

Trap of Pyrrhic victory in regional conflicts

War is easy to start but difficult to bring to an end. When Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a war on Ukraine, he must have been sure that the invasion would be completed as swiftly as the Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea in 2014, which ended in four days, or the Six-Day War of 1967, also known as the Third Arab-Israel War. Not to mention that he in no way would have expected an arrest warrant to be issued against him by the International Criminal Court, which recently accused him of war crimes. In reality, the war in Ukraine is now in its second year.

The Iran-Iraq War began in 1980 and lasted for eight years as a conflict of attrition, but the Gulf War of 1991 was over about one month after it broke out. The war in Ukraine is showing signs of being a prolonged, attritional one.

In Ukraine, Russia lost a slew of troops and weapons over the past year. Nevertheless, it retains its tradition of neglecting human rights and the rule of law, a practice it cultivated during the Bolshevik Revolution and World War II. Doing exactly what Soviet leader Joseph Stalin did, Putin has been unhesitatingly deploying personnel — not only regular Russian troops but also the Wagner mercenary group — in reckless operations. Putin also looks like Soviet Red Army Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who did not mind making huge sacrifices, if necessary, for military gains.

Putin has continued losing many lives on the Russian side but achieved no strategic gains. What he has been doing is reminiscent of the fate of Marcus Licinius Crassus, a member of the ancient Roman Republic's so-called First Triumvirate with Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great. After embarking on a war with Parthia, a major empire in ancient Iran, Crassus died an ignominious death. The man who was invincible until shields were held up for him underestimated Parthia's strength and willingness to take on an invading force. The Romans who became involved in the incursion because of Crassus' greed for power and honor gained nothing from the invasion and their home country fell into misfortune, according to Plutarch's "Lives," a collection of biographies of famous Greeks and Romans. The predicament of Crassus was the same as that of Putin, who is indeed poor at warfare.

Liken to Fabius, not Pericles

Western pundits often compare Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to ancient

Athenian statesman Pericles, known as the guardian of democracy. They argue that the Ukrainian leader has been acting as a shield, defending free Europe from Russia's dictatorship.

But whereas Athens in the era of Pericles was at its pinnacle, Ukraine's gross domestic product is only one-tenth that of Russia. Zelenskyy took over the leadership of Ukraine while its national power was still weakening in the wake of the loss of Crimea to Russia. The Ukrainian leader should be compared to ancient Roman general and statesman Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus, who had his army tenaciously withstand an invasion by a North African force led by Carthaginian general Hannibal. Zelenskyy looks more proficient than Fabius in



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commanding troops.

Somewhat unlike Fabius, who avoided a pitched battle with Hannibal's army, Zelenskyy, heightening the morale of the Ukrainian population, has had his country put up an all-out resistance against the invading forces. He has not backed down in the battle with Russia over Bakhmut, a small town in Ukraine's Donetsk region.

Zelenskyy has been disgruntled with U.S. President Joe Biden and European leaders for providing Ukraine with weapons only in small quantities out of fear of Russia. The more the war in Ukraine becomes prolonged, the higher the cost of postwar reconstruction will be, decreasing the workplaces and industries that can accept Ukrainians returning home after being refugees abroad during the war.

Zelenskyy apparently believes that in order to get Putin to agree to a truce, he would need to realize over a short period of time a military breakthrough like the outcome of the Battle of Zama in North Africa around 202 B.C. Back then, the force led by Roman general Scipio Africanus, also known as Scipio the Elder, defeated Hannibal and forced Carthage to surrender. Nonetheless, to realize a Zama-like triumph, Zelenskyy has to get Ukraine prepared to fight a protracted war, which he does not want, to the extent that fatigue in the West about support to Ukraine will certainly grow. The purposes of the war for both Ukraine and Russia are again questioned.

For Zelenskyy, his leadership in Ukraine's homeland defense to repel Russian troops will surely be enshrined in history as a national myth. If he wants Ukrainian troops to recapture Crimea and the territory of eastern Ukraine, which Russia put under its control prior to the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Kyiv will have to keep fighting for almost the same duration as the Iran-Iraq War. Does Ukraine have sufficient "basic physical strength" to remain involved in such a protracted war?

For their part, the Russian people have nothing to gain from the war that was launched based on lies and unjustifiable reasons. Russia will have to hide under a veil of glory the fall of its national power and the decline in national prestige resulting from the war. The thought is that Putin will make no concessions as to any change in the status quo concerning Crimea and two eastern regions. This means that the red line for him is believed to be a truce that will keep the pre-2022 boundaries intact. If Ukraine tries to have the upper hand over Russia beyond those boundaries, Moscow will undoubtedly put forward the possible use of tactical nuclear arms as a realistic operational choice for the first time.

Lessons from history

Once the war gets protracted, Ukraine is likely to end up facing what will amount to a Pyrrhic victory no matter how many isolated wins can be achieved. Such a victory means that even the triumphant side would have sustained devastating war damage and have little to gain.

In the 3rd century B.C., after prevailing over a spate of major enemies, Pyrrhus, the king of the ancient Greek kingdom of Epirus, said, "If we are victorious in one more battle with the Romans, we shall be utterly ruined," according to Plutarch's "Lives." Answering a question of who the greatest generals were, Hannibal was quoted as saying that Pyrrhus was a better general than

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Scipio and himself.

In the preface of his history of Rome, Roman historian Livy wrote how important it was to learn lessons from historical events by saying that if things began hideously and ended still hideously, it would be better to avoid them. There is a country that has dutifully followed this teaching, enabling itself to learn a resolute lesson from Putin's fatuous war on Ukraine. It is Japan.

Japan has already been applying the lesson learned. In December 2022 it adopted a set of three new national security and defense strategy documents — the National Security Strategy, the National Defense Strategy and the Defense Buildup Program — at a Cabinet meeting. On March 16, the leaders of Japan and South Korea held a summit in Tokyo, agreeing to make efforts on both sides to reduce tensions between them over such issues as lawsuits related to former requisitioned workers from the Korean Peninsula and Japan's restrictions on South Korean-bound exports of certain industrial materials and products. More recently, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida visited Kyiv. These developments are imperative for Japan, the United States and South Korea — all of which basically share democratic values — to implement a coordinated Eurasian strategy in the security domain at a time when the war in

Ukraine is going on in western Eurasia and North Korea's nuclear threats and the possibility of a Taiwan contingency are increasing in eastern Eurasia.

For many decades now, Taiwan has been an exemplary flag-bearer for upholding freedom and democracy by ensuring the rule of law. Its administrations have peacefully changed in accordance with results of elections through universal suffrage. Taiwan is a "region" where freedom and democracy are shared as its fundamental values. The Taiwan people must resolve the issues with China peacefully for themselves, based on their understanding and agreement.

As a democratic economy, Taiwan is now leading the world especially in the area of semiconductor manufacturing technology, serving as a key link in global supply chains. There is no question that China, too, is in a position to share the same benefits with Taiwan. Should a Taiwan contingency happen, China's overall market value and component supply chains would be tremendously damaged, as shown by Russia's lesson. In the event of a Taiwan contingency, Japan as the most important country in the region should communicate to the rest of the world about the principles of action and norms concerning East Asia's security, human rights preservation and the rule of law in the same way as done by the United States and European countries vis-a-vis Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

China seems to believe that it will be able to stage military operations against Taiwan as a "little war" requiring just several days to complete. However, the United States, conscious of the war in Ukraine, is poised to enhance its military assistance to Taiwan to boost the Taiwan armed forces' capability to resist the Chinese military. For its part, the Japanese government should explain to China that diplomacy is the core of Japan's national security strategy first and foremost and unwaveringly persuade Beijing to understand that a war on Taiwan, like Russia's war on Ukraine, would only result in a Pyrrhic victory that would cause its growth and prosperity to relapse.

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