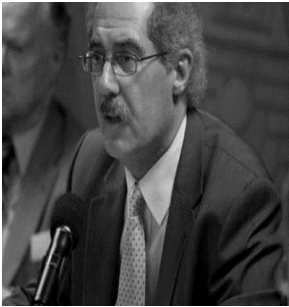


RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE AND THE DANGER OF PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AT THE WRONG TIME



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When young conscripts and volunteers went to war in August 1914 they were confident that they would be back home within a matter of months as the 'Great War' would be "over by Christmas". This was a naive delusion, which however was shared by most experts at the time. Instead, the major European powers which fought World War I were soon engulfed in "total war". Increasingly ruthless and savage trench warfare, which eventually lasted for more than four long years, led to much destruction and 40 million casualties (both deaths and injuries). The war brought down colonial empires and kingdoms and resulted in many other dramatic geopolitical shifts which changed the world forever.

If today's major powers are not careful we may be witnessing a similar development regarding Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine. At the time of writing in late November 2022 Russia is militarily on the backfoot while, however, hardly close to being defeated. Russia's vicious attacks on Ukrainian critical infrastructure in almost all major cities and towns in the country and the weaponizing of Moscow's gas and oil resources as a tool of war are posing major problems for both Ukraine and its supporters in Europe and also in the US. To some extent the Ukraine war has already become global. The effects of war induced inflation, grain and food scarcities, violation of climate change protections, supply line challenges and energy shortages and immense price hikes are felt everywhere around the globe. They have already led to great misery and much destitution in many parts of the world.

Since Ukraine managed to push the Russian occupiers out of Kherson on November 11, 2022, the war itself is turning increasingly into a war of attrition and stalemate, including brutal hand-to-hand fighting and savage trench warfare. It is unlikely that much military progress will be made by either side during the long winter months, which are notoriously harsh in this part of the world. The winter will severely challenge the resilience of the fighters in the field on both sides, their weapons and equipment and of course the remaining civilians in the destroyed cities and towns of Ukraine.

Nuclear Dangers

Despite the expected stalemate during the coming winter months there could well occur unexpected but frightening developments in other respects. The Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the largest in Europe, continues to be attacked by daily shelling. A meltdown cannot be excluded by any means, if these insane attacks lead to a permanent interruption of the power supply to the plant or destroy the back-up diesel generators.

And there also remains the danger of the deployment of the atomic bomb in the war in Ukraine, even perhaps “only” of a so-called tactical nuclear bomb or a dirty bomb. Yet, in November 2022 top secret Russian-American contacts occurred at least at three different levels and these meetings appear to have lessened the threat of the use of nuclear weapons. Meetings took place between President Joe Biden’s National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and his Russian counterpart, between the US and Russian Defense Ministers, General Lloyd Austin and Sergei Shogou, and between CIA director William Burns and his Russian counterpart at a meeting in Turkey.¹ As a result of all these secret contacts Putin has mostly stopped making his once frequent references to Russia’s nuclear weapons potential and readiness to use it under certain circumstances. While this scaling down of the nuclear rhetoric is good news, the situation could easily become inflamed again, in particular if the Russian leader feels pushed into a corner and if his political and perhaps physical existence is threatened in case of further disastrous defeats of the Russian military.

Thus, we are still pretty close to a potential calamity. The accidental missile strike on Poland by a misfired Ukrainian anti-missile system in mid-November indicates the escalatory danger of Russia’s war on Ukraine. The situation is made particularly volatile and ambiguous as we don’t really know what Putin’s war aims are. Initially the Russian President wanted to conquer all or at least most of Ukraine, including Kiev, and install a pro-Russian puppet government to run Ukraine as a kind of Russian satellite country. In Putin’s mind the model may well have been Belarus’s domination by Russia. Moscow allows President Lukashenko to stay in office while Putin himself has become the real holder of power in Minsk. Once Russia’s conquest of Kiev had clearly failed by early April 2022, it seems that Putin decided to shift his war aims and focus on attempting to conquer all or most of the Donbas area (consisting of both Donetsk and Luhansk).

Yet, after first losing Kharkiv in the east and recently Kherson in the south, which led to the Russian military’s withdrawal to the east bank of the Dnipro river, it is unclear how these defeats have affected and changed Putin’s war aims. Does he believe he will be able to reconquer these territories perhaps

¹ Julian E Barnes et al., “C.I.A. Director Warns Russian Counterpart Against Using Nuclear Weapons,” *New York Times* (November 14, 2022): <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/14/us/politics/cia-russia-nuclear-weapons.html>

by means of a massive spring offensive? While Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has repeatedly explained that Ukraine ultimate aim is to push Russia out of all sovereign Ukrainian territory as internationally recognized in 1991, Putin's war aims remain vague and shifting.

Should peace negotiations commence?

This uncertainty makes the prospect for peace negotiations even more difficult and complex than is the case anyway. After Ukraine's victory in Kherson General Mark Milley, the Chief of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, wondered whether now was the right time for the two sides to talk to each other and reach a settlement so that the Ukrainians might perhaps cement their gains on the battlefield.² The civilian leadership in the US and also the EU leaders quickly walked back Milley's suggestion. Only if and when Ukraine were prepared to enter into peace negotiations would such talks be convened it was announced in Washington and Brussels. Neither the US nor the Europeans would put pressure on Ukraine to meet the Russians at the negotiating table. President Biden himself declared: "But I do know one thing: We're not going to tell them [the Ukrainians] what they have to do".³

Ukrainian leaders have made clear repeatedly that they only wish to talk once Russia has given up all conquered Ukrainian territory, including the Crimean peninsula, and once Putin has been replaced. While Ukraine might be flexible regarding the latter, the return of all Ukrainian territory is not negotiable it seems. "The Ukrainian military will not accept any negotiations, agreements or compromise decisions," Ukraine's top military commander Valeriy Zaluzhny insisted firmly in a phone conversation with his American counterpart Mark Milley. "There is only one condition for negotiations – Russia must leave all captured territories," Zaluzhny continued.⁴

Moreover, the Ukrainian population is not prepared to enter into talks for a compromise peace with Moscow. In fact, Russian atrocities and war crimes and the widespread bombing of Ukrainian civilian infrastructure have hardened rather than softened attitudes toward Moscow. In light of the strong views of the Ukrainian public, at present President Zelensky is not in a position to enter into formal talks with Russia, even if he wished to do so.

² Karoun Demirjian, "Milley tries to clarify his case for a negotiated end to Ukraine War," *Washington Post* (November 16, 2022): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/11/16/milley-ukraine-negotiate/>

³ Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference, November 9, 2022: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/11/09/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-8/>

⁴ Telephone conversation between Valeriy Zaluzhnyi and Mark Milley, November 14, 2022: <https://mil.in.ua/en/news/ukrainian-military-will-not-accept-any-negotiations-or-compromise-decisions-zaluzhny/>

Russia, however, has repeatedly called for peace negotiations to take place. It is, however, not prepared to return any territory to Ukraine. It thus seems that Russia is ready to negotiate in order to obtain a pause in the fighting and win time over the winter until the training of the new mobilized conscripts has been completed, Russia's defensive positions along the Dnipro river in the south have been well fortified and its military resources and supply lines have been rebuilt. This, at least, is the thinking in both Kiev and Washington but also in many EU capitals. Hardly anyone believes that Putin is serious about starting negotiations to really end the war in Ukraine and enter into a compromise peace, which would have to include giving up at least some of the conquered Ukrainian territory, though not necessarily Crimea.

Putin's Stalin problem

But couldn't talks be entered into in any case in order to "check out" at the negotiating table what Putin has to offer and whether or not he is serious?

This reminds me of the western dilemma during the early Cold War years regarding talks with Soviet dictator Stalin about reunifying Germany. In 1952, after the receipt of the so-called Stalin Note on March 10, the US, Britain and France (strongly supported by then West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer) eventually turned down Stalin's offer to negotiate about reunifying the divided Germany. Once talks would have been convened, it was believed, public pressure in the western world to come to an agreement with Stalin to settle the volatile and potentially dangerous German question, might well have pushed the western negotiators into entering into a disadvantageous and unwise compromise settlement with Stalin, endangering the Bonn Republic's integration with the western world as well as European strategic stability and predictability in the long run.

Stalin clearly wanted to prevent West Germany's militarization and inclusion into a western military organization, such as the impending European Defense Community (EDC) or NATO. In particular the West feared that a neutral, demilitarized Germany, upon which Stalin insisted in his Note, would yet again become a "loose canon" in Europe swaying to and fro between east and west and destabilizing the emerging Cold War settlement. In hindsight the western powers were probably right though it meant in fact that the East German people were "sacrificed" as they had to continue living under the East German communist dictatorship. But an early reunification of Germany in the mid-1950s would in all likelihood have undermined the European integration process, and thus the creation of the EEC in 1958, and the relatively solid and economically prosperous though divided stability of the European continent.

Entering into negotiations with the Kremlin now and agreeing on a half-baked compromise settlement presents an equally difficult and complex dilemma. Such a course of action would antagonize Ukraine and make a mockery of the

country's heroic efforts to resist and push back Russian aggression. It would also encourage autocrats everywhere that war can be used successfully to change borders as you please. Not least, it would be a serious blow to the resolve of the western allies and their commitment to uphold the global order, western democratic values and indeed human rights.

Perhaps even more importantly, talks with the Kremlin would also bitterly divide the western allies and Ukraine. And even within the US and among the European countries such talks would be highly controversial and lead to bitter transatlantic recriminations and divisions. Perhaps this is what Putin has in mind when he calls for peace negotiations. The Kremlin knows that it can no longer win the war on Ukraine. Russia may not lose the war but it won't gain a victorious outcome on the battlefield either. The only way Putin can still win his war on Ukraine is by dividing Ukraine from its western allies and make the West stop supporting Ukraine militarily, financially and politically.

Negotiations are indeed necessary but the conditions and the timing for such talks have to be right. And it should indeed be primarily Ukraine rather than the White House or the Pentagon which takes the decision whether or not to enter into peace talks with Putin, which by necessity will have to result in a most difficult and highly controversial compromise settlement.



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