

A Workable Settlement to the Ukraine War Comes into View

Russia cannot be so severely rebuffed that it rushes into the arms of China.



by Conrad Black

The Ukraine war is not at all hopeless. It appears to have reached a point where neither protagonist wishes it to end on the basis of the current disposition of forces on the ground, but both sides and America and NATO would like the war to end as all find it increasingly onerous. Neither protagonist can force an end to it, and NATO is the only entity that could conceivably broker an agreement to end the war. A workable basis of settlement may now be coming into view.

President Putin blundered disastrously and inexplicably in imagining that a force of 150,000 combat soldiers could subdue Ukraine, a country of over 40 million people, which Mr. Putin must have known had a well-trained army of 200,000 and a substantially trained militia of another 300,000 men, and that there was a reasonable likelihood that Ukraine would be generously supplied by NATO.

No sane person in the Kremlin could have imagined that NATO would complacently acquiesce in a Russian subjugation of Ukraine if that country showed any serious disposition to resist the Russian invasion strenuously.

It is a little challenging now to think back seven months to the beginning of the war. American aerial reconnaissance published for the world detailed photographs of the assembly of the Russian invasion force day after day, President Zelensky scoffed at suggestions that Mr. Putin would actually invade, Mr. Putin announced that Ukraine had no right to sovereign existence and was governed by "Nazis and drug addicts," (a pretty far-fetched charge against the Jewish Ukrainian leader), and he launched his invasion.

The U.S joint chiefs chairman, Mark Milley, predicted that Kyiv would fall in three days and that the war would be over within two weeks, and President Biden offered Mr. Zelensky and his family safe flight out of Ukraine.

As all the world knows, the Russian generals proved even more inept than General Milley, and it quickly emerged that far from being ambiguous, Ukraine was pawing the ground to gain revenge for the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014.

That seizure followed Western interference in Ukraine to assist the Maidan Revolution which ousted the pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, who with help from Russia had been elected in 2010 and had moved to reject a closer association with Europe and to move instead into the Russian

orbit.

Russia has never explicitly accepted the validity of the secession of the other 14 republics from association with the Kremlin of which the largest and most strategic is Ukraine. The tug-of-war between the influence of Russia and the West in Ukraine has seesawed throughout the years since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the present war represents the escalation of that contest to what should finally produce a decisive outcome.

Ukraine is a complicated historical amalgam of Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, and Tatars and in modern times was never an explicit jurisdiction until established as one by Lenin in 1920. Mr. Putin's interest in and desire to regain Ukraine is understandable but unacceptable to the West.

Were Mr. Putin to do so, he would substantially undo the fragmentation of the Soviet and formerly Russian Empire at the end of the Cold War, which was the greatest and most bloodless strategic victory in the history of the world: the West's great rival collapsed like a soufflé without a shot being fired.

While Mr. Putin's appetite to be the restorer of Russia can be understood, Russia did guarantee Ukraine's frontiers when, in 1992, that country voluntarily, with Belarus and Kazakhstan, gave up the nuclear weapons it had inherited from the Soviet Union. State Secretary Baker also promised Gorbachev that NATO would not move "one inch" east of a reunified Germany. Mr. Putin isn't the only liar in the Ukraine drama, only the most brazen one.

Most of the world has recognized that the Russian attack was unjustified aggression. If the Russians were to succeed in reoccupying Ukraine, it would correctly be perceived in the world as a confirmation of the decline of the West and the impotence of the United States, as was portended by the

horrible fiasco in Afghanistan last year.

The Biden administration claims credit for its gradual escalation of the quantity and quality of arms it has sent Ukraine in a way that has not brought an irrationally escalated Russian response. Yet the president continues to babble about protecting “every square inch of NATO territory” although not one square inch of it has ever been under threat in this crisis.

The infantile administration nonsense about regime change, Putin the madman, and humiliating Russia, seems mercifully to have abated but it is not clear what America’s or NATO’s war aims are. Europe is maintaining an unexpectedly robust stance despite what promises to be a terribly difficult winter with insufficient available energy to assure a reasonable comfort level for most of Western Europe.

Mr. Zelensky and his people appear to be prepared to continue indefinitely as long as they can foresee recovering all lost territory. The Russians are staking out their position: the absorption by Russia of the four southeastern provinces that they fraudulently purported to annex with popular support last week, as well as Crimea, and Ukraine’s abstention from NATO.

The talk of nuclear war by Mr. Putin is nonsense – he would only justify the use of more sophisticated conventional weapons in such quantity as to overwhelm the Russian incursion into Ukraine. Such an escalation by Russia would be an ineffectual strategic disaster, and Mr. Putin must know that. All the talk about World War III is bunk.

Yet Americans who should know better should stop crabbing about the cost of this war: Russia, which has a GDP smaller than Canada’s and is a misgoverned, aimless, and lonely country that has pulled away from the West and whose nuclear arsenal is all that keeps China out of Siberia, had to be defeated in its ambition to take over Ukraine but cannot be so

severely rebuffed that it rushes into the arms of China. Ultimately, we want the western emulators of Russia to prevail over the Russian nativists.

Russia is being exposed as a country permanently reduced from its former vast extent and incapable of exercising the hegemony in eastern Europe that it did from the time of Peter the Great to that of Gorbachev, 300 years. This is being achieved without any American casualties.

To ease Russia definitively into a secondary rung of world powers alongside the major countries of Western Europe, the traditional position of pre-Stalin Russia, is a great enhancement of Western security being accomplished at a bargain price. Paleoconservative emulators of Pat Buchanan on Fox News and elsewhere ought to be less unworldly.

NATO should now adopt the position that if Russia can demonstrate a genuine desire by any of the provinces it claims to have annexed to remain in Russia, even if by changing boundaries and moving some people around, it can retain them but that is all; if not, it will have to settle for permanent Ukrainian neutrality.

Mr. Zelensky should be advised that NATO will not pay for Ukraine's achievement of more than that. Something very close to that is where this war can end but somebody has to be empowered to take that message to the parties.

Secretaries Blinken and Austin, NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg, and President Macron have all shown some aptitude to deliver such a message. The Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban, could be useful here, but NATO has to agree upon the objective and launch intensive diplomacy with Moscow and Kyiv, and steer toward that conclusion while offending the sensibilities of the protagonists as little as possible.

At the end of it, all of Ukraine's neighbors and all of NATO must guarantee Ukraine's revised frontiers and this time,

finally, our collective promises to that much-wronged people must count for something.

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