

Opinion **Global Insight**

The west is starting to feel Ukraine fatigue

As fear of Putin has abated, the spirit of international opposition to invasion has begun to flag

EDWARD LUCE



US president Joe Biden has his work cut out to keep the west shored up © AP

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

Stay across the latest Ukraine coverage

 [Get instant email alerts](#)

×

We knew this was coming. After the heady early weeks of Russia's military humiliation, Ukraine's heroic resistance buoyed by a remarkable popular western outpouring, tedium is beginning to creep in. Traditional wars usually go this way. The early mood swings from euphoria to despair are supplanted by ennui. Skilled leaders channel despair into fear, which can result in action. Boredom is a far more stubborn adversary.

Joe Biden's recent utterances show awareness of the problem. In the fortnight after Russia's invasion, his approval rating jumped to 47 per cent. Americans were rallying around at a moment of acute western vulnerability. Along with Russia's partial retreat, Biden's numbers in the same Marist poll then slumped back to the 39 per cent level he was suffering before February 24 (they have since crept slightly upwards to 41). In retrospect it looks almost like a dead cat bounce. In spite of having shown a degree of resolve and principle, Biden is reaping no credit for his handling of Ukraine.

America's public is focused on rising inflation, school massacres and a familiar diet of celebrity scandals. The US president this week made his most coherent pitch so far for America to stick to its course in Ukraine. It was in the vital national interest to stop

Russia from winning and ensure its barbarity failed. “We understand that freedom is not free,” Biden [wrote](#) in the New York Times. If [Putin] expects that we will waver or fracture in the months to come, he is . . . mistaken.”

Then again, Putin’s bet could prove right. The war is being fought on two levels — on the ground in Ukraine, and in the information battle for control of the global narrative. Both have entered a period of attrition. In terms of the real war, Russia’s Plan A was pulverised in the first few weeks and led to its humiliating reversal on the road to Kyiv. It is now trying to execute its more modest Plan B, which is to seize the Donbas and secure a land bridge to Crimea. Given Russia’s methods, the term “attrition” might be misleading. One European official [likened](#) it to “a war of oblivion”.

The information war will shape what happens on the ground. Here the west, and Ukraine, may be victims of their own success. Much of the western media has chosen to ignore everything the Russians say and draw heavily on Ukrainian data and stories. Given the darkness of Russian propaganda this is understandable. But such selectivity has two side effects. The first is complacency. The widespread sense of Russian haplessness has fuelled the expectation of its defeat. It is just a matter of time.

It is also possible, however, that the adage, often attributed to Josef Stalin, that “quantity has a quality all of its own” could become more relevant. Russia’s army may fare better with the east’s shorter supply lines and easier terrain. Many of the defects in today’s Russian military — low morale, shoddy equipment, lack of initiative and brutality within its ranks — were also true of Stalin’s Red Army, which eventually defeated the German Wehrmacht. If Putin’s Plan B works, he will probably return to Plan A with adjustments.

The second side effect is democracies’ reversion to the mean. As fear of Putin has abated, the west’s spirit has begun to flag. The late and controversial former US defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, differentiated between the response of “old Europe” and “new Europe” to the Iraq war. That division remains apparent with the public mood in Italy, France and Germany diverging from more gung-ho countries such as Poland. The UK, meanwhile, is causing irritation in Washington over its habit of boasting about things it has not delivered.

What can Biden do to keep the west shored up? Jamie Dimon, head of JPMorgan Chase, this week warned that a “hurricane” was going to hit the global economy, saying a Ukraine war could push oil up to \$175 a barrel. There is little Biden could do to stop that. Though the Ukraine war is only part of the problem, the prospect of recession will test public spiritedness on both sides of the Atlantic.

recession will test public spiritedness on both sides of the Atlantic.

This is where leadership comes in. Biden's Democrats will probably lose this year's midterm elections regardless. But the outcome in Ukraine remains uncertain.

Knowing the difference between what can be changed and what cannot is the test of any leader. So far Biden seems to get that distinction.

edward.luce@ft.com

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.
