the contrary: historically, Russia has not only consistently expanded its empire but also has celebrated conquest. Such sentiment is indeed stronger than ever.

Dmitri Trenin, a former Russian military intelligence officer who led a U.S.-headquartered think tank in Moscow, was correct when he pointed out that Russia's relationship with the West today has ruptured to a degree comparable to the split caused by the Bolshevik Revolution, in 1917. For a brief time after 1989, Russia looked as though it might join a more open and peaceful world order. But that period is over, and for the foreseeable future the West must deal with a Russia that is hostile, militarized, malevolent, and vengeful. That is an unpalatable conclusion for those in the West who prefer a different world order or a decisive pivot to Asia, but it is the reality.

Part of statecraft is about seizing opportunities. By the early fall of 2022, Ukraine's surprising battlefield effectiveness and resilience had opened up a window in which one could imagine the liberation of much, if not all, of its territories. Had Ukraine managed to sever the land corridor between Russia and Crimea, for example, Russian forces would have struggled to maintain their hold not only on the parts of Ukraine that they had conquered since the invasion but also on Crimea itself. Such an outcome may still come to pass, but at an increasingly, and unnecessarily, high cost, now that Russia has had time to dig in and mobilize hundreds of thousands of additional troops.

The war raises the likelihood that Ukraine will, in the long run, be fully incorporated into NATO, armed largely at its allies' expense. Some European politicians such as Petr Pavel, the new president of the Czech Republic, advocate for Ukraine's integration into the West. At the very least, Ukraine can be armed and supported so strongly in the interim as to deter further Russian aggression. But it will require an overwhelming sense of urgency, commitment, and willingness to act on the right scale to make that happen. And creating a sense of urgency in turn will require a change in the style of U.S. statecraft vis à vis ambivalent allies such as Turkey or Switzerland. As hegemons go, the United States has been remarkably benign; indeed, it does not like to understand itself as a hegemon at all. But at this juncture in world history, when a great deal of prosperity and freedom depend on Ukrainian victory and—equally important—Russian defeat, it is time for the United States to get far more transactional.

In particular, Washington should become unbendingly tough with Russia-tilting European states, such as Hungary. It is often forgotten that Spain and Vichy France avoided joining Germany during World War II in part because the United Kingdom and the United States threatened to cut off their food shipments. The United States still has levers, such as trade and investment relationships, at its disposal. There are times to treat the antics of corrupt, irresponsible, or supine leaders of small but strategically placed countries with bemused detachment, and other times, like now, to twist their arms without compunction.

The United States urgently needs to send Ukraine a wide variety of arms, including long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS). The Biden administration should also use the powers of the Defense Production Act to mobilize domestic munitions industries and to eliminate bureaucratic obstacles, in addition to awarding the long-term defense contracts needed to expand capacity. It should begin long-term planning for Ukraine's economic reconstruction and its arming against future threats. And the United States should launch a public information campaign, beginning with a presidential speech to explain the stakes for the United States in Ukraine.

A statecraft that is measured and seeks equilibrium and compromise has its place. But in a war it can be dangerous. Western, and in particular U.S., leaders picked up bad habits during the Cold War, in which incremental shifts and patient long-term engagement were the dominant note of security statecraft. During that period, too, a great deal of strategy played out through shadowboxing. That approach is less effective in today's hot conflict. During the post-9/11 wars, in which the United States enjoyed a vast margin of conventional military superiority, U.S. leaders got used to having time to reconsider, study, plan, and negotiate. Convoluted alliances with gimcrack command structures were not immediately fatal. For example, NATO operated in Afghanistan while being nominally controlled by its headquarters in the Netherlands. And the United States could get by with a desire to succeed rather than to actually win. Such an approach would be feckless in Ukraine, the most serious European war since the end of World War II.

A statecraft in which leaders understand the world, size it up quickly and accurately, decide fast, and act with an extreme sense of urgency, at scale and with full commitment is what the United States and its allies need now. With it, a Ukraine that is free, whole, and secure can be rebuilt from the carnage. Without it, Russia can still pull some measure of success from a criminal war in which it has every chance of suffering a well-deserved and thorough defeat.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

A Tool of Attrition

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Economic Sanctions

BY EDWARD FISHMAN

February 23, 2023

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This article is part of an ongoing series examining what a year of war in Ukraine has revealed.

In his 2022 State of the Union address, delivered less than a week after the invasion of Ukraine, U.S. President Joe Biden touted the "powerful economic sanctions" that the West had imposed on Russia, measures that had instantly crushed the ruble and laid waste to the Moscow stock exchange. Russian President Vladimir Putin, Biden warned, "has no idea what's coming."

This year, by contrast, Biden did not even mention sanctions in his State of the Union speech. His silence was understandable. After edging toward the brink of collapse, Russia's financial system stabilized. ATM lines dissipated, and the ruble bounced back. The biggest Russian banks lost access to SWIFT, the financial messaging system, and Visa and MasterCard pulled out of the country. But even Western-branded credit cards never stopped working inside Russia. At one point, the International Monetary Fund projected Russia's economy would contract by 8.5 percent in 2022. Now, it estimates that it shrank by just 2.2 percent.

A year on, it is easy to feel disappointed with the sanctions. Neither the Russian elite nor the Russian public shows any signs of breaking with Putin, and the war in Ukraine grinds on, with no end in sight. But sanctions are more of a marathon than a sprint, and the long-term picture looks much more promising than the short-term one. By cutting off Russia from foreign technology and investment and slashing the Kremlin's energy revenues, Western sanctions have fundamentally altered Russia's national trajectory. They are destroying the economic model Putin relies on to pursue his imperialist foreign policy.

This dynamic is unlikely to change anytime soon, as Putin has boxed himself in. His claim to have annexed four Ukrainian provinces, along with his forces' crimes against humanity and annihilation of hundreds of billions of dollars of Ukrainian infrastructure, makes it difficult to imagine either side accepting a negotiated settlement that would give Russia relief from sanctions. Putin's best chance for a reprieve is to rerun the strategy he used after the West imposed sanctions in 2014 following his annexation of Crimea and initial invasion of the Donbas: a mix of delay tactics and political interference to try to break the West's will. That means that the fate of the sanctions rests largely in the hands of the United States and Europe.

And despite prognostications that they would recoil from confronting Putin, the combination of Ukrainian courage and Russian atrocities has sustained their resolve.

Twelve months of sanctions have shown not only that the West can stay united but also that it is resilient to blowback from sanctions and economic retaliation by Moscow. Just as sanctions have not been as devastating to Russia in the short term as was originally expected, they have not hurt the United States or Europe as much as many feared. Oil prices did not spike. The eurozone did not fall into another financial crisis. European countries learned to make do with less Russian energy. The Kremlin's retaliation has been muted. The West, it turns out, has far more latitude to use hard-hitting economic weapons against Russia than most Western leaders believed.

In invading Ukraine, Putin sought to restore Russia's status as a superpower. So long as the West continues to tighten sanctions, that will be impossible.

FROM DETERRENCE TO ATTRITION

Last March, Russia's economic technocrats, led by Elvira Nabiullina, the head of the country's central bank, saved their country from oblivion and enabled Putin to continue funding the war in Ukraine. Sanctions and export controls on high-tech goods such as semiconductors have squeezed the Russian military's stocks of precision-guided munitions and other advanced weaponry. Putin has even had to go hat in hand to Iran for military support. But sanctions are neither striking fast enough nor biting deep enough to stop the war. Their role on the battlefield is minor compared with the West's military assistance to Ukraine. And there is no evidence that they have curbed Putin's appetite to swallow Ukraine's territory.

None of this, however, suggests sanctions are not working. That is because the definition of success changed, and rightly so, the day after the invasion.

Before February 24, 2022, Biden tried to use the threat of what he called "swift and severe consequences" to deter Putin from invading Ukraine. That threat failed. As soon as Russian tanks started barreling toward Kyiv, sanctions could never coax Putin to pull them back. Only Ukraine's military could do that.

After sanctions failed to deter an invasion, they took on a new objective: blunting Russia's capacity to do more harm, both in Ukraine and beyond. Instead of trying to generate enough economic pain to induce a change in government policy, the goal of sanctions against Russia today is now straightforward: economic attrition. The result is that the sanctions against Russia are ambitious in their scope but relatively modest in their aim. And in the more modest aim of sapping Russia's economic vitality, they are succeeding.

Russia's economy is big yet simple. The state sells oil and gas and uses the proceeds to field a large military, subsidize industries like manufacturing that employ millions, and fund the salaries of government workers and pensioners. Since the beginning of the war, Russia's military spending has skyrocketed. Luckily for Putin, energy revenues have remained high enough to keep the economy afloat, largely because the war itself boosted commodities prices, and the West, worried about surging prices at the pump, was initially reluctant to enact any measures that could pinch Russia's oil sales. The costliest error the West made in the sanctions campaign was to wait almost 10 months before aggressively targeting Russia's oil revenues. In 2022, Russia raked in nearly $220 billion from oil exports, a 20 percent increase from the year before.

But outside of the energy sector, Russia's economy has unraveled. That is because the combination of financial sanctions and export controls has cut off Russia's access to critical technology. The automotive sector, which directly and indirectly employs more than three million Russians, is a case in point: its production slumped by nearly 70 percent in 2022, dropping to the lowest level since Soviet times. A similar downturn is evident across Russian manufacturing. As a result, while official unemployment has remained low, millions of Russians have been furloughed and put on other forms of unpaid leave. When factoring in this so-called hidden unemployment, it is probable that more than 10 percent of Russia's workforce is jobless.

Even Russians who have kept their jobs have seen living standards fall. Real incomes have declined, and consumer demand has plummeted. With access to foreign components crunched, AvtoVAZ, Russia's largest automaker, started selling vehicles without airbags and antilock brakes. And notwithstanding this precipitous drop in product quality, car prices have risen. In 2014, it may have been an exaggeration to call Russia "a gas station masquerading as a country," as Senator John McCain did at the time. But sanctions are making this characterization truer by the day.

A FADING ENERGY SUPERPOWER

Dire as it is, this situation might still be tolerable for Putin if he could rely on a steady inflow of petrodollars. Yet sanctions are finally starting to hit Russia where it hurts most: the oil sector. In recent months, the EU has placed an embargo on Russian crude oil and petroleum products, and the G-7 has imposed a price cap on Russian oil, a kind of service providers' cartel that allows Russian oil cargoes to make use of Western shipping and insurance only if they are sold below a set price.

These moves are stinging. Russia's flagship brand of crude oil, known as Urals, is selling at huge discounts to Brent, the international benchmark crude, which resulted in a 46 percent drop in Moscow's energy revenues this

January compared with the same month last year. Paired with ballooning military expenditures, the fall in oil revenues will limit the Kremlin's policy flexibility and force it to make hard tradeoffs. Russia's budget deficit shot up to $25 billion in January. Excluded from international capital markets, the Kremlin cannot borrow to compensate for falling export earnings. Eventually, Moscow may have no choice but to allow the ruble to plunge. Gas stations are reliable businesses. But they cannot thrive if they must sell their product for a fraction of the market price.

The trendlines are grim. Starved of Western investment and cutting-edge oil extraction technology and shut out of the European market, the Russian energy industry's best days are behind it. According to projections by the International Energy Agency, Russia will forgo more than $1 trillion in oil and gas revenues by 2030, relegating the country to a second-rate energy power. And if Russia is a second-rate energy power, Putin's political and economic model, much less his imperialist fantasies, no longer makes sense.

DON'T HOLD BACK

Although it has been one year since Putin launched his botched campaign to capture Kyiv, it has been nine years since the war really began, back in February 2014, when Russia's "little green men" swarmed Crimea. In 2014, as in 2022, the West responded by slapping sanctions against Russia. The penalties of 2014 were weaker than those of 2022, but Russia was less prepared for them. By December 2014, under pressure from both sanctions and collapsing oil prices, Russia was on the brink of an uncontrolled financial crisis. Its economy was declining at an annualized rate of more than 10 percent. As they did last year, Russia's economic technocrats came to the rescue, hiking interest rates and imposing de facto capital controls.

What happened next is instructive. Instead of pressing its advantage, the West was terrified at the damage it had wrought. German and French leaders publicly cautioned against increasing pressure on Russia and hurriedly cobbled together the Minsk agreement in February 2015, which froze the conflict but left the underlying problem of Putin's imperial ambitions unresolved. By the end of the year, Russia's economy had regained its footing.

In 2023, the West must not repeat this tragic mistake. The impact of sanctions is never static. Targets adapt. They find workarounds, tap new markets, and build new revenue streams. The only way to keep up the pressure is to strengthen sanctions at a faster pace than the target can adapt. Over the last year, Russia's economy has proved more resilient than expected. The same is true of the global economy. Sanctions that were supposed to rattle markets, such as the G-7 price cap and the EU embargo on Russian oil, barely caused a blip. Meanwhile, retaliation by the Kremlin has proved meager. In the economic realm, the United States and its allies possess the equivalent of what nuclear theorists call "escalation dominance"—the West has many options to harm Russia's economy at an acceptable cost, but Russia's options for serious countersanctions would be costlier for Russia than they would be for the West.

All this means the West should not be afraid to tighten the screws. The best place to start is Russia's oil sector. Over time, price discounts on Russian oil will shrink if the market assesses sanctions have plateaued. For now, Russia remains reliant on G-7 tankers and insurance for a large share of its oil sales, but it may eventually build an oil supply chain that does not rely on the West. While it still has this leverage, the G-7 should progressively lower the price cap until it reaches Russia's marginal cost of production, which would give the Kremlin an incentive to keep selling oil while precluding its ability to earn a profit. And if firms based outside the G-7 undermine the policy, the West should not hesitate to wield the threat of secondary sanctions—penalties on non-Russian companies that are involved in buying Russian oil—to keep Putin's oil revenues as low as possible.

The next place to escalate is the financial sector. Shortly after Putin launched the invasion, the United States hit Russia with a slew of financial sanctions, targeting the Central Bank of Russia as well as Sberbank and VTB, the country's two biggest banks. But seeking to keep energy prices stable, it created broad carve-outs for energy transactions, and it did not sanction Gazprombank, the main bank serving Russia's energy sector and the country's third largest overall. It also steered clear of imposing financial sanctions on Rosneft, the state-owned oil giant; Sovcomflot, the state-owned shipping firm; and other key companies in Russia's oil sector.

These decisions were both needlessly cautious and massively beneficial to Putin. The West should impose what are called "full blocking sanctions" on all the major firms involved in Russia's oil trade, measures that would sever their access to the Western financial system. It should also narrow the energy carve-out so that it allows Russia to use its petrodollars only to buy humanitarian goods such as food and medicine. The West should stand ready to use secondary sanctions against foreign banks that help Russia use its oil proceeds to buy weapons, industrial components, and other goods that have no humanitarian value.

The Biden administration has signaled its willingness to use secondary sanctions against firms that aid Putin's war effort. It has also emphasized efforts to check sanctions evasion. These are good ideas, but they do not go nearly far enough. If the West focuses its sanctions campaign in 2023 on merely enforcing penalties it enacted in 2022, Russia's economy will continue to recover.

Economic strength is the foundation of military might. Over the past two decades, Putin remade Russia into a formidable military power thanks to flourishing connections to the global economy and soaring oil profits. Now, sanctions have a chance to reverse that. They alone will not end the war in Ukraine. But if the West keeps its nerve, sanctions can help end Putin's imperial pretensions once and for all.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Quiescent Russians

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Putin's Public

BY JOSHUA YAFFA

February 23, 2023

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This article is part of an ongoing series examining what a year of war in Ukraine has revealed.

Before Russia went to war in Ukraine, it was no great mystery that Russian society was adaptable, better at playing along and avoiding responsibility than actively protesting. From its outset, the system built by Russian President Vladimir Putin was based on the idea of a disengaged public, with matters of political and civic concern left to those on high. Even as the space for independent political and civic action shrank to near zero and real living standards declined, most Russians saw little reason to participate in collective action: such efforts were far more likely to result in a police baton upside the head or a lengthy prison term than in actual change. This arrangement suited both citizen and state just fine. Russian society was demobilized by design.

But after Russian forces invaded Ukraine, and particularly after they encountered stiffer than expected resistance, it seemed possible that the shock of war would overturn this dynamic. Within days of the invasion, Russia found itself more isolated than it had been in decades, facing Western sanctions that threatened to devastate its economy. International companies and brands left, flight connections to the outside world were canceled, and the ruble crashed to its lowest value in history. Putin offered up the vague goals of "demilitarization" and "denazification" for what he called a "special military operation," but it wasn't entirely clear to many Russians why Russian tanks were suddenly rolling through Ukraine—and by extension, why Moscow was taking on the risks and costs of war.

After a year of war in Ukraine, however, it is now clear that instead of disrupting the existing social contract, Putin's war has only extended it. In the early days of the invasion, the Kremlin made no attempt to sell the war as a defining struggle for which every Russian must sacrifice; rather, Russians were presented with an image of a war that was distant, low cost, outsourced to professionals, and, if one was so inclined, possible to ignore.

LOOKING AWAY

Since the late Soviet period, Russian society has been adept at playing political make-believe—that is, performing outward loyalty to the state while inwardly harboring a more cynical, detached attitude toward it. The Putin system picked up on this trait and, thanks to the consumer boom fueled by high oil prices, in many ways only intensified it. Each side, the Kremlin and the Russian people, largely stayed out of each other's business.

The Russian public didn't so much approve or disapprove of government policies as exist apart from them. The role of the individual was not to affect the state's behavior but to protect against its consequences. Instead of actively resisting, then, most Russians who opposed Putin sought to dissociate themselves from his rule, even if merely on an emotional or psychological level, what some sociologists studying Russia have referred to as "internal emigration." One remains in the Russian polity in body, but not in spirit.

This has become the defining method of protest in Russia, explained Ekaterina Schulmann, a Russian political scientist. "In America, people take to the streets with posters," she said. "In France, they like to go on strike. Whereas in Russia, the methods are those used by the weak and the dispossessed: evasion, sabotage, imitation, hypocrisy, and, when necessary, escape, and even self-harm." Shortly after the invasion, Schulmann herself left Russia, accepting a fellowship at the Robert Bosch Foundation in Berlin. Two days after she arrived, the Russian government declared her a "foreign agent," a designation meant to make her work effectively impossible.

Greg Yudin, a Russian sociologist and political philosopher, characterized the prevailing attitude as understandable, or at least unavoidable, given how deeply many people have internalized their own political powerlessness. "If you notice that it's started to rain outside, it would be silly to sit around and create a plan how to stop the rain," he told me. "Better to figure out how not to get wet." He has identified three camps in Russian society, which he calls "radicals," "dissenters," and "laymen"—that is, the fanatics who enthusiastically support the war, the critics who strongly oppose it, and the majority (roughly 60 percent in his estimation) who try to avoid the subject and take no position. In the war's early months, the Kremlin offered enough rousing pro-war content to keep the radicals engaged, but it also gave the laymen an opportunity to look the other way and carry on with their lives.

Last summer, survey data from the Levada Center, Russia's only independent polling agency, showed that nearly half of respondents were paying little or no attention to events in Ukraine. "The high percentage of approval for the war we see is a function of people's nonparticipation," Denis Volkov, the center's director, told me. Volkov shared his impressions from focus groups that he and his colleagues have held in various Russian cities since the invasion. "People tell us that they know that bombs are falling somewhere but can't do anything about it, and that it's all rather traumatic—so better not to look in that direction or think too much about it." Otherwise, they told Volkov time and again, "we'll make ourselves sick."

THE PRAGMATIC PUBLIC

This passivity came under intense pressure last September, when Putin, needing new troops to shore up Russian lines in Ukraine, announced a "partial mobilization," whereby the military would draft several hundred thousand Russian men of fighting age. The government did not make clear the precise terms and rules of its mobilization, and families across Russia feared it could prove more widespread and indiscriminate than Putin promised. (In this sense, the laymen, even as they tend not to actively resist the state, are clear-eyed about its penchant for treachery.) Hundreds of thousands of Russians, most of them draft-eligible men, fled the country in a matter of weeks—a sign that a sizable number of laymen could not be readily converted into radicals.

In September, in the wake of mobilization, the Levada Center registered the biggest drop in public mood—the share of Russians saying they felt stress, anger, or fear—in a single month since Russia defaulted on its debt in 1998, when the economy cratered and Russians' life savings were wiped out. The share of respondents who said they felt stressed jumped by 15 percentage points; those who said they were afraid rose by 11 percentage points. The draft scared and disoriented Russians.

"You might hear something about the war on television for a few minutes in the evening," Schulmann told me. "The newscaster blabbers on, and you nod along, not thinking much of anything. That is how people have been conditioned to live for 20 years." But suddenly, the rules changed. "People were not prepared for the moment they got a knock at the door," Schulmann said.

Yet mobilization swiftly proved less a rupture of the status quo than a continuation of it, albeit in considerably more fraught conditions. The initial, most active phase of the draft—when men were called up in large numbers and police and military officials combed the streets, workplaces, restaurants, and metro stations looking for draftees—was over in a month or two. Russians who hadn't been mobilized or didn't see their immediate family members called up were able to return to their habitual state of disengagement. At least for the moment, most men and most families had dodged the bullet.

This period of heightened stress and uncertainty has caused Russian society to lean even harder into its fundamental pragmatism. Most Russians have absolved themselves of responsibility for anything that doesn't concern them personally. And even Russians who are personally affected by the war—say, a parent whose son was drafted—have tended to compartmentalize, refusing to allow this entanglement to lead them to question whether the war is just or Putin has made a strategic mistake. Instead of confronting their government directly, they have focused on adapting: getting their children out of the country, perhaps, or finding a job in a category that makes them ineligible for the draft.

Given the climate of wartime censorship and repression in Russia, it is difficult to measure genuine public support for the war there. Levada Center polling from late last year showed that although three-quarters of those surveyed said they supported the "special military operation," over half said it was time for Russia to engage in negotiations to end it—a sign that enthusiasm may be waning. Paradoxically, the feeling of helplessness and insecurity brought by the war can also play to Putin's interests. When your country is at war, even if you don't like or even understand that war, the thought of defeat can be paralyzing. Even some Russians who harbor no goodwill toward Putin worry about what losing might bring: prolonged economic hardship or a chaotic collapse of the regime.

MAKING PEACE WITH WAR

Volkov, the director of the Levada Center, told me of one woman from a recent focus group. In 2019, she had participated in protests against a planned landfill in Russia's north. Now, she told Volkov, she has written off those who protest the war as having been "bought by the West." Volkov explained that the war has played into the Kremlin's strategy of framing the world as split between "us" and "them" and that even some of those who once opposed Putin have ended up choosing the Russian side in the war. Numerous Levada Center polls have shown that a majority of Russians blame the United States and NATO—rather than Russia or even Ukraine—for the war.

Over the past year, Yudin, the Russian sociologist, said he has been impressed by friends and colleagues who, at great risk, have refused to remain silent or make compromises. But he is also alarmed by the number of people who admit that the war was a terrible mistake yet say that now Russia has no choice but to win it. Theirs is "the scariest position of all," in his estimation, because it could lead to a genuine consolidation of support for the war. Yudin told me about some of his acquaintances in the world of higher education who go along with all manner of indignities—such as refraining from questioning or criticizing the war or remaining silent as their colleagues who do are fired—in the hope that they can preserve their educational programs or at least their jobs. He compared them to passengers in a car speeding toward a brick wall. "They see the danger ahead, but jumping out feels scarier than staying put," he said.

As Russia's war enters its second year, and as Russia is unlikely to muster the military force necessary to produce an outright victory, the brick wall is only getting closer. But that doesn't mean one should expect many more people to jump out before the crash.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Bomb in the Background

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Nuclear Weapons

BY NINA TANNENWALD

February 24, 2023

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In a major speech this week, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that he was suspending his country's participation in the New START treaty, Russia's only remaining major nuclear arms control agreement with the United States. He also threatened to resume nuclear weapons tests. The declarations sent jitters through the international community. These actions constituted yet another example of Putin's willingness to leverage his nuclear arsenal, dangling it like the sword of Damocles over the West in order to limit NATO's support for Ukraine.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine last February, Russian leaders have issued numerous explicit nuclear threats against Ukraine and NATO. In April, Putin promised to respond to outside intervention in the conflict with "swift, lightning fast" retribution. "We have all the tools for this," he added, "ones that no one can brag about." So far, however, there has been no significant or observable change in the operational readiness of nuclear weapons in either Russia or in Western countries.

Some observers see Russia's decision to not use nuclear weapons yet as proof that it will never do so. But that assessment assumes Putin is a rational actor and would not risk the calamity and the pariah status that would follow any Russian deployment of such a weapon. Unfortunately, it is far from clear that Russia's nuclear brinkmanship is mere bluffing. Moreover, nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine are not remarkable in their absence, but rather in how they frame the conflict. By deterring the greater intervention of NATO, the Russian nuclear arsenal has helped prolong the war and make any conventional resolution to the fighting more difficult to attain. The conflict in Ukraine is no doubt the most dangerous nuclear confrontation since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. As the past year of carnage and bluster has shown, nuclear weapons wield devastating power even as they remain locked in their silos—and governments need to reinforce the taboo against their use.

DEADLY DETERRENCE

In the context of the Ukraine war, nuclear weapons have mostly benefited Russia. Putin has invoked his nuclear might to deter NATO from any military intervention on Ukraine's behalf. That deterrence has worked: the West is (rationally) unwilling to enter the war directly or even to give Ukraine long-range firepower that could reach far into Russia, for fear that such help could end up sparking an apocalyptic nuclear conflict. As a result, the war will likely last longer than it would have if the West entered the fray. A longer war will lead to many more deaths and further destruction. Were nuclear weapons not in the calculus, the United States and NATO would be able to employ their superior conventional firepower more effectively in

Ukraine's defense to win the war quickly. But Putin's nukes neutralize the West's conventional military superiority.

It is also possible that Russia's nuclear weapons emboldened Putin to invade in the first place, because he would not have attacked Ukraine without a way of keeping the United States and NATO out of the war. Of course, Putin acutely misjudged the relative strength of the Russian military. But Russian leaders are aware of their conventional military's inferiority to that of the West. The fact that Russian leaders issued so many explicit nuclear threats suggests that they saw their nuclear arsenal as a way of compensating.

To be sure, the nuclear weapons in the arsenals of several NATO member states presumably have deterred Russia from expanding the war to NATO countries, such as Poland, Romania, or the Baltic states. In this regard, nuclear deterrence has clearly helped prevent a wider war.

But it has also prolonged the conventional war, at greater cost to everyone, especially the Ukrainian people. A grinding, brutal war of attrition could persist for a long time, with no side able to land a definitive knockout blow. In such a war, Russia maintains a significant advantage over Ukraine by virtue of its much bigger population and larger military.

A PERILOUS MOMENT

Some Western analysts suggest that the United States and NATO should call the Kremlin's bluff—they should more forthrightly back the Ukrainians and drive Russian forces out of Ukraine. Russian leaders have repeatedly warned of escalation if the West keeps arming Ukraine, but, the argument goes, the Kremlin will not actually resort to nuclear weapons and break the taboo regarding their use. As a result, many observers, mostly outside government, are taking a cavalier approach to the risk of nuclear escalation.

Some pundits take the fact that Putin has not used nuclear weapons after a year of embarrassing military defeats as evidence that he will not use a nuclear weapon in the future. They argue that the West should do whatever it takes to support Ukraine. They criticize U.S. President Joe Biden for declining to send advanced military equipment to Ukraine and deride the supposed defeatists who fret about escalation. "The greatest nuclear threat we face is a Russian victory," the journalist Eric Schlosser wrote in January in *The Atlantic*. The historian Timothy Snyder, one of the most perceptive observers of the war, has dismissed Russian threats as mere "talk" designed to scare the West. In February, he went so far as to mock people concerned about nuclear escalation, writing that discussions of the risks of nuclear war are mere media "clickbait" and "a way to claim victimhood" and "blame the actual victims." But some close observers of Putin, such as the writer Masha Gessen, disagree. They are much less sanguine about Putin's rationality. In the warped worldview of the Russian president, Gessen has argued, the use of nuclear weapons could be justified as a rational course of action.

Russia's decision to suspend implementation of the New START agreement—the last remaining treaty limiting the world's two largest nuclear arsenals—is a deeply disappointing development that increases nuclear dangers. It appears that Russia will no longer participate in the system of mutual on-site inspections and exchanges of information regarding each side's nuclear stockpile. These information exchanges were crucial confidence-building measures and also comprised one of the last few remaining regularized channels of communication between the United States and Russia about their nuclear arsenals. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that Russia will continue to observe limits on the number of nuclear warheads it can deploy under the treaty (1,550 deployed strategic warheads and 700 deployed strategic delivery vehicles). But this suspension makes it more likely that, after New START reaches its scheduled expiration in 2026, it won't be replaced. Without a replacement treaty, there will be no restraints on the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals for the first time since 1972. This is a recipe for a dangerous new arms race.

There is no easy solution to the bind Western governments find themselves in: deterred by the potentially phantom menace of the Russian bomb. Such are the geopolitical consequences of a world with nuclear weapons. Critics of the West's cautious behavior deride it as "self-deterrence," but it's just deterrence, plain and simple. During the Cold War, the West did not respond militarily when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Western leaders stayed on the sidelines owing to the unacceptable risk of nuclear escalation.

It's important for Ukraine to win the war because Russia's unprovoked aggression challenges fundamental international norms of the territorial integrity of states. But what a Ukrainian victory looks like remains unclear. In a world without nuclear weapons, a military victory would appear fairly straightforward: the recovery of all of Ukraine's territory, including Crimea. But under the shadow of nuclear weapons, such a victory may not be achievable. A good outcome for Kyiv will be more complicated to attain, and invariably less satisfying.

The challenge Ukraine's defenders face is how to prevent Russia from benefiting from its nuclear brinkmanship while still avoiding nuclear war. The tendency of wars to expand poses a real risk of escalation. Some commenters have applauded the West for its slow but steady increase of ever more lethal assistance to Ukraine. They frame it as a clever strategy of gradually enhancing Ukraine's firepower in a way that is not overtly confrontational. In January, for example, the West finally dropped its longstanding opposition to supplying Ukraine with tanks. Kyiv immediately raised its requests for Western fighter planes, which would allow it to strike far into Russian territory.

Neither U.S. nor European leaders seem to have a clear sense of where the redlines are in Ukraine. But they cannot risk finding out too late that their measures of support have incurred the ultimate Russian response. As Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, an expert on Russian nuclear doctrine, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in February, a "perilous moment will come if Russian military or political leaders decide that a direct military confrontation with NATO is inevitable." She warned the West against taking steps that Russian leaders could misinterpret as preparations for a military operation against Russia. Supplying more lethal weapons to Ukraine, offering more intelligence to help the Ukrainians target Russian personnel and military infrastructure, or sending military advisers to Ukraine may not reflect any Western intention to attack Russia. But when such actions are accompanied by talk about taking back Crimea, for instance, or winning a "total victory" for Ukraine, or even "weakening Russia," it fuels the perception of Russian leaders that a hostile West seeks to destroy their country. However unfounded these views may be, Western leaders have a moral obligation to take seriously the possibility of a catastrophic misunderstanding.

The interests of the United States and Ukraine may overlap, but they are not identical. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is doing exactly what one would expect of him: exhorting the West to provide more weapons. But Biden has different priorities and obligations. His job is to make sure that the war does not escalate into a nuclear conflict with Russia. No one wants Russian nuclear blackmail to succeed, for both moral and strategic reasons. But responsible Western leaders still have to weigh seriously the probability of a calamitous event. That means there will need to be continued and significant limits on Western assistance to Ukraine.

THE UNBROKEN TABOO

The course of the war will also shape the fate of a fundamental international norm: the taboo against the first use of nuclear weapons. Russia's nuclear threats have been harmful for the nuclear taboo because they suggest that the use of these massively destructive weapons is legitimate and a plausible part of war. Yet the taboo continues to hold and, so far, restrain Russia and NATO.

The world's response to Russia's nuclear threats has played a crucial role in reinforcing the taboo. World leaders from all continents, including Russia's friends in China and India, have made clear to Putin that nuclear use would be unacceptable. Chinese President Xi Jinping said in early November that the world should "jointly oppose the use of, or threats to use, nuclear weapons." He later added in meetings with Biden that nuclear use in Ukraine was "totally unacceptable." The UN secretary-general and diplomats at many UN meetings have condemned Russia's nuclear threats in their speeches and statements. Government officials, analysts, and journalists have explicitly mentioned the taboo and noted the importance of upholding it. It has undoubtedly become clearer to Putin that violating the taboo would likely alienate countries that have either supported the Kremlin or remained neutral: a Russia that breaks the taboo would instantly become a pariah.

Western policymakers have sought to defuse the possibility of nuclear conflict at every turn. The United States has not responded to Russia's nuclear bluster with either threats of its own or any change in the posture of its nuclear forces. Instead, if Russia were to launch a nuclear war, U.S. officials have promised an overwhelming conventional military response, not retaliation in kind. This is exactly the right approach to upholding the taboo. If the goal is to isolate the norm violator, it is important to avoid violating those norms, as well.

Still, the risk remains that Russia will use a nuclear weapon in Ukraine. A troubling new development is the nuclear militancy expressed in Russian society, especially on Russia's state-controlled television, where hosts regularly urge the use of nuclear weapons against the West. "Russia's popular culture is now marked by a level of nuclear fanaticism previously associated with North Korea," Schlosser wrote. "Nothing like it existed during the Cold War." Dictators may be relatively more shielded from the pressures of public opinion than leaders of democracies, but nuclear fanaticism anywhere threatens the taboo.

It is impossible to say definitively whether greater Western support for Ukraine will prompt a nuclear Russian response. No one really knows. The nuclear risks in this war are considerable, since NATO continues to get more deeply involved in Ukraine's defense while Russia seems less and less restrained (as Putin's announcement suspending Russia's participation in New START shows). Deterrence could fail in multiple ways, either through intentional acts or miscalculations. The Russian use of a nuclear weapon would be widely regarded as a failure of U.S. policy. Responsible U.S. leaders will err on the side of caution to avoid such a catastrophic outcome.

The past year saw the continuation of the 77-year tradition of nuclear weapons not being used. Western leaders must do as much as they can to ensure that this streak continues, even as the horrific war in Ukraine rages on.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

War Makes the State

What the War in Ukraine Has Revealed About Effective Governance

BY NATALIYA GUMENYUK

February 24, 2023

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In July 2021, seven months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a group of researchers completed a major study of how Ukrainians viewed key events in their country's recent history. The report, to which I contributed, yielded some striking findings. The first was that the population was not deeply divided over the country's Soviet legacy or the 2014 Maidan revolution. Ukrainians of widely different backgrounds and regions, it turned out, shared a deep reservoir of common values and experiences on which they shaped their understanding of history. The second was that the country's political institutions were generally held in low esteem. People across the board seemed to have a general lack of trust for the country's leaders, no matter what party they came from, and they blamed many of Ukraine's problems on its ruling class.

In the year since the war began, it has become a common refrain among Western commentators that the conflict has served to unite, almost for the first time, a previously fragmented society. But as the 2021 study makes clear, that assumption is flawed. Drawing on their shared experiences of hardship and resilience over many years, Ukrainians from all parts of the country have not been surprised that the conflict has brought them closer together. What has been unexpected is how this immense struggle has transformed the state itself.

After all, for centuries, Ukrainians have tended to identify more with grassroots movements or solitary heroes—the nineteenth-century poet Taras Shevchenko, say, or the anti-Soviet dissident Vasyl Stus—than with nonexistent or ill-defined national institutions. To defend themselves from imperial overlords, foreign invaders, and, after 1991, authoritarian governments that abused power, Ukrainians have tended to look not to Kyiv but to their own financial and political interests. Even after the 2014 Maidan uprising, when Ukraine finally became a liberal democracy, relations between civil society and the state remained antagonistic. There was an elected government, but it was often regarded as ineffective or corrupt by a distrustful public.

Today, after 12 months of almost unimaginable bloodshed, the picture looks very different. Not only is there far greater social cohesion but Ukrainians have also begun to view the state itself in a positive light. Of course, the war has played a direct part in this: a population in crisis has instinctively rallied around its leaders. Yet in recent surveys, many Ukrainians also express a real sense that despite the havoc of continual fighting, large-scale human displacement, and the constant threat of missile attacks, their national institutions have been redefined, and national governance has significantly improved. For almost the first time in their history, many people do not see the state as there to oppress them or take their wealth, but to serve their interests and save their lives. The question many Ukrainians are asking now is whether this shift is merely temporary or can provide the foundation for a postwar political order.

HARNESSING THE HOME FRONT

To some extent, the emergence of a strong state is a natural consequence of the war. To begin with, Russia's assault on the country has affected people of all backgrounds equally, contributing to a sense that all Ukrainians, including top officials, are in the same boat. While I was interviewing the deputy mayor of Odessa in March 2022, an air raid began, forcing us to stay together longer than expected; she told me how agonized she was about her nephew, who was fighting with Ukrainian forces near Mariupol. In a similar exchange last month, the Ukrainian ambassador to a major European country mentioned to me that she couldn't reach her husband, who was fighting on the frontline. Even now, the relatives of a Ukrainian cabinet minister remain in a Russian-occupied area. And on a train from Poland to Kyiv, I met the wife of a severely wounded war veteran who turned out to be a former minister from Ukraine's leading opposition party who had left his business to serve in the army.

But there have also been tangible improvements in the way the country is run. In the past, Ukrainians tended to trust their own community leaders and civil society groups far more than the politicians and bureaucrats in Kyiv. Soon after the war started, however, it became clear to many that only a well-functioning state can survive such an onslaught. In a war in which troops in the field and civilians in cities are constantly being shelled, it has been essential to have an efficient and well-run healt- care system to treat the legions of wounded. When Russian forces have blown up a bridge over a major river, disrupted the water supply, or sent energy plants into flames with missile attacks, it has been up to the government to begin repairs as quickly as possible. And with the Ukrainian economy under extraordinary duress, both the state and private banking systems have had to find ways to prevent a slide into economic paralysis. All these pressures have led to a surprisingly adaptive public sector.

Take Ukraine's transportation infrastructure. Since February 24, 2022, Ukraine's airspace has been closed, its seaports have been blocked, and its ground traffic has been restricted. One result is that the national railway—which before the war was disparaged as uncomfortable, slow, and outworn—has become critically important for transporting people and goods. This has been especially true because for the Russian military, it's harder to hit moving targets. So in addition to supplying the army, moving humanitarian aid, and getting refugees out of harm's way, the railway has become one of the main means of basic transport in a county in which travel by bus and car is limited by curfews. One of the greatest surprises has been that despite the ever-present risk of attack, train delays are rare, and when military actions block the way, alternate routes have quickly been found. Notably, when territories have been liberated from Russian occupation, train service has rapidly been restored to serve large numbers of displaced people.

When asked for identification papers, Ukrainians are now able to show e-documents on the Diia mobile app, a state service that keeps electronic copies of personal documents. It was developed in 2020 but has become especially valuable in the war, during which it has been frequently updated. Thanks to this system, internally displaced people can easily re-register in different parts of the country. The same app can be used to pay tax and traffic penalties, receive official documents and apply for social benefits—all of which previously required visiting government offices and state agencies. Ukraine's rapidly growing public digital infrastructure also offers new ways for people across the country to report damage from attacks and request compensation for lost housing.

Many more Ukrainians would have been killed over the last year had it not been for Air Alert, a mobile app for announcing air raids that was created within a week of the invasion. Similarly, since Russia began its systematic attacks on the power grid in October 2022, many Ukrainians have come to rely on an online service called Bright that provides an advance schedule of blackouts for every house address in major cities affected. With the onset of winter, many Ukrainians in areas without electricity also benefited from so-called "Unbreakable" points, centers installed in public buildings and in tents in parks where people can come and charge their devices, and use high-speed Internet connection.

Nowhere has the state's role in Ukrainians' lives been more omnipresent than in Kyiv itself. That some three million people have remained in Ukraine's capital despite continual blackouts is not a miracle but a result of the common work of the national government, city administration, businesses, and ordinary people. The majority of residents returned after it became clear the siege of Kyiv was over in April 2022, and they have since been joined by residents of eastern and southern towns that have been destroyed or occupied. Since November, residents of the capital have experienced daily power cuts, a situation that has worsened with each attack. Yet this month, the management of the city's main energy company announced that it had found a way to keep the system operating. For the third week of February, the city has operated as usual. Meanwhile, the city government continues to provide public transportation and municipal workers are keeping the streets clean. State and private banks, mobile operators, e-commerce retailers, grocery store chains, and restaurants have generally remained open, allowing normal life to continue as much as possible.

Of course, life is not normal. With curfews in force across the country—the schedule differs from region to region depending on the level of risk —people mostly stay home in the evening. In Kyiv the air raid siren alert rings on people's phones on a daily basis. (There was one during President Joe Biden's surprise visit to Kyiv on February 20.) In cities with subways, the tunnels serve as air raid shelters, just as they did in London during the Blitz in World War II. The government still has a huge amount of work ahead of it, and there is now a general understanding that nowhere is safe as long as the war continues. Yet in most cases, emergency responders arrive within hours of attacks, and many Ukrainians now have much the same high regard for firefighters and rescue workers from the State Emergency Service as they do for members of the military.

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

Before the Russian invasion, there was a long history of antagonism between the Ukrainian government and journalists and members of civil society. In 2000, Georgi Gongadze, one of the country's most prominent political reporters, was killed by a top official of the Ministry of the Interior. During the 2013–14 Maidan uprising, the Ukrainian riot police beat and shot peaceful protesters. Despite subsequent reforms, particularly in law enforcement, the state failed to investigate a car-bomb explosion that killed another journalist, Pavel Sheremet, in 2016, or the killing of Kateryna Handziuk, a well-known anticorruption activist in Kherson. After Volodymyr Zelensky was elected in 2019, his government was frequently criticized for hindering judicial reforms, and Ukrainian investigative reporters would argue with him at press conferences, accusing his government of misdeeds.

Since the war began, however, many have come to view the state—and the police in particular—as essential to their survival. It is the police who close roads after an airstrike, enforce curfews to protect civilian areas, help evacuate people from shelled areas, and even collect the bodies of those who are killed. By contrast, Russian forces have perverted local authority in areas under their control. After the towns of Balakliya, Izium, and Kherson were liberated from Russian occupation in the fall of 2022, Ukrainians discovered that the Russians had housed detainees at local police stations, where they were beaten, tortured with electric shocks, humiliated, poorly fed, and threatened with death. If Russian forces had captured Kyiv itself, its own large police building might have become a giant torture chamber, with almost every stratum of civil society—journalists, artists, activists, teachers, students, civil servants, and anyone with a relative serving in the army—potentially detained there. That Kyiv didn't fall should not be taken for granted. It was the army that saved the city. Many Ukrainians lost their lives defending the capital in the war's opening weeks. Now it is Ukraine's air defenses that help prevent cruise missiles and drones from reaching the capital.

The searing reality of Russian occupation has exerted a powerful effect of its own. Instead of complaining about poor government services as they did in the past, many Ukrainians who are not on the frontlines view their task as making the state more capable and efficient. But they also know that the state is overwhelmed and that they have to organize some things themselves. For example, in late December, a photographer delivered bulletproof vests purchased with public donations to municipal workers in the besieged city of Bakhmut so that they could take the bodies of those killed to a local morgue. At the time, Bakhmut was probably the most dangerous place in the country. The photographer's picture of four ordinary men wearing black flak jackets provided by the volunteers may be one of the most moving images from the last year. We now know that one of them was injured in a subsequent attack.

In the 2021 survey of Ukrainian public opinion, a negative theme emerged: people often didn't seem to understand how their livelihoods and well-being depended on counterparts in other parts of the country. Now, such dissociation is no longer possible. With nearly one of three Ukrainians displaced by the war, a majority of them still in the country, every part of Ukraine seems interconnected. In April 2022, residents of the liberated Chernihiv region, close to the Belarus border, were asking about their compatriots in Bucha on Kyiv's outskirts. In November, a woman celebrating the liberation of Kherson mentioned that she was still thinking about her friends in occupied Mariupol. In January, the city of Mykolaiv in southern Ukraine was helping utility workers in Kherson, around 35 miles away, provide municipal services. These connections run deep. But they also may raise the question of how durable the new Ukrainian state will be when the fighting stops.

For now, indications are promising. In December, a new opinion survey by the Kharkiv Institute for Social Research found not just high levels of solidarity but also growing political unity across different sectors of the population. Notably, few people seem to anticipate major social or political divisions erupting after the war. Even more striking was how Ukrainians now view their national institutions. One question posed by the researchers was, "Has your attitude toward the bodies of state power in Ukraine changed since the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine?" Forty-six percent said their attitude had improved, including 13 percent who said that it had improved a lot. The young were especially well represented in the latter group. By contrast, only 14 percent said their attitude toward bodies of state power had worsened, with three percent saying it had worsened significantly and 40 percent recording no change.

Of course, these views could swing the other way again if the government's ability to keep the country going seriously falters or if war fatigue begins to color perceptions of the leadership. Ukrainian civil society and the independent media have grown more concerned about President Zelensky's skyrocketing celebrity, which they fear could hinder democracy and pave the way for a new concentration of power after the war. Indeed, after months of avoiding controversial issues, Ukrainians are beginning to criticize the government, with newspapers once again running front-page stories about official corruption. But this time, the tone of the media has been more measured and the state has responded with greater seriousness, holding investigations and parliamentary hearings. If this renewed scrutiny is a harbinger of the future, at least it has shown that the war cannot be used to paper over government misdeeds.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Wars should never be romanticized, and certainly not one as brutal as this one. If Ukraine has become stronger as a nation, it has done so at an extraordinary human cost. Today, almost half the population has an immediate relative who serves in the army or law enforcement, and nearly everyone knows someone who has died in the war. At the same time, many Ukrainians are acutely aware that war destroys societies, even ones like their own that have turned out to be stronger and more resilient than anybody could have imagined. This is one reason that Ukrainians are desperate for the West to provide more help to win the war and end the bloodshed as soon as possible.

Remaining "normal" and human under the rain of Russian bombs is a form of resistance itself, but it requires strength and grit, which have their limits. It is impossible to say whether Ukraine's newfound unity and the growing cooperation between citizens and the state can be maintained in the long run. What is clear is that the state and the people are interdependent. Russian propaganda used the so-called rifts in Ukrainian society and inefficiency of the Ukrainian state as a pretext for the invasion. Even international allies who had invested so much in reform efforts in Ukraine feared that when Russia invaded, the government might fall because of internal divisions and the lack of public trust. But Ukraine didn't fall, and now its citizens have much higher expectations for the state and what needs to be done to rebuild the country. It will be up to both the Ukrainian people and their leaders not to squander the opportunity when the war is over.

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