



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

Ukraine, time for the West to set some red lines of its own



Those who want to know what it's like to live under the constant threat of war, could do worse than visit the Taiwanese pavilion at this year's Venice art Biennale. Three videos by artist Yuan Goang-Ming powerfully raise the spectre of ordinary life being abruptly and thoroughly devastated by long-delayed, yet entirely expected conflict.

Sometimes it takes art to drive home a point that reading analysis and news, and even reporting on it, can only hint at in the abstract.

To live in the shadow of an aggressive neighbour who has designs on (parts of) your country, whether Taiwan, Ukraine or many others bordering Russia and also China, is to live on the edge of a volcano and never know when the one big eruption will come that wipes away the semblance of normalcy and the years of slow, steady progress.

Ukraine has been experiencing just such an eruption for the past two years and the question that it and its allies are confronted with is whether there is any way of preventing the country from being swept away, let alone of taming the volcano long-term.

The 'victory plan'

The 'victory plan' that Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky is presenting on his visit to Washington, might be optimistically named. But it could pave the way to a, for all sides undesirable yet possibly for now best-case, scenario: stopping the current eruption, in effect refreezing the conflict.

For that to happen, though, Russia will have to be deterred from continuing to actively pursue the war and this will arguably require a massive rethink of the West's strategy for confronting global challenges that still seems rooted in an era when it enjoyed massive economic and military dominance.

How credible are either side's red lines?

Where before, this dominance allowed it the luxury of letting opponents guess how it would react to challenges, the new situation, especially with regards to the de facto Russia-China axis, might require the clarity of new red lines.

The issue of red lines crops up time and again, whether in relation to allowing Ukraine certain weaponry or how it uses Western arms, or in the careful Western calibrations of how seriously to take Moscow's nuclear posturing.

It goes to the core of the imbalance in strategies between Russia and the West, and in a larger context, also extends to China: how credible are either side's red lines?

Red lines

Russia promotes the narrative that it is acting in response to Ukraine crossing one of its red lines by seeking NATO membership. What led to Ukraine crossing that red line and how reasonable the line was in the first place, is irrelevant for the purpose of establishing the credibility of Russia's red lines.

Yes, other red lines have since been crossed, but it is now up to NATO to gauge what will be the next trigger to further escalate the conflict.

The West, by contrast, has given Russia ample examples of how it has not been willing to enforce its own red lines.

Apart from the failure to live up to the security guarantees to Ukraine given in 1994 and 2009, the most famous, egregious and damaging example being the failure of the Obama administration to act after the Assad regime used chemical weapons in Syria in 2013.

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This largely ended any prospect of the US exerting leverage during the Syrian civil war, thus opening the way for Russian and Iranian efforts to bolster the Assad regime and very possibly emboldening Russia to seize the Crimea from Ukraine the following year.

The US and other Western countries at times, and quite selectively, claim they do not want to be the policeman of the world. After the 2003 Iraq war and subsequent occupation, and again after NATO's failed Libyan intervention in 2011 there was an increasing, and understandable, reaction against being dragged into 'forever wars' and military adventurism.

A stark choice

This state of affairs more or less persisted until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The West had in the meantime not been willing to act decisively to help Ukraine restore its grip on its eastern parts where Russia had fomented and supported insurrection.

Only the unexpected strength of Ukraine's resistance and its initial successes on the battlefield then forced the NATO-allies into a stark choice: support Ukraine or lose every last shred of credibility, with possible further consequences for stability in eastern Europe and possibly in Asia.

The problem with the NATO countries' response has been that it has been far from whole-hearted, if judging by the 'salami slice' tactics of providing weapons systems for Ukraine and allowing these to be used effectively.

The NATO allies are held back by a fear of crossing other Russian red lines and escalating the conflict

While the West's support for Ukraine might be stronger than Russia had anticipated, it is clearly not aimed at making Russia lose the

war.

The NATO allies are held back by a fear of crossing other Russian **red lines** and escalating the conflict. Their best hope thus seems to be to return the conflict to a frozen state.

The question is what presents the best chance of freezing the conflict long-term, as no real prospect of a comprehensive resolution is in sight?

Let's, for now, dismiss the perverse option that allowing Russia to realise its claims on Ukraine's four eastern oblasts is the way to pause the fighting. That would imply a Ukrainian collapse that is currently unlikely and in any event undesirable.

A third option

Thus, can a frozen conflict best be achieved by making sure Russian advances come to a complete halt for an extended period? That would make the situation around the city of Prokrovsk even more significant. If it falls, it will extend the war possibly by many years. But if Russia is unable to take it, what else will be needed to freeze the conflict?

The answer might lie in a third option, which would probably follow the outline of Zelensky's victory plan, in terms of strengthening Ukraine's position on the battlefield to such an extent that Russia would, at least for now, desist from further costly and ineffective attacks.



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the direction it desires, is to establish new red lines of its own, with clear reactions set out in response to certain Russian actions

All these options are deeply flawed, as is the entire notion of freezing the conflict. Yet, it seems the only realistic course of action, short of an all-out war between NATO and Russia.

One thing that NATO could do to nudge the situation in the direction it desires, is to establish new red lines of its own, with clear reactions set out in response to certain Russian actions.

It would change the dynamic of the conflict and put the burden on the Kremlin of guessing what consequences some actions might actually have.

If Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure persist, for example, it could be a reason for the West to allow the use of its long-range weapons to strike deeper into Russia. If Prokrovsk falls, it should signal a new level of military support for Ukraine, etc. up to and including sending troops to Ukraine.

The problem with red lines is that they might trigger unwanted wars, and that circumstances change and conditions are mutable. That is on top of the problem of loss of credibility and deterrence if they are not acted on.

Many in the West therefore prefer ambiguous arrangements, such as the US non-commitment to the defence of Taiwan. That might have worked when the military, and economic, balance was overwhelmingly in the West's favour but is probably a lot less effective when the Chinese navy grows by the size of the entire British navy every two years.