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Why the Ukraine outcome is central to all our futures

How much of this war can European nations handle before their resolve

weakens?

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A Ukrainian soldier with a British-developed NLAW light anti-tank weapon mans a trench in the north of the Kyiv region in March. | REUTERS

This being the 31st anniversary of Ukraine's independence from the old Soviet Union, as well as marking six months since Russian President Vladimir Putin's unprovoked and savage invasion, minds in the West, and especially in Europe, are turning to what will be the outcome.

Can either side possibly "win" in the pure sense of inflicting full defeat on the other? When can it possibly end if neither side is anywhere near ready to talk with the other? How much pain is the West going to have to bear, especially in soaring energy costs, but also in major world shortages of foodstuffs, in order to keep the sanctions squeeze on Russia? How far can Putin be pushed before he presses the nuclear

button — tactical or strategic?

It is questions like these that are rattling around Europe's chancelleries and leading, so some say, to a weakening of resolution to maintain support for Ukraine as the price of the conflict keeps rising and the European economy stops growing and grinds to a halt. The pessimists also point to the fact that the wider world is far from united against Russia, with only 39 countries out of 191 imposing sanctions on Russia.

But against all that, there is a completely different picture emerging that contradicts the wavering and the gloom.

First, there is the extraordinary strength of Ukrainian morale, inspired by the powerful leadership of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in contrast to evidence of low morale among Russian troops, of whom 45,000 are said to have been killed and wounded. The latter is made even worse when combined with, so far, clumsy and utterly outdated Russian military tactics.

Second, individual Western countries have been ready to supply weapons, both tactical and now strategic, on a rising scale. Most notable is the U.S., which just announced a further \$3 billion package, but also the U.K. and France, with a more hesitant Germany following along behind. Other NATO countries have engaged in extensive programs that provide military training, which the agile Ukrainians are amazingly quick to pick up and apply. Most European countries have also been generous in welcoming Ukrainian refugees.

Third, the determination of those states that are ready to help in the struggle, although a minority, is enormous, especially in banking, insurance, investment, the application of trade embargoes and maybe soon on all forms of Russian tourism. This is having a clear impact on Russia and includes most of the advanced economic powers — except, of course China — despite the fact that the oil and gas revenues continue for the moment to flow into Putin's coffers.

So which picture is the right one and which way will things unfold? The outcome depends heavily on the leadership of the Western powers, and, behind that, on the sort of world view that the various national leaders and their supporters hold about the modern international order and their nations' roles within it.

Possibly for the U.S. and Japan, the choice seems obvious and simple: Any weakness shown in dealing with Russia over its actions in Ukraine will be closely watched elsewhere. It could pave the way for a Chinese assault on Taiwan. But for the Europeans, who are much closer to the actual war zone, things are less simple.

Is the blatantly illegal Ukraine invasion a matter primarily of economics to be somehow solved by clever diplomacy and a compromise deal of sorts with the Kremlin in what used to be called "realpolitik"? Or is it a matter of absolute fundamental principle underpinning the entire safety and security of sovereign countries, large and small, more democratic or less democratic, but nevertheless relying on the responsible and legal behavior of nations for their survival?

This is where the current struggle for the premiership of the United Kingdom becomes highly relevant. The U.K. under outgoing Prime Minister Boris Johnson has

been one of the strongest European voices and actors in support of an all-out win for Ukraine.

Which of the two candidates now, Rishi Sunak or Elizabeth Truss, looks like they will give the strongest priority to a tough line in world affairs against appalling tyranny here and now — reminiscent of Europe in 1939, when just in time the U.K. stood alone against Hitler's bellicosity while most of Europe went under his heel? This time, admittedly, the U.K. is at one removed from the actual killing fields, but like much of today's Europe, facing undisguised aggression and major disruption through economic warfare.

The media have depicted the aspiring U.K. duo's ungainly public quarrel as a matter of home economic policy — between cutting taxes and targeting direct help to the poorest facing completely impossible energy bills. But in practice both will have to use all available methods they can find domestically.

The truth goes deeper. It is between Truss, who seems to see the absolute centrality of the international threat, not just to energy prices but to the very existence of the continued world order, and Sunak, the brilliant financier who focuses on the top priority of returning to sound money and economic growth. Both accept the need for substantial further targeted aid to the poorest as inflation keeps painfully climbing.

Those who are old enough will remember that when Winston Churchill took over the country's leadership in 1940, no one talked much about growth, sound monetary policy or inflation. In fact, Churchill showed little interest in economics at all, despite having once been chancellor of the exchequer. Instead, his whole focus was on defeating the enemy without compromise and with raising morale and convincing Britons that victory was possible.

Churchill had no time for diplomatic deals, only for total victory. He seemed to know what neither his predecessors nor the rest of Europe knew: That there could be no deal of any kind with Germany or Japan's maniacal leaders and commitment to total and unrestrained aggression of every kind. There was simply no space for diplomacy. And in the end he proved tragically right.

Many things may be going wrong just now in the British economy, but the instinct to put survival first against existential evil is very deep in the nation's history and experience, even when it involves more immediate hardship. Compromise with Putin now would bequeath to future generations a century of unceasing authoritarian aggression. Truss seems to have that at the forefront of her mind, Sunak less so.

Neither of the two make ideal candidates for national leadership at a time of multidimensional crises. Neither can solve the cost-of-living horrors, and the associated suffering, purely by moves at home or alone when the true sources are external and inextricably linked, not just with Russia, but with China, Middle East oil, gas producers, U.S. shale output and with climate battles and a tangle of other international issues.

But I suspect that it is Truss' wider world view and the rugged determination that goes with it that will put her in No. 10 Downing St.
