Force and Its Limits (If Any)

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DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2026-24-2-5-8

The war that erupted in West Asia, on the last day of winter, has immediately spread beyond the region. The U.S.-Israeli attack on Iran is a watershed in world politics, even amid the expanding stormy conflicts of the 21st century. The last remaining norms—and even formal rituals, like inventing a pretext to attack—have been demonstratively cast aside. The world has entered a truly predatory era, in which ambitions are restrained only by the limits of one's strength. Attributing this historical shift to certain leaders' characteristics would mean underestimating it. Individuals do not determine the zeitgeist; an epoch brings certain personalities to the fore.

The Iran war is also important in that it may show the limits of military force. Iran is the U.S.'s greatest and most serious military opponent since the Korean War. Beyond the military balance, in the context of a deeply interconnected global economy, Iran's strength lies not in its ability to defeat the U.S. and Israel militarily, but in its ability

to disrupt global energy markets by blocking a critical artery. And even Iran's powerful adversaries lack the resources needed to render it utterly toothless.

If an unambiguous victory is impossible, can there be a negotiated settlement, or deterrence based on a certain balance and understanding of the limits of one's own capabilities? The military imbalance, which existed from the start, will constantly push the stronger side to seek complete victory—if not last June, then now; if not now, then next time. But can something like the last century's Cold War—an intense confrontation that does not descend into mass bloodshed—be repeated in the current unusual international circumstances?

The turn of winter to spring this year was marked by two 80-year anniversaries: George Kennan's Long Telegram on 22 February, and Winston Churchill's Fulton Speech on 5 March. Kennan's communique is considered the conceptual basis for containing the USSR. And Churchill's speech, about an Iron Curtain being lowered across Europe, was a declaration of the Cold War.

Both have been much discussed in Russia, whose fierce rivalry with the West has now resumed after a reprieve from the late 1980s to the early 2020s. By inertia, this struggle is called a new incarnation of the Cold War. But is it?

It was George Orwell who termed the new phase of world politics a 'cold war.' In a short essay published in 1945, he wrote that the invention of something as destructive as the atomic bomb could replace large-scale wars with "a peace that is no peace." He was right. Weapons of mass destruction have helped avoid a clash between major powers by making confrontation chronic and indirect. Both Kennan and Churchill spoke of prolonged struggle, a cold war of attrition. They believed that the West had every reason to count on winning. It would be a long and hard endeavor, but it would eventually bear fruit.

The first Cold War is sometimes remembered with nostalgia: supposedly, things were rough and sometimes dangerous, but at least clear and orderly. In truth, none of it should be idealized; contemporary documents and articles are enough to disabuse one of any romantic tint. But there is one thing that distinguishes the current situation from its predecessor: the 'free world' now has the experience of winning the first marathon of survival.

The USSR's self-dissolution surprised its opponents and convinced them of the validity of the prescriptions offered by Kennan, Churchill, and other ideologists at the confrontation's outset. It infused them with confidence in their own ideological and moral rectitude, as

they had won a dangerous conflict without using military force. It was the cleanest of victories, in a way: the opponent simply gave up, recognized his inferiority, and walked out of the ring.

Why this happened is a separate matter. But the West cannot forget the experience. Firstly, the victory seemed so fateful that its revision still seems unthinkable. Secondly, and more importantly: if you succeed once, you will expect to do so again. And since Russia is not the Soviet Union in resources or influence—and the West, on the contrary, has maximally expanded its position over the past thirty years—success is expected much faster this time. After all, the previous round already revealed who is historically right.

Hence the opinion that agreement with Russia is possible only on condition of its new (and this time not even veiled) capitulation. This approach remains unaltered in Europe. But the U.S. has adjusted its approach, in accord with the new administration's pragmatic desire to end the conflict in Ukraine, which is distracting it from more important issues. Yet the Americans also still believe that Russia should know its place—or rather, understand America's incomparably more important and well-deserved place.

Russia, of course, intends to prove otherwise. It is indeed not the USSR, and thus demands recognition of its right to define its own security, but now without attempts to export its worldview or development model. Yet the West perceives Russia precisely as a weakened version of the former superpower, which must be put in its place. Without recognizing any rights, which were recognized then only because the USSR's power and influence could not be ignored. Russia's nuclear capabilities are taken into account only in that they continue to ensure the Orwellian "peace that is no peace," i.e., the absence of direct war.

The risk of mutually assured destruction remains. But the West's victory in the Cold War led it to believe that total victory is possible through measures that simply bypass nuclear weapons. Such confidence is dangerous, as lessons from the previous confrontation are drawn not only by the winners, but also by the losers. And the latter now recognize that circumvention of the nuclear factor must be made impossible. Things like "decapitation strikes"—the assassination of Iranian leaders with whom supposedly serious negotiations were just being held—make the U.S.'s other opponents even more fatalistically resolved, in the spirit of legends about the "Dead Hand."

George Kennan lived to the age of 101 to see the aftermath of the Iraq War. He sharply criticized the

American geopolitical euphoria after 1991, i.e., after his concept had proven a success. And he specifically recalled the part of his Long Telegram that called for soberly assessing the opponent's motives and considering the opponent's concerns (rather than dismissing them and potentially provoking a disproportionate response). The patriarch's opinion has not been heeded.

No matter how the Iran conflict ends, its outcome will have far-reaching consequences. Is force almighty? How far is it ready to go to prove that it is almighty? And what will be left after that?