

USING UKRAINE AS A BELLWETHER IS A PATH TO TRAGEDY

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'China is clearly not Ukraine, or for that matter Russia, and Asia is not Europe' | Photo Credit: AFP

There is much sound and fury around Ukraine these days, but it is becoming difficult to decipher the truth. What is not disputed is that Ukraine is indeed engaged in a 'struggle for existence'. Notwithstanding its heroic struggle, there is a slow realisation that the Ukraine war is approaching a stalemate. In current reckoning, it would seem that matters can only go downhill from here as Russia appears intent on employing enhanced aerial attacks, which includes the latest hypersonic missiles to subdue Ukraine.

Consequently, and while applauding the heroism of the Ukraine people, serious attempts are being made across Europe, — this includes France, Germany and the United Kingdom — on how to bring about an end to the war. Neither side is likely to be able to claim a decisive victory, and any expectations that Russia can be compelled to withdraw from areas where it made initial gains are considered extremely remote. The initial euphoria seems to have been replaced by 'battle fatigue', and with the Ukraine imbroglio beginning to be viewed as a 'US backed NATO proxy war' against Russia, European leaders are at present engaged in finding ways and means to bring about a ceasefire, than in perpetuating the conflict.

Several other reasons can also be adduced for Europe's current mind-set. First, notwithstanding the generous supply of state-of-the-art weapons from the United States, Europe is painfully aware that it remains entirely at the mercy of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the U.S. today. Europe's defence industry continues to remain extremely fragile, and prospects that this would change appear remote, thus perpetuating Europe's dependence on the U.S. and NATO. Second, in the realm of economics, Europe is hurting, and the prospect of a prolonged stalemate and a war without end appears highly daunting. European leaders, including Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz, are now engaging in quiet diplomacy to end the war, without making it appear that Europe has had to make major compromises.

What has become all too evident, meanwhile, is not only Europe but also to much of the world is that the Ukraine conflict has convincingly demonstrated that the U.S. was the true defender of Europe, and in a manner not seen after World War II. Firmly entrenched in the peoples' psyche is that without the U.S., Europe would neither have come together nor provided Ukraine with

whatever support it needed to resist Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The convincing demonstration of U.S. superiority over Russian weaponry in regard to shoulder-fired surface to air missiles, anti-tank weapons such as the Javelin, and launchers such as HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Mobility Rocket System), has since given the U.S. additional confidence to take on all comers. In turn, this kind of thinking might well lead them to the next stage of convincing the world that the U.S. today can stave-off any challenge to its supremacy.

The situation is pregnant with many possibilities. The Ukraine adventure or misadventure is, however, helping the U.S. to erase images of its retreat from Afghanistan which had greatly hollowed out the reputation of the U.S. as a world power. This has since fuelled new ambitions in U.S. and western minds.

Both the right and wrong lessons could well be derived from this. It could encourage a U.S., flush with its recent success in Europe, to believe that the momentum now lies with it, and that if there is a tide in the affairs of a nation which if exploited at the right time can lead to success, then this is, perhaps, the best time and opportunity for such experimentation.

Such reasoning could also prove dangerous. Ukraine and the war in Europe is hardly a laboratory for similar experiments elsewhere. U.S. 'triumphalism' or what it might have achieved in Ukraine without the loss of a single American life, as also the demonstration of the superiority of its weaponry, could also lead to misadventures. China is clearly not Ukraine, or for that matter Russia, and Asia is not Europe. What has taken place in Ukraine and Europe cannot be a bellwether for what might happen if a conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific were to take place.

For its part, China is preparing for all eventualities. The language being used by China today is among the harshest and most direct in recent times. Alleging that the U.S. is engaged in the suppression and containment of China, it has warned that "if the US does not hit the brakes and continue to speed down the wrong path, no amount of guardrails can prevent derailment, leading to conflict and confrontation". Chinese President Xi Jinping for his part, has directly accused the U.S. and western countries of the all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China.

Many of these statements were made on the sidelines of the National People's Congress (NPC) held earlier this month, with China's newly appointed Foreign Minister, Qin Gang, openly accusing the U.S. of attempting to encircle China through its Indo-Pacific strategy (which, according to him, was an Asia-Pacific version of NATO) and whose real purpose was to encircle China.

Chinese criticism tends to be usually obtuse and seldom direct, but it has been unusually forthright this time, prompting concerns that China may be getting ready for a direct confrontation with the U.S., so as to effectively thwart a U.S. effort to restore its dominant position in world affairs.

Adding grist to such concerns is the Chinese leader Xi Jinping's call to delegates attending the recent NPC, viz., to maximise its 'national strategic capabilities' in a bid to "systematically upgrade the country's overall strength and safeguard its strategic interests and realise its strategic objectives".

While Taiwan may remain the flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific, further aggravated by the repeated visits in recent weeks of top U.S. military leaders to Taiwan, newer tensions are adding fresh grist to possibilities of a conflict in other regions in the Indo-Pacific. U.S. claims in the wake of the Ukraine conflict, of defeating all-comers, could instigate more tensions that lead on to a

conflict which comes perilously close to an open confrontation culminating in a war.

All wars start with a misreading, or misunderstanding, of the intentions of the other side. The U.S.'s success in assisting Ukraine to withstand the Russian offensive and, incidentally undermining Russia's image of being a kind of super power in Europe, appears to be encouraging the U.S. and certain other western powers to redefine the global power equation and seek a return to the post-1945 period in world affairs. After Europe, the target appears to be China.

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It would, however, be a gross misreading of the situation if the U.S. were to attempt the containment of China at this time, flush with its success in Europe and provoking retaliation elsewhere, thus paving the way for a new world conflict. It could turn out to be a tragedy of gigantic proportions.

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