

Ukraine: we need peace now

Soon it could be too late

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Archangel Saint Michael: the patron saint of Kiev, his statue in Independence Square watches over the city

As we write this article, Russia's war against Ukraine is going into the fourth week with all its ferocity and there is no end to hostilities in sight. Daily, we see heartbreaking pictures of horrific human sufferings, the killing of civilians caught in the fighting, the deterioration of basic living conditions and the enormous destruction caused to human habitat and infrastructure. The Ukrainians pay with their blood for this war. But this war has all the makings of becoming a far more dangerous conflict among Russia, the United States and increasingly also China, the three most powerful nuclear powers. In this case, this war could threaten all humankind. Not only for Ukrainians but for us all we need peace now.

The Ukraine war may turn into a battle among nuclear powers for global supremacy

Geographically, the vast plains of Ukraine have always been of prime strategic interest: whomever controls Ukraine, controls the central part between the European and Asian continents. Because of its strategic value, this war carries the risk of turning into a battleground of nuclear powers over who will maintain the upper hand in their competition for regional and global dominance. The United States may see in Ukraine an opportunity to defeat and humiliate Russia, a relatively weak but irritating competition, while creating there a military bridgehead to control access into Asia and keep Europe under its wings. After the loss of Afghanistan, this may have become a top priority.

China would only reluctantly join in this competition of who controls Ukraine. As a defender of national sovereignty, Russia's high-risk military intervention into Ukraine is surely not to its liking. But China could not afford to have Russia lose. It would almost certainly be next on America's list in its fight to regain global dominance. With the recent military build-up of US forces in the South China Sea and the sale of nuclear submarines to Australia, China must fear to be militarily confronted by the US now also from Ukraine. Its two vital trade routes, one through the South China Sea and the other via the so-called Silk Road would both be at risk of being blocked. China may therefore end up siding with Russia, simply out of self-preservation. The recent telephone exchange between US President Biden and China's President Xi, in which Biden has warned China of harsh consequences if it supported Russia, only underlines the high stakes involved in this conflict.

For Russia, this war has become almost a war of survival that it cannot lose without losing it all. It is even conceivable that, if losing, Russia, a country with its huge landmass and a small declining population, could slide into chaos. It is the political and economic weakness of Russia combined with its nuclear strength that would make any US plans to crush Russia so enormously dangerous, even potentially self-destructive.

The deepening of the Ukraine war comes at the worst time possible; almost all arms-control and confidence-building treaties that were developed towards the end of the Cold War with Russia have either been cancelled or were not extended – mostly by the US who felt that it holds such a decisive military edge over others that it no longer needed such treaties. Between the US and China no such treaties were ever even contemplated. After years of tensions and hostilities, any goodwill or confidence among the three nuclear powers must have been completely eroded.

At the same time, the development of modern weapon systems of mass destruction has made frightening advances. Together, the US, Russia and China have almost 12,000 nuclear warheads, about 90% of all nuclear weapons in the world. According to experts, the detonation of only about 100 such nuclear warheads could be enough to create a nuclear winter that would destroy all life on earth. In recent years, these weapons have undergone substantial ‘modernizations,’ which can only mean that they have increased their destructive power. More alarming, this may have created among some US strategists the illusion that a nuclear war might be winnable. There are now hypersonic missile delivery systems that are over five times faster than sound. For the first time, weapons systems are deployed in space, and cybertechnologies and artificial intelligence are driving much of the arms race. All together, they have made military attack systems so complex and so fast that it is now inconceivable that any courageous human, as it happened during the Cold War, could stop a nuclear war once it has, willingly or mistakenly, been set into motion. Already any information that is misinterpreted by an artificial intelligence system could send us all to hell. There are no longer red telephones to allow Presidents to avoid a nuclear war, in any case, they would be too slow. If a nuclear war is triggered out of desperation or out of superiority, it would later not matter.

Could the Ukraine war with all the emotions, bellicose language and hatred it has created, trigger the spark that sets off a chain of events towards a nuclear Armageddon? This danger is there, and this danger will increase with every day this war continues. Russia could feel so cornered by the massive influx of Western weapons that it launches in retaliation a missile strike across the border into a NATO country. It has already attacked a military base close to the Polish border as well as the airport of Lviv, apparently in response to Western arms shipments and the alleged training of irregular and foreign fighters by US instructors. With the war dragging on, pressures will mount on Western leaders to get ever more involved in the fighting. The Polish President went already so far as to call for a NATO intervention. Sadly, he is not alone in the West in wanting to deploy NATO forces. Should this happen, it would be the third time that a World War is set off in Europe – only this time it would most likely be the last time.

If any reasoning prevails, all sides should aim at ending the war in Ukraine as soon as possible. And if political leaders have any sense left, they should aim not only at a temporary fix but at an all-encompassing peace settlement.

It is not too late to end this war before it gets completely out of hand. At the Special Session of the UN Security Council on 17th March, the UN stated that war had so far cost the lives of 726 civilians including 52 infants. These are 726 deaths too many. Even if this is probably an incomplete count of civilian deaths, it would be a relatively low number for a war between the regular armies of two of Europe’s largest countries, one being trained and equipped by the US and UK and the other being the largest standing army in Europe with a nuclear arsenal behind it. In the US alone, on average twice as many people are killed by gun violence *every month*. And during the military operation to expel ISIS from the city of Mosul in 2017, over 10,000 civilians, according to some reports even over 20,000 civilians, were killed, mostly by airstrikes carried out by a US-led coalition.

However, the intensification of fighting over control of major cities, including Kiev, the arming of militias and citizen defense units, and, according to some reports, the recruitment of foreign mercenaries, could quickly turn this war more savage with the numbers of civilians caught in the middle rapidly rising. According to some reports, total arms shipments from the West by far exceed the military budget of Ukraine. The successive introduction of these Western arms onto the battlefield will not only increase the human costs for Russia; it will also make this war more deadly for Ukrainians. Realizing that time is running out for them, Russian forces may increasingly use its air force, artillery, and rocket launchers indiscriminately. The war could reach a level of butchery and embitterment that it would make it difficult to stop.

The time for a seeking a peace settlement may have come

If global powers would be able to pull back from their own strategic interests and instead focus more on the interests of Ukrainians, serious peace talks may be possible. Indeed, the war seems to have reached a stage where a peace settlement might be the preferable solution for all combatant parties.

For Russia, this war has not gone well at all. It was unable to achieve a quick and decisive victory, and even more importantly, with the only exception being the areas held by pro-Russian separatist, the Russian army was nowhere welcomed as liberators. It is now clear that Russia has miscalculated, and its army proved far weaker than previously assumed. Serious attempts to conquer Kiev or any other major city could end in a shocking laughter of civilians. It would also come at a huge human cost for the attacking Russian army. The return of thousands of killed Russian soldiers in coffins could quickly erode any support this invasion might still have in Russia. Even if Russia may hope it can still take large unpopulated areas and dig in, it must now look for a way out.

For Ukraine, despite all reports of heroism, this war is a human, social and economic disaster at a level Europe has not seen since the Yugoslav wars. Although Ukrainians may have scored a moral victory, it is unlikely that this will also lead to a military victory. Now that Russia had started the invasion, there is too much at stake for it to give up without having achieved something. Large powers rarely give up. NATO needed almost 12 weeks to bomb Serbia into submission, and this despite that fact that Serbia is a much smaller country and NATO was militarily far more superior. Russia may abandon the storming of Kiev or other large cities and instead focus on occupying ever larger chunks of Eastern Ukraine as a bargaining chip. It may even be able to encircle Ukrainian forces in Eastern Ukraine and cut Ukraine links to the Black Sea completely. To avoid this, Ukraine must look for a negotiated way out.

Also, for the West this war has not gone well. Many Western countries, especially those in Europe, suffer under the sanctions against Russia. But more importantly, not only Russia but the West too, is losing international support. The recent General Assembly resolution that condemned Russia's invasion with a large majority may suggest otherwise. However, most small and middle-sized countries may have supported this resolution because they see in it a last chance to uphold the UN Charter and its principle of banning all military actions for political reasons. For most countries the Charter is their defense against being invaded. Before Russia did so in Ukraine, the US, the UK and France — three other permanent members of the Security Council — ignored the UN Charter and conducted illegal wars. And there were the 35 countries that abstained. They include not only China but also India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and virtually all Central Asian countries. Together, they represent almost half the world's population. We know further that the ten ASEAN countries and Indonesia only reluctantly supported the GA resolution. The mistrust over US ambitions to regain a position of single global power runs deep. In fact, in many countries the US is seen as the main culprit in this war.

Furthermore, only Western countries and their usual Asian allies such as Japan, Australia and Singapore have adopted harsh sanctions against Russia. Virtually no Asian, Middle Eastern, African or Latin American country seems willing to support them, irrespective of whether they supported the GA resolution or not. Not even the NATO member Turkey or the West's close ally Israel have adopted sanctions. The feuding parties of the West and Russia together represent only about 10% of the world population and their share is rapidly declining. It seems that the other 90% of the world population wants no part in this war. For most of them, this is a war among the white men, reminiscent to the conflicts during the Cold War. In the Financial Times, David Adler deliberated on whether the Ukraine conflict has led to the reemergence of a non-aligned movement. This time, however, these non-aligned countries are gaining rapidly in economic and technological weight. They can no longer be treated with an air of superiority and arrogance and their calls for peace can no longer be easily ignored.

Is Zelensky the man who could bring peace?

Presently there is no Western politician, of Putin we do not even have to speak, who has made any proposal for how to end this war. The West is caught in a war frenzy and unable to look beyond this. In his old age, President Biden has turned into a war leader who now even threatens China while the UK Prime Minister Johnson has no qualms about stepping over the fresh blood of 81 recently executed men in Saudi Arabia to cozy up to Saudi strongman Crown Prince bin Salman in what he calls a mission to defend democracy against autocratic rulers.

The most disappointing of all is, however, the European Union. Although Ukraine is in Europe and what will happen there will impact all of Europe, ideas of how to end this war and what peace could look like simply do not exist. Instead, the EU's van der Leyden and Borrell focus on funding weapons for one billion euros and Poland's Kaminski even wants to take NATO into battle, while Germany's Scholz buys F-35 fighter planes to be able to nuke Russia. Hungarian Orbán walks on a tightrope over Russia in

an upcoming election, Draghi is only interested in how to make others pay for Italy’s debts while the President of little Lithuania, Nausėda, already fights China over Taiwan. Only Macron appears to have kept his head on his shoulders, but he is preoccupied with his re-election.

Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian comedian turned President, seems to be the only person who could make peace with Russia and end the war. He has shown surprising stamina and leadership during this war and is now the towering figure in an otherwise destructive environment. He has kept peace negotiations going even when there is no ceasefire, he looked to the Israeli Prime Minister and Turkish President (and not to the EU) to help negotiate a peace deal. Also, his proposal to meet Putin directly while the West bans him and his suggestion that this may be in Jerusalem – again not in a European country – would indicate a quite independent political mind that places Ukrainian interests first. After all, Zelensky was elected with a majority of over 73% throughout the country and his support in Russian-speaking areas was even greater than in the rest of Ukraine. According to recent surveys his approval rating jumped up to 90%.

On this background, media reports seem plausible that on 14th March the Ukrainian and Russian delegations had begun discussing a 15-point plan that reportedly contains guarantees on Ukraine’s neutral status, including a pledge that it would not seek NATO membership or host foreign military bases or weaponry within its territory, in exchange for security guarantees from Ukraine’s allies, including Turkey, the UK and the US. Following this meeting, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov said that there are “specific wordings that are close to being agreed”. This would be a major and unexpected breakthrough – albeit a break-through that appears to run to the contrary of stated Western policies on Ukraine.

Still, the West should support Zelensky in these peace efforts. Maybe here at least, Europe could take the courage and switch from its language of war to a language of peace. Zelensky will need this support because he will have to face many hardliners, both inside and outside the country, who will try to derail a peace settlement that foresees a neutral Ukraine. However, if successful, such a peace settlement would not only save Ukraine from being destroyed and dismantled but also Europe, if not the world, from being caught in a looming conflict among nuclear powers. Peace has its price, and this is a price worth paying.

It would be one of the most heartening ironies in European history that a small-town boy with Jewish roots would bring peace to Ukraine, a country where the horrific mass extermination of six million Jews had once begun when, in 1941 under German occupation, 33,000 Jews were killed at Babin Jar near Kiev.

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Michael von der Schulenburg

Michael von der Schulenburg, former UN Assistant Secretary-General, escaped East Germany in 1969, studied in Berlin, London and Paris and worked for over 34 years for the United Nations, and shortly the OSCE, in many countries in war or internal armed conflicts often involving fragile governments and armed non-state actors. These included long-term assignments in Haiti, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Sierra Leone and shorter assignments in Syria, the Balkan, Somalia, the Balkan, the Sahel, and Central Asia. In 2017, he published the book ‘On Building Peace – rescuing the Nation-State and saving the United Nations’, AUP.

Author profile









1. Volodymyr Zelensky, the Ukrainian President, seems to be the only person who could make peace with Russia and end the war
2. The war between Ukraine and Russia could easily become a far more dangerous worldwide conflict
3. French President Emmanuel Macron appears to be the only sensible voice in of the European leaders
4. Zelensky has shown surprising stamina and leadership, keeping peace negotiations going
5. Chancellor Scholz of Germany
6. This war has not gone well for Russia, unable to achieve a quick and decisive victory

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