

Struggling to Find the Exit From War

by George Friedman - June 7, 2022

French President Emmanuel Macron said last week that an off-ramp must be found for Russian President Vladimir Putin in Ukraine. This is not a novel idea. Negotiators know what they must have and what they must leave on the table for the other party. That's the way it is done when passionate hatred doesn't reign. Consider your friends' divorce negotiations. The goal of each party was many times not to find a reasonable exit but rather to inflict as much pain as possible on the other one. A skillful lawyer might find an exit ramp and convince them to take it. But war can be more bitter than the angriest divorce. Taking the exit ramp can be seen as a betrayal of the dead. Ukrainians will point to their dead and be appalled by providing Putin with a gracious exit. Russia's problem is even graver. In order to exit regardless of the ramp, they will be conceding that the invasion of Ukraine was a mistake. Sometimes it is easier to move beyond the dead than it is to admit error.

Any peace agreement founders on Putin's miscalculation. He launched the war expecting Ukraine to be incapable of waging war, believing that NATO and Europe would refuse to form a united front, and miscalculating the economic power the United States might muster against Russia or the massive amount of weapons it was prepared to provide.

This can be seen in the initial deployment of Russian armor. One force attacked from Belarus toward Kyiv. Another came out of Crimea moving toward Odesa, and another was moving into the Donbas in the east. The Russians were moving to seize the entire country in a single coordinated attack. There appears to be little thought given to resistance. Before the war began, the United Kingdom sent Ukraine Javelin anti-tank missiles, precisely the right weapon to blunt the Russian attack. The Ukrainians used them well and formed forces to resist what Russian infantry was supporting the tanks.

In Putin's assumptions, there was a fundamental geopolitical error. The attack was on Ukraine, and it was assumed by observers that his entire intent was to take Ukraine. Putin's mistake was not putting himself in the place of the Europeans and Americans, in not viewing the battlefield through their eyes – a rookie error.

The Europeans in particular had to ask this question: What happens after Ukraine? If the Russians enveloped and controlled Ukraine, what would they do next? The Russians had spoken of the threat posed by NATO. That was their justification for the invasion of Ukraine. But taking Ukraine did not

solve the NATO problem. Rather, it brought the Russians to the border of NATO from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Russia's intent was unclear. Russia's potential threat was clearer. Russia might not intend a move against NATO on its new western border, but it was altogether possible that military success in Ukraine would give them the opportunity and confidence to strike directly against Russia's stated enemy, NATO. Had Moscow swept Ukraine with the first armored strike, Russia would be seen as a great power, one that had to be placated, not resisted.

I don't know what went through the minds of NATO and national planners, but the idea that Putin would stop at Ukraine and Belarus' border was not self-evident. In any case, most of Europe and the United States acted as if preventing Russia's occupation of Ukraine was essential to their own national defense. Substantial cost was spent to weaken Russia militarily and economically. If Putin's enemy was NATO, these actions were essential.

So far, the actions have worked. Russia is fighting in eastern Ukraine, far away from the borders of NATO. The war is less about European grand strategy than about showing that Russia is capable of achieving a regional victory, and then forcing Ukraine into accepting a peace that Russia can claim as victory, at least domestically. The war is now very much about Putin's judgment and expertise. It was said that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was ousted because of hare-brained scheming. The post-communist regime justified itself by competence rather than ideology. Russia was to be a technocracy claiming expertise. Ukraine can certainly be regarded – thus far – as a hare-brained scheme to the extreme. Putin overestimated his military, underestimated his enemy and failed to grasp how identifying NATO as an enemy would provoke a massive response. He should have seen all of these things. He didn't.

He has spoken of using missiles against Ukraine. Air-launched explosives have been used since World War II, and though they have had a significant effect in wars such as Vietnam, they didn't end either conflict. In war, the enemy's territory must be seized and held. Putin's talk of missiles will not substitute for substandard ground combat.

Putin cannot accept peace while he appears to be incompetent, whether because of mounting opposition or his place in history. Macron's off-ramp for Putin is an illusion. He has no off-ramp that doesn't lead to an abyss. He cannot reach a peace agreement until he demonstrates – convincingly and not by his assertion – that his initial failures have been recovered. He must not only cripple the Ukrainian army but also seize a significant part of Ukraine. And he must do this in a way that eliminates the economic warfare he faces. It is not impossible that he has a massive reserve unknown to Western intelligence and will move with it. But if that reserve exists then he would surely

have hurled it into battle before now. Perhaps the Europeans will opt out, but the German vote on rearmament doesn't indicate a major move to the exits.

It should be remembered that war is filled with shifts. The Ukrainian forces have been engaged in intense combat on many fronts. Their troops clearly have greater morale than Russian troops, and morale, as Napoleon noted, is a key dimension of war. Months of intense conflict involving a significant portion of Ukrainian troops can break morale. But fighting for the homeland, fighting on the defensive and fighting with superior American weapons have thus far made the Ukrainian army more effective and perhaps less exhausted than the Russians. The Ukrainian weak point is that the United States in particular could halt weapons flows or ease the economic war on Russia. A peace negotiation is now an option for Ukraine. In this case, it would be essential. But the United States now needs Ukraine buffering Russia from Europe and is unlikely to shift strategy at this point.

The geopolitical point is that Russia has failed to take Ukraine or split NATO. The political fact is that Putin has failed. He cannot achieve his strategic goals. He has welded NATO into a solid force it hasn't been for a long time. More important, he has governed as the final authority on all things. The last is the bog he is caught in. He may blame others, but his country will blame him. That means that unlike the harshest divorce, he cannot concede without destroying himself. He will continue to fight. He has no one to answer to unless the regime evolves. There can be peace only if it is understood by Putin that in due course he will enter history.

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