



The Finland Option May Still Save Ukraine

Ted Galen Carpenter

March 01, 2022

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has underscored the warnings that the Kremlin has made for years that any attempt to give Kyiv membership in NATO or use Ukraine as a military asset would cross a dangerous red line. In December 2021, Moscow issued demands on the United States and NATO for security guarantees to preclude the possibility of Ukraine becoming a NATO pawn and to reduce NATO's overall military presence in Eastern Europe. It is now clear that Vladimir Putin and other Russian leaders were deadly serious about their red lines. Using Ukraine as an arena for the projection of U.S. and NATO military power was never going to be acceptable to Moscow, since such a move automatically threatened Russia's core security interests.

Numerous US foreign policy experts warned for more than 2 decades about the mounting dangers associated with NATO's decision to expand eastward toward Russia. Their warnings went unheeded, and Ukrainians are now paying the price in treasure and blood. Meanwhile, stunned NATO leaders stand on the sidelines wringing their hands and posturing about "allied unity" in imposing (probably ineffectual) economic sanctions against Russia.

As Russian military columns advance deeper into Ukraine on multiple fronts, Putin has offered negotiations that could bring the war to an early end. Moscow has made 2 key demands of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. First, Kyiv must officially renounce any ambitions for NATO membership, as well as engage in a process of comprehensive "demilitarization." The latter aspect would include a guarantee that NATO military forces will never be permitted to operate on Ukraine's territory. Second, there must be a process of "de-Nazification" to eliminate all neo-Nazi and neo-fascist elements from Ukraine's government and other institutions. The latter demand may ultimately prove to be the more difficult impediment to an agreement ending the war.

Putin seems to be offering Kyiv the "Finland option" as an alternative to a Russian conquest. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union established outright puppet regimes throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The Kremlin's policy regarding Finland was noticeably different, however. Even under Joseph Stalin's brutal reign, Moscow was willing to let Helsinki run the country's domestic affairs with minimal interference. Finland remained a vibrant, mostly capitalist democracy, not a communist Soviet clone. With respect to foreign affairs, however, the limitations on the country's options were emphatic and uncompromising. Finland had to toe the line on every aspect of the Kremlin's policies. Not only did Helsinki have to renounce even the slightest flirtation with the Western powers regarding military and security issues, but the

government even had to vote in lockstep with Moscow at the United Nations and other international bodies.

Those restraints may have been annoying – and even somewhat humiliating – to Finnish leaders, but the country's fate was far better than Moscow's satellites elsewhere in Eastern Europe experienced. During the 2014 crisis over Crimea, Henry Kissinger wrote in the *Washington Post* that Ukraine should pursue "a posture comparable to that of Finland." Zbigniew Brzezinski asserted in the *Financial Times* that "the Finnish model is ideal for Ukraine." Current Ukrainian officials need to ask themselves if a similar status of constrained independence might be the best option available to their country.

If the United States had not pushed blatantly to make Kyiv a Western military asset, an even better option likely would have been on the table. Moscow might have been willing to accept to approve the "Austrian model." Austria stands out as the one exception during the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the Western powers were able to come to an agreement about the political status of a country in Central or Eastern Europe. In 1955, a treaty guaranteed Austria's strict neutrality. One consequence was that the country enjoyed even greater independence regarding its domestic affairs than did Finland. The biggest difference, though, was in foreign affairs; Vienna did not have to follow Moscow's policy lead with no deviation. Instead, it maintained a rigorous neutrality, but one with a noticeable allegiance to Western political and moral values.

Today's Ukraine might have enjoyed that same status, if had not succumbed to the West's siren song of someday becoming a full NATO partner. In the light of recent developments, though, the Kremlin likely will regard the Austria model as insufficient. The Finland version is about the best that Kyiv can hope for now.

If Zelensky and other Ukrainian leaders are wise, they will accept the basic features of Moscow's first demand. (They also likely will have to accept a significant territorial amputation – the "independence" of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions.) Formal membership in NATO was always unlikely, given the firm opposition of both France and Germany. Even when George W. Bush pushed hard for NATO to give Ukraine and Georgia Membership Action Plans (a key step toward imminent membership) in 2008, Paris and Berlin balked. Not only were they concerned about the endemic corruption in both countries, they worried that the move would be a dangerous provocation to Russia. French and German opposition to including Ukraine in NATO has not diminished with the passage of time.

By renouncing ambitions for NATO membership, Kyiv would be relinquishing a status that probably was not attainable to begin with. Meeting Moscow's related demand – for demilitarization – should not be all that taxing either. It may have benefited certain elements in the United States (especially weapons manufacturers and other members of the notorious Military-Industrial Complex) for Ukraine to become a NATO military pawn, but it never served the legitimate interests of Ukraine's government or people. Like it or not, Ukraine is at the mercy of its larger, much more powerful, Russian neighbor. It would require enormous levels of defense spending – and probably the acquisition of nuclear weapons, an option that is simply not available – to close the gap in capabilities. It is a futile quest, and Kyiv should accept its status as a largely disarmed country.

Putin's other demand – that Ukraine agree to "de-Nazification" – is both the least reasonable and the least necessary. Yes, neo-Nazi and neo-fascist factions do exist in Ukraine – contrary to the country's Western apologists. However, their presence and influence in the government is decidedly limited, despite the Kremlin's propagandistic assertions. Putin's willingness to greatly dilute that demand is a key test of Russia's seriousness about reaching a reasonable agreement to end the war.

Washington led Zelensky down the primrose path with a cornucopia of US weapons and security funding, the prestige of Ukraine's participation in joint military exercises with US and NATO forces, and the illusory prospect of NATO membership. Ukraine is now paying a bloody price for succumbing to such blandishments. Ukrainian leaders need to look to their own country's best interests and strike the most favorable deal they can with Russia. The West is not coming to rescue Ukraine, and Ukrainians must face that bitter, disillusioning reality. The Finland option may be their only way out of a horrible situation.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of 12 books and more than 950 articles on international affairs. His latest book is NATO: The Dangerous Dinosaur (2019).