

# Russia, in the Battle of Ukraine, Flunks Out as a Great Power



by Conrad Black

**It is easy to lose sight of the fact,** but as 2024 begins, the underlying correlation of forces between the Western Alliance spanning Central and Western Europe, North America, India, Australasia, Japan, and parts of the Middle East is in good condition and is more than competitive with its rivals and adversaries.

After two years of war in Ukraine, Russia appears to have suffered approximately 400,000 casualties, which in comparative population terms would be about a million casualties in the United States. Their military has been more unimpressive than at any time since the Russian armies

collapsed under the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Having persuaded the world, including the incompetent American former chairman of Joint Chiefs, General Milley, that they would occupy all Ukraine within a month, they have only succeeded in occupying approximately one-fifth of it. The spectacle of a gang of mercenaries quitting the Russian ranks and being cheered by the public as they purported to march on Moscow was not an image-building event for the Putin claim of a swiftly reviving Russia, resuming its place at the top table of the world's nations.

Rather, Russia has flunked out as a great power at a cost to the United States of only five percent of its annual defense budget going to Ukraine and with no one except the brave Ukrainians taking casualties against the Russians. NATO has been revitalized, and its great bloodless victory in the Cold War has been reinforced, provided the Ukraine war ends reasonably promptly and with borders redefined close to the present military facts on the ground.

Though this has rarely been expressed explicitly, the West has always had two objectives in the Ukraine war: To prevent, firstly, a Russian conquest of Ukraine, or even of so much of it that it had no chance to become a viable and successful country, and, secondly, to do so without driving Russia permanently into the arms of China and rendering our long-term objective of welcoming Russia into the Western world unattainable.

Because Ukraine never existed as an independent country, and approximately one sixth of its population is Russian-speaking, though not necessarily possessed of any ambition to be Russian citizens, Russia has some legitimate interest in Ukraine. What is at issue in the present war is not only the confirmation of Ukraine's status as an independent sovereign country accepted as such by Russia, but also the preservation of the largest single element in the great and almost bloodless strategic

victory won by the West in the Cold War: the definitive separation of Ukraine from Russian control.

If the West had stood by and done nothing as Russia gradually, clumsily, and brutally reoccupied Ukraine, the world would have been confirmed in the view that China and Russia were more than happy to propagate, that the Western alliance is a sham, a worn-out task with no will to defend its declared values and legitimate interests.

Even now, if the United States' aid to Ukraine, either as part of the congressional Russian roulette game involving Israel and the southern border, or because the know-nothing Paleolithic isolationists in the Republican Party prevailed with their insane theory that there was no legitimate American interest in the outcome in Ukraine, it would be an incitement to attack every perceived soft point all around the fringes of the Western alliance.

General Eisenhower, then the founding commander of NATO, declared when North Korea invaded South Korea in 1949: "We will have 10 more Koreas if we don't respond forcefully now." The same reasoning still obtains, and the challenge to the West is to define our legitimate interests correctly and confine them to what is practically defensible and does not constitute impetuous overextension.

It is unutterably galling and disappointing to see otherwise intelligent Republicans rejoicing in Ukrainian difficulties and virtually cheering on the Russians in order to heap more obloquy on the Biden administration. There comes a time when the national interest must be supported and the conduct of the Biden administration in Ukraine already provides plenty of political ammunition for its domestic opponents.

The president began by assuming the war was hopeless and practically inviting the Russians to take at least a few provinces from Ukraine and then offering Ukrainian president

assistance in abandoning his position and fleeing his country. When the Ukrainians responded vigorously and successfully, President Biden then gloated in what he took to be some sort of vindication of himself and promised that the Russian economy would collapse, "the ruble will be rubble," and commending the virtues of regime change in the Kremlin.

Unfortunately, since then there has been no indication of the future of American policy in Ukraine other than "whatever," and implicitly, "as long as it takes." There is no sign that the United States has determined with allies what level of support it is prepared to give ultimately and how long it is prepared to wait to see where the battle lines end up.

For the West to make its point, it need do no more than salvage the unconditional independence, guaranteed by Russia and NATO, seriously and not in the cavalier and dishonorable way of earlier such guarantees of Ukraine, and then translate much of its military assistance into economic and political assistance to help build Ukraine into a strong Western nation in Eastern Europe, another milestone in the eastward expansion of the Western world.

The eastern boundary of those areas embracing Western values—democracy, the free market, and freedom of religion, would thus have moved a thousand miles in only 30 years from the western border of East Germany to the eastern border of an internationally recognized Ukraine. Of course, the other important strategic development as the year begins is Israel's systematic destruction with full cause and justification, of probably the nastiest terrorist group in the world.

The continued existence of Hamas as the ruling entity in Gaza would make it impossible for Israel to reach a durable peace agreement with the Palestinian entity that fanatically and even suicidally opposes the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state. The Biden administration has undermined by the concessions that it made in 2020 to the Sanders left and all

the woke and racist extremists who crowded into that party under its wing, sacking America with "peaceful protests" that cost scores of lives and billions of dollars in the summer of 2020 while Democratic municipal governments defunded police.

The administration is now trying to maintain the support of that morally bankrupt element while still pitching to the sensible majority of Americans and Democrats that accepts the right of Israel to respond to October 7, 2023 as the United States responded to December 7, 1941, and September 11, 2001.

Victory in Gaza, an acceptable settlement in Ukraine, and constitutional regime change in Washington, and there will not be another word for many years of the decline of the West or the twilight of America.

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