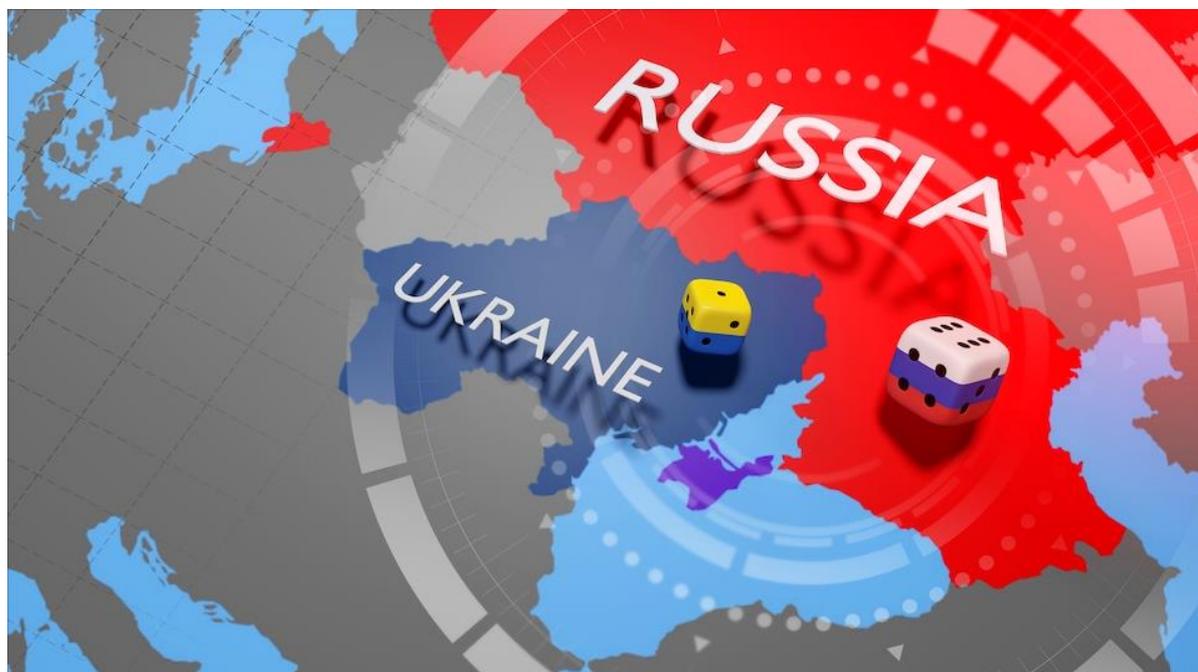


Whither Next?



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The airspace is filled with reports from Ukraine showing broken bodies and destroyed buildings reminiscent of those harrowing images from the Second World War. We, in the West, are horrified that such carnage could once more be inflicted on civilised European societies. We are supporting the Ukrainians as best we can, conscious of the risks of unleashing World War III between the nuclear powers: a risk that would, in turn, lead to the potential destruction of human life as we know it.

The Ukrainians have put up a much more determined and effective resistance than Putin expected. They had learnt from their military mistakes of 2014 when Russia invaded Crimea and the Donbas; the West has yet to learn from its political mistakes when, despite personal assurances from President Putin, went ahead with the



invasion and annexation on that occasion. As a result, the West is much more united, with a resolute front against Russia's aggression toward Ukraine today. How long that resolve will last is unknown, but individual member nations are already ratcheting up the blame game for which one was the most subservient to Putin and his cronies.

Russia continues to ignore facts on the ground, Western horror at alleged war crimes, and the accepted modes of international behaviour. It is preparing to wage a more concentrated campaign in the east of Ukraine to annex the entire Donbas region and the southern region bordering the Azov and Black Seas. One commander has suggested that the intention will be to link up with Transnistria and take Moldova. The terrain is less conducive to the guerrilla campaign waged by the Ukrainian army around Kyiv and ideal for tank warfare.

The possible outcomes of this phase are unknown at this stage: Russia might achieve all its military objectives leaving a rump Ukraine devoid of access to the sea and ripe for picking off at another time of Putin's choosing. Ukraine, on the other hand, equipped with more powerful Western weapon systems, might destroy the Russian army and force it to withdraw. Whatever the outcome, it will not come quickly; the Russians are now aware that their shortcomings, revealed to the West and the world, will require an exhausting and annihilating campaign to demonstrate their supremacy. Will the West hang in there and give the Ukrainians everything they require?

The West must decide, both in NATO, the EU and in concert with other like-minded western allies, how to finesse this dynamic situation and what outcomes they will tolerate. Their decisions will have far-reaching ramifications across the globe: should we try to strengthen the post-WWII international order; do we allow the autocracy (and bullying) of Russia and China to dictate how the world should be run? Is democracy worth fighting for?

There will be pressure to end the conflict at all costs - and accept that Ukraine will be sacrificed to Putin's vainglorious diktats. This situation is somewhat of a false conclusion since it will unleash more conflict in the future, including with NATO, when Putin decides he wants to put the old Soviet empire back together with attacks on Hungary, Poland, the Baltic States, and other nations with a "Russian" feel! This is the Sudetenland all over again. We have already seen what inaction by the West achieves: absolutely nothing. It merely fuels Putin's grandiose ideas about the invincibility of Russia and his historic mission to be a modern Tsar. The elephant in the room is, naturally, the fear of WWII: a war between nuclear-armed superpowers that would inevitably lead to an exchange of nuclear weapons at some stage down the line. Putin is building on this fear to keep the West pliant and at arm's length from his wars in Europe. Putin can still call upon China to give him some modicum of support, although



the CCP is unlikely to see the conflict spread as the emerging chaos might threaten its position.

The issue is whether the West wants to maintain the Rule of Law and governance of the world through international laws and agreements. Alternatively, to accept the power of might, the rule of the bully and the right of the sword. This is not going to be a short-term palliative but a long-term, hard-fought conflict between autocracy on the one hand and democratic government on the other. The challenge for the West is to finesse this outcome without a full-scale nuclear holocaust. To do this will require careful planning from the outset. So far, the West has been entirely responsive: we now need to be proactive and know exactly what actions to take as we move forward. For example, how should we react if Putin uses a low yield, tactical nuclear weapon against Ukraine? Are we just going to tighten sanctions against a few oligarchs? Are we going to do something positive like providing the technical assistance directly to Ukraine to assist in the cleaning up the area informing Russia that the action is a purely humanitarian one and that a Russian attack on the Western contingent would be considered an act of war?

The West needs to engage with those nations currently sitting on the fence to understand their perspectives on the situation and how best to help them develop. The Chinese Belt and Road initiative hold too many capitals in thrall. As the world's largest democracy, India must be included in the international debate and decision-making process. We also need to engage with our citizens and ensure that they understand the privations required before peace can be restored and that personal sacrifices will be worthwhile.

The West has been facing its most severe challenge for 80 years, and if we fail to stand up for the principles we claim to believe in, we will face a world where our children and their children cannot enjoy those freedoms we have largely taken for granted.

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