

Time to Listen to the Hundred Years Old Henry Kissinger



Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger attends a luncheon at the U.S. State Department in Washington on Dec. 1, 2022. (Roberto Schmidt/AFP via Getty Images)

by Conrad Black

If the Biden administration had devised a policy at the outset of the Ukrainian war to lead the Western allies in providing Ukraine with all that it would need to repulse the invasion successfully, the war would be over by now.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken publicly approved the provision of first-class American fighter aircraft by Poland to Ukraine nine months ago, and was promptly reversed by the lowly defense department spokesman John Kirby, who said that such an arrangement would be “escalatory.”

Now, nearly 30,000 dead Ukrainian civilians and 20,000 dead

Ukrainian military personnel and nearly 100,000 Ukrainian casualties later (and a total of about 220,000 Russian casualties also), the United States will directly provide F-16 advanced warplanes to the Ukrainians. It has been a similar story with the Abrams tank, which was withheld for a long time but is now being provided to the Ukrainians.

It will be recalled that the initial Biden administration response to the Russian invasion was that the United States had no particular objection to Russia seizing part of Ukraine but would disapprove of an attempt to occupy the entire country and reabsorb it under Kremlin rule. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, informed a congressional committee that he expected Kyiv to fall to the Russians within a few days and Russia to occupy the entire country within three weeks. President Joe Biden offered Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his family safe passage out of Ukraine. When the determination of Ukrainian resistance became clear, Biden took to calling Russian President Vladimir Putin a "war criminal." The administration, when it saw the extent of Ukrainian resistance, joined with other NATO allies in supplying Ukraine with sophisticated weaponry. For many months, Biden kept boasting about defending every square inch of NATO territory, but not one inch of it has been under threat.

As Ukraine bravely persevered and the NATO allies responded vigorously, U.S. policy became more purposeful. Politically, it was a free lunch to send assistance to Ukraine while enjoying the spectacle of Putin floundering. Putin had often declared his ambition to restore much of the former Soviet Union, and the largest piece of that defunct entity that had escaped the rule of the Kremlin was Ukraine, a country of more than 40 million people. Putin set out to be a Stalin, expanding Russia, and swiftly appeared to be a Mussolini launching a thoroughly ineffective invasion of an unoffending neighbor (Greece).

It had always been clear that the Russian government didn't accept the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. And it confirmed this as it seized part of the former Soviet Republic of Georgia and encroached on the easternmost provinces of Ukraine. When the pro-Russian Ukrainian government of President Viktor Yanukovich was overthrown in 2014, Putin seized Crimea from Ukraine. It had been a Russian territory until given by Soviet leader Khrushchev to Ukraine in 1954, and in the 1991 referendum on secession from the USSR, 46 percent of Crimeans voted to remain in union with Russia. Putin apparently believed that there was substantial support in Ukraine for reunification with Russia, and Yanukovich at times had come close to a majority, though he was known to be in favor of closer relations with Russia while keeping the European Union at arm's length. Ukrainian opinion appears to have moved decisively towards Europe and the West, and the present war must have almost exterminated pro-Russian opinion in Ukraine.

The Biden policy has been commendable in the generosity of its assistance but erratic and inadvertently partially responsible for an expanding and prolonged war by never expressing any exit strategy except a more decisive defeat of Russia than is likely to be possible by a much smaller country, no matter how ably led and well supplied. Biden spokespeople have claimed that the administration deserves credit for avoiding Russian action on its early intemperate threats of use of nuclear weapons and other forms of escalation, by only gradually enabling Ukraine to counter Russian armored vehicles and air strength, and leaving it defenseless against Russian missiles that were periodically rained down on civilian areas of Ukraine. We may never know if there's any truth to this.

The provision of F-16s for Ukraine and other upgrades of transfers of the most sophisticated weaponry from some of the allies is not in itself a strategy to end the war satisfactorily. No matter what the level of Western

assistance, I wouldn't be complacent about Ukraine's ability to evict the Russians from their country. Even if Ukraine were able to repulse the Russians, including from Crimea, that wouldn't be likely in itself to assure peace, unless Putin was removed, as the king and military commanders of Italy removed Mussolini, rescinded their declaration of war on Britain and France, and declared war on Germany, in 1943.

There is much uninformed talk about this in the West, but no one has any idea how the Kremlin functions, and other than the removal of Khrushchev in 1964, no Russian leader since the Czar in 1917 has been removed other than as a result of dying from natural causes, apart from Mikhail Gorbachev, who resigned when the country his government led, the Soviet Union, ceased to exist. Lenin, Stalin, Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko, and Yeltsin died in office. Nor is it any rightful concern of foreigners to try to meddle or claim to have a legitimate interest in the Russian leadership succession.

The West has two premier objectives in Ukraine: unconditional acceptance of Ukrainian independence in universally assured borders, and the attraction of Russia back to the West and back from the embrace of China. Russia's natural resources and sophisticated military weapons could help make China a much more formidable adversary to the West.

Henry Kissinger, who will be celebrating his 100th birthday this week, made the point in Europe last week that Ukraine is now a very powerful military state at the center of Europe whose war-making capability considerably exceeds its talents and experience in international relations. He proposed that the West offer some inducement to Russia to make peace and that Ukraine be inducted into NATO not so much to defend it but to moderate its foreign policy ambitions.

If someone of Kissinger's status was currently active among the Western powers, such a person could assure that a modest part of Russian Ukraine is conceded to the Russians, while

Russia, all of Ukraine's other neighbors, and all of NATO guaranteed its revised borders, while Russia and NATO signed a nonaggression pact, and that Western economic relations with Ukraine and Russia are intensified.

It's time for an exit strategy that's closely aligned both to what's militarily possible and what's essential for enhancing the security of the West. The American right has failed badly in waffling over which side the West should favor, but the administration has yet to demonstrate that it possesses any concept of what the West should aspire to in this war and how to achieve it. As always over the last half-century, it is worth listening to Henry Kissinger.

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