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As Taiwan tensions rise and Ukraine conflict drags on, it's time to reckon with the high cost of war

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No thanks to Nancy Pelosi, we dodged a bullet this week, perhaps coming closer to armed regional conflict in the Asia-Pacific than since the end of the Vietnam war in 1975.

Pelosi, US House of Representatives speaker, played fast and loose in Taipei in what appeared to be a piece of political theatre intended to show voters in November's midterm elections that the Democrat administration could act tough on China. In Beijing, at least, it seems that someone has had Sun Tzu's *Art of War* open at the right page: "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting."

With Russian President Vladimir Putin trying to pulverise Ukraine into submission, this was not the time to unleash a second – potentially catastrophic – conflict on the world.

Rather, it was a time to focus on the tragic cost and stupidity of war. It was a time to remember one of the most painful lessons of history: that, if all costs are considered, even war's "winners" are invariably net losers, and that the losses of the losers are significantly greater than any gains claimed by the winners.

As the Cato Institute's John Mueller wrote in his latest book *The Stupidity of War*: "War has come to seem not only futile, destructive and barbaric, but profoundly stupid."

Whether Ukraine eventually ends up being a loser or a winner, the cost to the country of Putin's "special military operation" is already self-evidently catastrophic.

So far, a third of the population has been displaced, thousands are dead, numerous cities have been reduced to rubble, a third of all bridges, roads, railway lines and waterworks have been damaged or demolished, and the cost of rebuilding is expected to be at least US\$750 billion – more than four times the country's 2020 gross domestic product.

As warmongers flex their muscles, it is for the moderate, rational middle to reflect on the appalling cost of war through the centuries and the recent evidence at hand.

The number is shocking in its own right, given the trillions needed to repair failing infrastructure, fund schooling and healthcare, and begin to tackle climate change, but even worse is the fact that barely a quarter of the US\$8 trillion was actually spent fighting wars.

More than US\$1.1 trillion was spent on “homeland security”, almost US\$900 billion on “increases to base budget”, and almost US\$1.1 trillion on the interest costs of debt servicing.

As the Quaker-controlled Friends Committee on National Legislation recently observed, this US\$8 trillion “did not eradicate violent extremism, and it won’t solve today’s emerging threats”.

While World War II is reckoned by many to have been the world’s most costly war (costing the US alone US\$4.7 trillion in today’s dollars), some of the costliest – and most pointless – have been more recent, like the Iraq war, and the US’ futile 20-year effort to bring peace to Afghanistan.

The Watson Institute calculates the cost of the war in Afghanistan at US\$2.313 trillion, with about a quarter of this spent on servicing incurred debts, and more than 10 per cent on “veterans’ care”.

Worst, out of the 243,000 people killed during the conflict, 70,000 were civilians and 78,000 were the US-supported Afghan and Pakistani military. Almost 86,000 Taliban and other opposition fighters were killed, which means civilians and US allies suffered almost two-thirds of the fatalities.

The fruits of such war are sour – not just for the people of Afghanistan, but for the millions of US citizens who would have felt massive benefits from the diversion of those trillions of dollars away from the military.

It seems Putin is learning similar lessons just five months into his invasion of Ukraine. Putting aside the appalling price being paid by Ukraine’s 41 million people, its defence ministry says it has destroyed 1,487 Russian armoured personnel carriers, 476 tanks, 230 artillery systems, 74 multiple-launch rocket systems, 118 helicopters, 96 aircraft, 44 anti-aircraft warfare systems, 21 unmanned aerial vehicles and three ships.

If analysts are right that, for example, a single Russian Amarta tank costs around US\$8 million, and a Kamov helicopter US\$15 million, then Putin has already run through an arsenal costing billions.

One would have thought that Russia’s futile struggle in the 1980s to control Afghanistan, and more recently its engagement in Syria, would have taught it powerful lessons about the folly of war.

A 2015 UN report on the price of the Syrian conflict is grim: 220,000 people killed, 3.8 million refugees, a US\$202 billion blow to the Syrian economy, and 58 per cent without a job. A quarter of schools had been closed or destroyed, and a half of all hospitals. Life expectancy for a Syrian

citizen collapsed from 75.9 years before the conflict to 55.7 years. That is surely a tragic price to pay for supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's "victory".

One can only pray that Beijing's bristling leaders are today taking careful note of such appalling figures. And apart from the venerable guidance of Sun Tzu, they might recall Lawrence Wittner, professor emeritus at State University of New York: "A case can be made that it is better for a nation to win a war than to lose it. But perhaps it is time to learn from the world's tragic blood-stained history that there is a third way: using our intelligence and creativity to solve conflicts without war."