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Bring Peace to Europe

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The United States is at war in Europe. Thankfully, Americans aren't dying (at least, not that the government has admitted). But Washington is ostentatiously and proudly killing Russians. The Biden administration is directing a large-scale proxy war-plus against a nuclear-armed state.

The U.S. role was recently highlighted by the *New York Times*, which reported: “Classified war documents detailing secret American and NATO plans for building up the Ukrainian military ahead of a planned offensive against Russia were posted this week on social media channels.” Although Washington and Brussels don't dictate Ukrainian battlefield tactics, their aid determines Kiev's capabilities. The U.S. is intimately involved in Ukraine's war with Moscow.

Ukrainians have demonstrated the importance of motivation—the determination to defend their homeland—as well as creativity and flexibility in combat. Nevertheless, success also requires the right tools. Without the tsunami of allied money and weapons for Ukraine the fighting would look very different.

The conflict is in its second year with no end in sight, as observers look through a glass darkly. Russia has lost many men and much materiel, and its tactics remain deficient. Moscow's much-predicted grand offensive with newly mobilized manpower so far has fizzled.

In contrast, the Biden administration has talked up the Ukrainian offensive, but it is important to look beyond propagandistic pronouncements. The intelligence breach revealed that the administration's private assessments are much more negative: “Ukraine's challenges in massing troops, ammunition and equipment could cause its military to fall ‘well short’ of Kyiv's original goals for an anticipated counteroffensive aimed at retaking Russian-occupied areas this spring.”

Even if allied assistance keeps Ukraine in the fight against its larger foe, Kiev will still find it difficult to regain lost territory, especially Crimea, let alone win the war. The result

could be a lengthy deadlock, with occasional flare-ups, which Washington should seek to avoid.

How to push the parties toward peace? American policymakers should step back and address the conflict as a European security challenge rather than a global moral crusade.

Russia's invasion was a terrible wrong. The U.S. should support Ukraine's independence, providing essential assistance and sanctioning Moscow. However, America's interest in Ukraine is limited. The latter, ruled by Russia since before the U.S. was founded, was never an American security concern. And an expanding proxy war increases the risk of escalation, which makes it ever more important for Washington to push both parties toward negotiations.

To do so Americans must see the Russo-Ukraine war clearly. To start, Washington should drop its sanctimonious cant about a battle between democracy and autocracy. At the administration's much-hyped but little-valued democracy summit II, Secretary of State Antony Blinken contended that "this war is an attack not only on Ukraine, but on the international rules-based order that seeks to defend international peace and stability, and uphold, in the words of the United Nations Charter, 'the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small'."

Such rhetoric might appeal to liberal elites in the West, but it plays badly in the Global South, whose peoples have suffered from centuries of American and European depredations. Those who created "the rules-based order" routinely exempt themselves from its requirements. Indeed, with no sense of irony, Blinken condemned "aggressive, revisionist foreign policies" shortly after the twentieth anniversary of Washington's lawless invasion of Iraq. Over the years the U.S. has subsidized or otherwise backed a large cast of odious dictators, including Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Iran's Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko, Indonesia's Suharto, and Somalia's Mohamed Siad Barre.

Claims that Ukraine is defending the West and that Kiev's defeat would unleash a Russian Blitzkrieg to the Atlantic, are silly, especially after Moscow's demonstrated military incompetence. A Russia unable to overwhelm its smaller and weaker neighbor isn't going to conquer the continent, which enjoys a ten-to-one economic and three-to-one population advantage. In any case, since coming to power almost a quarter century ago, Putin has not attempted to forcibly reconstitute the Soviet Union.

In truth, Putin has been less aggressive than his American counterparts, who have routinely and repeatedly droned, bombed, invaded, and occupied other nations, at enormous human cost. For Putin, Ukraine always has been unique.

U.S. and allied policymakers should acknowledge their role in bringing on the war. To be sure, Putin made the decision to invade and is responsible for all the horror to follow. Still, the West influenced his behavior. Putin's views changed markedly from his 2001 Bundestag address to his 2007 Munich Security Conference speech. Had Washington and Brussels behaved differently, Europe almost certainly would be at peace today.

Putin, along with both his nation's security elite and general public, were most angered by NATO breaking its many commitments and driving ever eastward. Indeed, Fiona Hill, who served in the Trump National Security Council, warned that such moves "would likely provoke pre-emptive Russian military action."

Western leaders piously insist that Moscow should not feel threatened, but the alliance acted aggressively "out of area"—dismembering Serbia and forcing regime change in Libya. The U.S. also lawlessly invaded Iraq, which Putin cited in Munich. "Color revolutions" and allied support for a street putsch against Ukraine's elected president further fueled Russian paranoia. None of these events justify aggression, but had Moscow acted similarly in Mexico or Canada hysterical demands for action would have filled Washington.

Finally, the Biden administration should eschew myopic, misguided proposals to humble and even destroy Russia. In the abstract, ousting Putin and weakening Moscow look desirable. However, the critical question is: compared to what? If Putin falls, he is most likely to be replaced by a more ruthless nationalist with strong security ties. Western-style liberals are few and politically impotent.

Turning Russia into an angry, isolated, fearful, and humiliated but still well-armed state would not promote a stable peaceful order. Imagine a really big North Korea with a lot more nukes and many other deadly weapons. A Russian collapse could yield multiple civil wars and lots of loose nuclear arms. Imagine a really big Yugoslavia with thousands of nukes. Who wants to wager the American homeland that stability, democracy, and peace would eventually result?

What, then, should be Washington's objective? First, the end of hostilities. The war's human and materiel costs are enormous. As long as combat rages, the potential for escalation remains. Indeed, the worse the conventional outcome for Moscow, the greater the likelihood that Putin will turn to nuclear weapons or other extraordinary measures. Americans took enormous risks in dealing with the Soviet Union over Cuba. They shouldn't do the same in confronting Russia over Ukraine.

Only Kiev can decide its course, but peace should be a priority. Ukraine is the battleground. Civilians are dying, atrocities are committed, cities are wrecked, refugees are driven abroad, lives are disrupted. However, President Volodymyr Zelensky insisted that "the world should know: Respect and order will only return to international relations

when the Ukrainian flag returns to Crimea.” Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba went even further, declaring that “Russia has to withdraw from every square meter of Ukrainian territory” and “the aggressor must pay for all damages caused to Ukraine.”

Blinken has hinted at U.S. support for Kiev’s maximalist demands, indicating that the Zelensky government had to “be open to the will of Ukrainians,” who, polls show, want to fight for Crimea almost irrespective of cost. However, the U.S. has no reason to finance and otherwise enable such a course.

Second, America’s overriding war objective should be the preservation of Ukraine’s independence. The U.S. has little interest in that nation’s ultimate borders or military status. Blinken insisted that a peace “has to be just and it has to be durable.” Actually, only the second really matters to Washington, for which a neutral Ukraine without Crimea would be a satisfactory outcome. During the Cold War Finland was a model of geographic compromise, free domestically while constrained internationally. Washington should calibrate its aid to push Kiev toward a realistic end.

Third, resolution of the current conflict should become an important step in shifting defense responsibilities for Europe onto Europe. That means not bringing Kiev into NATO or issuing a separate military guarantee for Ukraine. The priority should be developing a *European* security system, creating a stable peace for all parties. After more than 70 years, the Europeans are long overdue in taking over their own defense. Despite last year's widespread promises to do more, many have either not acted or even backslid. Only if Washington does less will America’s allies feel any need to do more.

Fourth, whatever emerges at war’s end will have to reflect geographic realities and address Moscow’s perceived vulnerabilities. No one wants to reward aggression, but stability will be achieved only if Russia believes the settlement meets its essential ends. The allies’ misguided treatment of Moscow after the Cold War set the stage for the current conflict, just as the similarly myopic treatment of Germany after World War I encouraged a repeat contest. The U.S. should not try to impose a second Versailles on Moscow.

Finally, the ultimate objective should be to reintegrate a peaceful Russia into the international order—diplomatic, cultural, and economic. One North Korea is enough. Turning Moscow into a much larger and better armed equivalent, heavily dependent on China, would not likely end well. Although in principle the Russian state should pay a price for its actions, the West must temper Kiev’s understandable demands for justice or vengeance. Assets will need to be returned; sanctions will need to be lifted. The exact details must be negotiated, but Washington should act on behalf of Americans’ interests, not Ukrainians’ passions.

With neither party showing much interest in negotiations, the war appears far from a swift conclusion. The U.S. should adjust its financial and materiel commitments to Kiev to avoid inflating Ukrainian expectations. Washington should indicate that it is essential for Ukraine to signal its willingness to talk, else risk finding itself fighting without American and perhaps European assistance.

Washington's priority should be halting the risk of Armageddon, despite how small that risk might appear to be. Neither America nor Europe can afford a repeat of World War I, in which all parties realized that the conflict had to be ended, but no one was willing to take the first step to stop the slaughter.

The U.S. should initiate conversations with Moscow about what kind of modus vivendi can be reached to end the war while protecting the essential interests of all sides. The U.S. should indicate its readiness to address Moscow's security issues, in contrast to last February, but warn Russia against making excessive demands, such as occupying Ukraine. All issues should be on the table.

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