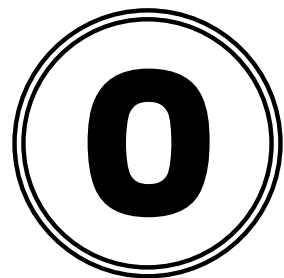




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CAN INDIA BE THE 'VISHWAGURU'?

WAR AND PEACE RESULT FROM POLITICAL CHOICES. AS THE **UKRAINE WAR INCHES TOWARDS A YEAR**, HERE ARE THREE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS OF ITS FUTURE COURSE



One of the critical questions of 2023 is whether the war in Ukraine will end this year.

It was an avoidable war. When Leonid Kuchma was president of Ukraine from 1994 to 2004, he balanced relations with Russia and the West. Viktor Yushchenko, who succeeded him from 2005

to 2010, pushed Ukraine into the Western camp. His successor Viktor Yanukovich chose the other side of the pendulum, embracing the bear. If Ukraine had declared constitutional neutrality, Russia would not have annexed Crimea in 2014 and if Ukraine had implemented the

INDIA MUST TRY TO BRING ABOUT A CEASEFIRE. IF SUCCESSFUL, THIS WOULD CEMENT ITS 'VISHWAGURU' STATUS

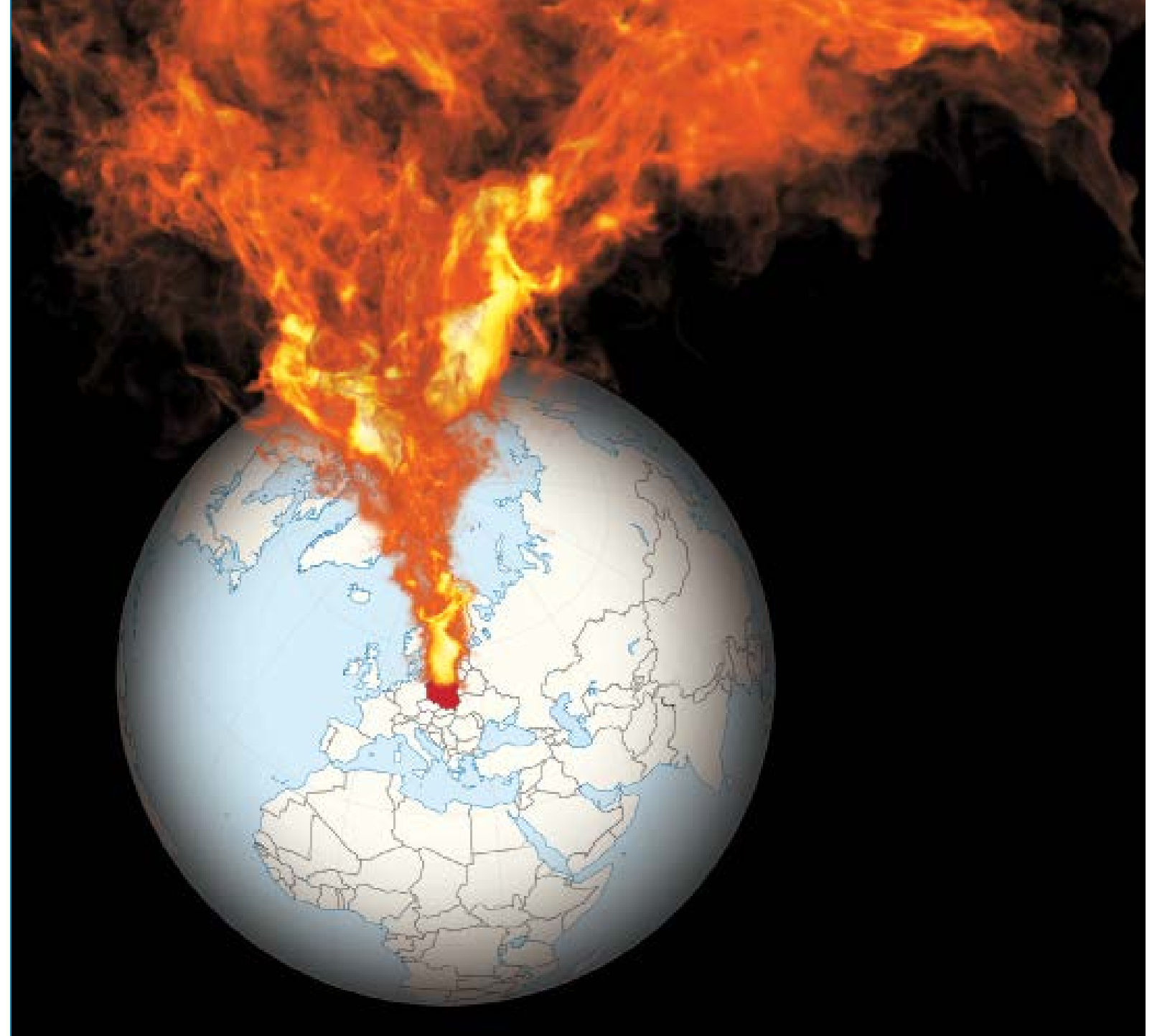


Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

Minsk-II agreement on Donbass, Russia would not have invaded Ukraine in 2022. Ukraine's lack of political wisdom in rejecting neutrality is not an excuse to absolve Russia of its violation of international law and the 1994 agreement guaranteeing Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity. The war in Ukraine shows that war is a matter of choice. War does not happen merely because of geography, economy, or destiny. War results from the choices leaders make.

If war is a matter of choice, so can be peace. General Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of

Staff, has advised Ukraine to negotiate a pragmatic solution. The Ukrainian leaders have responded hysterically, the way they did when Henry Kissinger had recommended constitutional neutrality in 2013. Despite the Pentagon's top boss uttering wise words, the United States supplies arms to Ukraine. This has created three possible scenarios for the future of the war in Ukraine.

SCENARIO I: CEASEFIRE AND PEACE PROCESS

If the Russians and Ukrainians want to escape mutually assured destruction, they may explore a ceasefire, followed

by a peace process. The latter would involve the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the frontline, exchange of prisoners, a demilitarised zone under UN supervision and the beginning of talks for the Russian military withdrawal in return for Ukraine implementing the Minsk II provisions for the autonomy of Donbass.

The question is who will break the deadlock. There is a complete breakdown of dialogue between the P5 member countries. The informal interactions between P5 ambassadors in Geneva and New York have been suspended. The US-Russia strategic stability talks are put on hold. India can fill the vacuum, assuming moral leadership as the chair of G20. India has political capital in Moscow, Washington, D.C., Paris and Berlin. India may act alone and launch aggressive mediation initiatives, perhaps through the back door. Alternatively, India can form and lead a ginger group of mediator countries. If India succeeds, it will establish its 'vishwaguru' status and ease the path for its inclusion in the permanent membership of the UNSC.

If there is no ceasefire by September 2023, India may face huge diplomatic challenges at the G20 summit. President Putin might remain absent as he did in Bali at the last summit in November 2022. If he attends the summit and is humiliated by Western leaders on Indian soil, it will be a major embarrassment for the host country. India need not wait until September for mediation. The war will lose pace in the winter months, from January to March. The time for launching a diplomatic initiative is now.

SCENARIO II: PROTRACTED CONFLICT

If there is no ceasefire by September this year, Putin will want to stretch the conflict to January 2025, when a

new US president is installed. In the meanwhile, the world will suffer from shortages of food, fertilisers and fuel. The events in Sri Lanka, where a sudden shortage of food, fertilisers and fuel caused the overthrow of the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government, will play out again in some parts of the world.

If the new US president wants a deal with Russia, he or she can easily force Ukraine to accept a ceasefire, followed by a peace process. If the White House of 2025 sees value in the continuation of the war for American strategic, political and military interests, the war will prolong beyond the late 2020s. The Vietnam War lasted for two decades, while the Iraq-Iran war and the Soviet invasion

nuclear annihilation.

In January 2022, the five permanent members of the UNSC issued a joint pledge to avoid nuclear war. However, their words are not matched by their deeds. The US, UK, France and Russia refuse to accept the 'no first use' doctrine. Russia and the US have placed 2,800 nuclear warheads on hair-trigger alert, ready to attack their targets within 10-15 minutes of an executive decision. The two countries, along with China, are involved in a hypersonic missile race. Russia has deployed the Avangard hypersonic missile, which travels at 27 times the speed of sound, evades radar and carries two tonnes of nuclear payload. Its range is the American homeland;

IF THE 2025 WHITE HOUSE SEES VALUE IN PROLONGING THE WAR FOR STRATEGIC-MILITARY INTERESTS, IT WILL GO ON BEYOND THE LATE 2020s

of Afghanistan went on for almost a decade. It is possible to foresee a long war beyond the 2020s in Ukraine until both sides have nothing more to lose and are locked in a mutually hurting stalemate. India, like other countries, will not be able to escape the economic consequences.

SCENARIO III: GLOBAL NUCLEAR WAR

A protracted war can spark an accident or incident that may inadvertently or deliberately lead to a nuclear exchange. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has warned on more than one occasion that humanity is one miscalculation away from

not Ukraine. A global nuclear war, initially involving Russia and the NATO countries, and then extending to China and India, is possible by accident, incident, or intent.

Since India will be an unwilling victim of such a war, South Block mandarins need to consider a diplomatic initiative for nuclear risk reduction and global denuclearisation. Such an initiative must be multilateral, since unilateral generosity does not pay, as proved by Ukraine's own example. Renouncing the most lethal instruments of power is not a palatable choice for the nuclear weapon states. The alternative is the end of human civilisation. ■