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The American Conservative

Appeasement For A Good Cause

Putin is not Hitler and peace in Europe is worth making a deal with Russia.

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Russia appears to be on the brink of war with Ukraine. It would be a crime for Moscow to attack its neighbor, but moral considerations do not rank high with Russian President Vladimir Putin. However, he is a pragmatist, not an ideologue, which likely makes him open to a deal.

Bargains, accommodations, and compromises, though sometimes tough, unpleasant, and distasteful, are the lifeblood of diplomacy. The U.S. should seek one with Moscow.

Of late, Putin has dominated international headlines, convulsed Washington, Kyiv, and Brussels, and challenged America's attempt to extend its sphere of influence up to Russia's border. The Putin government is threatening military action against Ukraine unless the U.S. and NATO make several concessions, most notably halting the expansion of the transatlantic alliance and rolling back force deployments.

Although the two sides are still talking, the U.S. and its allies have declared Putin's clearest red line, Ukraine's exclusion from NATO, to be nonnegotiable. Said Secretary of State Antony Blinken: "We make clear that there are core principles that we are committed to uphold and defend—including Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and the right of states to choose their own security arrangements and alliances." Ominously, Putin dismissed the administration's position: "The principal Russian concerns turned out to be ignored." Absent diplomatic concessions, he is likely to take military action of some sort to justify his brinkmanship. The potential consequences range between awful and disastrous, including for Russia.

Blinken claimed to act on principle, but his comment was sanctimonious cant. No country has a right to join NATO. Rather, Article 10 provides: "The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty." Existing members have no obligation to add any state; Ukraine's inclusion would degrade, not enhance, regional security; and there is

virtually no support within the alliance for Kyiv to join in the foreseeable future. Blinken's defense of a theoretical and nonexistent principle could yield a European war. This is precisely the moment for appeasement.

Until the 1938 Munich conference appeasement, addressing the grievances and demands of others was a respected diplomatic tool. Afterward, however, the idea brought to mind British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain waving his letter from "Herr Hitler." In fact, a better historical test of appeasement would be World War I.

On June 28, 1914, a Serbian terrorist, armed by his government's head of military intelligence, murdered the heir to the Hapsburg monarchy, which ruled over the ramshackle Austro-Hungarian Empire. Vienna was determined to punish Belgrade. Imagine how Americans would react if another nation dispatched armed agents to murder the vice president and destabilize the country.

Alas, no one was inclined to compromise, expecting the other side to back down. Momentum for war accelerated. "Things are out of control and the stone has started to roll," observed German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg in late July. Days later troops began marching across Europe and ultimately well beyond.

Looking back, perhaps the most striking feature of what was originally called the Great War was its utter lack of purpose. If only the statesmen of the time, by-and-large myopic rather than malevolent, had been able to peer into the future. They almost certainly would have made a deal. And there were many compromises that could have prevented what became the prelude to World War II.

Tragically, Hitler could not be appeased, but no one realized that before Munich's aftermath. Western statesmen were used to dealing with authoritarians like Benito Mussolini, Francisco Franco, and Jozef Pilsudski, for instance. Britain and France sought an alliance with the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin before he made his pact with Hitler—which the former kept even as invading German troops moved eastward. Hitler turned out to be *sui generis*.

Vladimir Putin is no friend of liberty, but he also is no Hitler reincarnate. When Putin took over as president two decades ago he showed no animus toward the U.S. After 9/11 he offered Russia's support for American anti-terrorism efforts. Moscow also provided logistical support for U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

His comment on the tragedy of the USSR's collapse presaged no Hitlerian campaign of aggression, but instead reflected the reality felt by many if not most Russians, whose living standards and national pride suffered from their country's dissolution. Most important, until the war with Georgia in 2008 Washington had little complaint with Russian behavior, beyond its own borders, at least. Since then, Putin's predation has been modest—annexation of Crimea, which was historically part of Russia and backed by residents, and influence over but not possession of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Donbass. This is a sorry list of acquisitions for any wannabe conqueror. Putin is a dangerous but controlled predator, someone with whom the U.S. can deal.

Nevertheless, the idea of making an agreement with Moscow sets off wailing and gnashing of teeth in Washington. For instance, Eric S. Edelman and David J. Kramer,

at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and George W. Bush Institute, respectively, claimed:

Putin invokes NATO enlargement as a convenient excuse when his real fear is the emergence of successful, democratic, Western-oriented countries along Russia's borders—especially Ukraine... Above all, it is a mistake to assume Putin would be assuaged by assurances that NATO membership for Ukraine (and Georgia) is off the table. On the contrary, concessions would likely lead him to up the ante, as he would view such pledges as a sign of weakness and could raise the stakes to include no European Union membership either. After all, it was closer ties to the EU, not NATO, that led to Putin's intervention into Ukraine in 2013 and 2014.

The claim that Putin fears a democratic Ukraine is common but never backed by evidence. The Russian leader has emphasized historical Ukrainian-Russian ties and evinced no fear of Kyiv's democratic experiment. Nor is Ukrainian democracy looking more formidable these days, as the president threatens his predecessor with a dubious treason prosecution, than in years past.

Moreover, Putin's intervention *followed high profile allied support for a street putsch* against the elected, moderately pro-Russian president of Ukraine. More important than the E.U. trade treaty set to be signed was the status of Sevastopol, Moscow's Black Sea naval base from time eternal, located in Crimea.

Fulfillment of the allied promise of 2008 for NATO membership also looked much more likely after the change in government, with allied officials wandering Kyiv discussing who they hoped to see in power. The prospect of NATO expansion long angered Putin. In 2007 he told the Munich Security forum that the U.S. had "overstepped its national borders in every way," whose "almost uncontained hyper use of force" was "plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts."

Putin noted that "NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders, and we...do not react to these actions at all." He went on:

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr. Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: "The fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee." Where are these guarantees?

Early the following year, a U.S. cable (released by Wikileaks) detailed Moscow's continuing concerns:

Ukraine and Georgia's NATO aspirations not only touch a raw nerve in Russia, they engender serious concerns about the consequences for stability in the region. Not only does Russia perceive encirclement, and efforts to undermine Russia's influence in the

region, but it also fears unpredictable and uncontrolled consequences which would seriously affect Russian security interests.

State went on to report, quite presciently, it turns out:

Dmitriy Trenin, Deputy Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, expressed concern that Ukraine was, in the long-term, the most potentially destabilizing factor in U.S.-Russian relations, given the level of emotion and neuralgia triggered by its quest for NATO membership. The letter requesting MAP consideration had come as a “bad surprise” to Russian officials, who calculated that Ukraine’s NATO aspirations were safely on the backburner.

Since then, Moscow has seen no reason to trust the allies, who offer continuing reassurances regarding NATO membership to Kyiv. Washington’s informal response? Don’t worry, we *are lying*—to Ukraine rather than Russia, of course! This cannot inspire confidence in Moscow.

Putin still might not be appeasable, but the only way to know is to try. The lack of a deal risks an armed attack on Ukraine, broader frozen conflict with Moscow, disruptive sanctions on Russia, U.S. military buildup in Europe, and increased cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. Surely a little appeasement would be worth the effort.

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