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On the Other Side of the Hill

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'The other side of the hill' is used in military thinking to guess the enemy's intentions, his tactical dispositions, and strategic designs.

Recently a British report informed the world that the West had been sleeping while Russia and President Putin built up a threatening military arsenal harboring a grand strategic design to roll back the decline of Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. So the West violated the principle of 'on the other side of the hill' assuming quite wrongly -- naïvely -- that Putin's Russia was looking to join the West, which every student of history knows is not so and never will be.

The anniversary of the Maidan massacre (February 18-21 2014) invites 'on the other side of the hill' thinking to form a picture of how Ukraine looks from President Putin's pedestal. The West seems oblivious that Russia has suffered a strategic defeat disguised by tactical victories.

But have a look.

A little more than one year ago Ukraine was -- shall we say -- a neutral nation-state leaning towards Russia with a pro-Russian President, Mr. Yanukovich, orchestrating a policy not to antagonize the big neighbor north and east of the border after the failed attempts of his predecessor, Mr. Yuschenko, to steer the country politically westwards. Mr. Yanukovich flirted with signing an association agreement with the European Union (EU). When the call came, he back-pedaled and, definitely under pressure from Russia, broke with the West, favoring President Putin's scheme for an Euroasian Economic Union, however vague and illusory it might have looked.

Russia and President Putin was on the verge of a major coup constituting the biggest, largest and most significant victory for Russia in geopolitical terms since 1991. Ukraine was not joining the West, but coming home to embrace the all-Russian design forming a block with Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The West was to receive a similarly grand strategic defeat; the first of its sort since 1991. The block controlled by Russia would lean heavily on the Central and Eastern European countries having joined the EU and NATO. EU's neighborhood policy would be in ruins. Just imagine the celebrations in the Kremlin!

What happened? Suddenly by a combination of forces this strategic victory giving President Putin a place among the great Russian leaders was transformed into a smashing defeat. Not only did Ukraine cut links to the Euroasian Economic Union virtually killing the whole scheme if ever it was viable, but soon the association agreement with the EU was resuscitated, followed by talks of joining the EU as a full member and what might have been the last nail in the coffin for the Kremlin's strategic design courting NATO membership. History may offer some examples, but not many of such a reversal casting Russia and its president into an agonizing reappraisal.

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Russia chose to strike, which in a Western perspective looks like a completely wrong response, but makes perfect sense from a Russian point of view. Ukraine's course towards the Western camp must be stopped at all costs. This was and is a vital Russian interest.

Currently the status looks like this for the four main players: Ukraine, Russia, EU, and the US.

Ukraine is under attack -- or to be precise a part of the country is occupied by rebels unquestionably supported by Russia -- but its course towards a Western style society with democracy and a market economy finds strong support from the vast majority of its population. It is paying a heavy price for maintaining this course, but so far whatever Russia has done, it has not been derailed. The West is providing financial assistance making it possible. For Ukraine the challenge is to reform itself from within and remove the obsolete remnants of an oligarch economy like the one run in Russia. The country keeps its fate and destiny in its own hands. There are signs that if before 2013/2014 a Ukrainian national identity might be disputed due to history, the pressure from Russia has helped to forge one. If successful the population in the Donbas region, torn between Russia, separatism, and staying in Ukraine might find it attractive to rally around the Ukrainian flag instead of looking to Moscow, which has little economic incentives to offer.

Russia is pulling out all stops to destabilize Ukraine and prevent it from being successful and joining the West. So far with little to show for its massive efforts. Probably President Putin was caught wrong-footed by the better than expected fighting capability over 2014 by the Ukrainian army forcing him to send Russian regulars into battle to prevent a defeat for the rebels. The people in the Donbas region have not rallied to him. He has not been able to divide the West even if there are some differences among the Europeans about sanctions and the Atlantic alliance creaks a bit, but broadly speaking both the EU and NATO stay the course. At home he has succeeded in presenting the war in the Donbas region plus the annexation of Crimea as victories for his all-Russian design, but in fact these tactical gains are negligible compared to his strategic defeat not digested by the Russian population as propaganda masks the real picture.

Russia is in a bind. What to do? For all the bravado the Kremlin knows Russia's weaknesses all too well. The key might be President Putin's visits last year to China and India. It is impossible to imagine that Ukraine did not figure on the agenda. Probably he got the message that the Donbas region and Crimea is his, but no more. Russia and President Putin may play with the idea of torpedoing the existing world order, but that is neither a Chinese nor an Indian policy goal, as both countries are dependent on economic globalization to fuel their economies. With Western sanctions plus the falling oil price Russia cannot afford a break with China and India leaving it without friends and completely isolated.

The EU and the US may look to have lost when the armistice was signed; in reality this is not the case. Russia and President Putin went on the world stage approving the armistice, which means undertaking a commitment to maintain it -- more or less. On paper Russia is now partner in solving the conflict and there are limits to how far and how fast Russia can break these promises.

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Russia has not succeeded in its primary goal to get Ukraine in its camp nor in its secondary goal to stop Ukraine from moving toward the West. The prospect of a successful Ukraine ramping up the pressure inside Russia for reforms must be deeply worrying for the Kremlin. It is difficult to see how President Putin can extricate himself from this unenviable situation.

To compensate for this strategic defeat he may contemplate moves elsewhere along the Russian border. If so, the Caucasus and the Baltic countries are the most likely candidates. So far he has been careful never to appear as the aggressor. In Crimea the annexation was presented as a local phenomenon. In the Donbas region the posture is that no Russian troops have crossed the border. In both cases the risk was negligible. To go further, using Russian troops in an operation to cross the border of a neighboring state would be a completely different ballgame. The implicit Chinese and Indian support or understanding would be forfeited; Russia isolated internationally contrary to the current situation where the West with a few other countries (Japan) imposes sanctions, but no one else does so.

However, the world has learned over the last 15 months that President Putin is not a man who accepts defeat without further ado and sets his own rules for the game he wants to play. The West better tune into this wavelength, not to be surprised again.

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