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The Case for a Neutral Ukraine: An Option to Achieve Peace¹ (2000 words)

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The NATO-Russia-Ukraine crisis could have been prevented. The U.S. and the European Union **ought to have thoroughly negotiated formal treaties** with both the Russian Federation and Eastern European states in the process of formulating and implementing a new system of European security immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991.²

Instead NATO and the EU engaged in an **uncoordinated “double enlargement”** into former Soviet bloc states without coordinating with each other—nor, even more crucially, with Moscow.

Since 2014, in a **strategy of preclusive imperialism**, Moscow has sought to counter both NATO and EU expansion by annexing Crimea and by now declaring the independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in the Donbass region of Ukraine. Russia is also pressuring NATO members through a major military build-up involving at least 150,000 troops, if not many more, deployed in Russia and Belarus.²

Moscow hopes to finally force the U.S. and NATO into a political settlement over Ukraine. At the same time, Russia seeks to **augment**

social and political tensions inside Ukraine in an effort to check the possibility that the Biden administration and the “Baltic Black Sea alliance” (with Lithuania and Poland) might strengthen their support for Kiev’s goals to regain control over the Donbass region and Crimea.

Putin expects that his now overt military support for the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, coupled with threats to invade more of an already truncated Ukraine, **will soon force the U.S., NATO and the Europeans to implement a new European Security treaty.**

With Kiev now declaring a state of emergency, the major question is **whether Russia will move beyond the Donbass** and seek to expand its control over the Azov region so as to provide a land bridge from Crimea to southern Ukraine. The more extreme scenario would be for Moscow to **directly threaten, if not seize Kiev**, the historic birthplace of Russia.

NATO’s military pressures, even if coupled with strong U.S. and EU sanctions, will not prevent Putin from attempting to incorporate much of Ukraine into the Russian Federation regardless of the risks to the Russian economy. While **staged sanctions should be applied, they must also be accompanied by significant geopolitical compromises**, if the deep disputes leading to this dangerous crisis are to ameliorated and if Moscow is not to march to Kiev—at the real risk of major power war.

A significant geopolitical compromise could take the form of **backing the formation of a neutral, non-nuclear Ukraine** as a step toward the implementation of a new European security treaty.

The Russian and Chinese Backlash

After he had warned President Bill Clinton on numerous occasions of a brewing Russian backlash in response to NATO enlargement, it is not accidental that

Russian President **Boris Yeltsin** suddenly resigned from power in January 2000 just a few months after the March-June 1999 NATO air war “over” Kosovo. Vladimir Putin then became Acting President.

From Moscow’s perspective, the **air war over Kosovo** represented NATO’s first violation of the [1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act](#) that had promised to “build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security.”

The fact that NATO announced at its [2008 Bucharest Summit](#) that both Ukraine and Georgia could eventually join NATO - without Russia’s input - further angered Moscow as did the EU announcement that former Soviet bloc states, including Georgia and Ukraine, could establish **closer ties to the EU “[Eastern Partnership](#)”** in 2008-09. This uncoordinated NATO-EU double enlargement led Moscow to punish Georgia in the 2008 Georgia-Russia war.

The U.S. recognition of **Kosovo’s independence** in February 2008, eight years after the war over Kosovo, additionally led Moscow to **recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia** in a *tit for tat* measure.³ The NATO-led air war “over” Kosovo leading to Kosovar independence subsequently provided justification, rightfully or wrongfully, for Moscow to proclaim its support for the independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in February 2022.

The **2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine** led Moscow to fear that Kiev would soon join NATO (and the EU) and force the removal of Russia’s military base leased at **Sevastopol**. Moscow annexed Crimea, while also engaging in political-military interference in eastern Ukraine.

In effect, Russia engaged in **acts of preclusive imperialism** that were seen by Washington as “illegally” violating the 1994 Budapest accords, among other treaties. For its part, Moscow feared that Ukraine’s membership in NATO could

permit NATO to more easily back Ukrainian irredentist claims to Russian territory. It **might permit NATO to control the Black Sea** from the geostrategic position of Sevastopol against Moscow's perceived vital interests—including its regional trade and energy routes.

NATO's Promises

The dilemma is that the U.S. and NATO have been reluctant to make an about face and alter their position that promised eventual NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia at the 2008 Bucharest summit. **Washington overruled French and German opposition against Ukraine's membership in the long run.** This is true even if Kiev, as President Biden himself [admitted](#) in his January 2022 press conference, is far from being ready to join NATO.

On the one hand, Ukraine is far from achieving democratic and economic reforms. On the other hand, from a purely strategic perspective, there is no way NATO itself should be put in the provocative position of defending contested Ukrainian boundaries and waterways until Russia and Ukraine are eventually able to resolve those disputes, most likely with multilateral French, German, and OSCE assistance. Such a scenario, however, is not likely in the present situation.

It has nevertheless been argued by the U.S. Congress that not to enlarge NATO to Ukraine would somehow undermine **American and NATO credibility**, particularly given the fact that Kiev has been trying to force the American hand by amending Ukraine's Constitution in 2019 to make NATO and EU membership a strategic foreign and security policy objective.

A position also backed by Lithuania and Poland, this is a clear case of the "tail wagging the dog," or of **lesser powers seeking to manipulate major powers**, in Hans Morgenthau's traditional realist critique. It is up to the U.S.

and Europeans—not Kiev—to determine how to best to deal with Ukrainian security within a NATO context.

The fact of the matter is that Washington (and the Europeans) will gain even greater credibility and legitimacy, if they begin to use all of the diplomatic tools at their disposal in the effort to **bring Russia into a new relationship with Ukraine and with its eastern European neighbors** as soon as possible.

This can be achieved by **forging a new European security treaty** instead of blindly supporting NATO and EU enlargement to Ukraine (and Georgia) that will continue to antagonize Moscow.

Ukrainian Neutrality

Even after the deployment of Russian so-called “peacekeepers” in support of the independence of socio-political movements in Donetsk and Luhansk in late February 2022, the best option is to work to form a new European security order around a **neutral and non-nuclear Ukraine** that would eventually **negotiate its disputes** over the Donbass and Crimea with Russia in the Normandy or another OSCE-backed multilateral format.

A truly neutral Ukraine, with its disputed borders protected by international peacekeepers under a general OSCE mandate, for example, would be closer to achieving the **non-aligned position** that Kiev originally demanded when it declared independence in 1991.

From the U.S. perspective, a successful historical analogy is the multilateral **Austrian neutrality treaty** which the U.S., Soviet Union, France and the UK negotiated in the period 1945 to 1955. That treaty had required the removal of U.S. and Soviet forces in exchange for an Austrian declaration of neutrality. In the contemporary case of Ukraine, **different forms of neutrality** in the form

of military non-alignment could be negotiated that would permit Kiev obtain purely defensive capabilities and to participate in UN, OSCE, or other multilateral activities.

The option of bringing Ukraine into NATO should be ruled out entirely.

The proposal that NATO could delay membership for Kiev for another 10 or 20 years will not work as there is no way Ukraine-Russian relations can remain unsettled for that long without provoking further tensions.

As Moscow does not trust US and NATO intentions after the air war over Kosovo in 1999 and also due to other more recent concerns – such as nuclear modernization, the deployment of Missile Defense systems in eastern Europe, renovated U.S. tactical nuclear weaponry - Moscow wants to negotiate a new European security order NOW and not in the future.

The Lack of U.S. Diplomatic Innovation

The dilemma is that support for NATO expansion limits U.S. diplomatic flexibility by overlooking the **full range of diplomatic options** that could bring lasting peace. These options include a French, German and European Union rapprochement with Moscow, as proposed by French President Macron, and that is aimed at establishing a new [European security order](#). Yet such an approach still requires the backing of the U.S. and NATO.

The deeper problem is that the **U.S. and NATO members need to overcome their *hubris***, or excessive pride, and begin to fully back a European rapprochement with Russia. In such a way, the U.S. and NATO can more easily retreat on their 2008 Bucharest promise to bring Ukraine into NATO without significantly harming U.S. and NATO credibility.

The U.S. and Europeans **could still back the defense of a neutral Ukraine** and help develop the country—while also working more closely with Moscow

where possible. Moreover, a U.S.-EU-Russian rapprochement over a neutral Ukraine could then lead to an even more general [European Security](#) accord much as was proposed by Moscow and discussed in Track II diplomacy after the 2008 Georgia-Russia war. At that time such a European Security accord failed to be pursued by the Obama-Biden administration.

Global Strategy

It is time for decisive U.S. and EU diplomatic action.

Yet can the Biden administration, as it has promised, engage in a truly **“relentless” and multilateral diplomacy** that will prove flexible enough to achieve a modicum of peace? Or will Biden continue to pursue his own version of Trump’s ‘Peace through Strength’ doctrine that appears to be pressing Russia, China and Iran even closer together by tightening U.S. alliances with NATO, the Europeans, including Sweden and Finland, plus Japan, India and Australia?

The dilemma is that without **significant geopolitical concessions and real compromise with Moscow**, the threat of NATO pressures and strong [sanctions](#) could potentially make successful diplomacy much more difficult to achieve in the future, negatively impacting the European economy and the continent’s political unity, while indirectly raising global energy prices. The Biden administration has begun to implement **“the first tranche”** of punitive sanctions on two major Russian banks and on the country’s sovereign debt. This means that Moscow will not be permitted to raise finance from the U.S. and Europe or trade new debt on U.S. or European markets.

In addition to most likely harming the Europeans more than Russia, **strong sanctions** plus military pressures without significant geopolitical compromises will not provide sufficient deterrence versus a possible Russian

invasion of Ukraine outside the Donbass—in large part as Moscow can turn to Beijing for an even closer political-economic, financial, and defense alliance.

Instead of pressing for sanctions that will prove counter-productive, Washington should be **pushing for deconfliction and de-escalation** by urging the implementation of treaties that deal with both nuclear and conventional arms reductions and eliminations and that involve the no-first use of any form of Weapon of Mass Destruction, including cyber weaponry.

And instead of boosting a panoply of new weapons systems, the U.S. and Europeans should be **boosting diplomacy** by working for geopolitical and economic compromises with Moscow, China, Iran and North Korea, among other actual and potential rivals—in order to prevent the real possibilities of war among the world’s major powers.

International recognition of Ukraine as an officially neutral country would represent the first step toward regional and global peace.

¹ *This article is an updated and revised version of the article "The NATO-Russia-Ukraine Train Wreck: Options for Peace," which first appeared in the [Wall Street International Magazine](#) on February 18, 2022.*

² Hall Gardner, *Dangerous Crossroads: Europe, Russia and the Future of NATO* (Praeger, 1997)

³ Hall Gardner, *NATO Expansion and US Strategy in Asia* (Palgrave, 2013).

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Books recently published by Hall Gardner:

IR Theory, Historical Analogy and Major Power War (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2019);

World War Trump: The Risks of America's New Nationalism (New York: Prometheus Books, 2018);

Crimea, Global Rivalry and the Vengeance of History (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2015);

NATO Expansion and the U.S. Strategy in Asia: Surmounting the Global Crisis (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan 2013);

Averting Global War (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan 2007).

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