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Ukraine: Paradigms for Problem-Framing

With the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops a frozen conflict explodes. The European security architecture is collapsing. The classic theory of the obsolescence of major wars is held in check. The war is very expensive, even too expensive to be pursued, is no longer an argument. It is a question of interrupting the negative ratchet effect that is constantly eating away pieces of Ukraine. The challenge is how to stop a war without starting it. The basic method consists in increasing the costs for the aggressor in order to make them unbearable. However, the limits of what can be accepted vary from culture to culture. There are societies where the first death is already a tragedy and others that do not hesitate to send millions of people to the butcher's shop without the slightest remorse. Economic warfare is the other lever: weaken Russia by isolating and ruining it. It is a long-term strategy that might culminate in an impressive number of Ukrainians killed and the country destroyed. The classic formula according to which the surgery was successful but the patient is dead could be applied.

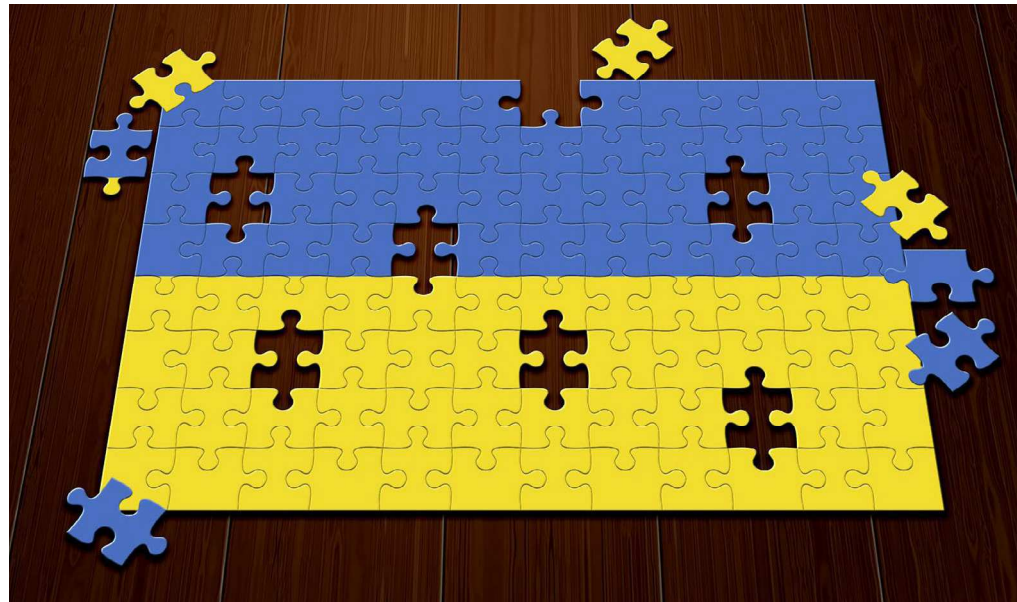
There is a shift from the war of influence that prevailed until recent months to war on the model of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – that is, based on artillery. The war of soft powers becomes that of sharp powers with a traditional conflict concerning narratives. Ukraine has embarked on an inexorable process of attachment to Europe and adherence to the model of liberal democracy. This is a model hated by Russia, China, and probably a majority of countries on this planet

who furthermore see the West as a civilizational entity in decline. Once again the theory according to which only two liberal democracies never go to war seems verified.

Considering the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a negotiated solution is very much dependent on the way both parties frame the problem. If there is no agreement on this very basic requirement – here, compatible definitions – resolution is extremely hard to imag-

security operations that are handled properly, easily, with no exceptional problems. Thus, there is nothing to negotiate. The only thing to do is to wait for the end of the friendly intervention to save the Russian-speaking population persecuted or massacred by the Ukrainian Nazis.

The Ukrainians have a totally different way of defining the current situation. It is about a conflict between neighboring and sovereign countries.



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ine. For the time being, it seems that the gap between both definitions of the situation is so wide that no window of opportunity seems visible or even conceivable.

Russia is framing the problem as a matter of security because it considers that the balance between itself and NATO has been challenged and that the old Cold War division between the two parts of Europe should be reinstated. On the ground, in Ukraine, the Russians state that there is no war, just

One has invaded the other and started killing scores of Ukrainian people and inflicting heavy destruction. Russia should withdraw from occupied parts of Ukraine, compensate for the destruction, and provide guarantees to ensure such an attack does not happen again.

If Russia wants to open the game to the integration of historical issues, its position would not be as strong as they imagine because it seems that its main concern was always to annihilate

the Ukrainian identity and massacre its population. Second, the Kaliningrad exclave issue could be reopened as this part of Europe, historically speaking, has never been Russian. Third, Siberia itself is an Asian land that has been the victim of a typically Russian colonialist and imperialist conquest. Fourth, much could be said about the Caucasus and the way Russia, then the Soviet Union and now again Russia, butchered the whole region.

On moral grounds, Russia also has a very weak position. One could not equate the victim of aggression with the perpetrator of it. It is not Ukraine that is invading and destroying Russia but the opposite. At the end of World War 2, no one would imagine it acceptable to have the SS officer in charge of a death camp sitting together with some surviving prisoners to discuss the fate of those prisoners. War crimes are not negotiable. The logic of peace is clearly opposed to the logic of justice.

On strategic and geopolitical grounds, today Ukraine must have two regrets because of its care to please Russia. One is not to have joined NATO because, in that case, Russia would have thought twice before risking starting World War 3. Second, Ukraine should not have given Russia all the nuclear weapons and equipment that were on its territory at the time of the collapse of the USSR. Today, Ukraine would have a very significant deterrent force to keep away the Russian threat.

If we consider the theory of negotiation and the different paradigms that can be used, there are three main options here. The first is the zero-sum

game; the second is the chicken game, the third is the prisoner's dilemma. If one considers first the zero-sum game, it is a paradigm typically applied to border-delimitation issues. The gains of one party are the losses of the other, and vice versa. In this case, we are in a situation where borders have already been established between Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine is an internationally recognized country, part of the United Nations, and sovereign. Theoretically, there is little to negotiate unless the objectives of Russia are something other than discussing the delimitation of borders. For example, it could be to control the whole of Ukraine, change its government, or divide this country into different zones of influence. It could also be to intimidate neighbors, an action in the ordinary panoply of Russia and previous USSR. There are very few possibilities for negotiating because, in a zero-sum game, there will be necessarily a winner and a loser. The loser, supposed to be Ukraine, does not intend to accept any deal offered by the aggressor, since the situation is clearly defined. It is not Ukraine that is trying to appropriate parts of Russia but quite the opposite. In this case, Ukraine has no interest in negotiating its own amputation, even if a limited one. The obvious strategy for Ukraine is building a balance of power that would allow the situation to be reversed or ensure that the warring parties reach a costly situation intolerable for the invader. Success, in this case, supposes that the balance of forces would reverse.

The second paradigm captures an extremely tough and risky situation, a

chicken game. Both sides push their advantage until they think the other will collapse and give up eventually. It can be a mutual brinkmanship attitude. The



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chicken game relates to a number of international crises such as the set up of Soviet missiles in Cuba with a project that was designed to issue a direct threat to major United States cities. It encompasses very high-risk situations because ultimately each side is really in a situation of displaying force, showing readiness for direct confrontation, with one party losing – or, even worse, both ending up doing so. In this paradoxical situation, there is no possibility of cooperation or a win-win outcome. In other words, with the chicken game paradigm, if NATO – who becomes then the major party to the dispute instead of Ukraine – for instance believes in the Russian threat, the whole world could end up with a world war with the use of nuclear weapons.

The only way to get out of it would be to transform the chicken game into

a prisoner's dilemma. Such a paradigm reintroduces possibilities of cooperation. It supposes to have fulfilled a necessary condition: trust. However, a minimal degree of confidence is required and still does not exist in the present situation. To transform the nature of the game, it is probably necessary to modify the balance of power and have each party change its objectives, which does not seem the order of the day – at least for the moment. Building trust seems especially difficult when one of the two parties, the Russian government, is considered as lying deliberately and cynically for years. It is very difficult to obtain a change of mindset when both parties tend to escalate on the ground and also verbally. When the Russians label the Ukrainian government neo-Nazis, it does not open the road to negotiation. Demonizing has always been a way to find an excuse for not accepting any form of dialog. Furthermore the Russians do not hesitate to resort to the nuclear threat, which is also a mode of verbal escalation.

Another obstacle to any resolution is the real reasons behind the aggression. Are they different from those invoked? Do the Russians seriously

believe that Ukraine is governed by a group of neo-Nazis planning to attack Russia?

If what is at stake is a conflict between liberal democracies and dictatorships, it is a conflict of values that cannot be solved as there is not much to negotiate in this domain. One cannot split values in the same way as can be done with quantifiable goods. A value is met or not met. An identity is respected or not respected. A country exists or does not.

There is also a misconception problem. Vladimir Putin regards NATO not as a purely defensive alliance but as a coalition whose intention is to one day attack Russia. It is particularly long and arduous to change perceptions because these are built as much on emotions and beliefs as on objective facts.

If we consider the situation today, it is not realistic to consider any negotiation package because the situation is far from corresponding to a mutually hurting stalemate, one painful enough to annihilate any desire to prevail over the other. Every party will only agree to negotiate in a situation of strength – a condition that is not met today. The escalation has not reached its parox-

ysmal peak point. The Russian army is caught in a trap, doomed to carry on its siege warfare against cities on the basis of gigantic artillery duels or exchanges of Javelin and Stinger missiles versus thermobaric bombs. The volatility of the situation adds to the difficulty faced. In view of international rules and standards, such a package should include not only the return of all territories occupied by the Russian army and its allies but also reparations for the destruction caused by bombardment and other acts of war. Compensation for mass rapes perpetrated by Russian soldiers should also be considered. Finally, it will also be a question of thinking about the longer term and deterring Russia from attacking again after a few years. After a certain time, a formal apology from Russia should be made in order to create the necessary conditions to reach the forgiveness stage. History has demonstrated that it is possible in the long term. However, we are very far from meeting all these conditions in the present conjuncture. Reestablishing peace and cooperation might, indeed, be a matter of generations.

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