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Putin Has Victory in His Grasp

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Credit...Maxim Shemetov/Reuters

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By Anastasia Edel

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On July 9, as the world stared at the [blood-splattered rubble](#) of a Ukrainian children’s hospital in Kyiv, Russia celebrated its rotating presidency of the United Nations Security Council with a lunch in New York. On the [menu](#) was chicken Kiev, a popular Russian dish of thin pounded cutlet filled with garlic butter. Before tucking in, the lunch’s host and Russia’s permanent representative to the United Nations, Vasily Nebenzya, [denied](#) Russia’s

responsibility for the bombing that killed two people and wounded seven children. If the diplomats choked on their chicken, they did so quietly.

The incident is a perfect summation of the world we live in now. As the West watches on, seemingly impotent, Russia grows ever bolder, like a bully who realizes the teacher isn't coming. Russians' fear of NATO, palpable at the start of the invasion of Ukraine, is now tempered by the impunity their leader enjoys no matter the atrocities committed on his watch. Why be afraid? Despite having the resources to end this war on Ukraine's terms, the West clearly lacks the will to win. For Vladimir Putin, victory is now firmly within reach — irrespective of who is in the White House next year.

In the past two and a half years, Western leaders have reiterated that they “stand with Ukraine.” Yet despite saying the right words, those leaders continue to treat the war as a localized conflict in which they have few obligations. Promised military aid arrives late and in insufficient quantities to match Russia's resources — and restrictions, like those against targeting military assets in Russia itself, limit the aid's effectiveness. The recent [Ukrainian advance](#) into Russian territory shows what could be possible if the shackles were lifted. But the West is wedded to its too-little-too-late approach, justified by the risk of provoking nuclear escalation from Russia. Ukraine's application to join NATO is a moot point for the same reason.

Nor has the West managed to cut off the sources of Russia's economic might, despite rounds of sanctions. The economy is [growing healthily](#), and the assets of Russian oligarchs remain safe in the West, even if frozen. Most important, Russian oil is being bought and sold with minimal difficulty around the world as Western leaders can't seem to decide what they want more: to meaningfully punish Russia or keep things as they are. Tellingly, the U.S. Treasury's proposal to impose penalties on tankers that help Russian oil evade sanctions has [stalled](#) over the White House's fear that higher gasoline prices won't play well at the polls in November.

One person not worried about the American election is Mr. Putin. Unlike the equivocal West, Mr. Putin is playing seriously. He has put his country and his economy on a war footing, dedicating at least a third of the state budget to the military and enticing tens of thousands of Russians to join his war machine with generous salaries and payouts. He has expanded the theater into NATO's territory, financing [pro-Russian parties and politicians](#), spreading misinformation and [directly targeting](#) Western individuals involved in sending weapons to Ukraine. When confronted, Russia simply shrugs off the evidence.

This setup — an adversary with the will and resources to fight to the end and allies that deliver just enough aid to stop the front from collapsing tomorrow — leaves Ukraine in a bleak place. At a certain point Ukrainian resolve, already tested to the limit, will wear thin and a peace deal with Mr. Putin, on whatever terms, will become preferable to dying. This moment may come sooner if Donald Trump wins the American presidential election and

ends the war “[in 24 hours](#),” as he has promised, by forcing Ukraine to negotiate on Mr. Putin’s terms. Or it will come later if the Democrats keep the White House and continue their halfway house strategy.

Mr. Putin is already planning for victory. His latest [so-called peace proposal](#) — in which Russia keeps occupied territory and Ukraine is banned from joining NATO — was dismissed as propaganda by many Western leaders. But it is, in fact, the most realistic scenario for how this war will pan out. Voices ranging from Kremlin supporters to [Nobel laureates](#) and even [the pope](#) are advocating a “peace” that would give Mr. Putin what he wants. Ukraine has rejected the proposal, of course. But Russia, after pounding the country’s infrastructure, people and army, will almost certainly make it again. Eventually, anything that stops the bombs will be viewed as an improvement.

Every war has winners and losers. If Mr. Putin wins this war, Ukraine and its allies, by definition, will have lost it. But defeat won’t be distributed equally. A peace deal on Mr. Putin’s terms will be bad for Ukraine. It will lose nearly 20 percent of its territory and around five million people. But that loss will be mitigated by the remarkable thwarting of Mr. Putin’s original plan to take over Kyiv and destroy Ukraine as a nation. War will stop. There will be dead to mourn, wounded to heal and a country to rebuild. Ukraine’s reputation on the global stage will be higher than ever and membership in the European Union will be in sight.

The West, on the other hand, will be hard-pressed to find any positives. The failure of its leaders to prevent war in Europe, or to successfully punish the aggressor, will signal to others that borders are no longer inviolable. Frozen conflicts will unfreeze and old grievances will resurface, with institutions like the United Nations simply recording the damage. Russia, backed by other openly anti-West states like Iran and North Korea, will be further emboldened. The next conflict may well occur on NATO soil. If nuclear saber-rattling proved enough to hold NATO in check in Ukraine, why wouldn’t it work were Mr. Putin to invade a member of the alliance, such as Estonia? The European continent will no longer be safe.

Ukraine and Europe won’t be the biggest losers of this war, though. In any alliance, the brunt of responsibility is carried by its leader. By first casting its lot with Ukraine and then failing to follow through, America has lost its place as the bulwark of the West that can guarantee protection and peace to its allies. Last year, its hesitant, piecemeal approach for lending weapons undermined Ukraine’s summer counteroffensive. This year, its political dysfunction held up [critical aid](#) and muddled American [public opinion](#) on the urgency of helping Ukraine. In a matter crucial to the world’s stability, America flunked the leadership test. Anyone subscribing to the idea of America’s greatness will find this a hard pill to swallow.

Depending on who's in power in Washington, this reputational disaster will either be downplayed as a regrettable necessity or celebrated as a triumph of isolationism. But even in the world of "America First," you need seconds and thirds to have your back. Will Europe stand with America in its looming geopolitical standoff with China, now reinforced by the natural resources that Mr. Putin has mortgaged to President Xi Jinping? Will the Middle East be as obliging in matters of oil prices?

Time will tell just how severe the security and economic consequences will be, but one thing is already clear. A small war far away from America's borders has reshaped our world — and made America's place in it smaller.