



Is War Between Russia and Ukraine Inevitable?

Or is There Still a Way Out?

(950 words)

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The eminent British historian A.J.P. Taylor once said that “nothing is inevitable until it happens.” Still, the recent developments in Ukraine point to the imminent outbreak of war in Ukraine and perhaps beyond. **Is military conflict really inevitable or is there a last-minute chance** to avoid yet another war in Europe?

In his hour-long speech, a couple of days ago, Russian president Putin **questioned both Ukraine’s very right to exist and the entire European security order** constructed after the demise of the Soviet Union in late 1991.

Ukraine became internationally recognized as a sovereign country in December 1991. Poland, Canada and Russia were the first three countries to recognize Ukraine. Three years later, in December 1994, the U.S., Russia and the UK signed the **Budapest Memorandum**. In return for the removal of all Soviet nuclear weapons from Ukrainian soil, these three countries gave security assurances regarding the use of force against the

political independence and territorial integrity of the Ukrainian republic (including Crimea).

Declaring the independence of the **People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk** and thereby creating two new states in the Donbas region on the territory of Ukraine is a **clear breach of international law**. At present the pro-Russian separatists in the breakaway republics control approximately one third of the Donbas region. Russian troops have entered these areas as "peacemakers," as the Kremlin has announced. In retaliation the U.S., the UK and the European Union have imposed severe sanctions on Russia.

Many analysts expect that Putin's troops will go further, however. Effectively, after all, Russian troops are already occupying neighboring **Belarus** with Belarusian leader Lukashenko having become a Putin puppet and his country a satellite state on the model of the former Soviet republics.

What comes next?

The **likely first stage** may be Putin's conquest of most of the rest of the Donbas and thus the area the separatists claim for their "republics." This will meet with strong resistance from the Ukrainian forces.

The **second stage** may be the conquest of the Ukrainian capital Kiev, the replacement of the Zelenskyy administration with a pro-Russian loyalist government and the occupation of most of Ukraine. This will be even more forcefully resisted by both the large Ukrainian armed forces and the overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian population. During the last eight years, since Russia's **annexation of Crimea** in 2014, Ukrainians have turned increasingly against Russian influence.

The **third less certain stage** may be the Russian conquest of the rest of Ukraine (western Ukraine with its main city Lviv). Perhaps there will also be strong Russian pressure on and intimidation of other former Soviet republics (not least Georgia and perhaps also the three Baltic states who are now NATO members).

Is there a chance to prevent these ugly and bloody developments?

It appears to me that there is only one real chance – but realizing it may smack of the appeasement of Putin.

For many years now Putin has said repeatedly that he is worried about the **eastern expansion of NATO and particular the westward drift of Ukraine**. The latter Putin sees as a buffer state between an autocratic Russia and the democratic countries in Eastern Europe who are members of both NATO and the European Union.

Thus, a promise and the signing of a **formal treaty** by Ukraine, Russia, the U.S. and the entire NATO alliance which guarantees that Ukraine will **never join NATO and will become a neutral country on the model of democratic Austria or Sweden may do the trick**. The renunciation of Ukraine's ambition to join the EU may also be necessary. All this would of course mean that the West was giving in to Putin.

But would it effectively mean that the western world was appeasing Putin as western countries tried to appease Hitler in vain and with disastrous consequences? The comparison with Hitler and 1938/39 is unhelpful. **The lessons of the past need to be adapted rather than merely repeated or strictly adhered to.**

Of course, it is a **risk to believe in Putin's guarantees and promises** as he views Ukraine as part of Russia, wishes to recoup the "lost territories" as

he sees it and perhaps intends to recreate a Russian empire. There is also the danger of a neutral Ukraine being drawn into the Russian sphere of influence rather than continuing on its westward course.

Still, if coming to a deal, even a temporary deal, with Putin could **prevent the conquest, destruction and perhaps the effective annexation of most of Ukraine** by Russia, it might be worth considering. Part of this deal, of course, would have to be the renunciation of Putin's new republics in Donbas.

Sanctions, after all, only work in the long run, once their cumulative effects have gradually made themselves felt. Sanctions, even the most severe sanctions, will not persuade Putin to stop his aggressive behavior in the short term. **Only military force would do this – but no one in the western world wants to commit NATO forces to Ukraine.**

Short of the employment of western military forces in Ukraine to stop Putin, it appears that despite the risks involved only a last-minute neutrality deal with Moscow might prevent a major war in Europe.

After all, **not a single NATO country is actually in favor of making Ukraine a member of NATO.** Having a war on our hands as a result of upholding the principle of not allowing Putin to veto NATO's eastern expansion seems to be rather unwise.

And wasn't it the lesson of the **Cuban Missile crisis** that despite all the crazy posturing and wild rhetoric, in the end after great efforts, **Kennedy and Khrushchev did manage to enter into a compromise deal** and thus spare the world a devastating major war?

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Books just published by Klaus Larres:

Uncertain Allies: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Threat of a United Europe (Yale University Press, 2022);

Dictators and Autocrats: Securing Power Across Global Politics (edited book, Routledge, 2022);

Terrorism and Transatlantic Relations: Threats and Challenges (co-edited with Tobias Hof, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).



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