

# Wars and Stupid Wars: A special report

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## Abstract

'Don't do stupid stuff', is supposed to have been President Obama's own description of the essence of his foreign policy doctrine. It is said, however, that privately instead of 'stuff' he used a spicier S-word. Whatever the precise word, what he meant was *wars*: don't fight stupid ones. This report examines the West's recent conduct of war since the end of the Cold War and finds that most cases where war is stupid are wars of choice. The report concludes with an examination of the case of Ukraine as a stupid war.

## Introduction

Don't do stupid stuff', is supposed to have been President Obama's own description of the essence of his foreign policy doctrine. It is said, however, that privately instead of 'stuff' he used a spicier S-word. Whatever the precise word, what he meant was *wars*: don't fight stupid ones. More recently, in a campaign speech on 10 February 2023 in South Carolina President Trump remarked on the foreign policies of the United States in practice, 'We were like the stupid country of the world...' Other such utterances might be cited—not only American but given the stature of the United States in the world these ones of two past presidents would seem indicative of something simple: great statesmen know they ought not to fight stupid wars but in fact with great regularity they do just that.

By stupid war, I mean a war which is demonstrably strategically retrograde. As a type, it's a sort of war that creates more of what it is supposed to be fighting in the first place; a sort of war that progressively narrows rather than expands the range of choices of policy makers, i.e., their 'room for manoeuvre', increasingly committing them to the fruitless pursuit of sunk costs in a losing endeavour; and, overall, they are practically impossible to defend by strict cost-benefit analysis. The fact of the matter, moreover, is that by the measures above, nearly all Western wars since the end of the Cold War have been stupid wars. The British general Sir Rupert Smith who fought in several of them described them as lacking utility. The more correct word is *stupid*.

Surely everyone agrees it is desirable not to do stupid things. A reasonable person, though, might suggest that the quality of stupidity of these wars is more obvious in hindsight. They made sense at the time, it might be argued. This leads to the simple question, whether we might reasonably judge a given war's potential stupidity earlier. Clausewitz reckoned that we could, indeed he regarded the judging of a war's character—before embarking upon it—to be the supreme act of military and political competence. I agree.

Indeed, it is my argument here that enough stupid wars have transpired for analysts to recognise factors that signal their thankless and invertebrate quality. In the following I shall elucidate these factors in three steps:

- I) with a brief review of past but similar and/or relevant efforts of other scholars; leading to a,
- II) crisp statement of three most important factors, as seen in wars of the recent past; and, finally,
- III) a short discussion of the most noteworthy stupid aspects of the current Western involvement in the ongoing Russo-Ukraine War.

## Part 1

### ON STRATEGIC FAILURE

Failure is a relatively well studied phenomenon, for obvious reasons. Armies that have suffered serious setback or defeat are powerfully incentivised to understand why it occurred. One of the most far-reaching of such responses to loss in war, for example, was the rethink of the Prussian army after its defeat by Napoleon in 1806. This was a process which ultimately led to the development of the best land army in Europe and other innovations, notably the establishment of the Prussian general staff and War College, whence emerged the philosophical writings on war by Clausewitz, mentioned earlier.

More narrowly, the ability of an army to learn from its mistakes, adapt solutions on the fly, and return to action more capable than before might be said to be the acme of military skill, as the Israeli scholar Meir Finkel suggests in his work on 'flexibility' in war. Other scholars such as Eliot Cohen and John Gooch have looked at the reasons for military failure in particular battles like the British campaign in Gallipoli 1915 or the fall of France in 1940. In that case, the authors suggested a five-step analytical model intended to trace a 'pathway to misfortune', the most important step being the initial identification of the specific point of failure. From that, further analysis can elucidate decisions (and indecisions) by commanders and organisations which led to it.

The above approaches to the study of military failure are predominantly tactical in their orientation, being concerned with battles primarily and less so wars overall. To get more precisely to the matter of

strategic stupidity, the concept of wars of necessity as opposed to wars of choice is useful. As Lawrence Freedman, who possibly originated the terms, put it,

The former [wars] are unavoidable, fought because of a threat to our basic way of life. The latter are discretionary. There is no strategic imperative.

These are the wars of regime change and of humanitarian intervention, he says. I would suggest the thing which distinguishes them is the intrusion, for whatever reason, by a third party (or parties) into the wars of other people. Nearly always they are always rationalised in moral terms, such as the Responsibility to Protect, and 'legalised', to a greater or lesser degree of convincingness, by some sort of international mandate. I call these 'do something wars' because they occur when as a reaction to some horrific situation in the world, brought to the eyes of the wider world through global media, liberal politicians perceive a demand to 'do something' about it, whether that thing is useful or relevant or not.

In truth, there is usually little useful that can be done about the horrific situation at hand and, in fact, the determination of people to seriously sacrifice on behalf of distant others is rather limited. The point is to be *seen* to 'do something' but at the same time not to suffer great cost in blood, treasure, national prestige and so on. Always, the most available something is a military force—to which might be attached, nearly always inadequately, some civil humanitarian effort. A good example are the operations against Moammar Khaddafy in Libya, motivated supposedly by the highest moral concern against the possibility of egregious violence against civilians opposed the regime, which resulted in a decade of civil conflict in which tens of thousands of people have been victimised.

Sometimes Stupid Wars may be motivated by the desire of politicians to posture domestically. The classic example is the declaration by the Russian Interior Minister Vyacheslav Von Pleve on the eve of the 1905 Russo-Japanese War that, 'What this country needs is a short, victorious war to stem the tide of revolution.' Many others, if somewhat less egregious and ironic, might be given. For beleaguered politicians, the chance to strike a powerful Churchillian pose is enticing.

The main thing is that while not all wars of choice are stupid (some may indeed be necessary, or desirable, or at any rate prosecuted militarily competently with robust and clear political backing) all stupid wars are wars of choice. Furthermore, wars which are motivated by and serve essentially as props in domestic political theatre are always stupid.

## Part 2

### PRIMARY FEATURES OF STUPID WAR

Many examples of 'do something' wars might be provided but the paradigmatic one is the 1993 US-led-UN-mandated Somalia intervention, which started as a humanitarian assistance mission,

metastasised into a nasty military campaign against a non-state actor, and culminated in an embarrassing (also highly mediatised) strategic defeat. The climactic event occurred on 3 October 1993 and is usually recalled as the 'Blackhawk Down' incident or the Battle of Mogadishu. It is generally well known, if nothing else because of a very good popular film about it.

Many reasons might be given for why 18 American commandos were killed on that day, the grisly-disfigured bodies of some dragged through the streets. The fundamental reason, though, was a miasmic combination of blindness to actual local cultural and political conditions and underestimation of enemy capabilities. These failings—of intelligence and overweening pride, basically—are prominent in stupid wars but Somalia is a terrific example of them.

For an example of the first, in his book on the battle Mark Bowden recounted the feelings of one Somali man on the eve of the American operation to snatch the Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid into custody in a daylight raid in the middle of the city as follows:

These soldiers, Ali knew, were different from the ones who had come to feed Somalis. These were Rangers. They were cruel men... as the armada of helicopters roared overhead... the sight filled him and his friends with rage... Rangers swooping down into their city killing and kidnapping their leaders, this was too much.

The commander on the ground had no accurate sense of the seething mood of the people amongst whom he was operating. On top of that, he was operating based on a completely flawed technical/tactical assumption that Somali militiamen, lacking sophisticated air defence weapons, could not effectively engage American helicopters—which, clearly, they could. Soon after the battle, President Clinton ordered the withdrawal of all American troops from the country. It was a foreign policy debacle.

War is always chancy, that is in its nature. Even victorious armies take losses and good commanders make mistakes. The problem in 'do something' wars is twofold. For one, they are frequently highly locally politically complex in ways that defy easy understanding by the outsiders sometimes literally parachuted into them. For another, by definition, the political objectives and will which animate them are, respectively, unclear, and tenuous. As a result, such wars are pregnant with the ever-present potential of catastrophic political collapse in the face of setbacks that in non-stupid war would be deemed unremarkable.

In wars which are fought on the injunction to 'do something' there is almost always also an implicit mission codicil to make it cheap. No one should admire or wish for a commander who is indifferent to the lives of the troops following their orders—though a character sufficiently robust as to accept those which are necessary to mission success is in order. Stupid wars, however, combine political hesitation and lack of strategic clarity with acute sensitivity to cost in a way that causes serious diminishment of the utility of force.

Typically, on account of misapprehension of the enemy's capabilities and determination too few troops are sent initially to pacify them. On top of that, concerns with the narrative impact of potential harm on a large scale to those on deployment cause commanders to act cautiously with respect to casualties. Suddenly, soldiers trained scrupulously to generate combat power independently, aggressively, and boldly in manoeuvrist fashion are enjoined to act cautiously, to await orders, and exercise extraordinary restraint lest mistakes be made.

Here, we might point to the war in Afghanistan as an object lesson in how not to progress a campaign. For a start consider the ever-shifting narrative of that war, which so confounded military commanders unable to answer a basic question. The words of a Canadian general, Andrew Leslie, capture this mood of exasperated vexation well:

I often get asked... why are you there? We're there because you sent us. As a soldier, it's not my job to explain why you sent us. Soldiers don't do that. We tell you what we're doing, we tell you how we're doing it, but we should not be in the position of explaining to the people... why we're there. The responsibility for that lies with the political leadership and those who sent us.

The effects of this political failing propagate all the way down to basic tactics. In Stupid Wars armies are practically compelled to fight stupidly.

To illustrate, imagine that you wanted to create the most effective adversary you could. In the pursuit of this aim you could do a lot worse than to begin your campaign against this enemy with too few men and without a clear purpose. Your forces would be unable to effectively adhere to the master principle of war: selection and maintenance of the aim. The force you employed would be faced with too many enemies to fight over too large a battlespace. To protect itself the bulk of your force would have to hunker down inside a handful of giant fortified encampments alienated from the surrounding community. The small fraction which left those secure places would be preoccupied by a myriad of small, vicious, and inconclusive fire fights.

The result: you would teach your rapidly learning adversary how you operated and how to exploit your habits to his own ends. As an example of this consider the young British officer Patrick Hennessey, who recounted the following battle scene from his time as a junior commander in Afghanistan, in this case terminated by the need to pull back to regroup and withdraw a casualty by helicopter:

Pull back from the buildings we'd fought into and held for four torrid hours, pull back from the positions we'd charged through that morning and, with the overwatch of the British units on the high ground in the north who had done next to nothing all day, pull wearily all the way back to the start-line. Pull back over ground we'd lost a third of the company group taking. Pull

back over ground we'd been shot and blown up by both enemy and our own side alike on, pull back in one steady, demoralised trudging hour over what it had taken us twelve to take.

The tactic very effectively demoralises—one sees this obviously in the myriad published veterans' accounts of the war, which share a progressive wearying bewilderment of soldiers and commanders with it. A particularly poignant example may be seen in the memoirs of Major General John Cantwell, an Australian officer with thirty-eight years of service encompassing three wars from Operation Desert Storm in 1991, through Iraq in 2006, and Afghanistan in 2010 where he headed the Australian contingent. He was hospitalised afterwards suffering from post-traumatic stress, powered at root by a gnawing doubt:

As I paid a final salute at the foot of yet another flag-draped coffin loaded into the belly of an aircraft bound for Australia, I found myself questioning if the pain and suffering of our soldiers and their families were worth it. I wondered if the deaths of any of those fallen soldiers made any difference. I recoiled from such thoughts, which seemed disrespectful, almost treasonous. I had to answer in the affirmative, or risk exposing all my endeavours as fraudulent. I had to believe it was worth it. But the question continues to prick at my mind. I don't have an answer.

Such is Stupid War—a form of war in which the question 'is this worth it?' is so pervasive and so persistently unanswered that it causes even senior commanders to become clinically mentally ill. It probably goes without saying also that it tends to upset the population amongst whom one is fighting and whose towns and crops are blasted apparently fruitlessly.

Ultimately all this causes your own political and military leadership to become exhausted to the point that they order a humiliatingly pell-mell withdrawal, replete with scenes of desperate people plummeting from the wheel wells of departing transport aircraft, leaving behind billions of dollars' worth of military assets, and a population that hates you more than when you started. That is the story of the nearly 20-year war in Afghanistan in a nutshell.

Scaling up, however, we must remark on a final primary quality of Stupid War which is that in our connected age the second and third order effects of them do not remain confined to some distant theatre of war beyond the concern of the immediate safety and prosperity of home populations. Quite the opposite—a series of connected stupid wars which may be conveniently grouped under the more general Global War on Terror label—launched explicitly to prevent terrorism on 'our' streets happened to create *more* terrorism.

The London 7/7 bombings and the near beheading of army drummer Lee Rigby, the Bataclan attacks in Paris, the murder of a Canadian ceremonial guard at the national cenotaph followed by a one-man assault on parliament—these and a hundred others have been stated by their perpetrators as a response to war by their ostensible compatriots against their avowed coreligionists.



This is a well-rehearsed argument and if I touch upon it here only briefly that is not a sign of its lack of importance in the argument at hand. A war on terrorism costing trillions of dollars that produces hundreds more terrorist attacks, aggravates and deepens social divisions in multicultural societies that no one really knows how to fix, leaving many in fear of the likelihood of actual civil war, and which requires the imposition on formerly liberal societies of huge investments in surveillance and other security measures that are incompatible with liberal ideas of freedom, cannot be defended on a cost-benefit basis.

The unintended second and third order effects of Stupid Wars is the main theme of the next section of this paper, however. In sum of this section, we can say simply that the primary features of Stupid Wars are that their aims are poorly politically conceived and articulated, that this has a direct and serious deleterious impact on the way they are conducted, and that into the gap between political ambition and actual strategic performance it is possible to drain enormous (potentially nation-wrecking) resources.

## Part 3

### The Stupidest War

The stupidity of NATO in Afghanistan is exceeded by an order of magnitude by the stupidity of its involvement in the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war. Supposed differences to the contrary are superficial when scrutinised. For a start, it is possible to construct a compelling case for at least the initial post-911 punitive campaign in Afghanistan as a deliberate response to the Taliban's succouring of Al Qaeda. It is hardly possible, though, to construct an argument for NATO's approach to Russia since the end of the Cold War which may best be described as having been low and dishonest.

Indeed, no less an authority than George Kennan—the author of the Western Cold War containment strategy—was scandalised by successive NATO expansions that he saw as destroying his life's work, calling it the 'most fateful error' of American policy. As Kennan observed, very simply, Russia was not the Soviet Union—in fact, the people who had voluntarily dissolved the USSR in arguably the most consequential peaceful revolution in history—offered no ideological challenge whatsoever. It was a low move, ill-fitting with the ideal of magnanimity in victory which Churchill—a competent strategist—once prescribed.

It was also dishonest—in fact, Western policy toward Russia has been a rather toxic mix: three parts dishonesty, to two parts ignorance, and one part neglect with a dash of high-handed contempt.

There are on record statements of three separate assurances of American Secretaries of State conferring assurances to Russia that NATO would not expand eastward, amongst other documentary



evidence of discussions in the same vein by British diplomats. Obviously, though, it did expand and, the truth of the matter is there was little that Russia—until recently—could do about it. Even still, with respect to Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations specifically, the defence establishment of the West has been, until recently, cautious.

Sticking with the issue of dishonesty, however, consider the following exchange which occurred in a public debate in late May 2022 at a debate at the Munk School in Toronto, Canada between the former American ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul who was called out by Professor Stephen Walt of Harvard University:

Walt: 'In 2021 we kept reiterating that Ukraine was going to join [NATO]. We kept saying that, over and over again.'

McFaul replied, 'Did you believe that?'

Walt: 'Our [US] diplomats were lying when offering Ukraine NATO membership to Ukraine?'

McFaul: 'Yes! Yes! That's the real world.'

That is not realism nor is it realpolitik. It's just cynicism and dishonesty delivered with a dollop of moral posturing that is grotesquely out of order. Imagine a diplomatic conversation that begins with one side declaring 'We're lying but trust us!' to the other. In fact, we need not imagine any such thing if McFaul is correct. I suspect though that what he is describing is not the real world but the stupid world.

The CIA director William Burns described it as 'the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin)' and 'In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players . . . I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.' Robert Gates, former defence secretary was also highly sceptical, until recently. In other words, it is plainly the case that the West has acted provocatively towards Russia and, moreover, that it knew it was being provocative.

Until recently (I have used these words several times now) there was little that Russia felt it could do about the situation. For a generation its position vis-à-vis the West metaphorically has been like that of the Melians to the Athenians, i.e., one of weakness to strength. What changed relatively recently is that the West has dramatically weakened, in part because of the costs in treasure and credibility caused by the Stupid Wars discussed earlier, while Russia's fortunes have improved considerably. From the perspective of a 60-year-old with memory of the Cold War, the inversion of contemporary international politics is astonishing: the Russians are pragmatic realists while the ranks of Western leadership are packed with delusional ideologues.

To provoke a war and then to lose it is pretty stupid—and there is no doubt that it is being lost. Much has been written by others about the conduct of the war militarily and I do not intend to dwell on the issue. It is foolish to pretend that from the position of a comfy London office one can tell much that is accurate about a distant high-intensity war spread over thousands of kilometres in which both sides are actively seeking to shape perceptions of the battle based on what you read on Twitter and Telegram. Suffice to say Western punditry on the war has been so dismal because in essence that it was it is doing.

I shall, rather, confine myself to what are currently defensible statements about the war's conduct that are pertinent:

- Russian military casualties are grossly exaggerated in the West and, moreover, Russia—contrary to much that is reported—is actually rather acutely sensitive to casualties, and has been since the mid-1990s Chechen War;
- Russian military performance has been consistently underestimated in the West, not only in the fixed defence of fortified lines which stymied the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south this summer, but overall, it has been tactically and technologically adaptive;
- Russian armour, artillery and rockets, and air defence have served very well in terms of endurance, usability, and availability in quantity, and other systems—notably electronic warfare and engineering—have performed extremely well.

Wars, however, as is widely known are not won by tactics and weapons per se; it is with logistics with which serious professionals are preoccupied. In this respect, Russia's lead over the West is simply astonishing. Its production of artillery shells outstrips the whole of the West by something like 8 to 1 at present, a lead which is still increasing. In tanks and other armoured vehicles, Russian production relative to the West is about 5 to 1. In missiles of a range of types, including hypersonics, short-range conventional ballistics, and cruise systems, production is again outpacing the West by a factor of 5 to 1.

Given the relative size of the economies of Russia vs. the collective West this material gap is hard to explain. It exists, I would propose, for two reasons. Russia has prepared for the war economically and financially with terrific skill and thoroughness. At the end of the Second World War, the uniforms of Soviet Marshals were draped thick with military decorations. At the end of this current war, I should expect that they will be building statues in honour of the head of the Russian Central Bank, Elvira Nabiullina.

Consider, for example, the following two statements. The first is from Putin in February 2022 ruminating on the possible countermeasures to Russia and its ability to respond to them:

Indeed, today they [the West] have great financial, scientific, technological and military capabilities. We are aware of this and objectively assess the threats constantly being addressed to us in the economic sphere, as well as our ability to resist this impudent and permanent blackmail. I repeat, we evaluate them without illusions, extremely realistically.

Compare that with then UK foreign minister Liz Truss's Mansion House speech from a month or so later in which she explained the plan to 'push the Russian economy back to the Soviet era':

There can be no more free passes. We are showing this with the Russia-Ukraine conflict – Russia's pass has been rescinded.

We are hitting them with every element of economic policy.

We have raised tariffs on Russian goods. We've cut them off from WTO terms. We've banned their ships from our ports, we've banned their planes from our airports. We have sanctioned more individuals and organisations than any other nation, hitting Russia's banks, oligarchs, defence companies, Central Bank reserves, and oil and gas supplies.

We're cutting off the funding for Putin's war effort. We are also cutting investment ties with Russia – banning all new outward investment and ending the investor visa. At the same time, we are removing all import tariffs for Ukraine, and we're supporting the Ukrainian economy with loan guarantees, fiscal support and investment.

We are showing that economic access is no longer a given. It has to be earned.

According to the Chinese military philosopher Sun Tzu, if you know yourself and know your enemy then you will not be defeated in a hundred battles. With the benefit of some time and distance from the above statements, who would it seem possessed the more accurate self-knowledge and the more correct measure of their foe?

The answer is obvious and does not speak charitably to the competence of the Whitehall mandarin. The Russian economy is growing. Funding of the war effort has not been cut off. Meanwhile, Western European economies are in recession. The German industrial economy is particularly structurally vulnerable while the plausibility of plans to shift the energy sector of European economies away from dependence upon Russia ranges across a spectrum from the fantastical to the ludicrous. The West's shenanigans with the international financial system have spurred efforts at de-dollarization of international trade in ways that seemed impossible only a few months ago.

It is impossible to square these outcomes with a view of the qualities of the decision-makers who caused them as reflecting sagacity and competence. A main quality of Stupid Wars is that they are chosen—not forced: the West provoked a conflict against the serious warning, by its own leading experts, that it ought not. Another main quality of them is that they are pervaded by delusionary wishful thinking. In war it is perfectly acceptable to lie to your enemy. Lying to yourself, though, is the kiss of death.

There has been so much lying and wishful thinking. For instance, it has been said that Russia has lost a third of its standing army—an astonishingly improbable development based largely upon the dubious methodology of a Turkish blogger. We have learned that Russian logistics are collapsing, again and again, on account of the reliance of their military vehicles on Chinese tyres—a belief based also on Twitter ruminations, in this case of an American blogger. From the same source we get opinions upon the supposed decrepitude of the Russian nuclear forces based upon extrapolations of Wikipedia-tier evidence. We get daily updates on the war from the US-based Institute for the Study of War which has been a credible independent source on no actual war in living memory.

And much of this is repeated as authoritative by governments, notably the UK's Defence Intelligence agency which in its reports essentially recycles Ukrainian narratives with complete credulity.

What we do not hear is that the regular Ukrainian forces have been generally incapable of manoeuvre from their fortified positions since the first week of the war, in which disposition they are being progressively pulverised, and that offensives against non-already-withdrawing Russian forces have been obliterated. We are not told that Ukrainian tactic in defence has relied heavily upon the use of human shields, that torture and execution of Russian POWs is endemic, that morale is tenuous, or that leadership is exceedingly focused upon the creation of informational effects through the contrivance of atrocities such as the Mariupol Theatre or Mariupol Hospital bombings which turn out not to have happened as described. We are not told that Ukraine is the kind of 'democracy' where opposition media is shuttered, and opposition politicians jailed. We don't hear that Zelensky was shown in the Pandora papers to be a crook to the tune of nearly a billion dollars squirrelled away in overseas accounts. One could go on.

The damage to Western credibility caused by all this is extreme; in fact, it is probably fatal to its global leadership, which in its last formulation as the Rules-Based International Order has essentially been laughed off the world stage as patent self-serving aggrandisement—and nonsensical at that. As Mahathir Mohamed, Malaysia's longest serving Prime Minister, put it, the war is the result of Europe's 'love of war and hegemony'. Unfortunately, that view is typical in the non-Western world and not exceptional.

Indeed, the war in Ukraine has thrown a spotlight on a scepticism towards the global order that has been growing for some years. A 2015 Chatham House report argued cautiously and hopefully that the foreign and domestic threats to the global status quo visible then were,

... serious rather than catastrophic. There is little coherence or common interest among the challengers, except for discontent with aspects of the current order, and therefore little coordination. There is no sign of any integrated international opposition movement which might unite the discontented and advocate an alternative system, leading to the sort of ideological struggle that marked the last century.

Now, as seen by the strengthening Eurasian compact between Moscow and Beijing, there is very obviously common interest and increasing coherence among challengers and much sign of coordination amongst them to redress discontent with the current order. It would not be unreasonable to describe this as an accomplished strategic catastrophe. What is occurring is a functional division of the world into two parts: the West on one side, more precisely the increasingly financially tenuous dollar area plus the politically tenuous EU and its satellites, and Russia and China on the other with each making their own proposals to the rest of the world.

It is far from obvious that the West has the better offer. The BRICS, none of which have joined sanctions against Russia, now account for as much as eighty per cent of global heavy industry and a massive chunk of vital commodities, including as recent events have highlighted, food and fertiliser, and a gigantic slice of the world's actual savings. In March 2023 it was announced that the BRICS had overtaken the G7 in share of world GDP by Purchasing Power Parity.

The West, meanwhile, is in serious economic peril—much of the reason for that stemming from over-financialisation and unsustainable debt. As of 2022 America's debt-GDP ratio has already reached 129 per cent on a ballistic trajectory that is set conservatively to reach 225 per cent by 2050. For point of comparison, the historic high in 1946 bearing all the costs of the Second World War was 106 per cent. The truth, though, is that the numbers will never rise to that height because the system will collapse first. As it was put to me by a former senior banker and diplomat, 'it can't happen as investors won't accept it. This sort of thing normally ends in hyperinflation, conflict, and loss of empire!'

The problem is not simply American because no Western economies are in much better structural order, and several are in significantly worse. In terms of economic financialization, further debt issuance, and consumption, the collective West has reached the end of the line. For Europe, stark rises in energy and freight costs, combined with recession reducing domestic demand for industrial products, on top of an already higher cost base than other advanced economies make energy-intensive firms unprofitable.

In short, the homeland of the industrial revolution is being de-industrialised at a rapid pace. The currently unfolding economic downturn, a long overdue recurrence of the 2008 financial crisis, is combining with a progressive de-dollarisation of global trade turbocharged by sanctions on Russia.

Who is on track to economic ruin here? Who has 'contained' whom? Finally, as we have observed a last main aspect of Stupid Wars is that their consequences bounce back on their creators. The Frankenstein monster returns to its creator for vengeance. In the case, of the West's involvement in the Russo-Ukraine War that is proving true with a vengeance.

## Part 4

### The Arc of Stupidity

The emergence of the Stupid Wars coincided with the end of the Cold War, the beginning of the 'unipolar moment', and the era of Western triumphalism usually spoken of with reference to Fukuyama's famous essay on the supposed end of history. The alignment of the two is not accidental. The reason is probably obvious—hubris, or overweening pride, is an affliction of victors not losers. That is why the Romans, who were wise to these things, when a triumphant general was awarded a procession through the capital a slave was employed to stand behind him whispering 'you too are mortal' in his ear.

It might have been hoped that peak stupidity was reached in the War on Terror. It would seem, though, that the Russo-Ukraine War, brought on by many of the same people, will represent the pinnacle—and the precipice. The problem is that the fall from here is going to be very traumatic.

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