Lowered Expectations

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Abstract:

This chapter argues that the current global political climate is characterised by uncertainty and confusion. As the second half of the Biden presidency approaches, there are concerns about the potential return of Trump from retirement and the potential impact on democracy at home and abroad. The ongoing war in Ukraine has sparked discussions about the need for rearmament in Europe, specifically in Germany, which could potentially benefit NATO. However, this development may also lead to the resurfacing of policy differences within the EU and NATO, which could have negative and unforeseen consequences. The chapter concludes that the global political landscape is in a state of mutation and it is difficult to predict the future with any degree of certainty.

Key words: NATO, Ukraine, rearmament, policy changes, global political climate

To the end, Samuel Beckett insisted that he did not know who Godot was, nor what his two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, were waiting for. That was not the least absurdity of his play, which he wrote in French, the Irish author later explained, because he did not know the language well.[1]

That is where we all are now: confused and unclear over what to expect as we stagger into the second and arguably final half of the Biden presidency, possibly half before Trump's return from his unwanted retirement – at home a democracy at risk, and abroad a tragic war waged in a moment of global mutation told in languages we understand poorly even when they carry an American accent. This is unchartered territory: at home, half the people wait for Trump to return to the White House and the other half wait for him

[1] A slightly different version of this essay was released on the web site of The National Interest as "Talk to Russia before it is too late" (September 23, 2022).

to go to prison; and abroad, half the world wait for America to reassert its leadership while the other half awaits confirmation of its demotion.

Who knows what will come next? This is a lose-lose war, which neither side can win but which both refuse to end – no compromise, it is said in unison. "We have not started anything yet," Putin warns, as a criminal reminder that despite the mounting evidence of failure, Russia still owns the war he started since he controls its escalation beyond anything Ukraine can conceivably bear and the West dares to contemplate. "We have lost nothing and will lose nothing," he still asserts while a defiant Ukraine pledges "to force Russia to end this war." But what if Putin means what he says – are we deluding ourselves again? For those who dismiss the significance of his partial mobilisation and the seriousness of his nuclear hints, these are no echoes of the Cuban missile bluff: Putin is no Khrushchev, and what is known of him suggests that he might well choose the worst of the bad options available despite Biden's own escalatory warnings meant to deter him with equally consequential bad choices.

Time, then, to think through the path we're all on, and apply the brakes before it is too late? Recall the Sarajevo moment, over 100 years ago, when so much could have been avoided had so many not given so little thought to the cataclysm ahead. Or, closer to us, remember the Korean War after the breakthrough in Inchon, or the Vietnam War after the removal of Ngo Din Diem, or the Iraq War after Saddam Hussein's capture – all spurned opportunities to end a war before it exacted nearly unbearable costs. "A fundamental strategic reappraisal is very much needed from all, international in character, political, rather than military in substance; and regional, rather than simply [Ukrainian], in scope," as Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote about the war in Iraq as early as June 2004, when dramatically calling for "a reasonable deadline for the departure of U.S. troops" from Iraq before a bad war got much worse. Admittedly, there is no comparison between the natures of both wars. But there is a link between bad wars that get worse before they produce a bad deal.

For those who fear appeasement, a willingness to talk is not a repeat of prewar Munich or postwar Yalta; Ukraine is neither Austria in 1938, when the German aggressor remained militarily weak, nor Poland in 1945 when the war was for all purposes already won. For those who wait for a Korea-like *status quo ante bellum*, this is not a war with mutually accepted red lines that give its protagonists the time they need to achieve an alleged position of strength before agreeing to serious negotiations. For those who dream of

unconditional withdrawal from, or regime change in, Russia, this is not the war in Afghanistan, waged by the aged leader of a worn-out Soviet state: this is a moment of its own – an existential world crisis the like of which has not been seen since 1945. And make no mistake: if the war is not Ukraine's only, it is also ours, which is why it must be stopped before it comes to our shores.

One day "there will be a dangerous backlash," then-French president Jacques Chirac said of NATO enlargement (which he embraced nonetheless). As the most likely territorial backlash, Ukraine – although prudently kept at a distance – always loomed like a decisive test of Russia's choice between cooperating with or maneuvering against the United States in Europe. Moving into a new century, Putin made his choice known – to reload and go backward in the direction of Cold War belligerence, with enlargement his alibi, rollback his strategy, and Russian history his motivation. In the early fall of 2008, the short war with Georgia was a wakeup call, but then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates was not heard by either of the two presidents he served – let alone their immediate successor – as time ran out after Crimea and past Minsk. For the most part, Putin did not fool the West, he just fooled himself – about his army, about Ukraine's resolve, and about Western unity. In late 2021, therefore, Biden's early warnings about a full-scale Russian assault on Kyiv did not deter Putin, clearly dismissive of Biden's will to respond, and they were ignored by the Ukrainian government, skeptical of Putin's preparedness for such a strategic gamble, and rejected by most European allies, mindful of their senior partner's most recent intelligence debacle in Afghanistan.

That this war would be short was predicted by Washington and nearly all capitals with a stake in the impending conflict: Russian-staged images of the deceptive shock and awe made-for-television war in Iraq? Maybe – but however early it still is to forecast its long-term consequences, the war has had enough of a run for a first take on the repositioning of Europe with the United States and of the U.S. relative to Asia in the West, as well as a recasting of China relative to Russia and the Global Rest relative to the West.

In the West, there is much celebration: Russia down (and out?), America in (and back?), Europe up (and resolute?), and China aside (and troubled?). Thank you, Putin, you have served us well – NATO enlarged, with its identity and preponderance restored in Europe, America's leadership reset, with a figure of authority and resolve which the rest of the West welcomes, and the EU's complementary relevance asserted, which even perennial Eurosceptics applaud. Can it last, though? As the war lingers, sanctions hurt slowly but

weapons kill permanently, and escalation is feared unevenly. As Europe goes through its most demanding winter in 75 years, expect troubling questions about the conditions that led to this point: for over a decade, did the United States deter the Russian aggression – no; in anticipation of the war, did it respond to Ukraine's increasingly urgent arms requests – no; having failed to deter and defend, did it join the fight – no; having left the fighting to others, did it suffer like others – no; having engineered a strategy that has kept the war going, was enough done to win, stop, or end it – no.

In short, will the end – a defanged Putin and a weakened Russia – justify the means – says who, on either side of the Atlantic and on the battlefield? The little and sadly immoral secret of the war is that whatever is said about it, we are not all Ukrainians. To speak up for and arm Kyiv is one thing, to die for it is another – that is the untold reminder of the war: for allies in Europe and elsewhere to believe that any American president will risk a nuclear war on their behalf in every circumstance is a risky gamble. While applauding the West's unity and resolve, think of the Cuban missile crisis some 60 years ago, which opened a decade of West-West obfuscation, intra-European confusion, and East-West recalibration – until Reagan, past Carter, later restored enough strategic clarity to win it all.

The war in Ukraine was met with an unprecedented level of consultation in NATO and with the EU, and the Biden-Blinken foreign policy team deserves high marks for its management of the Alliance – the best since Bush-41 in Gulf War I. Yet, the war has also exposed Europe's vulnerability – the risks and costs of a military confrontation momentarily hidden by the fallacies of representation – and America's mendacity – a self-serving war by proxy whose costs are borne mainly by others: over six million refugees, dramatically higher gas prices and energy shortages with serious political consequences, more turbulence in strategically vital near-abroad countries across the Mediterranean, and, worst of all, the return of war on the Continent. Coming next, prepare for some European "jaw-jaw" not only with Putin but also with Biden of the sort the French like to lead, now with a forceful assist from a bolder post-Merkel Germany and a newly elected post-Fascist government in Italy. Yes, NATO is back but where is the Alliance going? While the war in Ukraine is cause for an overdue rearmament of Europe, including especially of Germany, which is a good thing for NATO, it will also resurrect overlooked policy differences within the EU and the Alliance, which is less promising.

Better than "war-war," like Churchill used to say about Four-Power conferences, which many of his US interlocutors found futile at the time? Calling Putin names while awaiting his unconditional surrender of every square inch of Ukraine, including Crimea, will not bring him to the table, and expecting him to leave Ukraine and the Kremlin empty-handed and head down is not a winning diplomatic strategy. As Henry Kissinger wrote most recently – and not for the first time – the test of statesmanship "is to temper vision with wariness, entertaining a sense of limits" – which includes an understanding of achievable war aims. A sense of justice certainly satisfies our anger and outrage, but it also closes the door on diplomacy as a sacrilege that reduces the conflict into a dehumanising body count for the sake of territory that appears to be lost but can be regained later at a lesser cost. Kissinger knows history well, some of which he composed himself in response to the circumstances he faced, both as an individual and as a statesman. "When you read a work of history," wrote historian E. H. Carr, "always listen out for the buzzing" – above the *déjà entendu* of angry calls to arms and outside the *déjà dit* of another Marshall or Marshall-inspired Plan.

Russia certainly stands as the main loser of the war, irrespective of what comes next, but the need to re-engage Moscow to stop the war until it can be satisfactorily ended is no less certain, with and past Putin. Think Kennedy after the 1962 missile crisis and, although different in character and significance, Bush after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, with both presidents opening an exit ramp to their treacherous interlocutors, and seeking a path to *détente* with the Soviet Union after its most dangerous provocation and recovering from the then-greatest blow to normalisation with China within the following six months.

What will become of Putin himself is gaining clarity despite approval rates that remain surprisingly high. Remember, Khrushchev's demise after his Caribbean fiasco took two years, nearly to the day – it is a matter of time for the alleged President-for-life to run out of time, as early as March 2024 when he might be "convinced" to not run for the presidency again. Yet, we hardly know for sure what difference his removal will make, as it was learned from Brezhnev for nearly two decades of increasingly global confrontation. Now, Putin's critics and most likely successors are demanding more war not less, and fewer red lines not more; with no identifiable political bench in Moscow, who and what will come after Putin – another Putin *en pire*?

Admittedly, the thought of engaging Russia after "the obscene wrongness of its invasion" (*dixit* George Packer) ended its moral legitimacy, degraded its economy, and wasted its military power is disturbing. Why not finish what he started, and with him Russia? But beware, Putin was the way he was because Russia is the way it is: open-ended punitive sanctions would divert public resentment from him to the West and set the stage for another confrontational round, like 1919 opened the door on World War II – a new clash possibly more dangerous than Cold War I because of China's full-time involvement with its own baggage of historical revendications and ambitions.

Limited to a small cohort of coerced, bribed, and marginal allies or partners, Russia is heard as a global supplicant shopping for security assistance, economic shelter, and strategic rehabilitation. Lacking access to the West, who better than China to invest in an underpriced gas station and overstocked nuclear warehouse? And who better and bigger than Russia to satisfy China's interest in willing, capable, and compatible allies at a time when many of its neighbors appear to be building up their own forces to complement or even activate the US deterrent – just in case a catalyst is needed.

To be sure, China's embrace of Russia's intervention in Ukraine raises "questions and concerns," acknowledges Putin, and it is cautiously focused "on issues concerning their respective core interests," pointedly adds his Chinese counterpart before his new friend in Delhi publicly lectures him about the sanctity of territorial integrity. For China especially, support for Moscow carries a heavy price as it means further isolation from the United States and the states of Europe, including post-Brexit London and post-Merkel Germany. In other words, Ukraine is not a winner for China, and if nothing else, Putin's fiasco in Ukraine serves as an anti-model for a Chinese government that is learning what not to do abroad the way it learned from Gorbachev about changes at home: as Bush-41 said about the Chinese, whom he knew well, strength irritates them, but they understand it better than weakness.

In the Global Rest, Ukraine also confirms that every war does not count equally as human suffering gets a different billing depending on its victims and location. "Ukraine must win because it is one of us," awkwardly declared the President of the EU Commission in Devos in June 2022 – a war *chez nous*, so to speak, whose people are easily recognisable and worthy of protection and help. This civilizational divide underlines a perceived Western indifference to the more customary wars *chez eux*, where the reaction is more of a drop dead-get lost variety – in the Sahel and the Tigray regions, or in Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Double standards that echo Sam Huntington? After 200 days of war, the Ukrainians expect an open-ended $5 billion monthly allowance, on top of the $60 billion-plus in military and non-military assistance already provided or pledged by the United States and the EU – about one-third of the original Marshall Plan costs (in current dollars) for rebuilding half of Europe after more than five years of total war. But who is counting if it is "over here" in the wide white world? As Secretary Antony Blinken keeps saying, confidence is back but humility remains *de rigueur*. Do not wait for an instant resurrection of a US-led Western world. And looming ahead of Cold War II, the like of India and Turkey hope to lead the next network of non-aligned states that refused to condemn Russia, wary of China but weary of Europe and mistrusting the US and the West.

Living in fear again, the old-fashioned way, is no fun. Yes, of course, there is the fear of climate change, and the fear of guns and their indiscriminate killing, the fear of the missing paycheck or the unexpected bill, the fear of inflation and the next recession, the fear of Trump and the MAGA Republicans or Biden's Democrats and socialism, and the fear of COVID and the next pandemic – so much to fear beyond fear itself. But, surging anew and perhaps worst of all, there is now the old fear of total war which previous generations fought to end, *plus jamais* we were told, and the fear of nuclear war that was thought to have ended with the Soviet Union, *pour toujours* we assumed, is back now, openly discussed like a war like any other.

Yes, this is the time to talk, however hard to do. Absent diplomacy, too easily equated with so-called appeasement, there would be only war left – the me-Tarzan-you-Jane script of the jungle of old. Yes, as we look ahead, Putin and, with him, Russia must not be driven to strategic desperation, however much they earned the punishment and however satisfying that would be. And although different and differently, Zelenskiy, too, cannot be allowed to get reckless, however deserving he may be for winning a war he has heroically won already. Better to remember now the wars we fought and lost after we had won them, from Truman's Korea after McArthur's landing in Inchon and before the Chinese intervention to Bush's war in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's capture and before the rise of the Islamic State.

Talking will not necessarily end the war but it will stop the killing, and it will not restore all of Ukraine's sovereignty, but it will keep it on track before facing consequences that will soon prove irreversible and unbearable for all. So, get to it, Secretary Blinken – the time to talk is your time: do not spurn the moment because later might be too late.