

Five Minutes to Midnight – Can the West Rise to the Challenge?

We are at War. A Global War for Democracy.

Garry Kasparov

Russian Chess Grandmaster, former World Chess Champion, political activist and writer



Two and a half years after Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine continues to put up an astounding fight, defying all initial expectations that it would fall one, perhaps two, weeks into the war. Its incredible resiliency is a reflection of the strength of its people's conviction in what they are fighting for—their country's survival as a free democratic state, but equally, the very future of global democracy. That is not an overstatement. From the beginning, the lines of the conflict have been crystal clear: dictatorship and tyranny on one side, and the liberal democratic order on the other. So what is Russia fighting for? The Russians dying on the front lines of the conflict are fighting for Putin's political life, for the survival of the corrupt, morally bankrupt mafia structure that stands in for Russian government today.

The regime has reached a point where war is the only way for it to maintain the political balance needed for its tenability. During the quarter of a century that Putin has been in power—just writing those words fills with me anger and grief—he has morphed from an authoritarian strongman into a hardcore ideological dictator. In its current form, the regime cannot function without war as its primary engine. Every facet of Russian life has been channeled into sustaining the war effort—political, military, economic, ideological. Even what is left of cultural life has been transformed into disguised propaganda to spread the regime's vision of Russian society. (And, when artists don't conform to the new social fabric willingly, they are punished. A Russian theater director and playwright were recently sentenced to six years each in prison on charges that the play promotes terrorism; this is an accusation levied indiscriminately against all members of the opposition, myself included.)

The war will not—cannot—end as long as Putin stays in power. Anyone who says otherwise is either blind to the forces at play, or corrupt. The logic of the regime is such that it needs external aggression to survive. Moreover, Ukraine as a target plays into the specific brand of nationalist mythology Putin believes in and propagates. In this world picture, Ukraine does not exist; it is cul-

turally, historically, geographically part of Russia. Under these circumstances, we cannot conflate the possibility of a temporary ceasefire, negotiated by outside actors, with the possibility of a genuine resolution to the war. The goal of annihilating Ukraine as a state and a nation has never been abandoned. There can be no negotiation with an adversary that seeks to wipe Ukraine from the map.

Diplomacy may not be an option, but the alternative is not to sit idly by. Parallels drawn to the 20th century to justify caution are at best inaccurate. The geopolitical balance has radically shifted since then. The period preceding World War II was marked by pervasive instability, with France, Britain,

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and other smaller democracies facing Nazi Germany and fascist Italy in their midst, and a rising Japan in the East. The overall climate was deeply unfavorable to democracy. The leaders who failed to confront Hitler in the 1930s, while they should by no means be excused, were dealing with the devastating recent memory of World War I and an understandable fear of re-tipping the geopolitical scales.

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Today, by contrast, the free world holds a decisive military and economic advantage but lacks the political will to use it. It suffers not from genuine geopolitical obstacles to action, but from a disease of the will. It is riddled by complacency, set in after the victory over Communism and Fukuyama's infamous prediction of the "end of history." It is beset by a lack of direction and political imagination on the part of its leaders, to envision what a democratic future holds and how they can contrib-

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Abandoning the stage never results in a morally neutral vacuum. Any empty space will inevitably be filled by other forces. And, abdication always comes back to haunt one at home, as we are now painfully seeing. Democracy hurt anywhere will have reverberating effects on democracy everywhere. Years of projected weakness, across the political spectrum, from Obama to Trump to Biden, have allowed for a continued chipping away at democracy worldwide. No wonder then that the landscape of the current election in the United States looks the way it does. And it's not just what is happening in Ukraine and in the U.S.—Gaza is clearly part of this global challenge to democracy. One only has to look at who the forces are propping up Hamas to see which side Israel is on in the global fight between the forces of tyranny and freedom. Many just don't want to recognize it. We see, too, the advance of illiberal forces in Africa, as America's retreat has left a vacuum that China and Russia quickly stepped into, taking advantage of the continent's riches in the process. It's just that nobody wants to talk about it.

The simple message here is: we are at war. And it's a global war. Globalization

cannot be played backward. We must admit that we have no choice but to act, cannot plug up our ears and stick our heads in the sand. Putin has a plan; China has a plan; the Islamic radicals have a plan. We don't have a plan, at least not yet. Instead, our leaders have been engaged in an almost hypnotic collective chant: We must avoid war. As though if they repeat this incantation enough they will succeed in bending the reality of the current situation to their wishes. They are not the only ones who seem to be under a spell; the Russian citizenry is living in a zombified state, having been fed the myth of an imperial Russia through decades of propaganda. They, too, need a shock in spirits to reorient them, and nothing less than the Ukrainian flag flying over Sevastopol will do. As for the rest of us—the sooner we recognize that regime change is the only policy that can bring the war in Ukraine to an end, and to turn the future of Russia around, the better.

The free world is beset by a lack of direction and political imagination on the part of its leaders, to envision what a democratic future holds and how they can contribute to it.

The war in Ukraine is the writing on the wall, and the letters are growing bigger and bigger. If the free world does not confront Putin's regime, we stand to usher in a new global era, one in which I, for one, don't want to live. If Putin is allowed to have his way, to redraw the lines of a sovereign state along his border—and, mark my words, all the strongmen around the world, from North Korea to Nicaragua, Belarus to Zimbabwe, are taking notes—we will have failed in our responsibility to uphold democracy, so hard-won by previous generations. The strength of our institutions, norms, and values is only as strong as our will to protect them against threats—which will always be there, whether we like it or not. We are at a moment of inevitable escalation. We know from history and experience that ceding to authoritarians and dictators always prompts them to try to take another inch. The costs of preserving the liberal world order will only continue to grow with each passing day, so I fervently hope we don't waste any more time. We must present a fully unified front in our support for Ukraine, and equally, in our uncompromising stance toward preserving democracy worldwide—even when it requires pain and sacrifice in the present. ■