

Restraint, an Intolerable Alternative to the Excitement of War?

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Last month, Elon Musk, a high-profile entrepreneur, offered, over Twitter of course, his own peace plan for the Russia-Ukraine War. His suggestions included UN-monitored elections in the annexed regions of Ukraine in which people could decide to join either Ukraine or Russia. He also suggested that Ukraine “remain neutral.” Simply put, this means that Ukraine must not join NATO. The backlash on online and offline media was swift and biting, and sometimes even profane.

Danielle Smith, Conservative premier of the province of Alberta in Canada, mused in April on a talk show, that given Ukraine’s proximity to Russia, why are we “surprised if Russia is upset because Ukraine has nuclear weapons and is aligned with the United States?” and therefore proposed that “the only answer for Ukraine is neutrality”. She faced severe condemnation for the statements, leading her to recently apologize for her “ill-informed comments”.

During the summer, US Democratic Congressperson Pramila Jayapal, together 30 progressive members of the Democratic party, wrote a letter to Biden urging him to engage in “direct talks with Russia” in order to negotiate an end to the war in Ukraine. When that letter became public last week, she hastily retracted it and is now facing anger from her own party.

Granted, one is an eccentric businessperson and the others are politicians. But upon calmer and wider reflection, their sentiments may not be totally bizarre, unacceptable or immoral. Firstly, Ukraine itself offered in March to accept neutral country status, dependent on certain security assurances from the West. And secondly, over the course of the past few months, several seasoned experts in foreign affairs have suggested similar compromises to end the war and calm relations with Russia.

Classifying the styles of foreign policy

The foreign policy of many nations can be plotted somewhere along a continuum from that ranges from isolationism at one extreme to restraint and on to primacy (hegemony) at the other extreme. Isolationism simplistically involves focusing exclusively on issues within one’s own country. Restraint entails being engaged with the outside world but limiting one’s geographic sphere of involvement and active engagement. Restrainers are seen as being more pragmatic and ready to consider compromises. Primacy means intervening in the situation of other countries, wherever they may be, and sometimes even preemptively. Primacists are seen as being idealists, viewing the world in black and white, and ready to fight for a cause till absolute victory. Today a

significant number of foreign policy experts, cognizant of recent historical trends and aware of the importance of peace to enable cooperation on critical global issues, seem to be veering towards restraint.

Even before the Russia-Ukraine War began, with Russian troops massing at the border, Stephen Van Evera, professor of Political Science at MIT, published a detailed paper titled *To Prevent War and Secure Ukraine, Make Ukraine Neutral*. In it he highlighted a key message: “Ukraine is a top priority for Russia, but it is not for the US “.

In May, senior statesman and master strategist Henry Kissinger advised Ukraine to give up some of its territory in order to broker a peace with Russia. This, from a man who had fled Nazi Germany as a Jewish refugee, became US secretary of state under President Richard Nixon, was known as a practitioner of Realpolitik, and played the key role in opening channels of communications between the US and both Russia and China.

Emma Ashford, Senior Fellow in the Reimagining US Grand Strategy Program at the Stimson Center, urges the West to adopt a policy of restraint in the Russia-Ukraine War. That means supporting Ukraine while at the same time avoiding escalation, and being open to engaging in conversations about conditions for resolving the conflict. How could or should this war end? What might an end to the war look like? Peering into the future, she hopes that “we will reach a point where both sides have, to some extent rethought their war aims and lowered those aims enough that there might be a settlement there”.

Stephen Wertheim, a senior fellow at the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (), also suggests restraint. He points out that Biden’s positioning of the Russia-Ukraine War as a combat between the forces of autocracy and democracy has two serious weaknesses. The first is that it puts on display the hypocrisy of the US and the West in general, who have no qualms about being on friendly terms with Saudi Arabia, an intensely autocratic nation with serious human rights issues, including the gruesome murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The second is that the democracy vs. autocracy dichotomy is not clearly seen as good vs bad in many parts of the world, which helps to explain why the current US-led coalition against Russia does not include half the world. In addition, many people of color see it as a ‘white people’s war’. Countries that have decided to remain neutral include China, India, Indonesia, much of Latin America and Africa, and even Turkey

Interestingly, the West’s coalition does not include Israel, which has remained neutral because it has good relations with Russia and particularly with Putin. Israel has side-stepped Ukraine’s request for air defense systems and has limited its involvement to humanitarian aid.

A just war is always in the mind of the believer

Wars can rarely be deemed fair. Outcomes do not always favor “the good guys” and often, it can be difficult to determine who are the good guys. Usually both sides feel they are fighting a just war. But justice is seldom served. The aggressors are not always roundly defeated in the end. That only happens in Hollywood movies. Nobody is saying that Putin was right to invade Ukraine; in fact, even those who have accused the West of provoking the war have unanimously

condemned Russia's invasion. Sovereignty is something all nations hold dear. The differences lie now in their appreciation of how to best resolve the issue.

Zelensky sounds heroic when says he'll fight to the last Ukrainian. But that cannot be entirely his decision when he is demanding other nations' tax dollars and their unlimited commitment to the cause. In the coming year, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that Ukraine will need external financing to the tune of \$3-5 billion a month.

The money and effort could instead be spent on each country's urgent internal issues, notably around the question of healthcare in countries such as Canada, the UK and the US. Alternatively, the money and attention could be spent on critical global issues, such as combating the rising prices of food and fuel, the looming recession, future pandemics, and of course climate change.

This war has already created a food crisis throughout the world. While the privileged among us will have to merely deal with rising food prices, others will face starvation. Money could be spent helping to feed people in need. In the midst of already rising fuel prices, OPEC Plus – which includes Saudi Arabia and Russia – decided to reduce their oil production. Europe in particular faces a cold winter. Money could be spent on developing alternative sources of energy, with the aim of liberating these nations from the grip of “petro-dictators.” The World Bank warns of a global recession in 2023, along with “a string of financial crises in emerging markets and developing economies” Money could be spent on supportive measures for threatened economies. Finally, with the world distracted and divided by this war, it is difficult to focus and collaborate on future existential fights against new pandemics and climate change, issues that will need all our resources.

Negotiation is always required to end a war. However, it becomes more difficult when one side believes it occupies the moral high ground and when the other side can be simplistically characterized as ‘evil’. When the US and its allies invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, did anyone place sanctions on the invaders? Whoever starts a war always deems the war just, believing that it is being conducted for valid reasons. The US made such arguments when it invaded Iraq and Afghanistan. Russia is now trying to do the same thing with Ukraine.

The major difference is that the US crossed an ocean and a continent to start a war, while Russia is fighting a neighbor. The US sees its sphere of influence as far-reaching and unlimited, while Russia is attempting to gain a bit of control over its own neighborhood. NATO expansion up to Russia's doorstep is a key factor in Putin's decision to go to war in Ukraine. As Ted Galen Carpenter, senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, explains; “Putin bears primary responsibility for this latest development, but NATO's arrogant, tone-deaf policy toward Russia over the past quarter-century deserves a large share as well.”

Knowledge of history can help by putting events into perspective. Russia is neither the first nor the only country that has played the role of invader. In 1961, the US invaded Cuba in an attempt to overthrow the communist government of Fidel Castro. The attempt failed after three days but the US continues its embargo and imposes draconian sanctions against the small island country to this day. More recently, the US invaded Iraq on the spurious pretext of possessing weapons of mass destruction. That was shortly after invading Afghanistan in a war against terrorism. 2,456

US military personnel were killed, and some 176,000 to 360,000 Afghans are estimated to have died over the first 13 years of the 20-year presence of NATO troops.

Before the start of the Russia-Ukraine War, the renowned Canadian historian, and currently a professor at Oxford University, Margaret McMillan said this: “History can help us to understand others ... The more you know about them, the more success you’re likely to have in avoiding things that they may feel angry about or dealing with, the more finding ways of negotiating ... I think we can see Putin as a typical authoritarian leader, but his particular goals and his particular animosities and his particular wishes for Russia are shaped by Russian history and by his own experience of Russian history.”

In the interest of arriving at a quick resolution, minimizing human suffering and extensive damage to Ukrainian infrastructure, to say nothing of the hopes of a peaceful future for our children, we cannot afford to be continuously swayed by the simplistic, subjective, and emotional rhetoric of conventional media. Even less so by social media. We cannot afford to be drawn into unthinking, jingoistic fervor. We’re happy to get teary-eyed when we hear John Lennon sing “Give Peace a Chance”, but we refuse to engage with the practical implications of his lyrics. We idealistically and lazily tend to see countries and people – especially those in conflict – in binary terms: as good or bad, right or wrong. But reality is more nuanced, more complicated, and more difficult to deal with.

We need to educate ourselves on history. We cannot see incidents as isolated, but as part of an ongoing story. And we need to develop a more mature, pragmatic and broader perspective about possible solutions. This would serve us well, not only in this war with Russia, but in a long list of possible future conflicts. There are plenty to choose from, including ones that involve Haiti, Ethiopia, Iran, Afghanistan, the Koreas, and most threateningly, China.

The disapproving reaction to the comments of Danielle Smith in Canada and to Elon Musk’s and Pramila Jayapal’s in the US, does not reflect well on either nation. Both are supposed to be liberal democracies, where freedom of speech is respected and the voicing of different perspectives is encouraged. Suppressing differing perspectives limits our society’s capacity for problem-solving. Suppressing perspectives that point towards restraint and encourage negotiation will inevitably result in a protracted war in Ukraine, increasing tensions with Russia, likely future conflicts with China, and a poorer future for us all. As a civilization, we deserve better.