



The Chinese are said to value a calm, serene life. To curse them would be to wish them an "interesting life" or "May you live in interesting times." We are living in interesting times. I submit to you that this requires western leadership, General Phil Breedlove told the Berlin Security Conference in November 2023

As we look back at the winter of 2013 and the spring of 2014 we have to ask ourselves - could we have made those times, and today's, "less interesting"?

My predecessor, SACEUR #16, Admiral Jim Staviridis commissioned an in-depth Ukraine study at the senior officer level. That decision was prescient. We continued the work of the commission right up until the Russian invasion of Crimea began.

It involved a General Officer team from the US and Ukraine, looking at what it would take to transform Ukraine's military forces into a more western, NATO compatible force

There were tangible results. Training at Yavoriv took on new meaning and vigour : Small unit tactic and superb IED training, meshing experienced fighters from the front (Line of control) with new recruits to develop unit integrity and share experience  
We also learned from the experienced UKR fighters about Russian tactics and how to better use some of the weapons we had given them, such as the counter battery radar. But we were already so deterred by Russia that we digitally limited the radars so they could not see into Russia. They later innovated and were able to show us how to better use them.

More to our current point, the superb staff work of the commission pointed out many of the

changes, capabilities and training that Ukraine would need to "move its forces from Soviet practices into the way of the west."

When Russia's invasion began and the President and Secretary for Defense asked me, in my Commander USEUCOM role, for recommendations, because of the superb work of the commission I was ready.

Three in particular were very relevant

The ability to establish and hold air sovereignty over Ukraine land and on the Black Sea.

The ability to see, target and strike precisely and at long range

The ability to communicate, command, and control forces in a severe electronic warfare environment

American forces, and by extension their allies do not go to war without a minimum of battlefield air superiority. Western "manoeuvre warfare" and logistics depend on it. As a consequence, late spring 1953, in Korea, was the last time a US soldier, sailor, aviator or marine died through fixed wing attack by enemy aircraft.

The ability to control the skies over your troops is NOT about any one shiny object. It is a system of systems. That gives you the ability to sense/see the enemy; to label them hostile and then bring weapons to bear; and cover your forces with land based air defenses. As a result, where and when needed, you cover your forces with air defense aircraft.

Another key element of western manoeuvre warfare is to strike the enemy's capabilities BEFORE he brings them to bear on you. And then once he has engaged you, to strike his forces, his sustainment, and his lines of communication in depth. This demands long range precise strike.

Ukraine had, and still has, some superb HUMINT, but we knew they would need the west's help in targeting. Some intelligence requirements, such as overhead imagery was beyond the near term grasp of Ukraine and would require western help

However, our work identified that the biggest need were weapons to strike persistently, pervasively and precisely throughout the enemies' entire depth. This includes the Ukrainian Peninsula of Crimea, and into the staging bases around the borders of Ukraine

Our third, but not last, area of need was then, and remains now, the ability to communicate, command and control Ukraine's forces. Russia was then, and is even more today, VERY good at electronic warfare. Jamming was key in confusing the issue as Russia invaded Crimea and continues today to confuse the facts on the battlefield. Russia cut Crimea off from communicating with Kiev.

Secure and frequency hopping technology remains vital to the fight. Russia has paid a dear price by communicating on open unencrypted cell networks. Ukraine must continue the transition to tactically capable and secure comms.

The ability to see and interpret the battlefield is the difference in the west and the Russian forces. It is imperative that Ukraine has the ability to build a comprehensive Common Operating Picture of the air, land, sea and cyber warfare situations.

So 10 years ago we knew, prior to the two invasions of the Ukrainian peninsula and the Donbass, the major elements of what Ukraine needed. Imagine how different this fight may have been if we had acted them, on what we already knew. History will judge us on how well we have addressed these needs.

But even now we can ask what, in the last 9 years, has been accomplished? Is Ukraine able to project Battlefield Air Superiority over its troops? Can Ukraine strike deep persistently, pervasively and precisely to deny the enemy sanctuary and to destroy and disrupt his forces even before they are brought to bear? Does Ukraine have a common operating picture that is assessable down to the smallest manoeuvre elements. The same answer to each is NO; some slowly; but not enough

And now in this subsequent Russian invasion, we are re-observing what we concluded before the first two invasions almost 10 years ago. So how should we move forward?

Our policy must be clear. It is most often described as we are going to be here as long as it takes, or we are going to give them everything they need. To a military planner these are incomplete sentences. They ask "to do what???" To this question Ukraine, and the Ukrainian people, are clear :To remove all Russians from all sovereign Ukrainian lands.

In my view that is how we should end those sentences. Why do we not set such a policy? Why do we not ascribe to what the Ukrainian people have clearly intimated as the future they want for their country? Simply put, we in the West are deterred.

Some key policy leaders of the west are unable to intellectually comprehend how to deal with a Russian defeat and what that means, or what a defeat of Putin would entail?? Ergo we seek another appeasement to stop the fighting - we would trade Ukrainian land at the cost of Ukrainian lives to ensure our safety.

In the war colleges of the west, we learn that the great thinkers about war had many axioms about conflict. There were many and they did not universally agree, but on these two key directives they did: Seize and maintain the initiative; deter your enemy, and do not allow him to deter you

We have to change our approach. We ceded the initiative to the enemy in this war before the first shot was fired. We told the enemy what we were NOT going to do: No NATO boots on the ground, no firing into Russia. Over and over we said to the enemy "if you do this, we will do that."

There are zero no-risk ways ahead. We have to make the enemy react to us, rather than us reacting to him. It is time for us to deter Putin, rather than us making every decision trying to find a no risk way ahead among Putin's many threats concerning nuclear war and a widening war. Russia can no longer be guaranteed against western supplied long-range fires.

Multiple elements of the western press are reporting that important leaders of western policy are moving to urge Ukraine to go to the table and negotiate. The bargaining chip of course is the type and quantity of continued western support. The result must be that any settlement would involve the loss of more Ukrainian land and soldiers' lives in exchange for "peace." In the words of Ambassador Kurt Volker, "peace now, means more war later."

In 2008 Russia was rewarded for its bad behaviour by being allowed to seize and hold 20% of Georgia. In 2014 Russia was rewarded for its bad behaviour by being allowed to seize and hold approximately 13% of the most important tactical and commercial land and ports in UKR

The question now is, will the western world once again, for the third time, reward Russia for amassing its army, attacking across an internationally recognized border and subjugating portions of a neighbouring sovereign nation?

Past rewards for bad behaviour are no way to assure future good behaviour.

*This article is based on a keynote address at the Berlin Security Conference on 29th November 2023 by General Phil Breedlove, USAF ret. SACEUR 17. Reproduced y kind permission of General Phil*