

Why Ukraine War Has No Winners

By [M. K. Bhadrakumar](#)

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*The war in Ukraine is quintessentially Clausewitzian. And to understand it, we need to return to **Carl von Clausewitz**, the doyen of modern war, who recognised that war is practically limitless in variety, “complex and changeable,” and noting that every age has its particular kind of war with “its own limiting conditions and its own particular preconceptions.”*

Clausewitz’s contemporaneous observations of the character of nineteenth-century warfare are often misinterpreted confusingly as an advocacy of the unchanging nature of war itself. This paradigmatic complacency has engendered the Western narrative of the Ukraine conflict.

Evidently, the Russian side did not conform to the Western narrative. The ensuing bewilderment threatens to fragment western unity. Not all NATO countries are anymore speaking in one voice.

The **US President Joe Biden** and Britain’s **Boris Johnson** vow that they will be satisfied with nothing less than a Russian defeat. The New Europeans — Poland and the Baltic States principally — also demand an apocalyptic end to Russia’s history. Somewhat aloof stands Germany’s chancellor Olaf Scholz who merely says he doesn’t want Russia to “win.” France’s **Emmanuel Macron** keeps saying that without engaging Russia, European security architecture cannot be built. Then, there are outright sceptics like Greece, Turkey and Hungary.

Biden and Johnson have the upper hand since they manipulate the current set-up in Kiev and leverage the war. But even these two hardened politicians seem to realise lately that things are more complicated. The [Joint Vision Statement](#) issued in Washington yesterday following the US-ASEAN special summit completely eschews the usual American rhetoric and hyperbole over Russian “aggression.”

It omits any references to Russia or the Western sanctions and instead underlines “the importance of an immediate cessation of hostilities and creating an enabling environment

for peaceful resolution.” (See my blog [Indo-Pacific strategy adrift in an illusion.](#))

Nonetheless, incredible as it may seem, the fact remains that the US Congress is offering Biden a massive war budget to help Ukraine, which exceeds the state department’s annual budget and is more than what he proposes to spend on green energy projects in the US.

Equally, the EU, which imposed such harsh sanctions on Russia, are realising belatedly that the sanctions are hurting European economies more than the Russian economy. In some European countries, the annual rate of inflation is approaching 20%, while prices in the eurozone increased by over 11%, on average. During a [videoconference in Moscow](#) on Thursday, President Putin highlighted that:

- Russian companies are steadily replacing Western partners who left due to sanctions;
- 130 million tonnes of grain expected in Russia’s harvest this year, including 87 million tonnes of wheat — “an all-time high in Russian history”;
- Inflation rates in Russia have fallen several-fold on March levels;
- Budget surplus have reached 2.7 trillion rubles;
- There has been a record-breaking foreign trade surplus;
- The ruble is posting “better results than all other foreign currencies” since early 2022.

Critical voices are heard lately that anti-Russia sanctions are only exacerbating the US inflation crisis, and that prioritising aid to Ukraine is distracting Biden from more important domestic issues. [Senator Rand Paul has demanded auditing](#) of the gravy train to Ukraine, citing the analogy of Afghan war. He noted that the latest spending package will bring total US aid to Ukraine to \$60 billion since the conflict began in February, which is nearly as much as Russia earmarks annually for its entire defence budget!

Yet, Russia has no timeline for this war. It is taking its own time to systematically destroy Ukraine’s military capabilities, industrial base and infrastructure comprehensively. Biden and Johnson thought attrition would set in, as Russia is fighting the “collective West,” after all.

But Putin reminded them on Thursday that Russia won World War II “not only by fighting on the frontlines, but also because of its economic might. At the time, it [Russia] had to confront not only Germany’s industrial potential, but Europe as a whole, enslaved as it was by the Nazis.” Putin deliberately shot off a stark reminder that will resonate in Europe.

An EU consensus on oil embargo against Russia already seems elusive. Twenty European companies have so far [complied with Moscow’s end-May deadline](#) to make payments for gas purchases in ruble currency. And they include Germany, Europe’s powerhouse.

The EU’s top executives, Commission president **Ursula von der Leyen** and foreign policy chief **Josep Borrell**, two ardent Atlanticists and hardcore Russophobes, pushed the envelope too far. Will EU unity survive these cracks? [Scholz’s call to Putin](#) Friday, which reopened a line of communication after several weeks, needs to be understood against this backdrop. Interestingly, US **Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin** also [spoke with his Russian counterpart Sergey Shoigu](#) on Friday — their first conversation since Russian operations began in February.

Indeed, it is entirely conceivable that the time may be approaching to revisit the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project. The closure of all Russian pipelines passing through Poland and Ukraine's pipeline shutdown leaves Germany tantalisingly close to electricity shortage interrupting industrial production. ([here](#) and [here](#))

Bloomberg reports, citing data from the International Energy Agency (IEA) that despite Western sanctions, Russia's oil export revenue jumped some 50% in 2022. Russian shipments have increased by some 620,000 barrels per day in April, returning to their pre-sanctions average. Due to increased demand, more shipments were directed toward Asia. Ironically, the EU, despite the executive's hardline stance, has so far remained the largest market for Russian fuel with 43% of the country's oil exports going to the bloc in April, the IEA estimated.

Paradigms, to be relevant, must accurately reflect the reality. When that is no longer possible, the paradigms must be replaced, or the leaderships that rely upon them will inevitably fail. Politicians like Biden and Johnson are used to thinking in terms of a Westphalian world, and are taking time to come to terms with anomalies in the existing paradigm when new powerful trends are dramatically altering the concept of war.

Karl Marx called it the "annihilation of space by time." The phenomenon of regional conflict has become extinct, and localised violence has global implications thanks to advancement of transportation and communication and technologies. The paradigm-shifting present period is caused by a military-industrial revolution, which makes it a period of sharp, discontinuous change where existing military regimes are being upended by new more dominant ones, leaving old ways of warfare behind.

One would have thought that on a Clausewitzian battlefield, ancient armies arrayed against one another would fire and manoeuvre according to the commander's directions. But in Ukraine, by contrast, these have been replaced with ambient forms of physical and nonphysical violence—sniping, lethal drones, hypersonic missiles, electronic attack, spoofing, disinformation on the other and so on. Russia is practising a warfare that the West is not used to — where wars aren't won anymore. It is highly unlikely that there will be a ceremonial occasion bringing the Ukraine war to an end.

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Featured image: Russia expects grain harvest of 130 million tonnes of grain, including 87 million tonnes of wheat - "an all-time high in Russian history," says President Vladimir Putin, Moscow, May 12, 2022 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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Articles by: **M. K. Bhadrakumar**

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