

Giving War a Chance

That seems to be the policy of all the parties – at least for the moment.



by Conrad Black

Fourteen months after the fighting began, it is surely time to check on the Ukraine War, where the casualties and the damages continue and there is no sign of an end to it. All parties seem for the moment to have signed on to the policy of giving war a chance.

The Chinese peace plan was nothing of the kind. It was a gesture to set the minds of the Third World at ease about its goodwill towards underdeveloped countries and its own peaceable intentions. It condemns and laments the war as such, implicitly blaming the Russians for their invasion, but

effectively blaming the war on the West and thus reallocating Russian blame to the West, because of NATO's expansion and lack of consideration for Russia's legitimate security interests.

The prospects of peace are not going to be enhanced by self-serving sloganeering. Both sides have promised spring offensives and the conventional wisdom outside Ukraine and Russia has been to wait to see how these play out before trying to approach the fundamental question of what borders will ultimately be agreed. The Ukrainian talk, frequently supported by Washington, of driving Russia out of every square inch of Ukraine including the Crimea and other territory seized in 2014 is bunk.

Russia's performance in this war has been dismal and embarrassing for it, as no effort was made to damp down early predictions of an easy and complete Russian victory, a prediction made by the chairman of the American joint chiefs of staff, General Milley, presumably on the basis of American intelligence and not just acceptance of the saber-rattling of the Kremlin. Ukraine has less than 30 percent of Russia's population and cannot really defeat Russia completely.

It is also clear that Russia does not possess the ability to defeat and occupy Ukraine as long as NATO is prepared to supply most of the equipment and munitions needed for Ukraine's defense. If whatever military offensives are launched in the next few months do not substantially change existing lines of demarcation between the two sides, there will be increasing logic behind an armistice reminiscent of that concluded in Korea in 1953, which is still observed.

Such an arrangement would be preferable to war and would obviously be acceptable to Russia, but the Ukrainian government thinks it can do better. Kiev's expectations must at all times be based in large part on the amenability of the West, in particular the United States, to supply its war

effort. This is onerous for the West, though not as onerous as it has been for the combatants, and it is a small price to pay for down-sizing Russia as a serious threat to the West.

In these circumstances, there is probably nothing to do but await events a little longer. It is increasingly obvious that the international interest and almost certainly the interests of the parties directly engaged in the Ukraine War are best served by an early peace. In this respect, the Kremlin, having committed the atrocity of unleashing this war and after occupying significant further parts of Ukrainian territory, is better served than Ukraine would be by either a durable or standstill cease-fire.

However, unless Ukraine can push the Russians back from where they are, an adjustment of Ukrainian borders to accommodate the outrage of the Russian invasion will become necessary, and Ukraine will have to settle for three quarters of a loaf of independence and security. Ukraine's war effort has been magnificent but it is not remotely as powerful a country as Russia and cannot realistically expect to expel Russia altogether, nor to expect the West to provide the resources in equipment and manpower that would both be necessary to inflict such a defeat on Russia.

The goals of the Russians, Ukraine, and the West are now not far from intersection. Russia wants to undo its defeat in the Cold War and the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist republics and steadily to rebuild beyond Russian borders. In light of the correlation of forces on the field in Ukraine, it seems ready to settle for what it has taken. Ukraine believes it can push Russia back from where it now is; this is the moment of truth; it must do so or not.

The West wants the war to end within survivable borders for Ukraine, which the West and Russia will then guarantee with some sincerity and not replications of the phony guarantees that were given Ukraine when it, along with Belarus and

Kazakhstan, gave up the nuclear weapons it had inherited from the USSR in 1991.

In addition to the unambiguous recognition of Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign state, albeit in somewhat reduced borders, the West wants to reopen relations with Moscow and be able to make a serious bid to compete with China for the goodwill of Russia. Ultimately, the West wants both Ukraine and Russia in the Western world and absolutely does not want the immense landmass of Russia from the Volga to Vladivostok to be locked into a one-sided embrace with China.

If surplus Chinese population were allowed to exploit the resources of Siberia with a royalty to the Kremlin, that would be a geopolitical disaster for all of the West, and the sooner Russia is encouraged to pursue the course Russia has followed almost without variation since the times of Peter the Great 300 years ago as an autonomous Great Power, and not Mr. Putin's present role of the prewar Mussolini to Xi Jinping's Hitler, the better for everyone except China.

All the early Washington talk about Putin as a war criminal, regime change, Senator Graham calling for Mr. Putin's removal, the nonsense of the international Court of Justice indicting him, the porous sanctions that have in fact failed, and Joe Biden's bravura about the ruble becoming rubble; all of this was just the posturing of people who don't know anything about Great Power politics.

Once we have a clear indication of where the armies have redefined the borders in Ukraine, the West should set its mind to obtaining a peace which would include the internationally facilitated freedom of all people within the official borders of Ukraine to decide whether they wish to live in Ukraine or Russia including physically moving from one to the other.

Thereafter, the frontiers should be guaranteed by all parties: Russia, all of NATO, and Moldova and Belarus. Then, under

serious guarantees of responsible and efficient government, a comprehensive international program of assistance and development for Ukraine could be launched, and the West and Russia could settle down to trying to resolve their differences and cooperate more cordially, provided it was not at the expense of any third parties, except implicitly in liberating Russia from its pitiful and historically unprecedented position as a lackey of the People's Republic.

It is not clear that anyone in the Biden administration is thinking in any terms except endless war, even if it turns all Ukraine into a charnel house and Russia into a withered puppet of Beijing. We must do better than that.

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