DON’T BE AFRAID OF A RUSSIAN COLLAPSE

In August 1991, then-U.S. President George H.W. Bush was in Kyiv to counsel Ukrainians against statehood. Only weeks before Ukraine declared independence and only months before the Soviet Union was dissolved, Bush worried about the collapse of Soviet authority.

These worries were echoed at the time by other Western leaders, including German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Without Moscow’s continued control over its empire, they feared, the country’s future would be marked by nationalism, ethnic conflicts, and nuclear weapons getting into irresponsible hands.

These leaders, for all their achievements managing the end of the Cold War, were on the wrong side of history on this fundamental question of self-determination for Moscow’s captive peoples. Luckily, Ukraine and the other former Soviet republics that are now independent did not listen.

Today, we are witnessing similar fears in Western capitals. With Russian President Vladimir Putin’s regime in a downward spiral due to the Kremlin’s disastrous war against Ukraine, the Russian regime’s collapse and even Russia’s possible disintegration have become a major cause of concern.

Support for the war among Russian citizens has decreased, domestic criticism has grown despite harsh repression, and hundreds of thousands of men have fled the country since Putin announced a partial mobilization in late September.

Once again, the West is hesitant about the right way to manage these tensions and could be making the same mistake as in 1991.

Several Western leaders have been showing fear of a Ukrainian victory in the ongoing war against Russia—a prospect that many have found hard to get across their lips. The result is a series of equivocating statements that tiptoe around the issue of the endgame of the war.

Instead of finding clear words about a Ukrainian victory, leaders are focusing on denying Putin the success he seeks. The furthest German Chancellor Olaf Scholz will go is to declare that Putin “cannot win.”

French President Emmanuel Macron, who has missed no opportunity to announce his desire to negotiate with Putin, has even suggested that any end to the Kremlin’s genocidal war must not humiliate the Russian leader.

Beneath the surface of remarkable trans-Atlantic unity opposing Russia's war against Ukraine, therefore, there is still a yawning gap between the concerns of Russia's immediate neighbors and those of countries farther west.

Washington, Berlin, and Paris are preoccupied with their fears of escalation and the potential of a cornered Putin using nuclear weapons, and they have denied Ukraine the offensive weapons it needs to win the war.

For instance, the United States only decided to provide Ukraine with advanced High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems starting in June—but secretly installed features that would prevent their use with longer-range rockets and thereby deny the Ukrainians the ability to attack military bases on Russian territory, as was widely reported this week.

Germany, despite pressure from Ukraine and some NATO allies, has consistently refused to supply Leopard battle tanks (or even allow other countries to supply them) that would be hugely helpful for Ukraine to liberate occupied territories.

Any look at the history of empires shows that only a clear defeat can force a change in Russian thinking.

The Baltic states and Poland do not fear any real or imagined escalation as much as a Russian victory. They have therefore provided Kyiv with as much military aid as they can, outpacing many other countries when measured relative to the size of their economies.

And they have made their frustration with Western handwringing clear. From the viewpoint of these countries, the West's inconsistent and constantly shifting limits on the kinds of weapons it will deliver unnecessarily prolong the war, increase Ukraine's death toll and civilian suffering, and raise the chance that Putin may yet turn the war's tide.

He has not moved away from his declared goal of destroying Ukrainian statehood and can only be pushed back by force—the sooner, the better, NATO members closer to Russia argue.

It is ironic that Western Europeans are more afraid of escalation than countries closer to Russia, even though the latter would be directly affected by any escalation of the war. Beyond the flow of refugees, the war has, in fact, already reached their soil.

When, during one of Russia's many attacks on civilian infrastructure, a Ukrainian air defense missile landed on Polish territory and killed two people on Nov. 15, Poles saw the incident as proof

that Ukraine needs more Western military aid, not less.

If Russia were to use nuclear weapons or, more likely, attack a Ukrainian nuclear power plant, nuclear fallout would reach neighboring countries first. They would also face the biggest burden of any new waves of Ukrainian refugees—but are willing and prepared to receive them.

Being the object of Russia's imperial policies from the 1700s to the present day has taught the Baltic countries and Poland to fear Russian strength more than weakness—and to fear Russia's potential victory in Ukraine much more than its defeat.

The 20th century alone saw three major upheavals in Europe, each of them with existential consequences for the three Baltic states and Poland. These countries gained their independence as a result of World War I, were twice occupied by the Soviet Union during and after World War II, and only reestablished their independence from Moscow with the end of the Cold War.

Feb. 24, the start of Russia's second invasion of Ukraine since 2014, was another such fateful moment. In some Western capitals, the initial instinct was to accept what they saw as Ukraine's unavoidable defeat and not prolong the conflict by sending arms.

The immediate instinct of the Baltic states and Poland, on the other hand, was to do everything possible to assist Ukraine and prevent a Russian victory.

Unlike Western governments, the Baltic states and Poland have been paying close attention to what Putin and the Russian elites actually say, including their clearly stated intent of reestablishing Moscow's imperial sphere of control.

The invasion opens up two perspectives: Either Russia violently reimposes its influence over its neighbors, starting with Ukraine and continuing with other states it formerly controlled, or Ukraine reaffirms its freedom and eventually joins the Euro-Atlantic community as a full-fledged member, like the Baltics and former members of the Soviet bloc have done.

Anything in between—a cease-fire that freezes the conflict, for instance—will allow Putin or his successor to rearm, resupply, and give it another go. For Ukraine to secure its freedom, Russia must suffer a clear defeat in Ukraine.

That's not to say that concerns related to Russia's nuclear weapons shouldn't be taken seriously. Managing the threat requires a mix of prudence and firmness from the West.

Because of an overabundance of prudence, however, Russia has managed to smartly manipulate fears of a nuclear Armageddon to maintain the West's self-imposed constraints on sending heavier and longer-range weapons to Ukraine.

Thankfully, the West is now relearning deterrence—including clear messaging to Russia about the devastating consequences it would suffer if it were to follow through on its nuclear threats. It is in the interest of global stability that the Kremlin does not succeed in using nuclear blackmail to eke out a victory in Ukraine.

What's more, Russia resorting to nuclear weapons carries great risk for Putin and is therefore highly unlikely. Russia using conventional force to occupy territories in neighboring countries, unfortunately, is a devastating reality.

Which is why the reality is: there's no peace in Ukraine without Russian retreat, that calls for diplomacy are misplaced and naive.

Moscow is unlikely to give up its imperialist designs on neighboring countries anytime soon, and any look at the history of empires shows that only a clear defeat can force a change in thinking.

The idea that Russia is only secure if it dominates its smaller neighbors and controls a sphere of influence is deeply rooted in centuries of Russian thought. *No smaller neighbor of Russia has yet managed to achieve truly friendly relations*: Even Finland, which tried just about everything short of letting itself be occupied, has given up and is on the way to joining NATO.

In all likelihood, the next Russian leader will emerge from within the current system dominated by the security forces—and represent the same values and worldview now on display in Ukraine. Russia's disintegration seems much less likely than the continuation of centralized, autocratic, and oppressive rule.

In spite of the realities staring them in the face, some Western leaders still hold on to hopes of returning to a version of the old status quo with Russia.

Scholz, as he hems and haws on military assistance to Ukraine, hopes that "we can come back to a peace order that worked and make it safe again." Russia's neighbors are left to wonder what "order that worked" Scholz might mean.

During the Cold War, large parts of Central and Eastern Europe were occupied. In the 1990s, Russia instigated wars and frozen conflicts in post-Soviet states in order to keep them under its

control. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and has been fighting and occupying Ukraine since 2014.

Western governments issued a few diplomatic statements and minor sanctions but endorsed Russia's sphere of influence by blocking Ukraine's and Georgia's aspirations to join the European Union and NATO. This caution was motivated by the wish to "reduce tensions and ensure stability" but ultimately encouraged Russia to impose its "order that worked" *by force*.

Today, the most stable part of Russia's immediate neighborhood are those countries that have joined NATO and the EU following their own choice and efforts to break free from Moscow's domination. Ukraine has embarked on the same path, supported by more than 80 percent of its citizens.

In the 1990s, the Baltic states had to overcome strong suspicions in Western capitals about the wisdom of extending the EU and NATO to any former Soviet republics. Some Western observers continue to echo the Kremlin's claims that NATO enlargement is to blame for Russia's growing aggressiveness.

Yet Russia's neighbors know all too well that NATO did not cause Russia's aggressive imperialism, which existed for centuries before the alliance was even born. On the contrary, NATO enlargement has turned out to be the most successful means of containing it. When deterred by a superior force, Russia backs down.

The Ukrainians' courage and determination to defend their independence is a historic chance for the United States and Europe to deliver a decisive blow to Russian imperialism and toxic nationalism.

But so far, the major Western powers hesitate to throw their weight behind this outcome. Ukraine, strongly supported by the Baltic countries and Poland, insists that Russia must be fought, isolated, and sanctioned until it completely withdraws from Ukraine, pays reparations for war damage, and delivers Russians accused of war crimes to face trial.

This will be a long process requiring a change in Western thinking, but it is unavoidable if past mistakes of handling Russian aggression are to be corrected.

Eventually, a free and democratic Ukraine, secure in its borders and fully integrated into the trans-Atlantic community, will be the best possible chance for a deep transformation within Russia. It is that outcome—about which the West should be clear—that could one day open up a truly peaceful, post-imperial era in Russia's relations with its neighbors.

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