

# No Victor, No Vanquished

## The Notion of Victory in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wars

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### GLOBAL INSTABILITY: REDEFINING THE STRATEGIC SECURITY EQUILIBRIUM

During the 20th Century Cold War era, great power rivalry and competing spheres of influence defined the global politics of a bipolar world. The disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1991 paved the way for the US-led unipolar world to exhibit exceptionalism and unilateral intervention norms. However, the 21st Century is witnessing the decline in US global power status and retrenchment, China's assertive rise, with incremental expansion impacting global realignments and the strategic churn in Europe, and with a revanchist Russia flexing its muscles authoritatively.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, there is turmoil in the Islamic world, with terrorism engulfing the

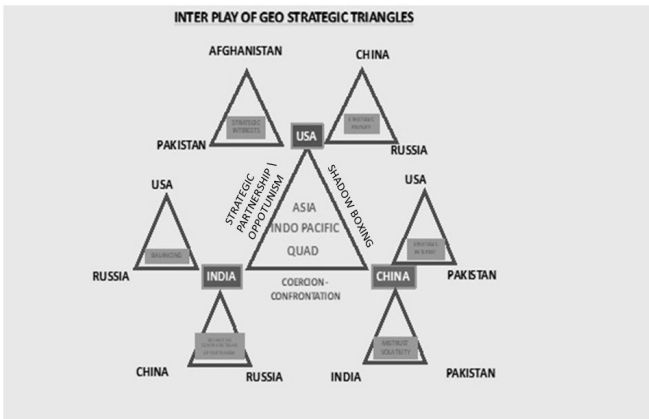
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1 A.B. Shivane, *Professional Military Education: Making of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Warrior*, KW Publishers, New Delhi, 2023.

Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, and financial crises creating global instabilities.

In this geopolitical melee, inter-state relationships are based on the convergence of national interest and strategic opportunism. Strategic behaviour has an inter-relationship based on these realities. This volatile triangle and its geostrategic periphery also form the epicentre of the global stability–instability paradox. Thus, it bears the shadow of overlapping triangles such as US-India-China and China-India-Russia, for the furtherance of their interests and national agendas. The triangular conundrum among stakeholders is depicted below.<sup>2</sup> All triangles have an interplay among themselves, some more pronounced and impactful, some less.



## NEVER ENDING WARS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

In the 21ST century wars, conflict initiation is the easier strategic decision than the more difficult one of conflict resolution. These are “never-ending wars”, wherein the entry

2 A.B. Shivane, “India-China-Pakistan: The Triangle of Strategic Instability”, *Raksha-Anirveda*, July 31, 2020, <https://raksha-anirveda.com/india-china-pakistan-the-triangle-of-strategic-instability/>.

is a show of power and the exit, of an unresolved dilemma.<sup>3</sup> The ease of initial entry distorts perception, obscures ground realities, and promotes a skewed strategy, which often results in an unresolved dilemma of an honourable exit. It is always easier to pervade but difficult to prevail. Geography, regional geopolitics, and nationalism too play an important role in the evolution of these wars which must not be ignored. The intervention objectives may have clarity, but the end game of the war is often unformulated and unforeseen. Further, the trajectory of these wars is increasingly unpredictable, and its grammar is nebulous. Such wars do not end based on just shifting frontlines, but a host of structural and geopolitical realities beyond the immediate battlespace. Neither do they end with the same objectives as they were started.

Research from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, using data from 1946 to 2021, found that 26 per cent of interstate wars ended in less than a month and another 25 per cent within a year. But when interstate wars last longer than a year, they extend on average to over a decade.<sup>4</sup> These never-ending wars can not only be catastrophic in terms of economic and human costs but their effect also spills beyond geographical boundaries, with a negative cost-benefit ratio. Often their fallout has both regional and global ramifications, both in the global power play and third-world supply chain challenges.

The key challenge to conflict resolution lies in the complexity of the notion of victory. The traditional notion of

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3 A.B. Shivane, “Never-Ending Wars of 21st Century”, *Indian Defence Review*, September 24, 2021, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/never-ending-wars-of-21st-century/>.

4 Benjamin Jensen, “How Does It End? What Past Wars Tell Us about How to Save Ukraine”, *CSIS*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-does-it-end-what-past-wars-tell-us-about-how-save-ukraine>.

victory or defeat based on success in battle is simply a historic relic from a bygone era. This is not how wars end in the 21st century.<sup>5</sup> They are not conducive to clear-cut endings. Thus victory, more than an act of prevailing, is seeking a shade where the contest between who loses, or is perceived to be losing, less. From the clash of wills through the clash of egos, to face-saving negotiations, is a treacherous process often resulting from hot war to negative peace. The elusive challenge remains developing the diplomatic track to complement not contradict the dynamics on the battlespace. It may be complex and spread over several rounds beyond just the military, focusing on nonmilitary elements of contestation, but is the only way forward. The key remains to decipher the complexities of contemporary wars and the nuanced understanding of accommodative victory, to find a mutually acceptable path for the cessation of hostilities.

### **EVOLVING CANVAS OF CONTEMPORARY WARS**

The rapid transformation in society and the global power play have brought about rapid changes in the geo-political and geo-economic canvas impacting war and peace. From competition to coercion to confrontation and conflict is now an escalatory ladder of contestation. While the traditional linkages between war and politics remain, the mechanisms driving these have altered.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary wars have witnessed a tectonic shift in the goals of war, the rules of war, the players, and the instruments of war, reshaping its character and redefining its lexicon. Culture, history, geography, technology, society, geostrategy, doctrines, economics, trade, financial system,

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5 Jo Adetunji, "Can wars no longer be won?", *The Conversation*, December 2, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/can-wars-no-longer-be-won-126068>.

6 Mohammad I. Zaidi, "The conduct of war and the notion of victory: a theory and definition of victory", Cranfield CERES, December 1, 2010, <http://dspace.lib.cranfield.ac.uk/handle/1826/4684>.

and nationalism all combine to shape the modern battlespace. Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan are glaring recent examples and the Russia-Ukraine War has added a new dimension of pawns, proxies and players complicating the notion of victory. There are more questions than answers. Are 21st century wars driven by objectives beyond the politico-military? Are proxies and mercenaries the new players in these hybrid conflicts? Are players driving and making war a lucrative business, including arms and oil/energy lobbies? Are these lobbies backdoor financial support systems, thus gaining political space? These are just some of the harsh realities of 21st century wars.

The Clausewitzian meaning of war gaining political favour, which dominated military thinking, that war has only one grammar, is today questioned by the experiences of the never-ending wars of today. The debate is on—How do we know we are at war? Who is participating in the war? What rules govern war? Who is winning the war? How do we know the war has ended?<sup>7</sup> Thus, the national security calculus and understanding of war dynamics demand a relook through a more holistic prism.

Prevailing in the future battlespace will also require a deep and wider understanding of its constituents and complexities. The weaponization of everyday technologies and the socio-cultural battle space used by those within and outside the military is fast transforming perceptions of good over evil. Perception management has become the new centre of gravity and narratives are scripting the contest of victory. These may, however, often diverge widely from ground realities. Thus, conflict resolution has also gone beyond those who

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7 A.B. Shivane, “Making The Military Future-Ready”, *Raksha Anirveda*, January 14, 2023, <https://raksha-anirveda.com/making-the-military-future-ready/>.

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initiate conflict to geopolitical complexities and cheerleaders who grab the opportunity for their power play and national interest. In this muddle, there are players, pawns, proxy actors, mercenaries, fence-sitters, opportunists, and bulls with varied diverse interests playing for their selfish goals. This makes securing positive peace even more difficult.

### **DEFEAT MECHANISM**

Military power is a principal variable in theories of the geopolitics, geostrategy, state legitimacy, national identity, growth, and culture of a nation-state. It empowers diplomacy and is insurance for a nation's growth trajectory. Thus, its application in war must result in desired outcomes. This is also directly proportional to the nation's long-term investment in its armed forces for the D Day.

Traditionally, there have been three main drivers of military victory.



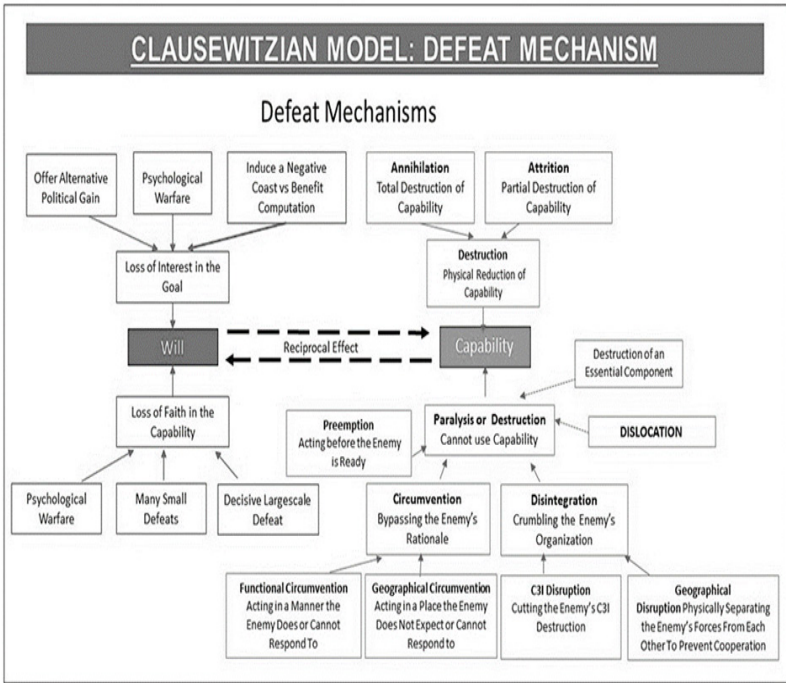
One, material resources, sometimes referred to as force ratios; two, a manoeuvre which results in the dislocation of enemy forces and three, nontangibles, such as human valour, courage, morale, and team spirit. Of course, technology and multi-domain capabilities are inbuilt into each of these. Their

interplay and synergy contribute to the theory of the defeat mechanism.

Defeat Mechanism is the process that targets the physical capabilities and the psychological vulnerabilities of an army, eventually resulting in its paralysis. The adversary's physical capability can be adversely diluted by the degradation of its manpower and its war-fighting resources, but not necessarily their complete annihilation. Often, partial destruction or sufficient degradation is adequate to dilute the warfighting capability below the desired threshold, because of the psychological effect of accumulating casualties and loss of means. The three principal means of defeat are preemption, dislocation, and disruption/degradation. Preempting the enemy army's preparations for offensive or defensive action, dislocating (physical, functional, moral, and temporal) its capabilities and disrupting its lines of communication or destroying of an essential component in its structure may also prevent that army from fulfilling its tasks.<sup>8</sup> This, in essence, is manoeuvre warfare, which targets the ability to fight and saps the will to fight. The will to fight can also be uprooted by convincing the enemy of the futility of fighting, or that the cost-benefit will be extremely adverse.

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8 Eado Hecht, "Defeat Mechanisms: The Rationale Behind the Strategy", *Infinity Journal*, Volume 4, Issue 2, 2014, <https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/Defeat-Mechanisms-The-Rationale-Behind-the-Strategy/>.



The above Clausewitzian model is too simplistic, yet enduring when applied to the contemporary battlespace. The complexities surrounding geopolitics, war economics, diplomacy, and strategy necessitate redefining the defeat mechanism. Victory and defeat, although opposites, are not binary. The lexicon of victory is as ambiguous as the perplexity of defeat. The key issue in the defeat mechanism is that the continuing power of physical and psychological resistance of the enemy must lie below the winnability scale. Thus, strategic success or strategic advantage assumes a more plausible term in contemporary conflicts.

Victory and defeat in contemporary conflict are inherently ambiguous, subjective, and transitory. Though victory can be



hideously costly in modern war, and invariably accomplishes far less than it is intended to achieve, it is not an entirely vacuous concept.<sup>9</sup> Victory may be seen in the context of achieving or denying an adversary politico-military objectives/end states, at least cost and minimum time, and is thus indicative of a better outcome than that which existed before the war. Sometimes the status quo for an adversary also constitutes a victory. What derives from antiquity here is not the general concept of victory itself, but the notion that, instead of yielding an absolute victory for one side and, conversely, an undeniable defeat for the other, modern armed conflicts are prone to descend into protracted, drawn-out endgames. Success is a matter of perspective, which varies with the perception of the players involved and nations at large. The challenge arising from this is to rethink how we define military victory in the 21st-century warfare. Historian Christopher Hill once wrote, “The ever-changing character of war demands that every generation must also rethink its understanding of military victory.”<sup>10</sup>

### COMPLEXITIES OF VICTORY AND DEFEAT

Wars are fought for securing peace, yet the connotation of peace, be it positive or negative peace, remains ambiguous. Negative peace implies that there is no war, no violent conflict between states or within states. Yet the absence of war by itself does not guarantee peace or prevent confrontation below the threshold of war. It is more commonly called ‘No War, No Peace’. Positive peace is essentially the restoration of trust

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9 Cian O’Driscoll, “Can wars no longer be won? *The Conversation*, December 2, 2019, <https://ca.sports.yahoo.com/news/wars-no-longer-won-060024739.html>.

10 Cian O’Driscoll, “What If No One Can Ever Really Win a War Anymore?” *The National Interest*, February 22, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/what-if-no-one-can-ever-really-win-war-anymore-126016?page=0%2C2>.

and relationships, the creation of social systems that serve the needs of the whole population and the constructive resolution of conflict. The views of what constitutes a better peace will often differ widely between belligerents.

Victory as a concept is mystifying in general and even more so in the context of contemporary wars. Military victories alone do not conclude the outcome of these wars. They provide opportunities and conditions for the desired political end state. Even a political end state is not always a product of premeditated strategic choice. War termination often lacks rationality, and rarely follows a course anticipated by the participants, as states rarely finish wars for the same reasons that they start them. Different lenses can be used to look at the idea as several factors impede a clear-cut understanding of victory.<sup>11</sup> Victory is also subjective, with perceptions of the various actors in conflict, at different levels, varying according to their beliefs and manipulation. At the basic level are the physical, moral, temporal and perception domains, with a host of sub-factors adding to their complexity. This results in shades of victory and defeat. One of the most common synonyms for victory is ‘to prevail’, ‘to triumph’, whilst another common synonym is ‘success’. To reiterate, victory and defeat, although opposites, are not binary, as illustrated in the Figure below, introducing a scale of success – defeat, lose – not lose, stalemate, not win – win, and victory. These scales are closely related yet independent variables that can be used in analysing and understanding contemporary conflict.<sup>12</sup>

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11 E.A. de Landmeter, “What constitutes victory in modern war?”, *Militaire Spectator*, March 20, 2018, <https://militairespectator.nl/artikelen/what-constitutes-victory-modern-war>.

12 A.B. Shivane, “The Notion of Victory in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Warfare”, in AK Singh & Narender Kumar eds., *Battle Ready for the 21 Century*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2022, pp. 6-27.



Victory and defeat are opposites but are connected and can be described on sliding scales as a function of the interaction between opponents.<sup>13</sup> More often, military victory refers to achieving a favourable military end state for the furtherance of the war’s political object. However, the defeated adversary and its population may choose not to accept their defeat and the peace on the victor’s terms. Thus, victory does not necessarily end violence and often marks a transition to negative peace. Victory is also inherently subjective; it depends on the viewpoint of the actors involved in the conflict and how the result is perceived and assessed.<sup>14</sup> The subjectivity problem is further enhanced by the multiple actors, in particular non-state actors, and their wide variety of interests, methods, and goals. Thus, victory as a concept for contemporary wars/conflicts is ambiguous and debatable. The political and economic dimensions of victory, too, have outgrown the military. Further

13 E.A. de Landmeter, op. cit.

14 A.B. Shivane, “Youth and the changing geopolitical landscape”, *Taaza Khabar*, May 2023, <https://taazakhabarnews.com/youth-and-the-changing-geopolitical-landscape/>.

victory is not just what is achieved in the battlespace, but also what is perceived by both domestic and global audiences. As seen in Iraq, Afghanistan and the ongoing Ukraine war, the formulation of victory now requires more long-term, abstract, and less tangible and immediate terms of interpretation. The diversity in perception of victory and defeat is now related to viewing different perspectives and their changes over time. Around-the-clock media coverage, information warfare and social media plausibly affect perceptions. Modern armed conflict has thus become a battle of narratives as much as a violent struggle. The multitude of complexities surrounding this illusive concept is indicated in the Figure below.



The notion of victory also requires considerable strategic patience, because while the hostilities may cease, the political, social, cultural, and economic issues may remain unresolved. Concurrently, both sides reach levels of strategic exhaustion and need to re-strategise, rebuild, and reapply forces. The fatigue factor of the public, because of destruction, loss of lives and economic costs, also plays its part in the dynamics, as nationalism is an important driver of conflict. Post-conflict reconstruction is another challenge for a war-torn economy, which exposes its vulnerabilities to exploitation by others. Such are the nuances of the notion of victory and beyond.

## **RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR- A CASE STUDY**

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is another never-ending war which is redefining the global order and creating new polarities. It may be termed as a non-contact, hybrid, third-world war, with players, proxies, and pawns. While the friction is embedded in the historical and geopolitical context, the narratives are built around the expansion of spheres of influence or regaining perceived historically lost influence. In short the US' NATO-fication and Russia's Russification. A war that has been provoked and ignited by the US-led West and initiated by Russia.

The provocation by the US and UK was essentially to expand NATO to Ukraine and Georgia, to surround Russia in the Black Sea region with NATO countries (Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Georgia, in counterclockwise order) having installed an anti-Russian regime in Ukraine. The ugly outcome is the US and UK have destroyed Ukraine and European economies for personal agendas of their leaders. An assurance of respecting Russian security concerns and assurances not to 'NATOfy' Ukraine could have averted this catastrophe. The fate of Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Yemen, Pakistan, and Yugoslavia is a testimony of the past outcomes of proxy confrontations. Russian President Vladimir Putin, on several occasions, stated that the war was not against Ukraine but against the United States. In a real sense, he was right, even though he meant it only as propaganda. Ukraine remains a puppet in the game, no longer in control of its destiny or the trajectory of the war. China as a fence sitter is having the last laugh, with the decline in US global power and status and Washington's progressive retrenchment. PLA is learning lessons and fine-tuning its possible Taiwan adventure, assessing US response capabilities and vulnerabilities. US' short-sighted

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North Atlantic focus to counter Russia has created space for its principal competitor, China, in the South Pacific. China's assertive rise and global realignments are now accelerating the shift in global power from the West to the East.

While Ukrainian President Zelensky has stated that the war in Ukraine has united the West, it is also true that it has divided the West from the rest. The global south reels under its fallout. The gap between the West and the rest goes beyond the rights and wrongs of the war. The Russia-Ukraine war is not about democracy versus autocracy, as is being projected by the West. The fact is, two-thirds of the world's population lives in countries that are officially neutral or supportive of Russia. These countries do not form some kind of axis of autocracy; they include several notable and highly respected democracies, such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa. The United States, 4,400 miles away across the Atlantic Ocean, has convinced almost every nation in Europe to voluntarily commit resources and arms to Ukraine and join the sanctions bandwagon against Russia. This has led to economic suicide and the destabilization of societies. The European Union (EU) had huge dependencies on Russia for its economic sustenance and livelihood. Since the EU's energy decoupling from Russia massive plants, mills, and factories have closed disrupting the European economy and bringing misery to the people.

The tragedy of the Ukrainian conflict is embedded in the historical past and geopolitical present. In particular, the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, the Treaty of Versailles 1919, the Marshall Plan of 1948, the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, and the US-driven unilateralism of the last three decades post-disintegration of the Soviet Union. Between 1997 and 2021, NATO expanded manifold in five tranches, to bring the threat into the Russian backyard. A clash was inevitable, when no assurances of retraction or peace found favour.

Ironically, Ukraine became the West-enticed pawn in the game and was led down the garden path in an essentially Russia – US power play. The US-led Western proxy narrative changed from saving Ukraine to weakening Russia to NATOfication, albeit through militarisation of the rest. Instead of peace and diplomacy the option exercised by the US-led West was arming and sanctions, which have substantially boomeranged. The grammar of escalating sanctions has been an abject failure, especially in pushing the conflict to an end. Moreover, it has created alternative markets for the Russians.

The conflict still raging in Ukraine has left widespread chaos, destruction and suffering in its wake – a calamity whose proportion will be known only to the war-ravaged country that has, indeed, been ‘Ukrained’ (let down by those who propped it up).<sup>15</sup>



Once again diplomacy took a backseat in preference to expanding/curtailing spheres of influence, with little concern for human miseries and catastrophic destruction. The art of conflict prevention and conflict resolution gave way to the science of conflict extension for selfish agendas. The Western narrative of Russia losing, ‘ostriches’ the realities of Russia not only gaining large vital territory but, more importantly,

15 A.B. Shivane, “Russia-Ukraine Conflict: The Great Betrayal”, *Raksha-Anirveda*, March 24, 2022, <https://raksha-anirveda.com/russia-ukraine-conflict-the-great-betrayal/>.

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controlling the Ukrainian industrial heartland, its energy resources, its ports, and shores, and making it a landlocked, economically ravaged, skeleton state. The Ukraine counter offensive, a show of strength of the western war machines, has yet to measurably turn the tide and succeeds more on narratives than the battlefield.

A protracted conflict risks possible nuclear escalation or a direct Russian-NATO conflict. Ukraine's dependency as a nation-state would rest on the levers of the West which will cause budgetary challenges of reconstruction. The global economic fallout has already cast its shadows, including volatility in food and energy prices. For the US, the consequences of weakening Russia will be adverse, coming at the cost of strengthening China and creating a powerful Eurasian power bloc, which is likely to eventually challenge US primacy. Against this backdrop, the West's notion of victory as the primary fueler of this war remains debatable. Russia under Putin would look for signs of fatigue in the West but will not accept concessions over the immense gains secured at the cost of lives and resources. Nevertheless, the protraction of the conflict will increasingly turn Moscow's strategic outlook negative and impact its long-term economy. Thus, Russia too needs to define its own notion of victory or honourable exit.

#### **NO VICTORY NO VANQUISHED-THE STRATEGIC SCOREBOARD**

The reality is no one is winning the war in Ukraine. After more than 15 months of war, neither Russia nor Ukraine and its Western allies are any closer to their desired end state. Neither side has the capacity – aided or unaided – to achieve a decisive victory. The real challenge is, who will lose less? So, while both sides continue to take losses, the moot question is, who will suffer more. In this war, there is no righteous sides, nor any noble intentions. There is mistrust and unreasonable conditions for peace being offered, more so from those arming



the war. These will never allow a cease fire to get off the starter block. Thus, negotiations remain stalled and offensive/counter-offensive seesaw battles continue. The focus remains on aiding the parties in conflict to fight, rather than facilitating peace.

<b>RUSSIA UKRAINE CONFLICT- NO ONE WILL WIN THE WAR; IT IS WHO WILL LOSE LESS ?</b>			
<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>GAINS</b>	<b>LOSSES</b>	<b>NOTION OF VICTORY</b>
<b>RUSSIA</b>	RUSSIFICATION. TERRITORIAL GAINS, DEMILITISATION, DE NAZIFICATION of UKRAINE	MILITARISED EUROPE, EXPANDED NATO, CHINA DEPENDENCY- ECONOMY, HI TECH AND UNLIKELY AN INDEPENDENT POLE	GLOBAL RESPECT OR DISCREDIT? SUBDUING UKRAINE? STRATEGICALLY WEAKENING US?
<b>USA (PROXY)</b>	NATOFICATION. CONTAIN AND WEAKEN RUSSIA. ARMS, ENERGY, POST WAR CONTRACTS. EUROPE DEPENDENCY ON US	CHINA-RUSSIA-IRAN? EURASIAN AXIS? GLOBAL FINANCIAL SYSTEM, ECO COST. RETRENCHMENT. STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY FOR CHINA AND NEW WORLD ORDER.	WEAKENED RUSSIA? NATOFICATION? CREATING DEPENDENCY IN EUROPE?
<b>UKRAINE</b>	GLOBAL IMAGE- NATIONALISM	TERRITORIAL, SOVEREIGNTY, REFUGEES, ECONOMY. DEVASTATION. PAWN STATE STATUS.	RESISTANCE – US MONEY & WEAPONARY VS CATASTROPHIC DAMAGE AS A NATION?
<b>EUROPE</b>	PERCEIVED THREAT AND	ENERGY, INSTABILITY, ECO, REFUGEES, DEF EXPENDITURE, HOSTAGE TO USA? SOARING INFLATION AND LOW SUPPLIES. RECESSION?	CRACKS WITHIN – FASTER NEGOTIATIONS. STRAT GOAL? STRATEGIC COLLECTIVE SECURITY?
<b>CHINA</b>	STRATEGIC LEVERAGE – NEW POLES – COUNTER US LEVERAGE STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY. RUSSIAN DEPENDENCY AND NEW FINANCIAL ORDER?	ECO LINKAGE WITH EUROPE DISRUPTED.	WINING TIME AND DIVERTING ADVERSARY; LIMITING US GLOBAL POWER STATUS?
<b>WORLD</b>	MULTILATERALISM – MULTIENGAGEMENT	INFLATION, FOOD, ENERGY, RECESSION, GLOBAL INSTABILITY	IS THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE????

## RUSSIA

The Russian aim at the start of the war was to prevent further NATO expansion, have the alliance refrain from deploying assault weapon systems on Russian borders and, finally, roll back the bloc's military capability and infrastructure in Europe to where they were in 1997, when the NATO-Russia Founding Act<sup>16</sup> was signed. Apart from this the stated aim was to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, which seemed to be getting closer to the Western camp and NATO ambitions. Ironically, the military-economic-political aid extended to Ukraine by the West, the rise of anti-Russian opinion among the Ukrainian population, and the granting of EU candidate member status to Ukraine now makes the country's Western turn a *fait accompli* and its Western alliance even stronger. A strategic miscalculation Russia did not foresee from what was started as a quick strike, but that has transformed into a protracted, never-ending war. Instead of restricting NATO expansion, Russia today faces the reality of Finland as a new member, and Sweden on the anvil of the alliance, after years of neutrality even at the height of the Cold War. Another fallout has been the militarisation of its flanks, clearly against Russia, by NATO's European partners, in a major reversal to peaceful coexistence. Russia has thus ensured for itself long-term hostility with Europe right on its borders, as much as traditionally with the US. Russia has certainly made large territorial gains, with a high casualty rate, and financial strain, but ironically ended up with the extension of a direct land border with NATO by over 1,000 kilometres in terms of Finland. In addition, while the sanctions have had little impact and remained counterproductive in the short term, their high

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16 *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation* signed in Paris, France, May 27, 1997, [https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm).

economic cost in the long term is yet to be seen. Ironically, Russia has also become China's junior partner, to plug gaps in the economic and technology sphere, which it historically dominated. Russia's economic, investment and technological needs were earlier being met by the advanced economies of the West, thus China's pivot becomes the default option. The reality is, from a major power with a say in the world order, Russia is now threatened with a dwindling war economy and military resource commitment, and will find it difficult to remain an independent pole in a future multipolar world.

## USA

The US aim was clearly to contain Russia and its allies and NATOfy Europe including Ukraine and territories adjacent to Russia. The subsequent deployment of NATO arms was only a matter of time. The US armament and oil industry continues to boom with orders from Europe and Ukraine, after a brief lull following the withdrawal from Afghanistan. US arms dealers and oil producers have reaped billions of dollars in the windfall from the Ukraine war price surge, recording the biggest profits in recent times. Thus, Ukraine remains a booming industry and testing ground for the West, with the further carrot of a reconstruction boom after the cessation of hostilities. Ironically business and selfish national interests of those outside fighting are calling the shots. The loss of life and mayhem of war with the continuation of hostilities is not the focus of pawns, players, and proxies in this war.

The greatest threat to the US is posed not by bleeding Russia but by a belligerent China, which is seeking to displace the US as the world's dominant power. The US may gain in arms, energy sales and post-war contracts, but the biggest strategic loss is getting Russia-China-Iran together in strategic partnership, closer than ever before. It may also be the

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beginning of the US decline and quest for alternate global/localised financial systems, undermining its grip on the current global financial system.

## **UKRAINE**

After 2014, instead of rolling back, Kyiv increased its military ties to the West and became an enhanced opportunity partner of NATO in 2020, with the US continuing to affirm Ukraine's aspirations to join the alliance. The Russia-Ukraine war is a manifestation of the Russia – US rivalry, and Ukraine is the scapegoat. Ukraine has lost territorial integrity, and sovereignty, has 9.6 million refugees and a devastated country in all spheres, and is currently under Martial Law. It has played the blind puppet to the West. Ukraine's war and rising inflation have driven four million children into poverty. Several thousand soldiers and civilians have been killed and millions displaced with catastrophic damage to infrastructure and basic amenities such as shelter, food, clean water, and electricity. This has left scars for many a generation to come.

## **EUROPE**

The EU's decoupling from Russian energy will have a negative impact of soaring inflation and low supplies for households and industry, which could push the region into a recession. Such a scenario could have already started creating fissures in European unity, with France and Germany seemingly more eager for a faster-negotiated solution and accommodation of Russia within Europe. Europe, especially Germany, will lose energy, peace, and security, will have to spend more on defence, and will have sizeable refugee load, mixed in with mercenaries. There will also be a measurable loss of strategic autonomy to the USA.

## CHINA

China's response to the Russia-Ukraine War has been a careful balancing act with distance diplomacy at the core. It needs to be seen through the lens of China's geostrategic competition with the US. China has refused to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, opposed economic sanctions imposed by the West, and abstained or sided with Russia in United Nations votes on the war in Ukraine. It has pursued a policy of neutrality, adopting a superficial posture of peace making, to shape the international order. The now infamous joint declaration issued on February 4 in which President Putin and President Xi pledged their "no limits" partnership also referred to "international relations entering a new era." A protracted Russia – Ukraine war with the commitment of the US and Western resources seems to serve China's strategic interest. It provides both strategic opportunity and an understanding of US-led capabilities and vulnerabilities on the platter. It also prepares Beijing for future economic warfare and has helped China reap massive economic benefits from Russia's misadventure and US sanctions.

Further, along with Russia, Beijing aims to weaken the all-powerful US dollar as a global currency and create a new financial order with the Yuan's expanded role. The discounted oil supplies, grains and coal denominated in renminbi (RMB) rather than US dollars, have added to its strategic reserves. China is now the equal largest importer of Russian oil and has signed a new 30-year gas deal.<sup>17</sup> The termination of the war or a victory for either side would not be in China's interest. A Ukraine victory would strengthen the hegemony of the US-

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17 Stuart Coles et. al., "Seven ways Russia's war on Ukraine has changed the world", Chatham House, February 20, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/02/seven-ways-russias-war-ukraine-has-changed-world>.

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led West, and would be detrimental to Beijing's 'reunification' goals. If Russia wins decisively, it will enhance its sphere of influence and possible economic integration with Europe, again would reverse Russia's increasing dependency on China. China would like to keep Russia as a dependent weaker partner and a resource asset. Thus, a lose-lose situation in the war best meets its strategic interest.

### **THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND THE REST**

The war has not only created instability in Europe, but it has also created a food and energy security crisis globally, including in the Middle East and Africa, when the world was barely recovering from the pandemic. It has divided the world opinion into Ayes, Noes and those who abstained – the last category essentially from Africa and Asia. The world has suffered inflation, food and energy insecurities, and risks of recession, as a result of this big power contestation. Non-West and many neutral countries have not joined the West in sanctioning Russia, a win-win situation for both the former categories. The US's untrustworthy past and interventionist opportunism have also cast shadows. It serves the national interest of Russia not to be isolated and secure alternate markets, while the other side benefits from cheap oil in plenty. The benefit to the Global South of not siding with the West, however, will demand both time and resources and Russia efforts to continue to expand its influence as a global power will remain a challenge.

### **INDIA AND THE UKRAINE WAR FALLOUT**

As regards India, it has played its cards well in balancing its conflicting choices. India's stand has been principled and bold. Every nation has the right to carve its foreign policy based on its national interests and make choices based on a cost-benefit

analysis.<sup>18</sup> The UN stands antiquated and defunct as a global peacemaker. India's stand is not pro-Russia or pro-US, it is pro-India, and works for the preservation and furtherance of its national interest. There are no interests but self-interests in *realpolitik*. There is nothing known as absolute strategic autonomy; strategic dependence is suicidal; so strategic balancing in pursuit of one's national interest is pragmatic. India will have to balance the trinity of US-Russia-China to meet its national interests in the short, medium, and long term. Both Russia and US need an emergent India, as much as India needs them for geopolitical balancing and meeting its technology and economic needs.

In *realpolitik*, strategic opportunism is now an acceptable norm. India is no more a swing power, but a balancing power based on its national interests. India stands at the cusp of strategic opportunity, from being a spectator to a player in the global arena. In the present geopolitical context, the world needs India more than India needs the world, because of its geostrategic location, its economic resilience and military capability, duly empowered by decisive polity and agile diplomacy. Thus, India needs to play its card well in a long-term perspective.

However, India needs to learn the lessons so far from the ongoing conflict, both from the Russian and the Ukrainian perspective. India will have to fight its battles alone. No nation will step into another's conflict zone, irrespective of strategic partnerships and projected bonhomie. Moreover, the sanctions will hurt India's energy security, economy, and military modernization plans. The huge dependency on Russian equipment will have its challenges, especially in conflict

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18 A.B. Shivane, "Diplomacy in Defining Russian-Ukraine Conflict", *Scholar Warrior*, Autumn 2022, <https://www.claws.in/publication/scholar-warrior-autumn-2022/>.

scenarios. The emergency procurement, as in the past, from a war zone in Russia, may not be pragmatic. *Atmanirbharta* (self-reliance) is a strategic necessity in the pursuance and preservation of national interest. Yet, *Atmanirbharta* is a long-term imperative; in the short and medium term, it is a tedious journey with several ambiguities and challenges. Self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and technology infusion is desirable in all spheres, particularly defence; but the reality is, we still need imports. It will take time to reduce imports and increase exports. Till then we need to make the best of both worlds without creating dependencies.

Militarily, India needs to bridge the capability deficit in the non-kinetic domain as well as the kinetic domain, which are mutually complementary as manifestly demonstrated in the Ukraine conflict. The Russia-Ukraine war has emboldened India's primary adversary China. China continues to deny border resolution and projects the new *status quo ante* as peace and tranquility. A typical 'salami slicing' approach. The trade dependency on China has only increased manifold, as also the adverse balance in trade. This gives China strategic leverage.

The voids in C5ISR, Space capabilities, cyber and IW also merit focus. The cliché 'War is not an option' is a self-inflicted injury. Conventional wars with hybrid content are here to stay and we need to prepare for them in all domains, with synergy. 'Boots and Tracks' on the ground will remain predominant. Yet the space, sky and oceans will be critical for dominating and deterring future threats. The greatest weakness lies in joint warfare capabilities, beyond just semantics of 'theaterisation'. The military needs to embed joint warfare in its foundation warfighting construct and move from jointness to joint dependencies. It requires a cultural revolution of minds and souls beyond just structures or doctrines.



Another area for military strategic and operational leadership reorientation is the need to imbibe a preemptive and proactive offensive outlook based on the 3D's – domination, dislocation, and denial. Our present deterrence and warfighting strategy remains essentially defensive and reactive with glaring recent examples of Kargil and Galwan. This has led to repeated strategic surprise and loss of lives.

India has batted well on the diplomatic front. Yet it needs to visualise the strategic future. It needs to envision the dynamic geopolitical melee and be prepared for the entire spectrum of contingencies employing all instruments of national power in symphony. Time is critical and India needs to be prepared to prevail with a sense of urgency.<sup>19</sup> Capabilities take time, while the intentions of adversaries can change overnight. Future threats will need to be envisioned and war-gamed at the national level. The ability to envision future scenarios and to be prepared for the worst case, is to be wise and forewarned. No country be it an ally or strategic partner can be depended upon in adversity. This is an era of strategic opportunism and *realpolitik*.

## CONCLUSION

Wars of the 21st century are complex, uncertain, and never-ending. At best, they result in negative peace. The trajectory of conflict and conflict resolution is no longer in the control of any one set of leaders or individuals. This is an era of hybrid wars with players, proxies, and pawns. The notion of victory or defeat in these wars is an ambiguous and complex relationship of narratives and counternarratives. The truth may be altogether different and never known. These wars are unwinnable. Thus, the competition is – who is losing more? Further, war has gone

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19 Ibid.

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beyond just the battlespace and has weaponised all instruments of national power. Thus, the impact is both regional and global. Yet a strong self-reliant modernised military will be the primary instrument of deterrence for a nation, duly supported by a resilient economy and decisive polity/diplomacy. The military remains the critical instrument of statecraft for exerting national will.<sup>20</sup>

As regards the Russia-Ukraine War, the key to peace in Ukraine is addressing the roots of the war, which is Ukraine's neutrality and NATO non-enlargement, in return for Russian guarantees of Ukrainian independence and sovereignty. Some borders will have to be realigned before they expand further. This is a reality which cannot be wished away. US-led weaponry will not result in victory or end the war for Ukraine. Its protraction is also accompanied by the dangerous potential of its escalation and expansion beyond Ukraine. Ironically, Ukraine remains a victim of unreasonable and unattainable US strategic aspirations, and a mere pawn. The first step for peace negotiations to commence is to stop provocation, declare a ceasefire even if temporary and start a dialogue. The key players to stop the war will be the US and Russia. Zelensky could have an opportunity to get a good face-saving deal from the Russians, if the US backs a diplomatic solution. Yet only time will reveal the unpredictable trajectory on which this war is headed. Till then, it will be mayhem and destruction, which will set Russia, the US-led West and Ukraine back in time.

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20 B.S. Dhanoa, "Russia-Ukraine war: New face of 21st century conflict - no victor and no vanquished", *India Today*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/opinion-columns/story/russia-ukraine-war-decisive-victory-achievable-1957065-2022-06-01>.



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