



Neutrality for Ukraine? Armed, Yes; Guaranteed, No

by Doug Bandow

Posted on April 06, 2022

Russia's attack on Ukraine continues. The latter's citizens demonstrate that motivation matters: people defending their country are naturally more determined than conscripts ordered to kill their neighbors. US and European aid also strengthened Kyiv's defense.

Yet Moscow's manpower and materiel advantages remain and will be difficult to reverse. Absent a peace agreement, Russia likely can sustain its conquests in the east while disrupting Ukrainian life – economic, political, and social – elsewhere. And the longer the fighting persists, the greater the damage to Ukraine. Russian soldiers are dying but the Russian homeland remains unmolested. In Ukraine civilians are dying alongside military personnel, as cities are bombarded and territory is occupied.

Thus, much depends on the Turkish-sponsored peace negotiations. It is difficult to judge Moscow's seriousness. Even Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov evidently has little authority to negotiate. All decisions appear to be made by President Vladimir Putin. Ukrainians fear that the Russian military will use the negotiations for combat advantage.

Nevertheless, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky indicated his willingness to accept neutral status for Kyiv and drop its efforts to enter NATO. That should create a basis for a negotiated settlement.

However, the devil is in the details. First, Ukraine is highly unlikely to agree to demilitarization, especially now. It would have been foolish for Kyiv to have trusted Moscow before (Ukrainians also discovered the nugatory value of allied promises of NATO membership). Now it is impossible to imagine Kyiv agreeing to anything but well-armed neutrality. However, that remains the Zelensky government's and Ukrainian people's decision to make.

Second, Zelensky indicated that he wants security guarantees. And not just rhetorical promises like in [the 1994 Budapest Memorandum](#), which accompanied Ukraine's relinquishment of Soviet-era nuclear weapons. The US, United Kingdom, and Russia all offered assurances that

were to be enforced by going to the United Nations Security Council, which meant they would not be enforced at all.

Proposals include having the forgoing three powers, the five permanent Security Council members, or a disparate collection of states including Canada, France, Germany, Israel, Poland, and Turkey guarantee the new arrangement. What to do if Ukraine then was attacked, presumably by Moscow? Some obligation to act. If not to formally come to Kyiv's defense, then to impose a no-fly zone and/or provide weapons and other materiel, personnel, and financial aid.

This is "what we call Ukrainian NATO," declared Ukrainian negotiator David Arakhamia: "So we get neutrality but our idea is to get fortified neutrality status." Ironically, the latter is a greater formal commitment than NATO's Article 5, which has achieved almost totemic, even "sacred" status, in President Joe Biden's telling.

Although more is expected in practice, since NATO is a military alliance, the relevant treaty provision only mandates consultation: "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

In short, Zelensky is seeking NATO membership by other means. He hopes that the US – only Washington really matters, despite the upsurge in European professions of commitment to defense – will grant as part of a peace settlement the military commitment that it wouldn't provide before. It's a creative move, to be sure, and an understandable ask by Kyiv, but guaranteeing a peace settlement is not America's responsibility.

First, while demilitarization is a decision solely for the Zelensky government, security guarantees are up to those nations being asked to defend Ukraine. That is, Washington, not Kyiv, decides on security guarantees for Ukraine. And doing so is no more in the US interest today than it was yesterday. Kyiv deserves support against Russian aggression, but American officials must put the interests of the American people first. And that means not going to war absent a compelling, vital interest, which is not present in Ukraine. Especially against a nuclear power with much more at stake in any conflict.

Second, if it was not in the interest of NATO members to defend Ukraine before the Russian invasion on February 24, it is not in their interest to do so in the future. Even more so, if it isn't in their interest to defend Ukraine today, while it is under attack, it isn't in their interest to do so in the future. Despite Moscow's thankfully ineffective, even incompetent attack on Ukraine, direct allied involvement in combat would allow the regime to present the conflict as defense of Russia, with the threat of resorting to nuclear weapons to equalize the odds and secure interests that would remain far more important to Russia and the West.

Finally, allied promises made ancillary to a Ukrainian-Russian peace settlement would be no more believable than the last 14 years of NATO membership assurances. The latest anniversary of the infamous 2008 Bucharest summit, at which Kyiv was promised eventual membership, has passed, and Ukraine is no closer to joining. Once the latest crisis passes, and some sort of peace is made, Europe, especially, and Washington will feel less pressure to act. The guarantees that Zelensky apparently is seeking, though more detailed in nature, would remain but paper promises, just like the Budapest Memorandum.

Peace is a necessity for Ukraine and Russia. The Ukrainian people have been far more successful militarily than expected, thwarting Moscow's apparent plan to overrun their nation, oust the Zelensky government, and turn Ukraine into a puppet state. However, Kyiv has not been able to prevent Russian military advances, causing widespread death and destruction and driving millions of people from their homes. While Western aid has substantially bolstered Ukraine's defense, it is not likely to enable the Ukrainian military to drive Russian units from Ukraine. That will almost certainly require a peace settlement.

Such an agreement will be difficult to reach, made harder by Russian brutality. Washington can and should promote a diplomatic solution, but not at the cost to its own security. Whatever the war's ultimate outcome, it will not be Americans' responsibility to police.

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