



The Ukrainian Endgame: An Imperfect Peace is Better Than Endless War

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The Russo-Ukraine war is destructive and dangerous. Much of Washington believes that a win by Kyiv would serve America's interests. However, pursuit of victory would be far more costly than Ukraine's advocates acknowledge. The US and leading European states should seek a modus vivendi with Russia that would secure Ukraine's independence and yield a stable if imperfect regional peace.

Of course, only the Ukrainian government can decide what it is willing to agree to. However, the allies should make clear that they will not provide Kyiv with a blank check. It cannot expect support for an endless campaign in search of victory.

No doubt, the Baltic countries, NATO's most aggressive but among its weakest members, remain ready to fight Russia to the last Ukrainian *and* American. However, US policy should focus on protecting this nation. The world is filled with good people stuck in bad neighborhoods – not just in Europe, but consider Taiwan, Nepal, Mongolia, and Mexico, which lost half its territory to an avaricious young American republic. (Canadians had better success in beating off several US attempts at conquest.) Geographic bad luck doesn't warrant Washington going to war on another nation's behalf.

The initial shock of Russia's unjustified aggression triggered a wave of popular support for Ukraine in the US and Europe. Kyiv's unexpected success made supporting Ukraine easy, spurring a dramatic expansion in what weapons Washington and European governments were prepared to supply. In the same way Ukraine's and its armorers' aims also grew. Initially the objective was to sustain the Ukrainian state. Soon there was talk of weakening Russia, preventing Moscow from launching a similar misadventure in the future, defeating Russia, pushing Moscow's forces out of areas seized in 2014, and even ousting Vladimir Putin.

All worthy objectives, perhaps, but likely achievable only at great cost and risk. Ominously, the interventionist Greek Chorus in Washington also insisted that the US abandon independent decision-making and give Kyiv whatever the Zelensky government requested. For instance, retired Gen. Philip Breedlove argued: "We in the West have to decide that Ukraine and its future is to be determined by Ukrainians and we need to keep our nose out of it. We need to support their decision and help them move forward." Just shut up and pass the ammunition – along with tanks, long-range rockets, airplanes, and even nuclear weapons, if Poland's former defense and foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski has his way.

However, America's and Europe's interests are not the same as Kyiv's. All other things being equal, it would be great to insulate Ukraine from its position next to its large, authoritarian, and threatening neighbor. But that objective is not worth going to war with a nuclear-armed power, which is why members of the transatlantic alliance spent 14 years ostentatiously misleading successive Ukrainian governments, seeming to promise membership while refusing to consider membership. No NATO member was prepared to fight for Ukraine.

Since Kyiv is already at war, it *would benefit from* the conflict's expansion to NATO and, most importantly, the US. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's reaction might be similar to that of Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill after Pearl Harbor: the latter said he "slept the sleep of the saved." This is not to blame Zelensky if he goes to bed every night hoping for a similar triggering event. American revolutionaries probably felt much the same when the French monarchy was debating whether to support their fight against the British.

However, the administration should put America's interests first and hold back, despite the foreign policy establishment's inflamed passions for Ukraine. For instance, Breedlove also denounced "a growing group of appeasers in Washington, D.C.," who were pushing for a diplomatic outcome. In fact, US policymakers have several compelling reasons for attempting to end the conflict.

- Americans – at least anyone lacking access to classified information – have little idea how the war is really going. Although much has been made about Russian casualties, until recently Kyiv failed to release Ukrainian numbers. Moscow's early military efforts were embarrassing failures, but that didn't mean Ukrainian losses in men and materiel were light. In the US official and informal censorship of news and social media threatens to cancel anyone pro-Russian, even if not a propagandist, biasing reporting. This limits access to accurate information, even for policymakers who strongly support Ukraine.
- The conflict's future course is highly uncertain. Moscow evidently learned from its mistakes, adjusting strategy and tactics. Relying on its overwhelming advantage in artillery, Russian forces have been making progress in Ukraine's east, pulverizing Ukrainian positions and causing significant casualties. However, there remains great disagreement over what this success portends for the future. Some observers believe that the Russian offensive will soon grind to a halt, that Moscow's forces are "exhausted," in the view of retired Gen. Ben Hodges. Then Kyiv will stage a counter-offensive after Western arms arrive. Others contend that Moscow's advance will break the Ukrainian military, leaving the latter without an experienced cadre, which

has resisted so firmly. Along the way many Western weapons will be destroyed in transit and there will be insufficient time to train the Ukrainian military for their use. In any case, recent calls to push Russian forces from Crimea look increasingly unrealistic.

- Moscow has significant ability to escalate and expand the war. The Putin government could stop fighting with its peacetime military and initiate general mobilization. More seriously, Russia could use chemical or nuclear weapons against Kyiv's forces. Doing so would devastate Ukraine and push the world to a nuclear precipice. Moscow is more likely to take this course if the allies continue to expand and proclaim their intervention against Russia. If the latter faced NATO, backed by US nuclear weapons, using chemical or nuclear weapons would risk much. However, if deployed against Ukraine alone the Biden administration, the ultimate "decider" in a case like this, would have no good options. Despite deranged demands that it initiate war and regime change, Washington would be unlikely to directly intervene if neither it nor an ally was targeted. For instance, adopting Sen. Mitt Romney's crackpot suggestion that "NATO could engage in Ukraine, potentially obliterating Russia's struggling military" almost certainly would trigger a nuclear response from Moscow, with full-scale war in the offing.
- Russia cannot afford to lose and has the weapons to avoid doing so. Putin's conduct so far suggests that he is willing to temper his objectives when they prove impractical. For instance, he retreated from Kyiv and postponed if not abandoned efforts to oust the Zelensky government. However, the specter of a successful Ukrainian campaign to retake Crimea and Donbass likely would generate a far more brutal reaction. Such a defeat would humiliate the Russian dictator; dramatically worsen Moscow's strategic position; weaken Russia's influence over its "Near Abroad," most notably Central Asia; and yield Kyiv a position of strength, which might cause NATO to invite Ukraine to join the alliance. If the Zelensky government's success was propelled by ever increasing US military aid, Moscow would feel even greater pressure and have even stronger justification in its view to strike.
- Both sides appear to believe that time is on their side. In Kyiv's view, Russia will wear down its forces and sacrifice its most capable troops, creating an opportunity for a counterattack utilizing additional allied weapons. Moscow's tired legions will suffer from new long-range fire and be driven home. In Russia's view the current artillery-led offensive will wreck much of Ukraine's trained troops, forcing surrender or withdrawal and opening the way to conquering the rest of the Donbass. Victory there might allow a renewed thrust on Kyiv, perhaps in conjunction with Belarus. With the actual battlefield result currently uncertain, both sides would gain from negotiation. If Ukraine and the allies guess wrong and refuse to talk, they will suffer as the war becomes more destructive and the peace ends up less tolerable.
- Economic factors favor Russia. The war has driven millions of Ukrainians from their homes and is expected to cut the country's GDP almost in half. Western aid can only ameliorate the enormous harm and is likely to fall as the US and European countries face public pressure to focus on domestic problems. Economic recovery will be difficult for Ukraine even in areas free of combat since Moscow could launch missile or air attacks at any time and open a new front through Belarus. Although Russia has been hurt by sanctions, so far the impact has been manageable. Technology sanctions

have real bite but will take time to measurably weaken the Russian army, the most important target. And the longer the conflict goes, the more likely Moscow find willing partners in the Global South to aid sanctions evasion.

- The US-European partnership against Russia faces increasing stress. The Washington War Party remains united and enthusiastic, viewing Moscow's aggression as an opportunity to destroy Russia as a major factor in international politics. However, Moscow does not operate in a vacuum. Allied sanctions come atop a global economy roiled by COVID-19 and related problems. Dissent from Ukraine 24/7 is increasing in Europe in Hungary, Germany, Italy, France, Denmark, and elsewhere. Criticism of current policy is growing within the Republican Party while the Biden administration might find it harder to sustain political support as inflation rages and the election approaches. Most of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, tired of Washington's sanctimonious and destructive interventions and eager to take advantage of discounted Russian oil, is resisting Washington's latest sanctions campaign.

For good reason, then, Americans worry about deepening US involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war. While it is unsurprising that Kyiv and its Washington factotums advocate going all in, even risking escalation of the conflict, doing so is not in this nation's interests. Unfortunately, President Joe Biden's recent article in the New York Time did little to ease public concerns. Especially his promise not to "pressure the Ukrainian government – in private or public – to make any territorial concessions."

The US and Europe should focus on ending, not winning, the war. The longer the conflict goes, the more it will devastate Ukraine and undermine the Ukrainian state. The economic harm to the allies and beyond also will grow, weakening support for Kyiv. An American attempt to carry Ukraine to victory is more likely to encourage Putin to double down, perhaps even using nuclear weapons, than meekly yield. Washington's goal should not be to save the Russian dictator from personal humiliation, which retired diplomat Dan Fried deemed "risible," but to forestall Putin from engaging in dangerous escalation to prevent personal humiliation.

Life is unfair, President Jimmy Carter once observed. That is especially true when it comes to international affairs. In a perfect world Ukraine would recover its territory, including that seized in 2014, collect reparations from Moscow, and frame Putin's written apology for invading. However, none of these should be Washington's objective. The US should promote a stable, peaceful settlement, one that keeps the Pandora's Box of nuclear war closed.

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