



Evolving Meanings of the War for Ukraine: Winning, Losing, Fearing, Needing

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Abstract

The accelerating pace of change and even the near-term unpredictability of its consequences calls for more enlightened and timely analyses of the most globally disruptive events. The continuing war for Ukraine is indisputably such an event. This essay presents an academically unconventional assessment of what that war means, addressing its consequences in terms of four conditions; winning, losing, fearing and needing. Until the war, at least, stalemates, it will be, if not impossible, unwise to decide on the winners and the losers, or on the fears that were fully realized, or on what needs remain to be met. Every effort has been made to express the listed issues in ways that do not foreclose their analysis, recognizing that, for all of them, tomorrow will be different not only to 24 February but to yesterday.

1. Introduction

The war for Ukraine has made the transition to the next global ‘normal’ overwhelmingly intense, chronologically unpredictable, and massively costly.

Never before has a significant country had more than one quarter of its citizens displaced, abroad and internally, in only a few weeks. Never before in modern times have more families been ordered apart; for women and children to flee to safety outside their country, for the men to stay to fight. Never before have so many intelligence agencies been proved so inaccurate, on so many long-watched geopolitical fronts. Never before have so many established, even revered political, economic and military assumptions been destroyed. Never before in modern times has one crisis—the War for Ukraine—so thoroughly sucked the air out of attention to other global wicked problems; among them COVID-19, climate change, pollution, human displacement, and the obscene and rising inequality of wealth and opportunity.

After only two months, civilian and military deaths number in the tens of thousands, the displaced number in the millions, cities are besieged and some all but laid waste, even as the so-called ‘international community’ struggles to provide an uneven, ever-changing patchwork of far-from universal support for Ukraine. There is now a collective, if very non-consensual, opinion of three, or four, scenarios for the future. Although individually and collectively evolving and expressed in a variety of ways, these are, in descending order of plausibility *today*—stalemate, Ukraine wins, Putin wins, and compromise peace.

The latter is considered by far the most likely, the more so the longer the shooting war continues. Fiona Hill on 8 April stated that there will be no ending soon. William Browder

on 11 April stated that there is ‘no reasonable way for this to end, only an unreasonable way’. He foresees a slow simmering conflict going on for years and years, if not at the current level of awfulness. But it was Putin who probably nailed the notice to the post on 12 April when he announced: Russia will win; peace negotiations are ‘dead’.

The result today, which was different yesterday and will be different tomorrow, is that there are no final winners or losers, only those winning *today* or losing *today*, and a globally pervasive fear of being on the wrong side of the ledger, tomorrow and beyond. To add to the ‘storm’ of crisis, some are winning and losing simultaneously.

This accounting was first produced on Christian Good Friday 2022, 15 April, in the fog of the third week of war. This version attempts to reflect the evolution of the war and its global context since that time. A next full review will probably be appropriate after 9 May when Russia will, as usual, celebrate its WWII victory over Nazi Germany. That product will forgo a lengthy introduction in favour of an enhanced narrative to validate the reason each person, people, country, organization, or condition is on a list.

2. Winning

- China is unobstructed in its form of illiberal democracy.
- Taiwan, as China, is shown how hard invasion can be.
- Inequality is ever more unattended to.
- Other states in the region and elsewhere may settle their own border disputes through violence. Political leaders are positioning themselves taking sides in the Ukraine crisis according to their perceived political benefits at home.
- Arms makers are working full shifts today, ever more confident the future will be as profitable.
- COVID-19’s continued spread, as new variants cruelly highlight the absence of a necessary level of global attention.
- Climate Change: The war in Ukraine reinforces the consequences of the continued failure of the COP—latest; COP 26—to demand that countries’ pledges on Greenhouse Gas Emissions include those due to military/security related activity.
- Collective imperialism through global capitalism, with China growing ever more influential globally with the Belt and Road campaign on land and at sea.
- Mutual aggravation of simultaneous crises as the international *community* proves incapable of effective and durable collaboration on more than one crisis at once.
- The acceptance of virtue signaling by leaders as national ‘action’.

3. Winning and Losing

- Ukraine: An unexpected Churchill-like President leads his nation in repelling Russia, at horrific cost.
- US: A country setting a powerful example of material support to Ukraine, while mired in political polarization, chaos and uncertainty at home.

- NATO: Gained a mission and possibly meaningful new members, as it struggles with its members' diversity of opinion on Russia.
- EU: United in response to millions of displaced Ukrainians, while far from unified in response to Russia's behaviour.
- Germany: Sholtz' astounding national sea change on security and NATO, now forced to backslide due to energy and commercial realities
- Africa: Much attended to by Russia, and China and the US, promoting rising continental unevenness and disunity intensified by three (more) coups.

4. Losing

- Cooperative, and peaceful, Globalization.
- Progress on all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, with no one having the clear urgency of the globe's worst wicked problems.
- Canada: The G7 poster child for promoting and being self-satisfied claiming virtue-signaling is action. Recent small military contributions to Ukraine's defence have only highlighted the sad state of its own armed forces and its 'reputation' in NATO.
- Afghanistan: Quickly forgotten as the promises made by retreating/departed NATO, US, UK, UN; suddenly atrophy, notwithstanding two decades of blood, sweat, tears and repeated political statements of commitment.
- International scientific research, particularly in and about the Arctic, the region and ocean for the next 'Great Game'. Seven of the eight Arctic Council members have shut down work until 2023, when Russia's term as Chair ends.
- Russia: Even if it "wins" the War for Ukraine, the country will lose more than it can 'afford' and has made its future fragile.
- Democracy: Autocrats are proving more effectively decisive in these times. The 'messiness' of democracy results in too little action, invariably too late.
- Sports is less and less an international unifier/pacifier.
- The UN: A 'goliath' tied down by a dysfunctional Security Council whose structure and mandate are for a long-gone era. The consequences of the agreement on the 'veto initiative' will be to highlight the problem.
- Nuclear disarmament and non-Proliferation are both now being re-contextualized, mostly negatively.
- Progress on Human Security, most especially 'social security' as implied first in the 1994 UN Development Program's Human Development Report.
- International Justice in the face of ever more, and more frequent, obvious crimes 'against' humanity.
- Food security, especially for those (many) for whom it was never strong and durable, but increasingly also where, until recently, enough food was never a concern.
- Energy Security, now dictated by the geopolitics of collective imperialism.

5. Fearing

- The words fear, fears, fearing, fearfulness and threat are appearing and being heard increasingly frequently from people and places everywhere.
- The intensification of already significantly weaponized geopolitics, economics, history, food, water, energy, trade, immigration, veracity, humanitarianism and international scientific research, each and all of which degrade cooperation and enable conflict.
- That sanctions are not sufficiently wounding Russia or dissuading Putin. Loopholes remain, significant external support continues, and the country's massive size and resources are 'insurance'.
- That Russia will continue to fight Ukraine beyond when the 'West' remains substantively interested in supporting it with military goods and services.
- Military escalation by Ukraine or by Russia or by NATO, by design or default, involves nuclear or chemical means.
- Irreversible fading of global collective resilience; for humanity and for biodiversity.
- Falling and increasingly uneven availability, accessibility and affordability of energy, globally. The (underway) responses by some; e.g., China (coal), the US (oil and gas) directly contradict what is needed to halt climate change before the 1.5 degree threshold is breached.
- German backsliding on its commitment to play a major geopolitical role, not wanting its people to 'freeze in the dark', poorly.
- The 24 April re-election of President Macron will not lead to better days for France, as a more constructive member of the EU and NATO.
- The ICC and the ICJ will continue to be incapable of meaningful action until too long after (even confirmed) crimes to dampen autocrats' willingness to exploit the impunity inherent in a bureaucratic if fair, 'justice' system. The average time from crime to conviction (in far calmer geopolitical times) has been decades.
- Increasing numbers of events and conditions that substantively distract attention from the 'other' inescapable wicked problems *that will not wait out the war for Ukraine*. Among them, of course, are climate change, in particular the lack of substantive attention to the contradictions among emissions gap and the adaptation gap and the rising global displacement.
- Legally enforceable compromises for durably settling conflict, now especially but far from exclusively the war for Ukraine, continue to take far too much time to be achieved before changing context invalidates them.
- That harmonization of Retaliation and Reconciliation by warring parties will continue to be impossible.
- A second term as US President for Donald Trump, Putin's friend. This scenario is widely seen as one of the most negative in the medium term.
- That Truth and Veracity are increasingly 'dead letters'. The information glut combined with deliberate generation of mis- and dis- information means virtually no one is able to

‘tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth’.
And even if they could many would not believe them.

- The UN will remain hostage to a 1945 Security Council structure and mandate, the result being intensification of already significant damage to its reputation in its ‘charter’ field; international peace and security.
- That famine will become endemic, leaving more and more millions desperate and displaced. The war for Ukraine has not only provoked the displacement of more millions, but also the intensification of food insecurity.
- There is no limit to what Putin is willing to do to achieve his commitment to the ‘legacy’ *he* wants *for himself* and *for his Russia*, notwithstanding sanctions on his war resources.
- Russia has NOT miscalculated about anything globally important. Xi has signalled to him, and possibly informed him, that time is on his side unless NATO takes the field in Ukraine—which is unlikely.
- The fate of other European states; formal ones such as Poland and pseudo-states such as South Ossetia if Putin decides the results of the war for Ukraine is only a first step on the mission to return Russia to its rightful prestige.

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6. Needing

- A common, if not necessarily commonly *understood* acknowledgement that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine immediately changed geopolitics globally and the war is continuing to do so. There is not a single field of human activity that has not been impacted to some degree. This acknowledgement calls for an end to revisionism; arguing for a return to the ‘good old days’. This is not only because, as often as not, the good old days were not very good, but because the more time wasted working with imperfect memories of the past will leave less time for anticipating the future and preparing for it much better than has been done in the past.
- Strategic Foresight: anticipation of 21st century futures. Arguably, there will be as many as four political and military spheres of influence globally, each more or less capable of substantively influencing conditions for humanity and biodiversity: China’s, The US’s, Russia’s and the EU’s. Foresight will be more likely to be relevant if it begins with a review of the established definition and key determinants of influence. Reflecting on the characteristics and impacts of the war for Ukraine, climate change, COVID-19 and inequality, the four most important seem to be sovereignty, neutrality, justice and remediation.
- A clearing house for collecting and protecting the verbal, audio and visual record of the Ukraine war: This ‘third party’ repository must be independent of—at arm’s length

from—all parties to the conflict. It will *not* be responsible for assessing the veracity or analyzing the meanings of the record. This would be a fraught conflict of interest. Who and what will do those tasks is unknown today, and probably will remain so until, at least, 1) the Ukraine war is far less violent and not/not the pre-eminent global crisis, and, 2) the UN tangibly demonstrates not only its verbal willingness, but an inescapable commitment to the creation of a Security Council structure and mandate suitable for peace and security in the 21st century. The agreement to the ‘veto initiative’ may be a signal that this is possible.

- Money: COVID demonstrated that there is never ‘no’ money. However, the COVID-19 pandemic sickened and killed people in every country, whose governments were ‘locally’ driven to fund a response. The war for Ukraine, notwithstanding its global geopolitical impact, has displaced, wounded and killed citizens who are almost all from only two countries. Therefore a ‘fund’ subscribed to by many governments, all still under attack or recovering from COVID-19, is unlikely. Remediation for and reconstruction of Ukraine should be funded with Russian government and oligarch money held abroad, and the proceeds by sale after seizure of Russian-owned goods (mega-yachts, mansions, property, companies). In addition, since Ukraine’s application of the rule of law has not featured strongly in its reputation, funds of extremely rich Ukrainians should be accessed, ‘in the national interest’.
- A more visible and outspoken ‘diplomacy’, especially in and from ‘democratic’ countries: Naming, blaming and shaming should be formally established as accepted activities in international relations. If not, the next ‘normal’ and the ‘normals’ thereafter are unlikely to be more than brief chaotic periods between major disruptive or destructive events, whether natural or man-made, while the evil, the crooked and the selfish will continue to enjoy the fruits of anonymous impunity.
- A global learning and training package—not ‘higher education’, and not ‘graded’—that provides life-long learning about Human Security which promotes universal engagement in its preservation and promotion: The only ‘necessary’ cost for what would be an unprecedented transformation of civil society is the freedom to participate.

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