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The American empire in the fog of Ukraine

A war that grinds without dramatic shifts poses a challenge to political judgment; the observer is tempted to make a sweeping historical judgment

In a critique of the political thinker James Burnham, penned in the wake of World War II, George Orwell wrote, 'Power worship blurs political judgment because it leads, almost unavoidably, to the belief that present trends will continue. Whoever is winning at the moment will always seem to be invincible. If the Japanese have conquered South Asia, then they will keep South Asia forever, if the Germans have captured Tobruk, they will infallibly capture Cairo; if the Russians are in Berlin, it will not be long before they are in London: and so on.'

Orwell was characterising the intellectual response to a conflict that had fairly clear directional trends — steady advances for the Axis powers until about 1942, followed by a grinding, brutal but consistent Allied counteroffensive. But a war that seems stalemated, that grinds without dramatic shifts, poses a somewhat different challenge to political judgment; the observer is always tempted to discern a certain trend, a sweeping historical judgment, amid a state of ebb and flow and wartime fog.

Things are not as they might seem

The war in Ukraine is a case study, yielding very different big-picture arguments based on developments from month to month and even week to week. Thus, you see, one moment, the delays and the disappointingly slow progress of a Ukrainian counteroffensive securing realist sceptics in their certainty that the war will inevitably turn Russia's way. The next moment, the bizarre Yevgeny Prigozhin mutiny secures hawkish certainties about the direction of the conflict — Putinism is faltering, the Russian regime is starting to crack, and full Ukrainian victory is within reach.

The same pattern applies to analyses of how the war fits in the global

power picture. I will use my own columns as examples: At various times in the past year and a half, I have interpreted the war through the lens of revived great power conflict and the waning of the post-Cold War Pax Americana, but then also through the lens of the persistent weaknesses of America's major adversaries, the deficits of legitimacy and competence in illiberal regimes. You could accuse my interpretations of being in tension with one another, or you could defend them by saying that each captures something about a shifting and unstable reality — a world where Samuel Huntington's theory of civilizational conflict and Francis Fukuyama's end of history both have claims to relevance.

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But it isn't just the fog of Ukrainian war that makes it difficult to capture this particular moment. The exact US relationship to the rest of the world would be a bit hazy even without battlefield confusions. Clearly, our position has weakened relative to the heady 1990s or even the Barack Obama years. But the language of a 'multipolar' world, a clash of rival great powers, implies to the casual reader a kind of parity between the various poles, the United States as just one power centre among many — with the secondary implication that maybe we've entered the kind of superpower decline that unmade British power in the 20th century, or Spanish power in the 17th, or Soviet power much more rapidly than that.

And that's pretty clearly not true. America is emerging from the Covid era with stronger gross domestic product growth than the rest of the Group of 7. It's China, not America, that faces the more acute birth-rate crisis. It's the United Kingdom and Italy and Japan, not America, that seem in danger of becoming 'undeveloping' countries, with stagnation shading into decline. Pick your example — the clear military weakness of Russia relative to NATO, the GDP of even our poorest state relative to that of other developed countries — and US advantages seem resilient.

Consequences of changes

At the same time, you also can't seriously argue that the US imperium has anything like the freedom of action it enjoyed two decades ago. Instead, you have to analyse the world in terms of both the resilience of core US power *and* the developments that have cut against US influence outside its circle of close allies. A short list might include:

— A failure of American-style liberal norms to take root outside what I've termed our 'outer empire' in Western Europe and the Pacific Rim, and the emergence instead of hybrid regimes, neither fully liberal nor fully postliberal, in rising powers like Turkey and India and to some arguable extent in Eastern Europe, too.

— A failure of armed Fukuyamaism, meaning the inability of US military power to function as a tool to spread democracy and expand our outer empire by turning Iraq and Afghanistan into the equivalent of Germany or South Korea.

— A shift in economic and military power from countries that share our values and/or regard themselves as part of a common Western civilization to countries that do not — meaning, mostly, the decline of European power relative to the rest of the world and, relatedly, a simmering resentment of both America and the West as arbiters of global priorities and international norms.

— A widening ideological gap between the specific version of liberalism ascendant in the American elite and the core values of non-American populations around the world, and a related internal division within the United States over what, in a clash of civilizations, our own civilization represents.

— The emergence of China as a real military rival — in the Pacific, if not worldwide — and an economic and diplomatic alternative to US influence across the Global South.

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The Ukraine war has been shaped by and interacted with all these trends. Vladimir Putin's revanchist rule in Russia is itself an example of the global retreat of liberalism. His decision to invade was probably encouraged by the failure of US arms in Afghanistan. Russia's relative resilience against the US-led embargo depends on both China's strength and the rest of the world's unwillingness to join fully with a US and European design. Ukraine's dependence on US aid, specifically, reflects the continuing weakness of our European partners relative to our own strength.

But that strength still casts its shadow as well: We're fighting Russia via proxy, using a fraction of our strength, and it's Russian troops stuck advancing by inches or facing counterattacks, the Russian regime that's

under massive strain.

So, which is the larger story of the Russia-Ukraine war: our strength cracking or our strength prevailing? We'll know more when the fog lifts.

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