

An Alternative Way to Face the Ukrainian War

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Structured Abstract

Article classification: Commentary Essay

Purpose—This essay outlines the conflict in Ukraine, assesses the positions of the parties involved, and suggests a path toward peace.

Design, Methodology, Approach—This essay uses media and government sources to create a timeline of events and consider the perspectives of Putin, Zelensky and Biden.

Findings—It goes without saying that for Ukrainian leadership, ousting Russia from all Ukrainian territory including Crimea is the best outcome, but there is no realistic perspective that Putin will endure the humiliation of complete defeat, particularly if he sees the Ukrainian war as a proxy U.S. war.

Practical Implications—In the case of the Ukrainian War, respect for human life gives the only clue for a common exit strategy from which all parties concerned will benefit deeply.

Originality, Value—This essay provides a viewpoint that countervails much of the prevailing media reportage that paints a narrative of a path to Ukrainian victory and Russian defeat regarding the Ukraine conflict.

Keywords: Biden, peace, Putin, Ukraine War, Zelensky

I. Introduction

It has been just over a year since Russia invaded Ukraine. There is no doubt that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought about many tragic results. This brief essay reviews how the war in Ukraine has evolved over the past year and shares thoughts on how to achieve a ceasefire that can eventually be developed into a peace treaty.

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II. Events of the War from February 24 to August 9, 2022

Even soon after February 24, a date which changed the world, genuine efforts for a ceasefire existed and, as early as the March 29 peace talks held in Istanbul, Ukraine made an astonishing proposal which might realize Ukrainian neutrality as well as a satisfactory settlement of Crimea and Donbas to put them outside the scope of neutral Ukraine. Since Crimea was under de facto control by Russia on February 24, Ukraine proposed a special regime of 15 years of negotiations, and on Donbas, an equivalent proposal was made.

The Russian side was seriously interested, but a reported massacre at Bucha changed the situation. On April 2, immediately after the rapprochement of March 29, the Ukrainian side reversed the proposal. In particular, it put Crimea inside the framework of a neutral Ukraine, meaning to remove it from a special negotiated position. The Russian side immediately refused that proposal and since then, no peace talks have taken place. Then Ukraine adopted its key position, requesting more arms to win over Russia at the battlefield. That basic strategy continues to this day.

From April to July several changes took place, including the fall of Mariupol and surrender of the Azof regiments, whose headquarters were located there. But on May 8, the G7 issued a joint statement that they shall not let Russia win. The U.S. supplied \$4 billion of military assistance by early May. The Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, visited Kiev on May 1, and promised that another US\$20 billion in military assistance would be procured as soon as possible.¹ From June to July, the U.S. supplied 16 HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket System) and substantially and politically consolidated the Ukrainian position.

III. Events from August 9 to the End of 2022

The situation began to change dramatically from the beginning of August. On August 9, the first attack on Crimea was made. Zelensky made repeated statements about regaining Crimea, and on August 23, made an impressive statement that to “regain Crimea was his own decision.”² On August 24, it was followed by Biden’s statement to implement an additional US\$3 billion of military assistance.³ On September 7, the Ukrainian government acknowledged that the August 9 attack was an action taken by Ukraine.

Putin did not stay silent. On September 21, he reacted by ordering 300,000 troops to partial mobilization.⁴ It was followed by a decisive referendum, which was implemented from September 23 to September 27 in four regions: not only Luhansk and Donetsk, but also in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. According to Russia, the referendums demonstrated that the regions were in favor of joining Russia,⁵ and on September 30 these four regions were formally declared as a part of Russia. It was probably the most important measure taken by Putin in this period.

While Russia took these moves, on September 26, three out of four Nord Stream pipelines were blasted.⁶ No one accepted responsibility, but the clear beneficiaries were those whose interests were damaged by these pipelines; the U.S. was one of them. Russia was most unlikely because it was the key beneficiary.

On October 8, Ukraine attacked the Crimean Bridge, which was built after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and connects the Russian mainland to Crimea. Putin launched a four-day retaliatory attack.⁷

On October 9, General Surovikin was named as the commander of the Russian army in Ukraine.⁸ On October 19, martial law was introduced in the four newly annexed regions. From around this time, Russian attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure became widely reported, including attacks on electricity or water supplies, both being critically important to maintain normal life during the winter in major cities. There were also increased reports of Russian-Iranian cooperation, including Iranian drones used for attacks in Ukraine. Although neither side confirmed such activities, the national interests of Russia and Iran seemingly converge because the U.S. is a vital enemy for both.

IV. Events from the End of 2022 to the End of February 2023

In these two months tensions rose higher on the battlefield. On December 21, President Zelensky visited Washington. In the media, delivery of a patriot missile was highlighted, but in retrospect there could have been debates about supplying a wide range of weapons, including missiles of longer range and tanks.

From the beginning of January, reports on the delivery of Euro-American tanks increased and on January 25, spectacular decisions were made that Germany was ready to supply them, but let other NATO partners deliver Leopard 2, the best and most numerous tanks shared by European NATO countries. This decision was simultaneously made public with the American decision to deliver its best tank, the Abrams M1.

It coincided that on February 2, the ceremony commemorating Soviet victory at the battle of Stalingrad, Putin utilized in full the menace, which was now becoming apparent, of the best German tanks. Memory must be still fresh that the Soviet Union had deadly tank battles against German tanks during World War II. Delivery of the Leopard 2 did not take place quickly, nor did the delivery of the Abrams M1 take place as quickly as once reported. Instead, on February 7 it was decided that 178 improved versions of Leopard 1 shall be delivered to Ukraine.

Zelensky made his second visit outside of his own country on February 8, traveling to London and then immediately to Paris, where he met Macron and Schulz, followed by a February 9 trip to Brussels, where he met with representatives of the European Union. Although details were not revealed, Zelensky's reportedly made a strong request for jet fighters, to which Britain and France were apparently not negative. This clear upgrade and increase of lethal weapons were followed by a major policy declaration by Putin on February 21 in his Address to the Federal Assembly; Biden's speech in Warsaw, made on February 22 just after his visit to Kiev on February 20, surprised the world because it was prepared under total confidentiality.

Putin emphasized that the current war is the result of Russia's inevitable defense against the U.S., and that Russia will not be defeated. Biden emphasized that the U.S. always stands on the Ukrainian side, which is fighting not only to protect its own territory, but also for the protection of freedom, and that Ukraine shall not be defeated.

V. Majority Views in the West

The majority's views are something along the following lines. One year of war in Ukraine has shown that Ukraine is fighting so much better and more courageously than expected. Zelensky is determined to win the war to oust Russian troops from all occupied territories, including Crimea. The U.S. and NATO are not going to fight directly with Russia because such a European war would be extremely dangerous, resulting in unimaginable deaths and risking the possibility of escalation into nuclear war. But to the extent that Western countries will not enter into direct war with Russia, it is ready to let Ukraine fight with adequate lethal weapons—enough to weaken Russia substantially.

The end game is not clear. Putin has maintained that Ukraine is not going to win over Russia. So, the majority view is that by supplying developed lethal weapons, Ukraine could succeed in winning over Russia, and that could result in the end of Putin or Putin's regime; this is the ideal image of an end game. There is no reason it cannot be realized. In such a situation, considering a joint exit strategy is not necessary or even counter-productive because it could give an impression that the Western side is weak.

President Biden made a surprise visit to Kiev on February 20 and proved to the world his solidarity with Ukraine. On the following day, February 21, President Biden made an emotional speech at Warsaw touting that he will be united with Ukraine: "President Putin chose this war. It's simple. If Russia stopped its invasion of Ukraine, it would end the war. That is why, together, we're making sure Ukraine can defend itself... Freedom. Stand with us. We will stand with you. Let us move forward with faith and conviction and with an abiding commitment to be allies not of darkness, but of light. Not of oppression, but of liberation. Not of captivity, but, yes, of freedom."

VI. Minority Views in the West

But if one follows carefully, there have emerged some minority views in the West that rely exclusively on the increasing supply of highly developed lethal weapons to Ukraine with the view of terminating Putin, which may be risky and improbable. The reason why is fairly simple: Russia may not be as weak as was expected. Prolonging war in that situation means a continuation of war over a long period of time, during which the loss of human life in every warring party will increase dramatically. Is it not wiser to find a mutually acceptable ceasefire as soon as possible and save lives for all warring parties? Let us examine whether Russia has become so weak that it might be destroyed reasonably quickly.

First, compare the abilities of Russian tanks to the tanks the West are trying to mobilize for Ukraine. According to various calculations, Ukrainian and Russian tanks so far destroyed and maintained are as follows:

	Ukraine	Russia
Tank numbers before the war	539	2,047
Destroyed	340	1,282
Damaged	35	114
Abandoned	25	110
Captured	139	541

*This table relies on open-source statistics from the Oryx group and only includes destroyed vehicles and equipment of which photo or videographic evidence is available as of February 24, 2023. Therefore, the amount of equipment destroyed may be significantly higher than recorded here. Source: <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-ukrainian.html> and <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-equipment.html>.

Second, when it comes to the numbers of jet fighters, the superiority of the Russian side is obvious. There is no wonder that Zelensky is strongly pleading that after tanks, his next aid target is jet fighters. According to the statistics as of August 2022, Ukraine possessed 61 jet fighters whereas Russia had 1,188. Russian jet fighters don't compare to U.S. power, which holds 4,500 F14 jets, 3,000 of which are deployed in 25 NATO countries. But for the time being, Russian superiority over Ukraine is clear.

In terms of the number of soldiers, Zelensky stated in May 2022 that 700,000 soldiers are on the battlefield.⁹ The Russian side initiated a partial mobilization of 300,000 in September 2022. But the Ukrainian side states that there can be further mobilization of 300,000 to 500,000 from spring to summer 2023. Exact pictures of troop mobilization are not clear, but given the fact that the Ukrainian adult male population consists of 20 million whereas that of Russia consists of 68 million, Russian capacity for troop mobilization looks no less weaker than that of Ukraine.

Lastly, in terms of the purpose of the war, majority views repeatedly stressed that for the Ukrainians, there was no need to even think about it because they were invaded and wanted to remove the invaders from their country. They saw Russia as having no motivation to wage war and thus was conducting an unprovoked attack against its neighboring country.

Putin's logic was entirely the opposite, and I am not trying to justify his logic at all. But in order to understand the current situation I think it is important to recognize the view of the opponent. In the latest Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly on February 21, 2023,¹⁰ Putin made a full exposé of his position. Here is a part of it (translated from the Russian into English by the author):

In 2015, they have tried direct attacks to Donbas and made artillery shooting and encirclements of the region. It was they who started that war and we have used forces to prevent them, and we are using them. Those who were planning to make new attacks to Donbas, Luhansk and Donetsk had as their next target Crimea and Sevastopol, but they are bound to realize that it is not possible for them to win on the battlefield against Russia. They understood it clearly and we understood it as well. That is now openly discussed in Kiev. We are protecting human life and our home. Western objectives are exertion of unlimited power. The responsibility of escalating the conflict and increasing the victims all lie in the hands of the West and the present regime in Kiev, which is essentially alien to the Ukrainian people. Present-day Ukraine is fighting not for its own national interest, but for the interest of a third country.

It goes without saying that some of Putin's logic seems a stretch intended to justify his reason for starting the invasion, and this cannot be accepted. But at the same time, there is a need to understand that some Western actions were seen by Putin as a provocation. When we contemplate an early ceasefire, particularly on the extremely difficult issue of territorial integrity and accept the reality that there is no possibility for Putin to accept complete defeat, geographic attribution in the presidential address gives an important hint. The names which appear in critical places seem to be Donbas, Luhansk, Donetsk and Crimea.

From there emerges a caution to accepting full Ukrainian territorial integrity. This cautious approach was surprisingly shared in media by Secretary of State Blinken and the RAND Corporation. *The Washington Post* as of January 25 carried an article titled "Blinken Ponders the Post-Ukraine-War Order" by David Ignatius, who is said to be "a career-long mouthpiece for the U.S. State Department."¹¹ A column, "Dances with Bears" by John Helmer, describes the cream of this interview as follows: "The conversation with Blinken offered some hints about the intense discussions that have gone on for months within the administration about how the war in Ukraine can be ended and future peace maintained... Crimea is a particular point of discussion. There is a widespread view in Washington and Kyiv that regaining Crimea by military force may be impossible. An all-out Ukrainian campaign to seize the Crimean Peninsula is unrealistic, many U.S. and Ukrainian officials believe."

Blinken's interview article was followed by a publication of the RAND Corporation Report dated January 27, 2023. It was titled "Avoiding a Long War,"¹² authored by Samuel Charap and Miranda Priebe, and summarized that "in short the consequences of a long war—ranging from the persistent elevated escalation risks to economic damage—far outweigh the possible benefits. The study describes President Vladimir Zelensky's vision of victory, in which Ukraine would recover all the territories it lays claim to and force Russia to submit war crimes trials and reparations as 'optimistic' and 'improbable.'"

VII. Conditions to Realize a Ceasefire

If majority views are going to prevail, and Zelensky continues on insisting on his essential war purposes—to achieve full territorial integrity, chase out Russian troops from all Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, force Putin to accept full defeat—there is a real danger for escalation and prolongation of deadly fighting. The end game of the war may be considerable bloodshed of Ukrainians and Russians until that full victory of the West can be achieved.

But if minority views are put on trial, what would the minimal necessary conditions be to achieve a ceasefire? It goes without saying that the most difficult condition is the question of Ukrainian territorial integrity. Certainly, this is not an easy question. Consider the facts:

- Crimea and a large part of Donbas were under de facto Russian occupation and governance before February 24, 2022.
- The Ukrainian proposal on March 29 included a superb formula that Crimea and possibly Donbas (at least its essential part) could be put in a special category so that negotiations could continue without any change of de facto control.

- For Ukrainians there would be a way to justify its compromise, which is to “go back to the 2024 February 24 line.”
- For Putin’s perspective, the issue of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson will remain. It is hard to argue now, but at least one can differentiate that Donbas is already presented as an independent People’s Republic under international law, whereas the annexation of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson are kept exclusively under Russian domestic matters. (At this point a ceasefire itself is such hypothetical question I do not consider it necessary to deepen our thoughts specifically on Zaporizhzhia and Kherson.)

Concerning another difficult issue, Ukrainian neutrality, I think that the March 29 formula is still the most attractive idea for compromise, in which Ukraine refrains from joining NATO but its security shall be guaranteed by other governments. The most difficult point is how should Russia be treated. But whatever the format, after the deadly war lasting a full year and with the possibility of its continuation for another extended period, during which Ukraine and NATO acted as virtual allies and in which Russia and Ukraine/NATO acted as a real enemy, an entirely different structure may be needed in the post-war period. One may also argue that the issue of territorial integrity is essential to introduce a ceasefire, but the issue of neutrality can be discussed more as an issue for eventual peace treaty.

VIII. The Question of a Third-Party Mediation

The question of third-party mediation does not take place unless and until the warring parties show some interest in a cease fire. But one can also argue that a ceasefire is an extremely difficult task, which can be enhanced in a very small step-by-step approach. If countries that might have the willingness and capability to act as a mediator appear, there is no reason that country can’t start acting as such.

In my view there are three countries which have natural capacity to act, should the leader of that country decide so, and one more country which needs to be considered in a bracket. The first country to appear on my list is Turkey. Given the special role it played during the peace conference in Istanbul on March 29 and its complicated but independent position taken inside NATO, it may act as a mediator.

The second country which might act as an intermediary is India. India is perhaps the only country which has maintained good relations with the Soviet Union and Russia as well as the U.S., particularly during the last 10 to 20 years under the rise of China. It has a position of trust with both Russia and the U.S. That alone makes it an adequate candidate. The unknown question is whether its leadership considers this difficult task a benefit to its national interest, or those interests are best served by maintaining a neutral position without an active role.

The third country is surprisingly Japan, which has two important historical experiences that put it in a powerful mediating position.

- The first experience is its war of the Pacific, particularly how it ended. In 1941, Japan started the Pacific War with the Pearl Harbor bombing. For the first half of the following year, both the Imperial Navy and Imperial Army achieved remarkable

- victory, but in June 1942, Japanese aircraft, together with fighters and their best trained pilots, experienced a smashing defeat at Midway.
- Afterward, it took more than three years for Japan to capitulate, and then with almost all cities bombarded, including burning out the Tokyo riverside area and two atomic bombs. But finally Japan succeeded in surrendering with its land and people basically preserved.
 - There was a determined cabinet, led by Suzuki Kantaro, to surrender before it was too late. But there was one condition—namely, preservation of the imperial Household—to accept the Potsdam Declaration. Americans knew about it, and it was their knowledge about their enemy that saved Japan. Without that American knowledge the full acceptance of Potsdam Declaration might not have been achieved. To that extent, a war which was once started is so hard to end.
 - Japan also has historic relations with Russia. The countries went through long periods of war and peace. Japan had a great victory in the Russo-Japanese war, but in the final days of World War II it was attacked by Stalin despite the Neutrality Pact. That attack gave Stalin occupation of the Kurile Islands, which became an object of peace treaty negotiations that remains unresolved. But those negotiations gave Japan the experience of dealing with Russia in a down-to-earth manner; Putin was a hard bargainer there but not without logic.
 - An early ceasefire will save possibly hundreds of thousands of people's lives. That converges so well with post-war Japanese pacifism and the traditional Japanese approach of moderation in its foreign policy.
 - In relations with the U.S., continuation of this war where levels of lethal weapons are soaring dramatically, not only would sacrifices become substantially higher in both Ukrainians and Russians, but the war could trigger the beginning of a European War, intentionally or by accident. This is what Biden tries to avoid most. As a faithful allied partner, Japan is responsible in pointing out this critical danger to President Biden and urging him to avoid that risk, namely by way of an earlier ceasefire.
 - We must tell Biden and Zelensky that a war once started, by whatever the reason, is so difficult to conclude, and the essential factor for the war's conclusion is knowledge of the opponent. What do we know about Putin? Is Ukraine's war conducted with sufficient knowledge and understanding of Putin?

The last country in the bracket is China. First, sheer logic of geopolitics indicates that China and the U.S. are mutually recognized arch enemies in the middle of the 21st century. In that situation, the longer the war continues in Ukraine, the U.S. shall be distracted in Europe, and China has greater room to expand its own sphere in the Indo-Pacific. So whatever verbal position it may take, it cannot be an honest broker. Second, China would need to keep Russia on its side in global competition and rivalry against the U.S. The direction in which it leads would be bound to take a pro-Russian standpoint. Third, if China would act as a truly successful mediator, it might become a humiliation for the U.S. to be so substantially helped by a future global rival and competitor. That would be another reason why its mediation proves a difficult scenario. As of February 26, China's February 24 official proposal has not been warmly received by the U.S.

IX. Conclusion

Biden, although a little more careful not to provoke Putin too much, continues to supply advanced arms to Zelensky, who is determined to fully win the war by regaining full territorial integrity, including Crimea. The situation has entered long-term war, where a perspective of a ceasefire seems to have disappeared entirely. In that situation, one thing is clearly emerging. Lives of Ukrainian citizens and soldiers and lives of Russian soldiers are continuing to be lost, with zero U.S.–NATO human casualties.

I think there is something fundamentally wrong. It goes without saying that for Ukrainian leadership, ousting Russia from all Ukrainian territory including Crimea is the best, but there is no realistic perspective that Putin will endure the humiliation of complete defeat, particularly if he sees the Ukrainian war as a proxy U.S. war. I think time has come for all parties concerned to direct their efforts toward finding an exit strategy from the war. The foundation of my proposal is *respect for human life*, which I honestly believe is important for all parties.

9.1 In Putin's Case

Perhaps the most decisive move Putin has taken was the referendum conducted that made four regions part of Russian territory. As long as attacks by Zelensky in these four regions continue, Putin has an obligation to defend those regions and continue fighting against the invading Ukraine.

But this means perpetual continuation of war, which Putin himself defined in his 2021 article as one of three Slav brothers. Russia is generally taken as the big brother, and there is something wrong with this big brother perpetually killing the younger brother. I wrote straightforwardly on Putin's contradiction in my October 2022 book published in Japanese.¹³ It goes without saying that Putin also has the responsibility not to waste the lives of Russian soldiers, and in particular facing Russian mothers with missing sons.

9.2 In Zelensky's Case

So far Zelensky's only policy has been to regain Ukrainian territorial integrity including Crimea, but there is inherently another responsibility for the Ukrainian president: to protect the life of Ukrainians. This is not only legitimate but also an extremely important responsibility. To my knowledge Zelensky has not spoken about this second responsibility. Has not the time come for him to start thinking seriously about this second responsibility as well? In terms of public opinion, every Ukrainian man I have heard states that he is ready to fight (i.e., to risk his life) to defend his country against the invader. It may well be so. But all the more so, Zelensky is in a position to think about his dual responsibility to territory and people, and to think hard where his optimum balancing point is.

9.3 In Biden's Case

The majority view is that Biden is letting Zelensky continue to fight, to the extent that Zelensky wants to fight. Biden has been a little more cautious not to provoke Putin too

much, but within this limitation Biden has never backed away from meeting Zelensky's will to beat down evil Putin. The result is continued expansion of the war. Biden knows too well that Zelensky wants to oust Putin from all of Ukraine, including Crimea, and let him suffer total defeat. But Biden surely knows that Putin will never accept that defeat and the result is just expansion and indefinite prolongation of the war. Not only will human life be wasted on an unprecedented scale, but there also might emerge a genuine risk that the war would extend to a total war between Russia and NATO even if tactical nuclear weapons are not employed.

Zelensky needs to be informed that beating down Putin is not possible, and that such an expectation leads only to the prolongation of the war with unending loss of human life for all warring parties. Biden alone can inform Zelensky that the outcome of the expansion of the war is just terrifying.

9.4 Final Thoughts

1. Over a full year has passed since February 24, 2022. The Ukrainian War is just expanding. Nobody knows the extent of this expansion.
2. This means constant loss of human life is taking place. The time has come to stop it.
3. Putin and Zelensky, who are directly fighting, but also Biden, who is supplying advanced weapons to Zelensky, have a stake in stopping this unending destruction of human life.
4. All parties to the war should point their minds toward finding a common exit strategy and common end game for an early ceasefire. The justification and objective of this exit strategy is respect for human life.
5. I am aware that logics of geopolitics also exist. But I am deeply convinced that in the case of the Ukrainian War, respect for human life gives the only clue for a common exit strategy from which all parties concerned will benefit deeply.

Notes

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