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On the question of Russian humiliation

There is no graceful end to Russia's debacle in Ukraine. And that's fine.

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Three months ago, there was concern that Russia would overrun Ukraine in less than a week. Plenty of folks tried to find a means to avoid that. John Mearsheimer talked about respecting Russia's sphere of influence. Other realists talked about the need for a "golden bridge" for Vladimir Putin to avoid further bloodshed. This mirrored the prewar European discourse about the crisis, in which the goal was to mollify Putin to avoid further escalation and forcible territorial annexation.

In the present, these same groups of folks are still very worried. Now, however, the concern is not that Russia will win, but that it might lose and lose badly. Mearsheimer told the Chinese TV network CGTN that "Russia cannot afford to lose." He told PBS that "one circumstance in which a great power is likely to use nuclear weapons is ... when it thinks a decisive defeat is being inflicted on it. What Biden is bent on doing is inflicting a decisive defeat on Russia." In other words, losing could cause Russia to lash out even more aggressively.

Politico's Matthew Karnitschnig reported about similar sentiments in Europe this week: "Western European leaders are now worried about what might happen if Ukraine actually wins. ... A Ukrainian win could destabilize Russia, making it even more unpredictable and putting a normalization of energy links further out of reach. That's why some western European capitals quietly favor a 'face-saving' resolution to the conflict, even if it costs Ukraine some territory."

The hard-working staff here at Spoiler Alerts finds this argument to be risible for several reasons. First, it is worth remembering that Ukrainian officials kept making pretty creative offers on issues like Crimea and the Donbas region, only to be rebuffed by Putin. A golden bridge has been proffered to Russia multiple times; it has been Putin who has repeatedly refused to take that exit ramp.

Second, we are still not sure whether Ukraine can go on the offensive in the east and the south. If this war grinds to a stalemate, the status quo is one where the Russian Federation controls most of Ukraine's coastline.

Third, even if Ukraine succeeds in going on the offensive, Russia's worst-case scenario is that Russia retreats back to the 2014 status quo. Its sovereign territory will not be threatened. As Robert Farley pointed out recently, Russia's willingness to antagonize its neighbors while seeing an awful lot of its ground forces put out of commission in Ukraine suggests "the action of a country that firmly believes its security is guaranteed by its nuclear arsenal."

Ukraine has conducted periodic air raids on Russian soil during this conflict, so one could consider the possibility that Ukraine expands the war into Russia proper. This seems highly

unlikely, however. It is far from clear whether Ukraine has the capacity or interest in mounting such an offensive onto Russian soil. U.S. officials have also drawn a bright red line restricting intelligence sharing with Ukraine for attacks on Russian soil.

Russia might lose the war in Ukraine, but Russia itself will persist. So why the concern about a golden bridge? My hunch is, analysts are conflating Russia with Putin, and that is where the conversation starts to get interesting.

Russia's war effort has suffered reverse after reverse, leading Putin to micromanage the fight. At the same time, the grumbling from Russia's populace is on the rise. Some hard truths are even being spoken out loud on Russian television:

A weakened Putin who has to focus on domestic discontent to stay in power is hardly the worst outcome for the United States. International escalation as a diversionary tactic is highly unlikely; as Lawrence Freedman notes, "nuclear use would not solve any strategic problems for Russia, and would create many, many more." It is even possible that Putin's time in office would come to an end.

None of this is to say that the United States or NATO should now pursue maximalist war aims. Patrick Porter, Justin Logan and Benjamin Friedman are correct to point out that NATO's war aims do not perfectly sync up with Ukraine; Western leaders should signal their limits now rather than later.

The idea that a victorious Ukraine spells the end for Russia, however, is far-fetched. Everyone should stop worrying about a golden bridge.