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MAD or Big MAC?



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Some of us are old enough to remember the Cold War and the nuclear deterrence doctrine called MAD: *Mutually Assured Destruction*. This was the impressively simple idea that if country R launched a nuclear missile attack on country A, country A would do the same against country R. And they'd both get blown to smithereens.

The logical and practical ramifications of this were explored in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 masterpiece *Dr Strangelove*. A top US Air Force commander decides to launch a nuclear attack on Russia as (not unreasonably) he's concerned about his precious bodily fluids. It turns out that the attack can't be stopped. But in turn that attack will trigger an automatic new Russian Doomsday Weapon attack on the United States.

Alas the Soviets have not warned Washington about this option. Under deterrence doctrine the deterring power of your Doomsday Weapon is rather lost if you don't tell the other side you have it. So the world gets blown up.

After the Cold War ended we dropped MAD and opted instead for Big MAC: *Mutually Assured Cooperation*. All sides invest in each other's prosperity by trade and capital flows. A completely different psychological relationship. Suspicion gives way to cautious trust.

And Big MAC is the gift that keeps on giving. As each year goes by the benefits of stability and peace grow exponentially. Why fight and put at risk those colossal and still compounding gains in all-round wealth and stability? Jaw-jaw and more-more rather than war-war. Fighting on any scale that matters will indeed be *mad*. Grotesquely self-destructive.

Russia's Ukraine invasion has wrecked in mere days those three decades of balmy post-Cold War confidence-building. We've hurtled back towards MAD. Chemical weapons are bad enough. But are the odds of a desperate Russia's use of (say) tactical nuclear weapons in Europe any longer close to negligible? What if it happens? How to 'calibrate' a military response that both deters further nuclear attacks by Russia and does not leave V Putin feeling compelled to escalate in a wildly MAD direction?

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

And so to 'negotiations'.

As previously spelled out here, talks are just talks. *The war itself is the only negotiation that matters.* Russia and Ukraine are testing to the absolute limit the ability and willingness of each other to deliver and withstand pain.

Both sides are forced to think the unthinkable. At what point do their own military losses and human suffering reach the point that core principles just have to be dropped? And how to drop them without looking humiliated or just *weak*?

Of course the situation is not symmetrical. It's Russia that's demolishing and 'punishing' large areas of Ukraine. It's Ukraine that stands to lose great swathes of territory if it capitulates.

Hence the official Kyiv position that Ukraine must not surrender an inch of land, come what may. No recognition of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk "republics" or the earlier Russian annexation of Crimea. Any such surrender sets a precedent for weakness. It tells Moscow that in due course it can grab some more Ukrainian land and get away with it.

Once this position is accepted, the only way forward for Kyiv is to try to force Russian troops to leave Ukrainian territory completely. Any 'ceasefire' simply allows the Kremlin to consolidate its grip on whatever land it currently controls and bring in reinforcements.

Ukraine can back up its attempts to change the facts on the ground by bringing home to Moscow that even if Russia wins some sort of control over any Ukraine territory and eg tries to impose a 'Two-Koreas' type outcome, it will face a grim and doomed task in holding on to that territory in the face of unrelenting sabotage and insurgency.

Does that mean that Kyiv and Moscow have nothing to talk about as far as territory goes? Not necessarily.

Within a wider settlement that guarantees Ukraine's internationally recognised borders and closely defined 'neutrality', Kyiv might contemplate granting Crimea and Luhansk/Donetsk some sort of 'special autonomy' and added formalised links to Russia. See for example the arrangements agreed for Republika Srpska as part of Bosnia and Herzegovina to have 'special relations' with Serbia. Plenty of other precedents can be pulled from the wily diplomat's brain.

But Kyiv can't be convincing in pressing Moscow to agree to any of that while Moscow has its boot pressing down hard on Ukraine's face. For the Stalinised 2.0 Russian nationalists now occupying the Kremlin's innermost power-circles, military losses would have to be on a giddy scale for Russia to 'surrender' any territorial gains it has hitherto made.

So the war goes on. The power of Ukraine's mobile hi-precision munitions is set against Russia's old-style tanks and artillery and Soviet-era tactical instincts. The civilian death-toll and the staggering refugee numbers grow and grow.

As Moscow finds the going harder and pulls back from attacking Kyiv to focus on the south and east, it's no surprise to see the horrific new evidence of war-crimes committed by Russian forces. It's part of the logic of MAD for Moscow to do anything it takes to raise the psychological cost to Ukraine of continuing the war.

Meanwhile Moscow threatens to cut off European gas supplies if payment is not made in roubles (ie on terms more favourable to Russia). This in turn is part of the wider negotiation going on between Russia and The West. Both sides are testing each other's ability to take pain, precisely *because* key elements of Big MAC remain in play. Yes, Europe depends (for now) on Russian gas and oil. But Russia in turn depends on European money. That said, those Europeans using Russian gas to cook and heat their homes might be wise to think about switching to firewood.

MAED – my old distinguished FCO Maritime Aviation and Environment Department? Or Mutually Assured Economic Destruction?

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