

Weekly Commentary 23 – June 2023

War and Peace in Ukraine

America seems to be coming apart at the seams. This is not my assessment. It is the conclusion you would get reading the following editorial in the esteemed Wall Street Journal.

A Destructive Trump Indictment

Do prosecutors understand the forces they are unleashing?

By The Editorial Board

June 9, 2023 7:09 pm ET

Whether you love or hate Donald Trump, his indictment by President Biden's Justice Department is a fraught moment for American democracy. For the first time in U.S. history, the prosecutorial power of the federal government has been used against a former President who is also running against the sitting President. This is far graver than the previous indictment by a rogue New York prosecutor, and it will roil the 2024 election and U.S. politics for years to come.

Special counsel Jack Smith announced the indictment in a brief statement on Friday. But no one should be fooled: This is Attorney General Merrick Garland's responsibility. Mr. Garland appointed Mr. Smith to provide political cover, but Mr. Garland, who reports to Mr. Biden, has the authority to overrule a special counsel's recommendation. Americans will inevitably see this as a Garland-Biden indictment, and they are right to think so.

The indictment levels 37 charges against Mr. Trump that are related to his handling of classified documents, including at his Mar-a-Lago club, since he left the White House. Thirty-one of the counts are for violating the ancient and seldom-enforced Espionage Act for the "willful retention of national defense information."

But it's striking, and legally notable, that the indictment never mentions the Presidential Records Act (PRA) that allows a President access to documents, both classified and unclassified, once he leaves office. It allows for good-faith negotiation with the National Archives. Yet the indictment assumes that Mr. Trump had no right to take any classified documents.

This doesn't fit the spirit or letter of the PRA, which was written by Congress to recognize that such documents had previously been the property of former Presidents. If the Espionage Act means Presidents can't retain any classified documents, then the PRA is all but meaningless. This will be part of Mr. Trump's defense.

The other counts are related to failing to turn over the documents or obstructing the attempts by the Justice Department and FBI to obtain them. One allegation is that during a meeting with a writer and three others, none of whom held security clearances, Mr. Trump "showed and described a 'plan of attack'" from the Defense Department. "As president I could have declassified it," he said on audio tape. "Now I can't, you know, but this is still a secret."

The feds also say Mr. Trump tried to cover up his classified stash by “suggesting that his attorney hide or destroy documents,” as well as by telling an aide to move boxes to conceal them from his lawyer and the FBI.

As usual, Mr. Trump is his own worst enemy. “This would have gone nowhere,” former Attorney General Bill Barr told [CBS](#) recently, “had the President just returned the documents. But he jerked them around for a year and a half.”

That being said, if prosecutors think that this will absolve them of the political implications of their decision to charge Mr. Trump, they fail to understand what they’ve unleashed.

In the court of public opinion, the first question will be about two standards of justice. Mr. Biden had old classified files stored in his Delaware garage next to his sports car. When that news came out, he didn’t sound too apologetic. “My Corvette’s in a locked garage, OK? So it’s not like they’re sitting out on the street,” Mr. Biden said. AG Garland appointed another special counsel, Robert Hur, to investigate, but Justice isn’t going to indict Mr. Biden.

As for willful, how about the basement email server that Hillary Clinton used as Secretary of State? FBI director James Comey said in 2016 that she and her colleagues “were extremely careless in their handling of very sensitive, highly classified information.” According to him, 113 emails included information that was classified when it was sent or received. Eight were Top Secret. About 2,000 others were later “upclassified” to Confidential. This was the statement Mr. Comey ended by declaring Mrs. Clinton free and clear, since “no reasonable prosecutor would bring such a case.”

This is the inescapable political context of this week’s indictment. The special counsel could have finished his investigation with a report detailing the extent of Mr. Trump’s recklessness and explained what secrets it could have exposed. Instead the Justice Department has taken a perilous path.

The charges are a destructive intervention into the 2024 election, and the potential trial will hang over the race. They also make it more likely that the election will be a referendum on Mr. Trump, rather than on Mr. Biden’s economy and agenda or a GOP alternative. This may be exactly what Democrats intend with their charges.

Republicans deserve a more competent champion with better character than Mr. Trump. But the indictment might make GOP voters less inclined to provide a democratic verdict on his fitness for a second term. Although the political impact is uncertain, Republicans who are tired of Mr. Trump might rally to his side because they see the prosecution as another unfair Democratic plot to derail him.

And what about the precedent? If Republicans win next year’s election, and especially if Mr. Trump does, his supporters will demand that the Biden family be next. Even if Mr. Biden is re-elected, political memories are long.

It was once unthinkable in America that the government’s awesome power of prosecution would be turned on a political opponent. That seal has now been broken. It didn’t need to be. However cavalier he was with classified files, Mr. Trump did not accept a bribe or betray secrets to Russia. The FBI recovered the missing documents when it raided Mar-a-Lago, so presumably there are no more secret attack plans for Mr. Trump to show off.

The greatest irony of the age of Trump is that for all his violating of democratic norms, his frenzied opponents have done and are doing their own considerable damage to democracy.

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Clearly, there is not a lot of love lost in political or media circles for Mr Trump. The man is rude, crude and takes so much liberty with the truth that Pinocchio would be considered to have a short nose. The fact of the matter is that even if he is not a man exuding presidential dignity among his peers, the obvious attempt to kill off his chances in the 2024 elections makes America's claims to being the beacon of democracy entirely unsustainable. The Trump law suit is what you would expect some banana republic to be guilty of, not the United States of America. No wonder the US is no longer the shining light on the hill that has beckoned to the rest of the freedom-loving world that it possesses values to be admired and acquired.

The criticism of the indictment did not end at the WSJ. Over at the NYT, they also had a lot to say, as follows:

Worldwide, Trump's Latest Legal Woes Draw Outrage, and Shrugs

Allies and rivals alike, beholding the messiness of America, must calculate the risks and opportunities in the latest plot twist in Donald Trump's legal troubles.

The world, it seems, is calculating the costs and opportunities of the latest Trump revelations transfixing and dividing the United States after former President Donald J. Trump was indicted.

By Damien Cave

June 10, 2023, 9:39 a.m. ET

As details emerged from the indictment charging former President Donald J. Trump with mishandling classified documents, global reaction ranged from strategic silence to unbridled outrage, with room in between for world-weary shrugs, wild conspiracy theories and ominous predictions of American decline.

China's propaganda machine, which would normally leap on a U.S. scandal, stayed quiet. Russian commentators called the charges a fake production of the "deep state." And among American allies in Asia and Europe, there were concerns that the episode hurt not just the former president, but also the United States by highlighting that security secrets were not safe in America's hands, and that the country's disorienting, partisan fever has yet to break.

"The case shows once again that Donald Trump belongs behind bars, not in the White House," Ralf Stegner, a German Social Democrat who sits on the German intelligence oversight committee, said in a text message, adding: "This man is a threat to security and democracy in the U.S. and around the world."

The world, it seems, is once again gawking at the messiness of the United States and calculating the costs and opportunities of the latest Trump revelations transfixing and dividing the country. It is a moment that feels familiar yet not quite the same.

When Mr. Trump was president, his moods and travails through two impeachments carried the weight of American power, and officials in distant capitals spent their days calculating the effect of his erratic, transactional approach to governing a hyper-polarized superpower.

Out of office, his troubles mean less. His indictment has mostly been a reminder of what came before — and what might return as he runs for office again. But the world now is more experienced, knowing that Mr. Trump's legal woes are far from over.

Many countries chose silence in public and eye rolls in private. "Save your energy, because there will be other things to react to," said Ian Chong, a political scientist at the National University of Singapore, summing up how many in Southeast Asia in particular are viewing Mr. Trump's latest case.

Nonetheless, that did not mean that the episode would pass unnoticed — or fail to be exploited by other nations trying to tilt the world away from American leadership. For China, publicly ignoring Mr. Trump's indictment may have reflected deeper, long-term goals. The country's top leader, Xi Jinping, and the former president ended 2020 as bitter rivals in the middle of a tariff battle and rancor over the source of the coronavirus, but before that, they were often praising each other and negotiating.

Anti-Trump protesters in April. Some U.S. allies were concerned that the indictment hurt the country by highlighting that security secrets are not safe in its hands, and that its partisan fever persists. Credit...Andrew Seng for The New York Times

Some analysts believe that Beijing might welcome the return of Mr. Trump to office because he was less committed to traditional alliances — and democracy — and might see value in a U.S.-China deal of some kind. Perhaps that would mean pulling back from support for Taiwan, the self-governed island that Beijing sees as its own territory, in exchange for some kind of big economic win.

"If you're China, Trump's transactionalism is appealing because that means he has the potential to be a friend, to be co-opted," said Drew Thompson, a former U.S. defense official and a fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.

In Russia, some commentators were open in their support for Mr. Trump.

Sergei A. Markov, a pro-Kremlin political analyst in Russia, wrote on his channel on the Telegram messaging app that the accusations against Mr. Trump were fake and could be made against 100 percent of high-ranking civil servants. Echoing false claims by the former president, he said that the 2020 presidential election had been rigged and that Mr. Trump had been the real winner. The Russian analyst called the indictment an attempt to stop the former president from retaking the White House.

Nikolai Starikov, a pro-Kremlin commentator on the Russian state news television talk show "60 Minutes," likewise characterized the cases against Mr. Trump as a pressure campaign to push him out of the 2024 race, saying he had angered the "deep state" and political establishment by refusing to admit defeat in an election. He said President Biden needed to win re-election because otherwise he would be prosecuted himself.

In Europe, given its deepening alliance with the United States in support of Ukraine's resistance to Russia's full-scale invasion, the accusations of mishandling of classified information by the former president were deeply worrisome. The bloc is anxiously following the political drama unfolding across the Atlantic, questioning whether it would help or hurt the former president's campaign, and European security.

"This is coming after the leak of the so-called Discord documents" — a batch of classified documents that surfaced on social media sites — "and all the concerns about what may have been leaked about the Ukrainian offensive," said Jacob Kirkegaard, a Brussels-based senior fellow with

the German Marshall Fund. “There’s a degree of Europeans thinking, is Trump someone we can rely on for our own security?”

He added that “Trump seems to be politically quite happy about being able to be the victim and the martyr, because it does appear to energize his base,” arguing that with a Republican Party seemingly wedded to such a leader, “Europe needs to take care much more of its own security.”

Many news media outlets were even more merciless in their critiques of the former president.

“Neglect, narcissistic desire for possession, lying, concealment. But above all, absolute disregard for national security,” an article in the French daily Le Monde declared in its coverage.

Image

A commentary piece in Germany’s Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung argued that, while the legal grounds for the indictment may be sound, the ensuing “political mudslinging” meant that no final result would be widely accepted in the country’s highly polarized environment.

“America’s reconciliation, that many had hoped, will not happen,” the column read.

Some officials and analysts mainly sought to put the indictment in context — seeing it as both a reflection of how the American experiment works, and a challenge to that experiment. Peter Tesch, a former Australian defense official and ambassador to Russia, said the case, along with Mr. Trump’s combative response and his continuing campaign for office, all pointed to the “wild mutations” that the American political system occasionally produces.

“He’s like a weighted Russian doll; he gets knocked over and he just rolls back upright again,” Mr. Tesch said. But he added that this was not a moment for false equivalence between democracy and autocracy.

“Convicted or not, he’s been charged,” he said. “That testifies to the strength and resilience of U.S. institutions — and democracy, where everyone is accountable before the law.”

For others, it was less clear that the United States was proving its mettle.

Ahn Byong-jin, a political scientist at Kyung Hee University in Seoul, suggested that the indictment would further damage the reliability of American diplomacy abroad, while revealing the deep flaws of Mr. Trump as a leader.

He said Mr. Trump’s indictment presented the United States with a challenge: how to restore respectability to its political system while preventing a cycle of past presidents facing criminal charges under new presidents amid outcries of political revenge — a pattern that has bedeviled countries like South Korea.

“This will be a barometer moment for the Americans: whether they will decline to become a political Third World nation, or will re-establish themselves as a liberal democracy,” he said.

One version of that possible future came in a tweet from an unabashed Trump supporter.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary, who in his years in power has adroitly used the levers of government power to erode democratic norms in pursuit of what he calls “illiberal democracy,” did not hesitate to take a side. “Your fight is a good fight @realDonaldTrump,” he wrote on Twitter. “Never give up!”

Reporting was contributed by Choe Sang-Hun, Paul Sonne, Matina Stevis-Gridneff and Christopher F. Schuetze.

Damien Cave is the bureau chief in Sydney, Australia. He previously reported from Mexico City, Havana, Beirut and Baghdad. Since joining The Times in 2004, he has also been a deputy National editor, Miami bureau chief and a Metro reporter.

Given that the Wall Street Journal leans towards Republican values, while the NYT is deeply liberal, we can say that on both sides of the political divide, there is some consensus that this action against Trump is not entirely kosher, whether you like the man or not. Most importantly, it is not getting America any admirers at a time when Biden is trying to unify his international alliance of democratic countries against what he calls the “autocrats”. It just does not make sense. It certainly undermines the US and western narrative that in their own countries, Putin and Xi do not tolerate dissent. The question will now be asked, “Do the Americans?” And the answer would be a resounding “NO”.

Perhaps the latest Trump mischief for the liberals confronting him is his claim that he can end the Ukrainian war in 24 hours. It seems that the liberals, and the neocons (the deep state element that drives American foreign policy) want Russia destroyed, dismembered or degraded, so that it cannot ally with China to challenge America, through this proxy war in Ukraine. This is the so-called Project Ukraine. Unfortunately, it is not working.

In the last week, the Ukrainians have launched their long-awaited counter-offensive. After seven days of fighting, Zelenskyy finally admitted they have launched their offensive. There can be no denying about this now, even when at the start of the battle, the media warriors were silent, apparently waiting for some success first before they were willing to be accountable. After five or six days, so much has already been revealed on the internet, that even western media had to announce this offensive, and Kyiv cannot try to be circumspect until they get some progress.

The offensive was supposed to be in spring. It started on the third day of summer instead. It has already been one week of fighting by June 10, and according to every military blog that has access to reporters embedded in the frontlines, the counteroffensive has been a disappointing disaster. The UAF has already lost thousands of KIA, plus a couple of hundred armoured vehicles including some of those much-vaunted wunder-panzers, Leopard 2's, which have been blown up by Russian artillery and aircraft. One video that went viral is of a Leopard tank destroyed, surrounded by several American-made Bradley infantry fighting vehicles. All clumped together in a tragic cluster, instead of being dispersed. What the hell? And we thought that the UAF had proper training from the British and the Germans...

The Bild newspaper had this headline: “Bei ukrainischer Offensive: Russen zerstören ersten Leo-Panzer”, which translates to “During the Ukrainian offensive, the Russians destroyed the first Leo(pard) tank.” That must have been disappointing for the Germans, as the tank is an export item. A lousy performance on the battlefield is not good for sales. That is why we may not see American Abrams tanks being given to the Ukrainians, to avoid the bad publicity that has already befallen the German vehicle.

The sight of German panzers destroyed on the plains of Ukraine must be a jarring and scary sight for those Deutsche-volk who still bear the psychological scars of the Nazi invasion of their eastern neighbour seventy plus years ago. Many Germans had in fact opposed their government’s gift of tanks to Kyiv for precisely this reason of not wishing Russia to be reminded of destroyed German tanks on battlefields of a bygone era, and now it has indeed happened.

And after seven days of being on the offensive, the Ukrainians have not even broken through the line of contact, not to say the first line of defence among multiple such lines, and the attacks are breaking up like waves on a sea wall. This must be worrisome for the Kyiv regime.

The Russian Ministry of Defence has been giving detailed casualty and damage reports. None of us know if these are accurate, and the standard western media treatment of the Russian figures are : “they are not verified”. Let’s assume that indeed, Russia exaggerates the Ukrainian casualties. But if we take just 1/3 of the Russian figures, it’s already a complete fiasco. Remember, there are drones flying all over the battlefield and there is no evidence that the UAF has made any progress beyond the frontline. None at all. The first of the proper Russian defences are actually 15-20 km behind the front. Now that’s a sign of non-accomplishment.

Here is a report from CNN, solidly pro-Ukraine, on the counteroffensive:

Ukrainian forces suffer ‘stiff resistance’ and losses in assault on Russian lines

By [Jim Sciutto](#), Chief National Security Correspondent

Updated 4:50 AM EDT, Fri June 9, 2023

Ukrainian forces have suffered losses in heavy equipment and soldiers as they met greater than expected resistance from Russian forces in their first attempt to breach Russian lines in the east of the country in recent days, two senior US officials tell CNN.

One US official described the losses – which include US supplied MRAP armored personnel vehicles as “significant.”

Ukrainian forces managed to overrun some Russian forces in the east around Bakhmut. However, Russian forces, armed with anti-tank missiles, grenades and mortars, have put up “stiff resistance,” with their forces dug into defensive lines that are several layers deep in some areas and marked by minefields that have taken a heavy toll on Ukrainian armored vehicles.

US and Western officials have been bracing for the counteroffensive for months, moving to shore up Ukraine’s defenses ahead of its start. This week, Ukraine’s Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar said an offensive was “taking place in several directions.”

“It is not only about Bakhmut. The offensive is taking place in several directions,” Maliar said. “We are happy about every meter. Today is a successful day for our forces.”

Both US officials say the losses are not expected to impact the larger planned Ukrainian counteroffensive. US and western officials long expected the counteroffensive to take time and put Ukrainian personnel and equipment, including Western-supplied systems, at high risk.

Russian Ministry of Defense claimed Wednesday that the Ukrainian offensive close to Bakhmut was “thwarted”.

“The Armed Forces of Ukraine, having failed to achieve the offensive objectives and suffered significant losses in South Donetsk direction, made the attempts to break the defence of Russian troops in Donetsk direction close to Artyomovsk (Russian for Bakhmut),” a spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Defense said.

“The attack of the enemy armored group using Western-manufactured hardware was thwarted. The enemy was destroyed.”

Moscow often inflates claims regarding Ukrainian losses on the battlefield. But Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky recently acknowledged the counteroffensive would be hard for Ukraine, telling the Wall Street Journal that “a large number of soldiers will die” as Kyiv’s ground forces make their advance.

This week, officials told CNN that “shaping” operations, in which Ukraine has been testing Russian positions for vulnerabilities, have been happening for nearly two weeks. A “substantial increase in fighting” early this week signaled to officials that the counteroffensive was likely underway, a senior NATO official said. But the collapse of a major dam in Russian-occupied Ukraine that has flooded areas of the region and killed multiple people could complicate Ukraine’s plans.

The Nova Kakhovka dam on the Dnipro River in Kherson is Ukraine’s largest reservoir in terms of volume. It’s unclear how the dam was impacted to the point of collapsing early this week, but both sides of the conflict have blamed the other.

It is interesting, perhaps appropriate, that the above news came from CNN, which made its name during the first Gulf War when it brought to the world vivid images of the American air assault on Baghdad. Since then, CNN has evolved, and is now no longer a news provider. It has become a left-leaning political talk show, and it seems to have lost its way, shedding ratings since Trump lost the election. Its ratings have gotten so bad that a new CEO was brought in to change course. However, in just over a year, the new man, Chris Licht, was abruptly fired last week, when he made a number of missteps to bring the organization back to being a news outlet, rather than a biased commentator on politics. Perhaps, the above

report on the war in Ukraine, which is somewhat closer to Russian accounts than any other western news report over the entire week of the counteroffensive, is getting back to its roots on accurate war reporting. And if what it reports is just half the truth, as western sources sympathetic to Ukraine tend to do, then the actual situation must be really bad. Perhaps as bad as the Russians say it is.

The performance of western arms, borne by brave men in the Ukrainian army but largely diluted by corruption in Kyiv, is a major indicator of the geopolitical forces changing the world. It is not just your run-of-the-mill war. It is a war in which the collective west is throwing everything they can at Russia to diminish it so that it cannot be a threat on their eastern flank. This is not due to an impending threat from Russia to the western countries, although apparently, they imagine it to be so. Throughout the history of the last two hundred years, the actual situation has been western armies, including an American contingent in 1920, invading Russia repeatedly and in its worse case, killed 28 million Russian citizens. 28 million... More than the total death toll in all the other countries combined, on both sides during the same conflict (WW2). So one wonders why there is this constant fear of Russia when the Russians should be completely justified in being wary of the west. Perhaps that irrational fear in western Europe reflects the concern that a country that bounced back to victory after the French Grand Armee occupied Moscow, after the German Kaiser's army brought about the most profound regime change in the history of mankind in 1917, and after Hitler's almighty Wehrmacht almost caused the capitulation of the USSR at Moscow in 1942 and then at Stalingrad in 1943 (more than 2,000 km east of the western boundary of Europe), only to come back to raze Berlin to the ground in 1945, is too powerful to be left alone. Better kill them first before we get killed...

Post-WW2 Europe needed an America to hold the main victor of that war back from across the Vistula River. Then there was Churchill's Iron Curtain which prompted both sides to set up NATO and the Warsaw Pact, in a face-off that last more than 40 years. As a matter of fact, this Cold War, in Russia's eyes, must have been the fourth act of aggression emanating from the west in the 20th century. That conflict, although there was no destruction of property or human lives, led to an arms race that bankrupted Russia, brought poverty to the country and dismembered the larger Soviet entity. It was a huge loss of prestige. Can you blame them for being wary of the west?

Just as it is recovering from that, there is then this NATO expansion that is essentially the single most important reason for the current conflict which brings Slav to fight fellow Slav. Looking at the history of the European continent from an Asian viewpoint, it is easy to see why the Russians consider the collective west to be a threat, more so than the other way round. Let's look at a simple benchmark - Who caused more citizens to be killed on the other side, unprovoked, over the last 100 years or even 200 years? I suppose the one with the larger deficit has the claim to righteousness. No independent thinker, outside the collective west and Russia, would see it any other way.

And if the current line-up in NATO, which includes America, cannot contain Russia, what hope is there for small European states of the collective west to defend themselves against a newly powerful Russia if geopolitical forces were to reverse the west's aggression over the last 200 years and bring the Bear out of hibernation against them. That fear is the motivation to strike first at Russia while it still can. I get it. Western Europe is scared of retribution after 200 years of having been the aggressor against Russia.

Concurrently, the US has a foreign policy that is centered on the concept that no other country can be more powerful than itself. And it will seek all means to ensure that, including militarily. Put Europe and America together in this set of circumstances, and we have the most aggressive partnership that is not so different in behaviour from the imperial western empires of the 19th century. A pattern of behaviour can be witnessed in the never-ending wars pursued by the west in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. And acts of military adventurism have been couched in terms of democracy and freedom. The non-western countries, generally the victims, are getting weary of it. And that must be how the Chinese and Russians look at the west in recent years.

For the United States, the defeat of its proxy Ukrainian army would completely screw up its plans intended in this contest to suppress Russia. The neo-cons in Washington have stated publicly that they want to destroy Russia in its current form, break it up into smaller entities, crash its economy through sanctions, and strategically prevent it from teaming up with China to counter its hegemony. Strike first, while we are still more powerful militarily. That's the American attitude towards Russia as well as China. And it pursues its policies with arrogance. That's why you have the secretary of state, Blinken, just calling the Russian military the "second best in Ukraine". As such, if the Kyiv counter-offensive fails, and it ends up being the better military in Ukraine, that would be a humongous embarrassment and a political disaster for America and more specifically a huge loss of face for Blinken and his boss Biden.

That is perhaps why, as the fighting is going on, the Economist carried the following article to persuade everybody in the collective west of the urgency of holding back the Russian hordes, which ironically was the principal justification used by an Austrian artist to justify his invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

The Geopolitical Stakes of Ukraine's Counter Offensive

The Economist

On the eve of the commemoration of the Allies' D-Day landings in Normandy, General Mark Milley, America's most senior general, drew a parallel with the Ukrainian counter-offensive starting some 2,800km to the east. The goal, he said, was the same as it had been nearly eight decades ago: "To liberate occupied territory and to free a country that has been unjustly attacked by an aggressor nation, in this case, Russia."

Then as now, the battles will determine the future security order in Europe. But for Ukraine's Western supporters, at least, the ultimate aim of the war is much less clear than it was for the Allies in 1944. Unlike Nazi Germany, Russia is a nuclear power. It is hard to imagine its complete capitulation. Ukraine's professed goal is to reconquer all of the land Russia has seized since 2014, restoring the borders that were set in 1991, when the Soviet Union broke up. But even if the Ukrainian army can achieve that (and many Westerners, especially, have their doubts), there are fears that Russia might view such an outcome as a humiliation so abject that it would be worth using nuclear weapons to avoid it.

*The upshot is a much vaguer aim: for Ukraine to inflict as many losses and make as many territorial gains as possible, thereby strengthening its hand as it tries to reach a modus vivendi with a weakened Russia. By this way of thinking, a positive outcome would be for Ukraine's new Western-armed brigades to sever the land bridge between Russia and the Crimean peninsula or to get close enough to endanger Russian positions in Crimea. Most Western officials expect more modest gains, however, with Ukraine recapturing and holding less strategic slices of the territory it has lost in the past year, but at least demonstrating that it can still make headway on the battlefield. **In the pessimistic view, the Ukrainians struggle to get past Russian defences, make only minor gains and end up in a stalemate. Happily, the prospect of Ukrainian forces failing, suffering a counter-attack and retreating can be all but ruled out, because Russia lacks the means to stage a big advance.***

*Although it is the resolve and competence of the Ukrainian forces that will be decisive, external factors will influence the outcome. America's president, Joe Biden, has declared two broad objectives: to ensure both that Ukraine is not defeated and that NATO does not get drawn into direct conflict with Russia with the attendant risk of nuclear escalation. Early on he declined to send troops to Ukraine or impose a "no-fly zone". But he **has delivered weapons of ever greater quantity and sophistication to help Ukraine defend itself. Equally vital has been the provision of intelligence, planning and training by America and its allies. Ukraine today has one of the largest armies in Europe backed by the most powerful military in the world. And while it is not trained to the standard of NATO, "it only has to be better than the Russian army" to get an upper hand,** say Western officials.*

China's leader, Xi Jinping, also appears to have set boundaries, according to American and European officials. He wants to prevent Russia's complete defeat, but also a breakdown in relations with Europe or the use of nuclear weapons. So even though he and Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, have declared that their countries' friendship has "no limits", there have been limits so far in the help China has been prepared to offer Russia. It buys Russian exports of oil and gas at a discount, and sells Chinese goods, some of which might be useful to the war effort. But Mr Xi has so far declined to provide big deliveries of weapons, of the kind the West has given Ukraine. That may change if China thinks the Russians are about to be routed, Western officials worry.

*Even allowing for that risk, however, and while sticking to Mr Biden's parameters, **America's generals increasingly think it is possible to engineer a "strategic defeat" for Russia.** Over time they have become less fearful of nuclear escalation. In part their "boiled frog" strategy of gradually increasing conventional military aid has helped to mitigate the risk. And by prodding Russia itself, through attacks on the border region of Belgorod or small-drone attacks on the Kremlin, Ukraine also seeks to expose the emptiness of Russian threats. Increasingly, America's top brass aims to ensure Russia loses both the military capacity and the inclination to launch another war of aggression. "Never again is not a difficult concept to grasp," says a Western official.*

This goal is especially enticing to America's military planners because they have long dreaded the prospect of having to fight two wars at once: with Russia in Europe and with China in Asia. If the threat from Russia were to be substantially reduced, at least for some years, it would allow more resources to be directed towards deterring China, which has become America's most pressing military concern.

*Western analysts have **three broad scenarios for how the war might unfold. The first involves a big***

Ukrainian breakthrough, in which they either sever supply lines to Crimea or regain much of the territory in the eastern region of Donbas that Russia grabbed last year and in 2014. Such a devastating collapse of Russian forces might conceivably result in Mr Putin's losing power. To some that is the best way to restore peace in Europe. But assessing Russia's capacity to maintain discipline among its troops is hard; gauging the brittleness of Mr Putin's regime is harder still. Nuclear worries are not entirely gone. Still, some American officials are less worried about Mr Putin's use of nuclear arms than they are about Russia's descent into chaos and a concomitant loss of control over its nuclear arsenal.

A second scenario entails smaller Russian losses, but also the prospect of further defeats if the war goes on, which may be enough to chasten Russia and weaken Mr Putin. A third, gloomier outcome would be a stalemate that lets Russia hold on to most of what it has taken. That would undermine Western confidence in Ukraine and embolden Mr Putin. For all Russia's military setbacks, says Alexander Gabuev of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Centre, a think-tank in Berlin, Mr Putin does not appear to have abandoned his intention of subjugating the whole of Ukraine, annexing more of its territory and installing a puppet government in Kyiv. He may imagine he can still achieve that by grinding out the conflict for years. His air force and navy are largely intact, and he can mobilise more soldiers, though that risks popular discontent in Russia. He will want to wait out the West.

In particular, Mr Putin will be hoping for a return to power of Donald Trump in next year's presidential election in America. Mr Trump complains that America has been wasting billions on Ukraine, depleting its own arsenal and prolonging a bloody war. If elected he claims he could put an end to the conflict within 24 hours, without saying how. Ukrainians fear that he might either cut off the flow of aid or otherwise agree to Mr Putin's terms.

How to avert a protracted war? One hope is that Ukraine will inflict such a smarting military defeat as to prompt Mr Putin to revise his goals. Some Western officials, notably in Germany, hope Ukraine's counter-offensive will soon be followed by peace talks. But others, especially in America, caution that Mr Putin is unlikely to be ready for serious negotiations unless he suffers a rout. Even if talks were to take place, Russia's participation might be an entirely insincere stalling tactic. Genuine diplomacy may have to wait for a further round of fighting next year.

The West is therefore debating how to give greater credence to its promises to support Ukraine "for as long as it takes". The thorniest questions surround what security guarantees the West might offer Ukraine, both in the short term and as part of a lasting settlement. Hitherto some Western leaders thought such matters were best left until after a cessation of hostilities. But given the scant chance of a negotiated peace, many argue the West should no longer wait; indeed, enhanced guarantees could hasten the end of the war by undermining Mr Putin's dream of winning a drawn-out conflict. President Emmanuel Macron of France, long regarded in eastern Europe as resentful of America and soft on Russia, took a surprisingly hawkish turn in a recent speech in Slovakia in which he called for Ukraine to be given "tangible and credible security guarantees".

The security "assurances" Ukraine received in 1994 from America, Britain and Russia itself, in an agreement called the Budapest memorandum, in exchange for surrendering its share of the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons, have proved wholly inadequate. Ukraine and its friends in eastern Europe argue that only membership of the NATO alliance—with its strong mutual-defence commitment, known as Article 5—can protect Ukraine from future attack.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, a former secretary-general of NATO, proposes a two-step plan. First, Western countries should issue "substantial" guarantees to Ukraine, ideally ahead of NATO's summit in Lithuania next month. Then the summit itself should issue an invitation for Ukraine to join the alliance, or at least signal that one will be forthcoming in the coming year. This would make clear that Russia has no veto on who joins. Ultimately, argues Mr Rasmussen, protecting Ukraine within NATO would be less costly than arming it to fend off Russia alone indefinitely.

One difficulty will be to ensure that the guarantees act as a bridge to membership rather than an alternative

to it. In a paper, Eric Ciaramella of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a think-tank in Washington, sets out a five-point plan to give Ukraine “less than Article 5 but more than the Budapest memorandum”. This includes legally codified commitments to help Ukraine defend itself, inspired in part by those that America gives to Israel and Taiwan, to ensure they endure regardless of who is in power in America and Europe. He also advocates multi-year allocation of funds to arm Ukraine; support to rebuild Ukraine’s arms industry; mechanisms for political consultation like NATO’s Article 4; and a clear path to EU membership. As Mr Macron has belatedly come to recognise, “today Ukraine protects Europe”; better to integrate it firmly than leave it in a grey zone that only invites Russian aggression.

The geopolitical ambitions of the collective west, especially the US, is explicitly repeated in the Economist article above. Therefore, there is the ardent desire to beat the Russians on the battlefield through the deployment of an Ukrainian military, armed by its latest weapons. Has it worked? Only the propagandists claim that it has. In actuality, the Ukrainians have lost 20 percent of their country, recently surrendered Bakhmut and in the last week, have been massacred by the Russian army everywhere they have counter-attacked.

It seems that other than the chest thumping by the Economist which is so typical of British media, there are others in the west who are far less confident. They worry about what would happen if the Ukrainian army gets thrashed, even destroyed, in the coming weeks. I am not saying that it will be, but going by the evidence in the first week of the counteroffensive, there is little chance of Ukrainian forces achieving anything close to what the west is hoping it will (cut the land bridge between Crimea and the Donbass in Zaporozhye and cause the Russians to flee in fear). Instead, according to independent media, the Ukrainian armed forces have in the last 48 hours suffered some of the largest defeats on the battlefield since the war started, with large numbers of western tanks and armoured vehicles destroyed.

And so there is this article in Politico :

Biden’s team fears the aftermath of a failed Ukrainian counteroffensive

Behind closed doors, the administration worries about what Ukraine can accomplish.

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and ALEXANDER WARD

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The Biden administration is quietly preparing for the possibility that if Ukraine’s spring counteroffensive falls short of expectations, critics at home and allies abroad will argue that America has come up short, too.

Ukraine’s ever-imminent counteroffensive will attempt to retake Russian-seized territory most likely in the east and south, though for operational reasons no senior officials from Kyiv have detailed specifics.

Publicly, President Joe Biden’s team has offered unwavering support for Ukraine, pledging to load it up with weapons and economic aid for “as long as it takes.” But, if the impending fighting season

yields limited gains, administration officials have expressed privately they fear being faced with a two-headed monster attacking it from the hawkish and dovish ends of the spectrum.

One side will say that Ukraine's advances would've worked had the administration given Kyiv everything it asked for, namely longer-range missiles, fighter jets and more air defenses. The other side, administration officials worry, will claim Ukraine's shortcoming proves it can't force Russia out of its territory completely.

That doesn't even account for the reaction of America's allies, mainly in Europe, who may see a peace negotiation between Ukraine and Russia as a more attractive option if Kyiv can't prove victory is around the corner.

Inside the administration, officials stress they're doing everything possible to make the spring offensive succeed.

"We've nearly completed the requests of what [Ukraine] said they needed for the counteroffensive as we have surged weapons and equipment to Ukraine over the past few months," said one administration official who, like others, was granted anonymity to discuss sensitive internal considerations.

But belief in the strategic cause is one thing. Belief in the tactics is another — and behind closed doors the administration is worried about what Ukraine can accomplish.

Those concerns recently spilled out into the open during a leak of classified information onto social media. A top secret assessment from early February stated that Ukraine would fall "well short" of its counteroffensive goals. More current American assessments are that Ukraine may make some progress in the south and east, but won't be able to repeat last year's success.

Ukraine has hoped to sever Russia's land bridge to Crimea and U.S. officials are now skeptical that will happen, according to two administration officials familiar with the assessment. But there are still hopes in the Pentagon that Ukraine will hamper Russia's supply lines there, even if a total victory over Russia's newly fortified troops ends up too difficult to achieve.

Moreover, U.S. intelligence indicates that Ukraine simply does not have the ability to push Russian troops from where they were deeply entrenched — and a similar feeling has taken hold about the battlefield elsewhere in Ukraine, according to officials. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says the U.S. hasn't adequately armed his forces properly and so, until then, the counteroffensive can't begin.

There is belief that Kyiv is willing to consider adjusting its goals, according to American officials, and a more modest aim might be easier to be sold as a win.

There has been discussion, per aides, of framing it to the Ukrainians as a "ceasefire" and not as permanent peace talks, leaving the door open for Ukraine to regain more of its territory at a future date. Incentives would have to be given to Kyiv: perhaps NATO-like security guarantees, economic help from the European Union, more military aid to replenish and bolster Ukraine's forces, and the like. And aides have expressed hope of re-engaging China to push Putin to the negotiating table as well.

But that would still lead to the dilemma of what happens next, and how harshly domestic critics respond.

“If the counteroffensive does not go well, the administration has only itself to blame for withholding certain types of arms and aid at the time when it was most needed,” said Kurt Volker, the special envoy for Ukraine during the Trump administration.

A counteroffensive that doesn't meet expectations will also cause allies in foreign capitals to question how much more they can spare if Kyiv's victory looks farther and farther away.

“European public support may wane over time as European energy and economic costs stay high,” said Clementine Starling, a director and fellow at the Atlantic Council think tank in Washington, D.C. “A fracturing of transatlantic support will likely hurt U.S. domestic support and Congress and the Biden administration may struggle to sustain it.”

Many European nations could also push Kyiv to bring the fighting to an end. “A poor counteroffensive will spark further questions about what an outcome to the war will look like, and the extent to which a solution can really be achieved by continuing to send military arms and aid alone,” Starling said.

Biden and his top aides have publicly stressed that Zelenskyy should only begin peace talks when he is ready. But Washington has also communicated to Kyiv some political realities: at some point, especially with Republicans in control of the House of Representatives, the pace of U.S. aid will likely slow. Officials in Washington, though not pressing Kyiv, have begun preparing for what those conversations could look like and understand it may be a tough political sell at home for Zelenskyy.

“If Ukraine can't gain dramatically on the battlefield, the question inevitably arises as to whether it is time for a negotiated stop to the fighting,” said Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations. “It's expensive, we're running low on munitions, we've got other contingencies around the world to prepare for.”

“It's legitimate to ask all these questions without compromising Ukraine's goals. It's simply a question of means,” Haass said.

Earlier this month, Andriy Sybiha, a deputy head in Zelenskyy's office, told the Financial Times that Ukraine would be willing to talk if its forces reach Crimea's doorstep. “If we will succeed in achieving our strategic goals on the battlefield and when we will be on the administrative border with Crimea, we are ready to open [a] diplomatic page to discuss this issue,” he said.

That comment was quickly rebuffed by Tamila Tasheva, Zelenskyy's Crimea envoy: “If Russia won't voluntarily leave the peninsula, Ukraine will continue to liberate its land by military means,” she told POLITICO earlier this month.

It doesn't help America's confidence that the war has slowed to a brutal slog.

Both sides have traded punishing blows, focused on small cities like Bakhmut, with neither force able to fully dislodge the other. The Russian surge ordered up earlier this year, meant to revitalize Moscow's struggling war effort, seized little territory at the cost of significant casualties and did not do much to change the overall trajectory of the conflict.

The fighting has taken a toll on the Ukrainians as well. Fourteen months into the conflict, the Ukrainians have suffered staggering losses — around 100,000 casualties — with many of their top soldiers either sidelined or exhausted. The troops have also gone through historic amounts of ammunition and weaponry, with even the West's prodigious output unable to match Zelenskyy's urgent requests.

U.S. officials have also briefed Ukraine on the dangers of overextending its ambitions and spreading its troops too thin — the same warning Biden gave then-Afghan President Ashraf Ghani as the Taliban moved to sweep across the country during the U.S. military withdrawal in 2021.

But the chances of Ukraine backing down from its highest aspirations is, to say the least, unlikely. “It’s as if this is the only and last opportunity for Ukraine to show that it can win, which of course isn’t true,” said Alina Polyakova, president and CEO of the Center for European Policy Analysis in Washington, D.C.

There you go, folks. For those peace-loving ones among us, it is more likely, according to Politico above, that peace would happen more quickly if the Ukrainian counter-offensive were to be defeated decisively by the Russians.

It sure looks like peace is coming...

By:

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Un-Influencer in a World full of Hubris