

Weekly Commentary 30 – July 2023

The Need for Plan B's

When things go in a different direction from what's expected, you would have to execute a Plan B. That's orthodoxy in proper business management.

In today's commentary, let's discuss how a few economic and geopolitical events in the world are also seeking Plan Bs. As usual, it is due to totally unexpected outcomes that had dashed original hopes and intentions, and necessitates a midway turnaround. The Plan B's we cover do not necessarily mean disaster; it could well mean a better result than originally intended.

The first of these Plan Bs is one suggested by Time Magazine, a key, if not once dominant, media voice in the English language, reflecting the views of the elite in the United States. In its latest issue, it suggested a Plan B for the ongoing Ukrainian counter offensive waged in the south and east of the country. Why? Because Plan A has been totally fxxked by an impregnable Russian defence...

Here goes, Time Magazine...

Ukraine's Counteroffensive Needs a Plan B

BY GEORGE BEEBE AND JAMES WEBB

JULY 27, 2023

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America's "Plan A" in Ukraine is on life support.

For months, U.S. officials had looked ahead to the Zelensky government's long-planned counteroffensive as the best hope for turning Russia's invasion of Ukraine into a decisive failure, forcing Putin to sue for peace. They posited that even if Ukraine ultimately proved incapable of driving Russian forces off all of Ukraine's territory, the counteroffensive would give Kyiv significant leverage at the diplomatic table. At a minimum, Ukraine would emerge from the war as a

strong and independent nation, boasting a Western-backed military more than capable of blocking any new Russian aggression for years to come

Some six weeks into the Ukrainian counteroffensive, things are not going as planned. Although damage estimates vary, Ukraine has lost significant numbers of men and weapons, while making negligible progress against formidable Russian defenses.

Despite vigorous recruiting and conscription efforts, Ukraine has too few soldiers to muster the three-to-one manpower advantage generally considered necessary for a successful offensive. Its supplies of artillery shells and anti-aircraft missiles, vital to battlefield success, are dwindling. As a result, Russia's air force—which was sparingly used last year in the face of effective Ukrainian air defenses—is now operating more actively near the front lines, devastating Ukraine's attacking forces.

Finger-pointing for this failure is already underway. Increasingly, Ukrainian officials openly blame the West for not providing enough armor, aircraft, artillery, missiles, and ammunition. Anonymous American officials blame the Ukrainians for not conducting Western-style combined arms operations to outmaneuver and outpace their plodding Russian opponents.

Regardless of who is at fault, there are no fast or easy solutions to the problems besetting the counteroffensive. Even if the United States and NATO had sufficient volumes of weapons and ammunition to provide Ukraine, the fundamental issue cannot be resolved simply by supplying Ukraine with advanced weaponry. Combined arms operations are among the most sophisticated endeavors in conventional warfare, and not learned on the fly.

Congress Is Grappling With the Wrong Questions on Ukraine

The U.S. military, for example, has long relied on the tactical flexibility, judgment, and initiative of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and junior officers. This concept, called “Mission Command,” is a critical component of U.S. combined arms operations. It enables even the most junior Marine or soldier adeptly to adjust on the battlefield to build or maintain momentum, especially during combined arms operations, which are highly dynamic and fluid. This approach has been refined over the course of nearly 100 years of continuous development and training.

By contrast, Ukraine has little experience in Western-style combined arms operations and insufficient time to train a large force in this approach to war. While it has begun slowly to adapt, Ukraine's military is still deeply rooted in Soviet-era offensive tactics and culture, centralizing decision-making at the top while penalizing subordinate soldiers who dare to deviate from the plan. In essence, Ukraine needs to reconstitute its military and install a new philosophy to conduct effective combined arms warfare.

But even such an extensive transformation would still not resolve Ukraine's critical gap in this war: air power. According to the Congressional Research Service, Ukraine's air force has 132 aircrafts, compared to 1,391 in Russia's. Providing Ukraine with a couple of dozen F-16 fighters, whose complex maintenance requirements make the aircraft ill-suited for conditions in Ukraine, will hardly bridge that gap. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, told Politico in May, "There are no magic weapons in war, F-16s are not, and neither is anything else."

Given such difficult circumstances, what are Kyiv's choices? One option would be to maintain its current course, betting that recent squabbling might cause the Russian military—and ultimately the Putin regime—to crumble from within. However, the risks of such a gamble would be significant. If Ukraine continues its under-manned and under-supported assaults on entrenched Russian defenses, it could exhaust its resources and leave itself dangerously vulnerable to a Russian counterattack. This has happened before—in 1943, the Battle of Kursk depleted the Wehrmacht of Nazi Germany and allowed the Soviets to counterattack across a front line too long for the Nazis to manage. The result was a massacre that did not stop until the Red Army was in Berlin.

In fact, Ukraine has a better option. By shifting their focus from offense to defense while shortening and reinforcing their defensive lines, the Ukrainians could force the Russian military to leave the security of its defensive network. With less territory for Ukraine to defend, it could mass troops at critical points across the battlespace, enabling its commanders to maximize the effect of its armor and artillery while preserving critical supplies of ammunition. Making this shift now could enable Ukraine to hold onto areas of the Donbass region that Russia has officially annexed but has yet to seize, putting Kyiv in a stronger bargaining position than its failing counteroffensive is likely to produce.

Playing defense is inherently easier than mounting a large offensive, and Ukraine's odds of military success in such a shift would be high. Today's Russian army is not the Red Army of 1943, and it is far from clear that the Russians have the logistical and organizational capacity to reach Kyiv. The Ukrainian military has shown for nearly a year and a half that it is capable of stymying Russia's offensive operations, particularly with continued Western support and encouragement.

Admittedly, a Ukrainian shift to defense would not, by itself, drive Russia to the bargaining table. But, if coupled with a diplomatic approach that incentivizes Russia to end the fighting rather than prolong it to keep Ukraine out of NATO, it could well prompt Russia to aim to secure its still quite limited gains through a negotiated end to the war. It is time to try.

Now this admission of failure in yet another American military adventure comes just a few days after another loud and influential voice in the west, the New York Time said on 25th July that the counteroffensive is now truly up and running. Two days later, it admitted that this rebooted counteroffensive is facing problems. In their own flip-flopping words...

After Suffering Heavy Losses, Ukrainians Paused to Rethink Strategy

Early in the counteroffensive, Ukraine lost as much as 20 percent of its weapons and armor. The rate dropped as the campaign slowed and commanders shifted tactics.

In the first two weeks of Ukraine's grueling counteroffensive, as much as 20 percent of the weaponry it sent to the battlefield was damaged or destroyed, according to American and European officials. The toll includes some of the formidable Western fighting machines — tanks and armored personnel carriers — the Ukrainians were counting on to beat back the Russians.

The startling rate of losses dropped to about 10 percent in the ensuing weeks, the officials said, preserving more of the troops and machines needed for the major offensive push that the Ukrainians say is still to come.

Some of the improvement came because Ukraine changed tactics, focusing more on wearing down the Russian forces with artillery and long-range missiles than charging into enemy minefields and fire.

But that good news obscures some grim realities. The losses have also slowed because the counteroffensive itself has slowed — and even halted in places — as Ukrainian soldiers struggle against Russia's formidable defenses. And despite the losses, the Ukrainians have so far taken just five of the 60 miles they hope to cover to reach the sea in the south and split the Russian forces in two.

One Ukrainian soldier said in an interview this week that his unit's drone picked up footage of a half-dozen Western armored vehicles caught in an artillery barrage south of the town of Velyka Novosilka.

"They all burned," said the soldier, who identified himself as Sgt. Igor. "Everybody is hoping for a big breakthrough," he said, adding a plea that those scrutinizing from afar appreciate the importance of slow and steady advances.

Russia had many months to prepare for the counteroffensive, and the front is littered with mines, tank traps and dug-in troops, while Russian reconnaissance drones and attack helicopters fly overhead with increasing frequency.

Given those fortifications, experts say, it is not surprising that Ukraine would sustain relatively severe losses in the early stages of the campaign.

This week, Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, acknowledged that there had been a brief pause in operations some weeks ago but blamed it on a lack of equipment and munitions, and called on Western allies to quicken the pace of deliveries.

American officials acknowledged that pause and said that the Ukrainians had begun moving again, but more deliberately, more adept at navigating minefields and mindful of the casualty risks. With the influx of cluster munitions from the United States, they said, the pace might pick up.

"It's not as fast, but it's not catastrophically behind schedule," the British defense minister, Ben Wallace, said on Wednesday. "It is doing what anyone else would do having to fight through minefields towards the Russian line."

The problems come into focus out in the farm fields in southern Ukraine where much of the counteroffensive is being fought. There the Bradley Fighting Vehicles, long coveted by the Ukrainians, have been running over anti-tank mines on a daily basis, soldiers who have fought in the vehicles say.

The vehicles, which weigh about 34 tons, are designed to carry infantry soldiers through areas exposed to gunfire or artillery. A rear ramp opens to allow soldiers to pile out and fight. In planning for the counteroffensive, the Bradleys were meant to carry soldiers across open fields to reach Russian trenches and bunkers.

The Bradleys have done part of their job well; their thick armor has provided good protection for most soldiers, who have survived many of the mine blasts with few injuries.

"Your ears ring and things inside fly around," said one soldier, who asked to be identified only by his first name and rank, Pvt. Serhiy. He survived such an explosion last month in fighting south of the town of Orikhiv in the Zaporizhzhia region. But in many cases the blasts severely damaged the vehicles, immobilizing them well before they could reach the Russian lines.

Military experts have long said that the first 15 miles of the counteroffensive would be the hardest, as attacking troops generally need three times more power — whether in weapons, personnel or both — than defending forces.

Ukraine's top military officer, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, expressed frustration that Ukraine is fighting without Western F-16 warplanes, which the United States only recently agreed to allow Ukrainian pilots to be trained on, but which are not expected to be delivered for several months at least. That has left the Ukrainian troops vulnerable to the Russian helicopters and artillery.

Military analysts cautioned that it was still too early to draw definitive conclusions about the counteroffensive. "It does not mean that it is doomed to fail," said Camille Grand, a defense expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations and a former NATO assistant secretary general.

Nevertheless, he added, the absence of air superiority and air defenses that Western jets could provide for Ukraine's attack means "that casualty rates are likely to be higher than in other conventional conflicts."

The precise numbers of weapons and armored vehicles that have been destroyed in the counteroffensive, as opposed to “mobility kills” that can be repaired, are closely guarded secrets, and the U.S. officials did not give raw numbers, though they did agree on the percentages of weaponry lost. But a combination of open source data and official estimates can provide a snapshot in time of the destruction, particularly in the early going.

Ukraine’s 47th Mechanized Brigade, one of the three Western-equipped and trained units that were deployed early in the campaign, was set to receive 99 Bradleys, according to the leaked U.S. military plans for the counteroffensive from February — still the most recent that have been made public.

Data from Oryx, [a military analysis site](#) that counts only losses that it has visually confirmed, show that 28 of those Bradleys have been abandoned, damaged or destroyed, including 15 in a village in Zaporizhzhia Province on June 8 and 9 as the 47th was attacked by helicopters while trapped in a minefield. Six additional Bradleys were reported abandoned or destroyed in Mala Tokmachka on June 26, but Oryx researchers said these losses had occurred earlier, although it is not clear exactly when.

Given that the 47th was the only brigade initially slated to receive the Bradleys, that means that nearly one-third of the original vehicles have been lost — although all but seven of them were blown up at one battleground.

“It is within the realm of possibility that Ukrainian forces have seen losses at this level,” said Dylan Lee Lehrke, an analyst with the British security intelligence firm Janes, adding that a “significant” level of lost weapons was generally a hallmark of wars of attrition, like the one in Ukraine.

The Oryx data show that only 24 tanks were lost for the entire month of June, including some from Ukraine’s own arsenal in addition to those supplied by Western allies.

Ten of them were German-made Leopard tanks and mine-clearers, the data show. Presumably, they were lost in battle with Ukraine’s 33rd Mechanized Brigade, one of the three units deployed early in the counteroffensive, and which was slated to receive 32 Leopards in the U.S. planning documents from Feb. 28.

Well, finally, these cheerleaders (from the western press) have come to their senses. They have to admit what the independent media have long observed to be an undeniable outcome of the NATO-Russia conflict. That Biden is wrong.

Yes, Biden (and Blinken) are wrong. Those two proclaimed very loudly just a short time ago that Russia has lost the war, that its military is incompetent and that Ukraine will prevail. They even said that the specific event of the counter-offensive will “eventually” work.

Well, that was all hyperbole. Russia has not lost the war in Ukraine and is in fact winning it decisively. The two reports cited above represent two of the most influential voices (Time and NYT) in American media, usually totally biased and reporting exaggerated propaganda issued by Kyiv, have now acknowledged a different interpretation of events as they unfold. As a matter of fact, these media sources were so pro-Ukraine that even in the above reports, they were avoiding mention of some of the observations made by independent media on the internet. The actual situation is much worse. Besides stopping the Ukrainians where they are attacking in the south and east, the Russians are breaking through Kyiv's lines in the northeast, just outside Kharkiv. Things are going downhill fast. And to salvage the situation, it is NATO and Kyiv that need to change to a new Plan B.

As a matter of fact, Time mentioned like I did two weeks ago, that the current situation in the war resembles the Battle of Kursk in the Russo-German war back in 1941-45. At Kursk, in the summer of 1943, the German army of the Third Reich wanted to engage the Red Army in one decisive battle to end the war on the Eastern Front. They brought up all their latest equipment against heavily fortified Soviet defensive positions in the north and south of the Kursk salient, like the Ukrainian army is doing today in Zaporozhia and Donbas. The outcomes were identical - all the over-rated German armour, with names like Tigers and Panthers (reminiscent of today's Leopard 2's) were smashed trying to break through the layered defensive lines. This is exactly what is happening in the Russo-Ukrainian war today. Russian military doctrine has not changed. But even Hitler was not stupid enough to keep bashing his head against Red Army lines and called off the campaign after about two weeks. But the idiots running NATO today have not learned.

Now, the modern equivalent of the German Wehrmacht back then is still not convinced they have been defeated and is trying to push forward, because of a political inability to admit a mistake in taking on Russia. After two months. It's over but they don't want to admit that it is.

And history tells us that the road forward from Kursk was all hell and brimstone for the defeated German Army until it was finally over on the streets of Berlin. The same will happen to Ukraine, when its leaders show no ability to think independently of its sponsors in NATO.

One American writer in Medium, an independent online publication, has an apt description for this inability of the collective west to cope with failure in a military misadventure. He calls it abdication of responsibility. Here is Mr Scott C Dunn in his own words.

The War in Ukraine is What Happens When a Billion People Abdicate Responsibility

Someone was waiting for someone else to do the work while depositing a check.

Scott C Dunn

Jul 14, 2023

After the fall of the Soviet Union, a strange thing happened. NATO grew really big, despite written assurances that it would never extend beyond Germany. As more countries were added to NATO, the members of NATO spent less and less of their respective GDP on their individual defense. They were enjoying a peace dividend. America took up the slack.

Since the end of the Cold War, Europe allowed itself to become more and more dependent on American defense hardware, training, and ammo. Europe developed an expectation that America would be there for them. They see the American bases in their countries and they begin to think that America has their back.

But America was also enjoying a peace dividend. America didn't grow its army. America stopped making so much hardware and began to focus on high tech rather than high quantity. At the same time, the quality and quantity of the recruits available for duty in the armed services declined. And in the past few years, that decline has been precipitous.

Meanwhile, Russia built up its military. China built up its military, too. America now considers both China and Russia as credible military threats. We can't be so sure we're up to speed with them. I don't think America can prevail against either one of them in a trench war. And I'm not sure I want to find out if we can.

In the events leading up to the war in Ukraine, I see something that most people are not willing or maybe they just haven't noticed. I see a country that hasn't taken responsibility for its defense. And I see this on several levels.

You could call this "blaming the victim" if you want to, but the fact remains that Ukraine's government didn't manage its affairs enough to not have a civil war. I think it's important to remember that Ukraine has been in a *civil war* since at least 2014. I think that every country that has sent aid, military or otherwise, has been adding fuel to a civil war.

Now some people might say that if Russia didn't send troops into Donbas there would be no civil war. And others might say that if Ukraine didn't start shelling Donbas in 2014, there would be no Russian troops in Donbas. And still more, some of them like me, say that Ukraine could have saved itself a lot of grief if they had signed a peace agreement with Russia early last year. Or if Ukraine had actually honored the Minsk Agreements. Or if Germany and France had nagged Ukraine to enforce and honor the Minsk Agreements like they were supposed to, but didn't.

If we look back carefully, we can see where one party after another dropped the ball. Then they pointed to the president of Russia and said, "He started it!"

All along the way, it's been trendy and cute to blame Russia. If you don't want to take responsibility for what happened, just blame Russia. DW will go along. The Guardian will amplify it. The NYT will tell us this is expected behavior. The WaPo will fill it in and make it look like it's all Russia's fault. Their readers will be cool with it. At the request of the Ukraine FSB, Twitter will ensure that only Ukraine's message will be heard. As long as we blame Russia and only Russia, it's cool.

And as long as we can blame Russia, we never ever have to take responsibility for our actions. We can impose sanctions. We can blow up pipelines and dams. We can keep sending weapons and ammo, but we will set no boots on the ground for if we did, we might have to take responsibility. And responsibility is really what this is all about.

Never mind that the Cold War never really ended. Never mind that defense contractors have families to feed, kids to put braces on, and send to college. Never mind that America never really stopped worrying about Russian influence in the world. And don't talk about hegemony. This conflict isn't about hegemony. It's about freedom.

Ukraine is fighting for freedom. America has only ever fought for freedom, freedom, freedom. Europe is free because of America, right? Is that what we believe? Did European countries surrender any sovereignty when they joined NATO?

I believe in freedom. I want people to be free. But with freedom comes responsibility. Taking responsibility means not blaming other people for your misfortune. That means Ukraine must take some responsibility for the war, just as much as we have been placing upon Russia. America must take some responsibility for the war in Ukraine, too.

Set aside blame and responsibility and notice a few facts. Notice that the best estimates say that at the current rate of progress, Ukraine will need 17 years to recover the land now occupied by Russia(ns). Another estimate says that, absent a huge mobilization and industrialization, a decade of time will be required to replace all the ammo and material that was sent to Ukraine to support the Ukrainian war effort.

Leading up to the present "Special Military Operation", America has been hard at work, expanding NATO. Europe allowed this to happen at America's direction, paying little heed to Russia's warnings. Now you could say that Russia is being belligerent if you want to. I know that's fashionable. But if we believed that Russia was a credible threat to our security, and we did not grow our military readiness to counter that threat, what were we doing growing NATO?

Does the West have credibility when it expands NATO while ignoring Russia's legitimate security concerns? How about this: America spends \$800 billion a year on its military. America has sent \$113 billion in aid to Ukraine over the last year and a half, and still Russia occupies 17% of Ukraine's land. That's not very efficient. Is that responsible?

Ukraine abdicated responsibility. Europe abdicated responsibility. And judging by the trail of wrecked hardware that litters Ukraine, America has abdicated responsibility. Even Russia has abdicated some responsibility, and if you want to pile onto Russia, you can read articles that regurgitate the dominant narrative all over the internet. They aren't hard to find.

There has been a ton of talk about stopping Russia, but no one is really stopping them. Ukraine is getting hammered by Russia. They are running out of ammo. Russia is destroying hardware as fast as we can send it. The sanctions didn't work. Russia hasn't surrendered. And Zelensky went to the NATO Summit seeking membership only to get a very qualified assurance that someday, Ukraine will become a member of NATO, under very specific conditions that weren't clearly specified.

Maybe the goal is not for Ukraine to win. Or maybe the goal is not to let Ukraine into NATO. Don't let the war end. Use the conflict for fundraising. Keep the fog of war intact so that money can flow without accountability or responsibility.

That's how this conflict is supposed to work or we would have stopped this exercise long ago.

Write on.

In this blog, the main tenets in the above article have been covered extensively many times by me. I agree with Mr Dunn. It leads me to conclude and to contend that the war in Ukraine must be ended asap. That's another call for a Plan B as per what Time Magazine is calling for. It's an inevitable ending for the most senseless war since WW2, and unfairly blamed on Russia. Even the biased standard western narrative now needs a Plan B.

On the other side of the world, American militarism has emerged to stir up shit and instigate a war between China and Taiwan. Biden wants to send weapons to Taiwan. Why is this necessary? Because of domestic political pressure, which is now seeing Biden as losing traction in clearing his own name in a sordid set of circumstances which engulf his son, Hunter, and in his driving a Justice Department to nail Trump in his own set of misdemeanours that on paper seems far less serious than Biden's own, the American president seems to be changing to another Plan B, in his foreign policy. Up to now, he has always preferred to first kill off Russia and then pivot to Asia against China. But now with the obvious failure of Project Ukraine, which the Republicans have been skeptical of in the first place, he has to address the Congressional preference to deal with China first. Biden does not want to look soft on China, and loudly claims he is not, but after three of his officials' apparent failure to smoothen relations with Beijing, he now has to have a Plan B.

That Plan B is simply his response to Republicans' demand to shift the emphasis to China. To do that, the Americans have no interest to spark a war (because their military has been degraded as described above) but they must simply adopt a narrative that China is being "contained", in the kind of familiar language older Americans from the Cold War era like to think in terms of.

The Economist, another prominent voice in the empire of the west, provides the following report of a new American policy of "donating" weapons to Taiwan from its own stocks, since the Plan A of "selling" arms to Taiwan has run into a huge traffic jam in the production lines since Ukraine is taking priority over everything else.

Joe Biden donates weapons to Taiwan, as he does to Ukraine.

Will it forestall a crisis with China, or provoke one?

July 29th 2023

America has long believed that helping Ukraine to repel Russia's invasion was not only essential to preserving the security of Europe, but also important to deterring China from invading Taiwan. On July 28th it took that reasoning a leap forward by announcing it would for the first time start to arm Taiwan from America's own military stocks, as it has done repeatedly for Ukraine. The main difference is that it has not invoked an "emergency" to justify the move. Instead, it believes the arms supplies will help forestall a war across the Taiwan Strait.

The military move may instead provoke a new crisis. China will not accept American claims that it is nothing out of the ordinary, and represents "no change" in America's Taiwan policy. After all, America is shifting from selling weapons to Taiwan to subsidising its armed forces. Even before the announcement, a Chinese defence-ministry spokesman denounced arms supplies to Taiwan as "malicious acts", saying they posed "a serious threat to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and created significant strategic risks in China-us military relations".

The question is whether, as in the past, China will show its anger by stepping up its military harassment of Taiwan, such as its daily testing of Taiwanese defences by flying close to its airspace and sailing near its territorial waters. Last year China fired salvos of missiles close to the self-governing island following a high-profile visit by Nancy Pelosi, the then Speaker of America's House of Representatives. America has repeatedly accused China of carrying out dangerous manoeuvres close to its ships and planes, raising the risk of collision and superpower escalation.

The White House offered few details of the arms, worth \$345m, to be supplied through the fast-track "presidential drawdown authority" (pda). It said only that it would provide "defence articles and services" as well as "military education and training". A Pentagon spokesman said the package would include unspecified anti-armour and anti-aircraft weapons, as well as "multi-domain awareness" (mq-9A surveillance drones, according to leaks). More such military aid may soon follow, given that Lloyd Austin, the defence secretary, has said he intends to use the full \$1bn authorised by Congress before the current fiscal year ends on September 30th.

The attempt to play down the move—by burying the announcement in legalese and issuing it late on a Friday, classically a means of burying awkward news—betrays a certain trepidation in the administration of President Joe Biden. He faces at least three sets of conflicting pressures.

First is the worry about provoking a new crisis with China, having sent a succession of senior officials to talk to their Chinese counterparts since May. They include Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser; Antony Blinken, the secretary of state; Janet Yellen, the treasury secretary; and John Kerry, the climate envoy. All, in their various ways, have sought to create a “floor” under Sino-American relations. But military-to-military communications are still all but non-existent. “The Department of Defence continues to seek open communication with Beijing,” the Pentagon said, adding that it would “continue to support Taiwan’s maintenance of a sufficient self-defence capability.”

Against this effort is the countervailing pressure from Congress, especially Republicans, who accuse Mr Biden of being too soft on China and getting little in return for his diplomatic outreach. Indeed, some believe the president has delayed the Taiwan pda for fear of upsetting the Chinese—a claim that American officials vehemently reject.

Third, Mr Biden must satisfy Ukraine’s pressing need for more weapons as its counter-offensive progresses slowly and its cities are repeatedly pounded by Russian missiles and drones. After a wave of attacks on Odessa, Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine’s president, urged the world to create a “full-fledged sky shield” over Ukraine. “We need more air-defence systems for our entire territory, for all our cities and communities. The world must not get used to Russian terror,” he wrote in a Telegram post.

The Biden administration has hitherto claimed it could “walk and chew gum” at the same time (**last time I look, the old guy cannot even walk straight without stumbling or leaning on some young aide’s hand**) : that is, help push back Russia’s onslaught while deterring China. Even as it has rallied European allies to help Ukraine defend itself, the administration has been weaving a variety of mini-alliances in the Indo-Pacific to constrain China. Mr Blinken and Mr Austin have been criss-crossing the Pacific this week to strengthen the geopolitical “lattice-work”. In Brisbane on July 29th they are expected to announce a further tightening of the military alliance with Australia, including the upgrading of military bases in the country, more deployments of American forces, deeper defence-industrial ties and greater military co-operation with other countries in the region.

Typically military supplies for Ukraine have been donated from American stocks—this week it announced its 43rd PDA for Ukraine, worth \$400m and bringing the total to \$24bn—whereas Taiwan has bought its arms under the lengthier Foreign Military Sales system. The Pentagon says the Taiwan package will not affect supplies for Ukraine. Yet Ukraine and Taiwan are now competing for American donations and, in some cases, the same weapons, too. The backlog of Taiwanese orders, which stands at more than \$14bn, includes contracts for the Javelin missile, used to stop tanks, and the Stinger, used to bring down aircraft. Large quantities of both have been supplied to Ukraine.

In contrast with the PDAs for Ukraine, Congress has not appropriated funds needed to replenish weapons being given to Taiwan. In the short term the Pentagon can probably re-allocate funds internally, say congressional staffers. But for the new Taiwan policy to be sustainable, Congress will have to appropriate money in the next fiscal year. That, in turn, will depend on the tortuous budgeting process in a divided Congress, especially the House, where “America First” admirers of Donald Trump, who are sceptical if not hostile towards Ukraine, hold greater sway.

Assuming Congress can agree on a budget on time, Mr Biden will probably face demands for even stronger measures to help Taiwan, including grants to buy weapons and more intense training. After all, one of the few issues on which Mr Biden's political supporters and foes can agree is the need to confront China. Some senior figures worry that such unanimity may prove an even greater danger than political dissension.

The pivot (ie, a sort of Plan B) to “donate” rather than to “sell” arms to Taiwan will end up being another waste of time, since American manufacturing cannot keep up with the demands of the US trying to fight a war on two fronts. Heck, it cannot even do it on one front in Ukraine, without running out of ammunition, and now they want to supply the same type of weapons to a second proxy, Taiwan. And if this is to scare China, which has the largest industrial capacity on planet Earth that can easily outproduce the US in any field of weaponry to prepare for a war near to home ground, it must be a bad joke. Come on, Joe, you can surely do comedy better than that clown, Zelensky...

So, let's be aware of the type of unrealistic policies that are being pursued by the American political class particularly by a President who has picked the wrong puppets to wage war on his country's behalf. Both Plan A and Plan B look ridiculous, and the only conclusion that can be made is that it is just engaging in rhetoric to salvage its shattered reputation of a global hegemon in the face of military inadequacy and bitter divisions in domestic politics.

Even in the economic war against China, the Biden White House needs a Plan B. One of the biggest campaigns to prevent China's rise is to get American companies to shift the supply chain out of China. Has that worked?

Apple has been obedient and tried to do that. It tried to reorganize its primary supply chain built around a Taiwanese company called Foxconn. Foxconn was instructed to change from being 90 percent of manufacturing in China to being more diversified across different production centers in more countries outside China, in a plan to reduce China operations to just 70 percent. It negotiated a deal with India to set up manufacturing there, but before it can start, it had to change to a Plan B, which is to quit India and go back to China.

WTF happened?

Here is the Financial Times report about this disaster:

Apple's manufacturing shift to India hits stumbling blocks

The iPhone maker is under pressure to unwind its China-orientated supply chain strategy following Covid disruption

Patrick McGee in San Francisco and John Reed in New Delhi

FEBRUARY 14 2023

Apple is hitting stumbling blocks in its effort to increase production in India, as the US tech giant faces pressure to cut its manufacturing reliance on China.

The iPhone maker has been sending product designers and engineers from California and China to factories in southern India, to train locals and help establish production, according to four people familiar with the operations.

It comes as Apple attempts to unwind its dependence on a China-centred supply chain strategy, following months of Covid-19 disruption that led to it reporting its first decline in quarterly revenues in three and a half years earlier this month.

Apple is building up nascent operations in India in an overdue diversification strategy, following the blueprint it set in China two decades ago, with engineers and designers often spending weeks or months at a time in factories to oversee manufacturing.

While Apple has been producing lower-end iPhones in India since 2017, last September was significant with Indian suppliers building flagship models within weeks of their launch in China, where virtually all iPhones and other Apple hardware are made.

But its experience in recent months has demonstrated the scale of the work to be done in the country.

At a casings factory in Hosur run by Indian conglomerate Tata, one of Apple's suppliers, just about one out of every two components coming off the production line is in good enough shape to eventually be sent to Foxconn, Apple's assembly partner for building iPhones, according to a person familiar with the matter.

This 50 per cent "yield" fares badly compared with Apple's goal for zero defects. Two people that have worked in Apple's offshore operations said the factory is on a plan towards improving proficiency but the road ahead is long.

Jue Wang, consultant at Bain, said Apple is at the start of its expansion into India. "We're not talking the same scale of the Zhengzhou factory" — a factory hub in China known as "iPhone City" that employs some 300,000 workers — "and everybody acknowledges there will be different efficiency, but it is happening", she said.

In China, suppliers and government officials took a "whatever it takes" approach to win iPhone orders. Former Apple employees describe instances in which they would estimate a certain task might take several weeks, only to show up the next morning to find it already completed at inexplicable speed.

Operations in India are not running at that sort of pace, said a former Apple engineer briefed on the matter: “There just isn’t a sense of urgency.”

A person involved in Apple operations said the process of expanding to India is slow in part because of logistics, tariffs and infrastructure. This person said Apple’s diversification into south-east Asia has been smoother thanks to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a free trade agreement among 10 regional nations.

Mark Zetter, president of Venture Outsource, a consultancy for the contract electronics industry, said such inertia has been a problem for years.

Five years ago, when Zetter did research for the Indian think-tank Gateway House, he found contract manufacturers would “frequently claim they can fulfil any need” for an electronics client. But in reality they would be “slow to respond to customer concerns after the deal is signed” and “lack flexibility” to respond to changes.

The Apple engineers have also, at times, been housed at city-centre hotels in Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, two hours away from the factories where they are working. This requires four hours of daily commuting, with occasionally poor WiFi connections along the route.

Apple declined to comment.

Despite these teething issues, analysts say India’s potential for Apple is huge. Bain, the global consultancy, estimates that manufacturing exports from India could more than double from \$418bn in 2022 to more than \$1tn in 2028, driven by policy support and low costs. It estimates that electronics exports alone will grow at an annual rate of up to 40 per cent.

Vivek Wadhwa, a Silicon Valley-based entrepreneur and academic who last month met with government officials including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, said the central government is encouraging businesses to take advantage of Apple’s need to diversify from China.

Provincial governments “are bending over backwards to bring industry in, and they will do what China has done”, he said. “But, these are baby steps. Apple is now getting its feet on the ground, learning what does and doesn’t work . . . Give it three years and you’ll see it scaling up.”

Wadhwa acknowledged that the fragmented, bureaucratic government in India was something Apple would need to adapt to. He suggested its engineers learn the art of *jugaad* — a way of “making do” or transcending obstacles. “Because everything in India is an obstacle,” he said.

Recent jobs ads from Apple make clear it has major ambitions in the country, which is on track to surpass China as the world’s most populous nation this year.

One ad tells prospective employees they will “grow nascent operations in India to service all product lines of business at Apple while simultaneously building the factory of the future”.

“India” was also mentioned 15 times in Apple’s earnings call earlier this month, with chief executive Tim Cook saying he is “very bullish on India”. He called the market “hugely

exciting” and “a major focus”, and confirmed plans to soon open the first Apple Stores in the country.

Tata has ambitious plans to become a full-service Apple supplier like the Taiwanese, and it has the approval and backing of the Indian government, according to people in India familiar with its plans.

The Indian conglomerate is in talks to buy an iPhone assembly plant outside Bangalore in the neighbouring state of Karnataka from Wistron, a Taiwanese rival to Foxconn that is seeking to exit after experiencing labour unrest and protests in 2020.

One person familiar with the plans said Apple was facilitating discussions that would allow Tata to take majority ownership rather than a 50:50 joint-venture structure. Bloomberg first reported on the talks. Tata declined to comment on its plans. Wistron did not reply to a request for comment.

Meanwhile, India’s government has given the preliminary go-ahead to Apple’s Chinese component suppliers to begin operation, in joint ventures with Indian partners, according to a person familiar with plans.

The move is significant as the Indian government has a simmering border dispute with China. It had banned dozens of Chinese apps and launched tax and other regulatory proceedings against phone manufacturers since a clash at its northern frontier in 2020 that left at least 24 dead.

Earlier this month, India’s finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said India intended to provide customs duty relief on the import of certain parts and inputs used in mobile phones, such as camera lenses, in a bid to “defend domestic value addition in manufacturing of mobile phones”. An electronics industry executive in Tamil Nadu said Apple is late to the game. “They should have started this exercise five years ago,” he said. “They should have started diversification earlier so they would reap the benefit at this time.”

Well, my friends, those are all very loud calls for various Plan Bs even in this matter of trying to diversify supply chains out of China.

What else in the antagonistic effort to “de-risk” or “de-couple” from China needs to screw up before America realizes that the best plan is to go back to working happily together in one peaceful global economy?

Well, if not, then let’s keep looking for Plan B’s...

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Un-Influencer in a World full of Hubris