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A year when Ukraine reminded us what a lion's heart looks like

Рік, коли Україна нагадала нам, як виглядає левине серце

Австралійський військовий експерт М. Раян нагадує, що рік тому, на початку російського вторгнення, він писав, що історія сповнена бажання швидких операцій, які перетворюються на довгі війни. На жаль, так сталося в Україні, яка стала широкомасштабною війною з глибокими наслідками для двох воюючих сторін і глобальної безпеки. Ця війна, як і всі попередні, є сукупністю ідей, організацій і технологій попередніх конфліктів: недавні операції по боротьбі з повстанцями, В'єтнам, Афганістан, світові війни ХХ ст. та конфлікти набагато глибшого минулого. В Україні набагато більше наступності, ніж змін. Ці безперервності легко вгадати. Важливість стратегії, підкріпленої обґрунтованими припущеннями, вийшла на перший план. Президент росії володимир путін проігнорував цей вислів і опинився у війні, яка тривала довше і коштувала більше, ніж він уявляв. Центральна роль хорошого матеріально-технічного забезпечення на полі бою та національних конструкцій підтримки відіграла роль, коли росіяни голодували. Союзи, такі життєво важливі в багатьох попередніх війнах, виявилися важливими. Ще раз продемонстровано необхідність вступу в ближній бій, як найчистіше волевиявлення людини.

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/a-year-when-ukraine-reminded-us-what-a-lion-s-heart-looks-like-20230221-p5cm6l.html>

A year ago, on the morning of the Russian invasion, I wrote that “history is full of a desire for rapid [military] operations that turn into long wars”. Unfortunately, this has been the case in Ukraine, which has become a large-scale war with profound implications for the two belligerents and global security.

This war, like all before it, is an aggregation of ideas, organisations, and technologies from previous conflicts: recent counter-insurgency operations, Vietnam, Afghanistan, the world wars of the 20th century and the conflicts from much deeper in the past. There is far more continuity than change in Ukraine.

These continuities are easily divined. The importance of strategy – underpinned by sound assumptions – has come to the fore. Russian President Vladimir Putin ignored this dictum and found himself in a war that has lasted longer and cost more than he imagined. The centrality of good battlefield logistics and national support constructs has played out as Russians have gone hungry. Alliances, so vital in many previous wars, have proven essential. The need to engage in close combat, the purest expression of human will, has once again been demonstrated.

But two ancient concepts stand out.

First, surprise has been a constant feature. We were surprised at the lack of Russian competence and at Ukrainian battlefield prowess. Many (including Russia) have been surprised by the resilience and commitment of the NATO alliance in its ongoing support for Ukraine. Offensives that led to Ukrainian battlefield victories north of Kyiv, in Kherson and in Kharkiv, have amazed us. No matter how sophisticated or advanced our societies become, and how good sensor and intelligence networks might be, the agency of human beings and their desire to surprise their adversaries remains constant.

The second continuity is leadership. This was in evidence early on when Western leaders like US President Joe Biden and then-British PM Boris Johnson pledged support for the defence of Ukraine. It has also been shown by leaders from Poland, Estonia and Finland.

Battlefield leadership – a key asymmetry – has also been fundamental in Ukraine's turning the tide. And, most crucially, the leadership of a former comedian-turned-president, Volodymyr Zelensky, has united his people, inspired his army and encouraged us all to support his nation and expect more of our own national leaders.

As we step into the second year of this war, we are all changed by its conduct and we ponder its impact. Whether this is about one's cost of living or the multitude of lessons for the grand strategic

competition between the United States and China, we now live in a very different world from the one that existed on February 23, 2022.

It is no longer a world where, as President Xi describes, the West is declining and the East is rising. Not only has the war reinvigorated NATO, but it has also reignited the knowledge that, as flawed as our democracies are, they are worth defending against those who propose more brutal forms of governance. There is a global systemic rivalry taking place, of which Ukraine is a symptom. Unfortunately, this is a rivalry with negative trend lines. And, as we have seen with the recent Chinese balloon over America, it is getting more intense and impassioned.

It is a world where national resilience, stockpiling and helping oneself before asking for help is revitalised. Nations are no longer safe (or sage) in assuming large wars are part of the past and that indigenous defence industry can be replaced with imports from overseas. After 2014, Ukraine spent years reforming its military and national security apparatus to repel Russian aggression. This involved an intellectual shift to NATO systems and ideas, as well as stockpiling enough arms and supplies to last until the West might be able to assist. They knew that despite international agreements they would have to help themselves – and prove themselves – before others might come to their assistance. It is a concept sorely lacking in many of our polities.

It is a world where robotics and algorithms are no longer discretionary elements of war, they are now central to its conduct. The Cambrian explosion of autonomous systems and algorithmic support in this war means that the time between detection and destruction is so brief now that many traditional weapons may no longer be viable. It means there is now an adaptation battle to develop better autonomous weapons and defend against them with counter-autonomy systems. And it demands our military institutions invest in rethinking war-fighting concepts and organisations, as well as how they develop their people to partner with, not operate, these new-age and more intelligent machines.

Finally, a year on, we understand more about what we value as individuals and nations. Many of us have been forced to contemplate not only what kinds of nations we want to live in, but how much worse our lives might be if we don't stand up for our values, sovereignty and democratic ideals. This rejection of authoritarians was in evidence again this week as President Biden visited Kyiv. He spoke of how the Ukrainians “remind us that freedom is priceless; it's worth fighting for as long as it takes. And that's how long we're going to be with you... for as long as it takes.”

In the past year, there have been comparisons between Zelensky and Winston Churchill. This is apt for many reasons. In November 1954, Winston Churchill celebrated his 80th birthday with a speech at Westminster. He reached back to the early days of the Second World War, noting “it was the nation...that was the lion's heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.”

In the past year, we have seen anew what a nation with a lion's heart looks like. And with its young, charismatic leader, Ukraine and the world were lucky that Zelensky was called upon to give the roar.

It behoves us all to strive to live up to the courage and commitment of the Ukrainian leader and his people. In his darkest hour, when asking for ammunition instead of a ride, Zelensky demanded of the free world not a way out of the war but a way to stay, save his people and win the war.

It was a roar heard around the world.