
Now is the time to save Ukraine with fortitude and political intelligence

Almost a month has passed since Pope Francis sent out a heartfelt appeal, urging us to have the courage to save the future of the Ukrainian people with fortitude and diplomatic intelligence. Despite the controversy over which flags to hoist and despite positions that degrade the Holy See's pre-negotiation efforts to the level of unconditional surrender, preferring to trust in the messianic promise of arms deliveries, the relevance of the Pope's exhortation has been underscored by facts. Starting with the unvarnished account by some senior Ukrainian officials in Politico magazine, while a number of political analysts in the English-speaking world are still predicting a total debacle by the end of the year. Such a scenario could not be avoided at this stage, not even if the West - scraping the bottom of the barrel - were to send all the equipment needed. Russia has been taking countermeasures against Western armaments, while developing its own. The fact remains that while European governments can't provide what they don't have, the US (adhering to the rule of stockpiling for two simultaneous wars) is intent on empowering Israel and Taiwan and militarising the Indo-Pacific against the backdrop of the West's revival of NATO and the widening gap between Moscow and Europe. In addition, we face the tactical error of failing to reinforce the defensive lines, resulting in a breach of the front in several points that had not been anticipated by the British coordination of the failed counter-offensive.

The risk is real, given that Stoltenberg himself is proposing the idea of freezing the camp, temporarily renouncing the liberation of the occupied zones in order to strengthen Kyiv with a view to a future reconquest.

Apart from the unilateral nature of such plans, which lack any feedback from Moscow, the critical point is that the war continues to be seen in purely territorial terms. Russia hardly needs additional strips of land, given its boundless expanse. In fact, from a geo-strategic point of view, it is anchored in Ukraine's geographic positioning along the Arctic, the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean all the way to the Arab and African outposts. Against this backdrop, Ukraine emerges as the 'neutral' camp, so to speak, in which the disputes of other parties are played out. Linking the invasion of Ukraine to the open war in Syria to overthrow Assad means outlining the geostrategic containment that will turn the Baltic and Black Seas into two Atlantic lakes. It also means ousting Damascus' regime, which runs counter to the converging positions of Israel, the oil monarchies (see the Abraham Accords) and al-Sisi's Egypt, necessary for the US withdrawal from the region. Indeed, the drills planned for the coming months are quite revealing: in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Arctic Ocean, the latter in conjunction with the new territorial claims of the offshore islands of Alaska made by the US, which, in view of the shrinking ice cap, could extend its control over a vital route connecting Asia, America and northern Europe. The situation in Georgia bears a clear resemblance to that of Ukraine, namely the secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Tbilisi after a dispute dating back to 1991, which flared up several times and became entrenched due to the UN and OSCE's failure to regulate the armistice, until Russia intervened in 2008, coinciding with indications that Georgia might join NATO. Simultaneously, the aims of invading the rest of Ukraine must be considered. The purpose of an invasion is not only annexation and occupation. In fact it entails unprecedented vulnerability and costs, and is self-defeating in the absence of any guarantees. In the case of a hostile population stationed on a vast area such as the territory stretching from Kyiv to Lviv, this is especially true, as it lacks the characteristics of the Russian-speaking regions involved in the conflict that started in 2014. This argument helps to assess the request to arm the Ukrainian defence shield to the bitter end, in order to protect Europe - nevertheless armed and shielded by the dissuasive nuclear deterrent - from invasion. The objective of "demilitarisation", announced the evening before the invasion of February 2022, therefore, is testimony to the determination to continue the war, in order to prevent Ukraine from becoming another NATO casemate, and thus to silence

those who - even now - argue in favour of a ceasefire (albeit a provisional one) based on mere territoriality. Confirmation of this can be found in the draft agreement that emerged from the Istanbul negotiations in March 2022, scrapped due to the prospects of a total victory on the ground. It reproduced the terms of the Minsk agreement in several respects: Ukraine's military neutrality, to be integrated into the EU, and the independence (at the Minsk talks autonomy was still on the table) of the Donbass oblasts. These conditions were discussed two years and many thousands of deaths ago, when the landscape was very different from today's Ukraine, which faces a bleak future. Recognising all this is crucial if we are not to waste time discussing flawed and dead-end assumptions. In this context, and in a situation of military superiority, Russia's intention to advance at a slow pace in order to impose irreversible negotiating terms for the future is clear. The aim is to exclude Ukraine's formal integration into the Washington-led military alliance, not to mention the intention to exhaust, both politically and materially, the Euro-Atlantic bloc, which is supporting the enemy in the background, by subjecting it to an "old-fashioned" trench warfare for which it is no longer prepared, not least on account of public opinion that is unwilling to witness a bloodbath (74% in Russophobic Poland, to quote just a few figures). Advancing at this point also means exhausting the internal resilience of the Ukrainian state. Dissent is growing over rifts that predate February 2022, as observers with no trace of Russiophilia have noted. The incident of the veteran who murdered a teenager in the Kyiv underground a few days ago after an argument about the war is just one emblematic episode. And it fits in with the growing climate of evading conscription overseas. The same can be said of the highly unpopular reform of the conscription law that was passed by the Ukrainian parliament in the absence of 130 MPs. The new law expands indefinitely the number of civilians that the army can mobilise into its ranks and lowers the minimum age for conscription. This will create a generational gap in the age group most affected by the demographic decline that has hit the country since the 1990s. It also makes it compulsory for male expatriates aged between 18 and 60 to register in the consulates' military registers (under penalty of permanent exclusion from public services, including health care). All this exonerates the deputies whose mandate expired in October. According to their critics, they have a vested interest in extending their mandate. Under martial law, this extension will also affect the presidency, which is due to expire in May, creating a further obstacle to negotiations. In fact, Moscow - which seeks to negotiate with Washington rather than through the intermediary of Kyiv - could invoke Zelensky's illegitimacy, thus responding to the ban on negotiations that the latter imposed on himself by decree. The peace conference planned for June in Switzerland will also be useless. Without the Russian presence, it will be just another cosmetic operation. All is not lost, but the resumption of negotiations that were interrupted two years ago requires not only a real understanding of the situation, but also a number of other preconditions. The war is far too serious a tragedy not to demand that the narrative be rectified at this stage. This means putting an end to an information war which, like the Russian one, has so far obscured the way forward in the name of an inevitable victory in the Manichean struggle against the demonic evil embodied by one part of the world. This operation is counterproductive when it is conducted by peddling such crass mainstream information as to foster disbelief, if not opposing theories. Such propaganda marks two years of the 'Russia is about to collapse' mantra. The same mantra now pretends to have a weapon capable of causing headaches to enemy rulers thousands of miles away, marking unquestionable progress for a people who previously fought with shovels, saw their planes taken down with shotguns and their tanks scattered by changes in road signs, and who collected gold teeth and washing machine microchips to assemble their weapons. Despite the censorship that prevents an appreciation of the opponent's positions, it is unlikely that the Russian accounts of events were more truthful. Whatever the source, cognitive pollution not only disorients public opinion, it also creates a web of narratives that risks entangling not only its authors, but also - for the sake of consistency - the choices of the actual decision-makers. Nevertheless, the essential requirement is to reckon with the interests of the Ukrainian people, dismissing the quest for a purely instrumental exit strategy, such as Europe investing in rearmament, foreshadowing Trumpian neo-isolationism, making

it an economic vehicle for those who, as in the Weimar Triangle, are running for leadership in the relaunch of the military-industrial sector. All this is taking place at a time when Brussels continues insisting on austerity measures to be implemented through cuts in social spending and privatisations that will not be compensated by taxes on the hedge fund giants, although they are instrumental to channel billions of euros to the arms sector. But serving the real interests of the Ukrainian state may also mean rescuing it from the despair of abandonment. Indeed, Kyiv's government is so desperate that it is raising the spectre of a catastrophic all-out war, threatening to escalate by dragging in the non-complying West. This fits in with the "the worse, the better" logic that haunts those who see themselves lost, with no alternative to outright disintegration. From the pages of the Washington Post, while Moscow insisted on blaming Kyiv for the hybrid matrix of the premeditated and non-suicidal massacre at Crocus City Hall, Zelensky noted that if left to its own devices, Ukraine would feel justified in targeting Russia's national security. This is a message to friends and foes alike that precedes the recent torching of the missile corvette in the hypermilitarised Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, filled with nuclear carriers since 2018, and the recent attacks on the Zaporizhzhia power plant, occupied by Russian forces since March 2022. The Ukrainian Security Services deny the accusation, claiming that it was self-sabotage, were it not for the disclosure on public television of a map showing how, in the event of an accident with a western wind, the radioactive dust would sweep over Donbass and the Russian oblasts on the other side of the border, leaving the areas administered by Kyiv unaffected. Instead of lamenting or justifying the strategy of despair, what is urgently needed is to save Ukraine from the impasse by preserving its future, just as one would save a friend from a fight that would lead to his defeat, instead of inciting him to be slaughtered. If you really cared about them. This means believing that destruction and devastation cannot be erased by a virtual narrative, because war is not a matter of rooting parties. Understanding the events should not be confused with trivialising those who tirelessly try to compensate for the unfortunate absence of an operative third party: as basic peace studies show, this is an indispensable element in conflict mediation, which should not end with the final annihilation of the unconditionally defeated party. This may seem disturbing and unacceptable to those who have become accustomed to a warfare that pretends to solve violence with more violence. But in his recent audience, speaking of the virtue of courage, the Holy Father said in no uncertain terms: "A Christian without courage, who does not turn his own strength to good, who does not bother anyone, is a useless Christian." Instead, life-saving strategies should replace those that exacerbate protracted conflicts by preparing for more, based on the delusion that salvation lies in fighting to the last drop of blood. Ukrainian blood, in this case ça va sans dire.

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