

THE LEARNING GROUNDS OF UKRAINE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Destroyed Russian military vehicles lie in a garbage dump in Bucha, on the outskirts of Kyiv, Ukraine. | Photo Credit: AP

Mariupol has fallen (sans the Azovstov steel mill), the existence of the 'Ghost of Kyiv' fighter pilot has been officially denied by Ukraine, the media reports that Europe is trying to fully phase out its dependency on Russian energy and that some embassies are reopening in Kyiv — but, even as the Ukraine-Russia conflict recedes from the public glare, the misery for the common citizen continues. This is expected to last many more months, if not years, considering the East-West politics and great power equations at play and the resilience shown by the Ukrainians (with copious armament supplies from the West). Over two months into the conflict, it is time to draw some interim lessons.

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First, alliances do matter in this inter-connected world no matter how powerful a country may be. So, while the David in the conflict has the backing of Europe and NATO, the Goliath too is pulling out all stops to make sure that China's sentiments stay with it and India continues its fine balancing act, a victory for Moscow given India's democratic credentials and the not-so-subtle pressure brought on by the West on New Delhi. With time these equations may change when the practical realities of geo-economics start biting and the weightage of theoretical geo-politics starts waning; money power talks decisively in real life. A long-term sustainable view that looks after India's interests through linkages with other like-minded nations is therefore vital, especially since our neighbourhood is not benign. Though it is too early to say that a truncated Ukrainian nation is what would emerge when the conflict ends, what we have witnessed is that brute 'power' has spoken; here, there is a vital lesson for India.

Second, the key to power is intelligence, just as it is to combat. American intelligence was right about Russian President Vladimir Putin's intentions to go to war. 'Political war' was at play, as a CNN report put it; it was all part of a strategy to prevent Moscow from launching a false flag operation and blame Ukraine for starting it. In the event, Mr. Putin himself had to announce the launch of a "special military operation." That high-resolution satellite imagery is now commercially available to any nation that is willing to pay levels the playing field a bit in modern warfare. Most of the strategic intelligence, though, is gathered during peacetime and one would only be sage to remember the adage that in international relations there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests. So, while it is important to have tactical knowledge of enemy dispositions, what is much more vital is to discern the thought process of the adversary's leadership.

Third, leadership counts and good leaders have an intangible positive impact – an almost axiomatic reality re-emphasised by the visuals and pep talks tweeted by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy these past months, as he conveyed two vital messages from the streets of Ukraine. The first was that the Ukrainian leadership was intact and second, their executive head was in the fight as much as the citizens were; that he has never appeared in a business suit, and always in combat fatigues (even while meeting foreign leaders), has added a halo to his standing. Contrast this with the flight of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as the Taliban closed in on Kabul – resistance collapsed and Afghan soldiers melted away; here, the Ukrainians have

given the Russians a run for their money.

Finally, in the realm of realpolitik a country's vital interests can be protected only by that country, and hence the potency of a nation boils down to its Comprehensive National Power (CNP). CNP is a true yardstick of a nation's deterrence capability and its ability to fight if deterrence fails, as it takes into account social and political stability, aspects of economic strength, natural resources, geography, R&D capability, manufacturing capacity and quality of its national leadership. For India, surrounded by two adversarial nations, a true appraisal is necessary since the government's well-meaning *aatmanirbharta* drive has still to reach take-off speed. A nation doesn't become *aatmanirbhar* overnight and New Delhi has to allocate available resources to imports that would still take place (especially in the defence sector) while domestic capability and capacity is ramped up in parallel. Social cohesion is another vital ingredient in CNP and needs the leadership's focused attention at all times in our multicultural and multi-religious polity. With international relations in a churn, a new rising power in China, Russia trying to regain its lost status and Pakistan not turning any friendlier, it is imperative that there be no chink in India's deterrence armour.

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