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The War In Ukraine Must Come To An End

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As Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine continues, Moscow is making gains but facing sustained resistance. Moscow and Kyiv officials are meeting and talking peace, with the gap between them closing ever so slightly. An end to hostilities still seems far away, but at least is imaginable—if the participants focus on peace and stability rather than fairness and justice.

That won't be easy, however. Russia's unprovoked aggression has become a cause celebre and moral crusade. That may make compromise more difficult.

Without question, the attack is a terrible crime without justification. Yet the attention it received is surprising. After all, millions of people died in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Hundreds of thousands died in America's invasion of Iraq, the Syrian civil war, and US-backed Saudi and Emirati aggression against Yemen. Yet none of these conflicts, all of which caused far more casualties than the Russo-Ukraine conflict is likely to generate, energized people elsewhere to a similar degree.

The disparity in the reaction is disturbing. After all, Yemenis continue to die in substantial numbers from attacks conducted using *US aircraft and munitions*, with Washington *backing the aggressors*. Still, popular antagonism to Russia's campaign, which is causing so much destruction and so many deaths, is a welcome change from the international apathy that so often greets wars elsewhere.

Moscow deserves the tsunami of obloquy that it has received. Vladimir Putin's complaints about NATO expansion and allied aggressiveness—Washington illegally attacked Serbia and Iraq, among others—were not without foundation. However, nothing justified war, especially one with the apparent aim to subjugate an entire country.

Yet the extraordinary emotional release threatens to make it harder to end the conflict. Russophobia rules the day. In recent years the US responded to complaints that impoverishing entire peoples to punish their governments was both immoral and ineffective with targeted sanctions to focus on culpable policymakers. However, the objective of many sanctions being applied to Russia is to punish the entire population.

Moreover, hysteria has driven a private boycott movement that seeks to cancel all Russians, irrespective of blame. For instance, the Paralympics have barred Russians from participating. Singers, conductors, and athletes are being driven from jobs and competition. There is a move afoot to force Russian tennis player Daniil Medvedev, who has called for peace, to publicly denounce Putin if he expects to keep playing. One wonders if the next step will be to mandate lie detector tests to determine if individual Russians really, *really* oppose the ruling regime. And force those who fail to wear a scarlet letter.

Sanctimony may have reached its height when former US ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, safely ensconced at Stanford University—and making nearly a million dollars annually, as he helpfully let the world know—insisted that the Russian people rise against Putin. They should risk arrest, he proclaimed, because, well, Putin can't imprison them all. No word yet on whether McFaul would pay for their defense counsel.

Looking forward, many people in Western countries would like to see Putin tried before a war crimes tribunal. Allied governments may be tempted to use frozen Russian assets as reparations for Ukraine. A few people probably want their militaries—or at least the US armed forces—to march on Moscow. Almost none would back Russia gaining its pre-war objectives after launching a war and causing so many deaths and so much destruction. Commit aggression and war crimes, then get a mulligan?

However, just such an outcome might be necessary to halt combat today and ensure peace and stability tomorrow.

No one knows how the war will turn out. Determined Ukrainian resistance might halt the Russian offensive, leaving Moscow having to choose between retreat, effectively acknowledging defeat, and stasis, defending fractured, noncontiguous territorial gains against persistent resistance. Moscow's forces might learn from their failures and deploy their superior firepower to break through Ukrainian defenses, seize most of the major cities, and occupy a large share of the country, perhaps that east of the Dnipro River, though still facing irregular resistance. Something in between might result—with Russian forces continuing to advance slowly and inconsistently, while sustaining substantial, costly losses.

All of these are bad for Ukraine since they involve continuing combat. The losses could go on and on. Particularly worrisome is the potential for a burgeoning insurgency. Ironically, the more effective it is in the short-term, the more destructive it would be in the long-term.

Ukraine is very different from Afghanistan, but the latter's experience remains instructive. The US promoted a successful insurgency against the Soviet Union. The victors fell out among themselves, triggering a terrible civil war which led to a Taliban victory. After 9/11 Washington reentered and ousted the Taliban, leading to renewed insurgency and civil war. Today the great powers are out but Afghanistan is an impoverished, smoldering wreck.

Experience suggests that the greater the losses suffered in combat, the less likely the parties will settle the conflict through negotiations. World War I was one of humanity's terrible disasters. As the war dragged on with mass slaughter—Somme, Verdun, Passchendaele, Gallipoli, Ypres, Tannenberg, and many more names became synonyms for a particularly toxic mix of stupidity, arrogance, and incompetence. Officials on both sides acknowledged the necessity of ending the war, but simultaneously insisted that their nations' sacrifices required achieving more of their objectives as "compensation." Which frustrated diplomatic flirtations. Europe remained a continentwide abattoir, consuming ever more lives, until the collapse of the Central Powers.

Initial conversations between Ukrainian and Russian representatives suggested that Kyiv remained undaunted despite its losses and Moscow was unaffected by its disappointing performance. However, both sides appear to be edging toward compromise. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said the talks were beginning to "sound more realistic."

For instance, he acknowledged that NATO does not appear to be in his nation's future. It must be painful for him, finally realizing that the West has been lying to Ukraine for 14 years by insisting that Kyiv would eventually be invited to join the transatlantic alliance. "For years we have been hearing about so-called open doors. But we have also now heard that we cannot go there," he admitted.

Russian appears to have dropped talk about "denazification" of Ukraine, which would mean regime change, as well as "demilitarization," which would leave the country defenseless. Instead, Moscow has raised the examples of Austria and Sweden as possible models of neutrality for Kyiv—forbidding membership in foreign alliances and hosting foreign bases, but otherwise not infringing Ukraine's independence. "This option is really being discussed now, and is one that can be considered neutral," explained Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Both sides sounded hopeful. Zelensky opined that "All wars end in agreements" and called the negotiating positions "more realistic." Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov admitted that "the negotiations are difficult for obvious reasons," but saw progress. Indeed, he claimed that "specific wordings" were "close to being agreed" to.

Still, Zelensky said time would be necessary to forge an agreement protecting his nation's interests. He understandably wants "security guarantees" of some sort. Moreover, demands for recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Donbass' secession are a major potential block. Putin has been skeptical of the talks, previously opining that Kyiv was "not showing a serious commitment to finding mutually acceptable solutions."

Nevertheless, until February 24 Putin was seen as a rational, practical actor. Given reports of the removal of top security officials who were presumably responsible for mistaken intelligence estimates and incompetent military plans, he evidently realizes that his initial strategy has failed, making a course correction necessary. Moscow also suggested the possibility of US-Russia talks. Peskov noted that while none had yet occurred, "If necessary, the contacts can resume."

The US and Europe should aggressively back a ceasefire and intensive negotiations. The allies should state that if the Putin government agrees to halt military operations, they will hold sanctions in abeyance and suspend weapons transfers to Ukraine. Washington and Brussels also should indicate that if an agreement is reached they will lift sanctions and engage in negotiations over other security issues raised by Moscow.

The allies will have to resist inevitable public pressures to punish Russia. The desire to do so is understandable, but such a threat might wreck talks between Kyiv and Moscow. If the Putin government is going to be punished, either way, it could decide to go for broke by continuing its offensive and seeking a decisive victory.

Moreover, after World War I the US and Entente powers got their revenge, remaking the world on their own terms. Alas, they unknowingly set the stage for another, much worse conflict a generation later. Punishing Moscow might yield short-term satisfaction, but doing so would be counterproductive at best, disastrous at worst. The benefits would pale compared to the costs of turning Russia into the equivalent of a giant North Korea—angry, distrustful, vengeful, and isolated, only with many more nuclear weapons.

The Russian attack on Ukraine is a tragedy at many levels. The best outcome would be a swift halt to combat and compromise agreement similar to what could have been reached before. That

might be widely seen as an unsatisfying result but in practice would be the best outcome for the Ukrainian people.

A 1945 Contributing Editor, Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and editor of the political magazine Inquiry. He writes regularly for leading publications such as Fortune magazine, National Interest, the Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Times. Bandow speaks frequently at academic conferences, on college campuses, and to business groups. Bandow has been a regular commentator on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. He holds a JD from Stanford University.