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Warriors' lament, peacemakers' hymn

Narrowing public debate to a military victory for Ukraine as the only option diminishes the potential for diplomatic solutions that could bring peace

Ukraine urgently needs arms and support to bring the Russian attack to a halt. Russia must not be allowed to win. And still, General Vadym Skibitsky, deputy head of Ukraine's military intelligence, was recently quoted in an interview in *The Economist* as saying that he saw no way for Ukraine to win the war on the battlefield *alone*. Even if Ukraine were to succeed in pushing the Russian forces back to its borders – a prospect that looks increasingly remote – this would not end the war: 'Such wars can only be ended by treaties' and 'at present, both sides are jockeying for the "most favourable position" in the run-up to possible talks.'

'It would be naive to believe that Ukraine could regain full control of its territory in the foreseeable future', Czech President and staunch Ukraine supporter Petr Pavel told *Sky News*. Russia will not give up the occupied territories: 'What we have to do is stop the war.' In the face of endless suffering and deaths, looking for ways to stop the war instead of clinging to the hope of a military victory as the only acceptable option, contrary to the facts, is an imperative of moral realpolitik.

When German politician Rolf Mützenich raised the question in parliament in March as to whether ways to freeze the war should not be discussed in parallel with resolute arms aid to Ukraine, a storm of indignation broke out. 'Naive policy of appeasement towards Russia', proclaimed MPs Ricarda Lang and Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann in unison.

But to equate considerations about freezing a conflict – while at the same time providing decisive military, political and humanitarian support – with what happened in Munich in 1938 is evidence of historical ignorance or dishonesty. At that time, the major European powers decided over the heads of the Czechs to hand over part of their country to Hitler's Germany without a fight. The use of untrue equations is an attempt to disavow an inconvenient question from the outset.

Alternative paths

Questions of burden-sharing for the reception and integration of 1.2 million Ukrainians need to be discussed just as much as the increase in defence spending. In this context, the change of terminology from 'defence capability' to 'war capability' is no semantic trifle, but gives the turning point a deliberately bellicose accent. There needs to be an open debate about the fact that Ukrainian and German interests, while aligned on important issues, are not congruent. The more intensively NATO participates in the war with material and personnel, the more secure Ukraine is likely to feel. At the same time, according to an opinion poll, 72 per cent of Germans oppose the deployment of soldiers, 58 per cent the provision of Taurus cruise missiles and 31 per cent the supply of weapons to Ukraine in general.

Narrowing the debate to a military victory for Ukraine as the only acceptable option raises the question of what should be done if this does not materialise. If Russia is to be defeated on the battlefield and driven from its occupied territories, this will not be possible without massive further escalation — including, at least indirectly, the deployment of soldiers from NATO countries. It would entail prolonged fighting and high Ukrainian losses and – if successful terrain gains are made – the risk of a Russian arms escalation.

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More than anything else, the thousands of deaths call for a search for ways to end the war without Ukraine losing and Russia winning. Mützenich's call to consider, beyond the small-scale dispute over individual weapons to be delivered, whether there are other ways of ending the war besides a decisive military success for Ukraine is not a betrayal of the Ukrainian cause. Such considerations are part of an absolutely necessary democratic debate to continue to win over a majority of the German population in favour of supporting Ukraine.

People are losing faith in policies that demand sacrifice for unrealistic goals. If complete victory over Russia is out of reach, a bitter compromise in which Ukraine – supported and secured by Western military and economic aid – retains its freedom but loses territory may be more likely to win the long-term consent of the population. Russia's violation of international law remains a continuing injustice. Anyone who wants to banish the debate about such imperfect but possible solutions from parliament and the opinion mainstream will see it unfold all the more in

self-reinforcing bubbles, where even the most far-fetched ideas are clicked on, liked and shared.

However, all considerations regarding negotiated solutions will remain abstract and hypothetical as long as Russia is not seriously prepared to negotiate. Putin will not voluntarily give up his stated goals, which can be roughly summarised as follows: First, the redrawing of borders and the annexation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine; second, regime change in Kyiv; and third, the establishment of a Belarus-style demilitarised vassal state in the rest of Ukraine. Russia will be willing to negotiate if the impression grows in the country that time is working against it in military, economic, domestic and foreign policy terms, and that points two and three are unattainable.

In terms of foreign policy, countries outside the NATO structures must be persuaded to contribute to the resolution of the conflict.

In addition to arms deliveries to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, extra efforts are needed to bring about a ceasefire and peace negotiations. The peace conference organised by Switzerland in mid-June, which will initially 'only' discuss nuclear safety, humanitarian aspects such as the return of abducted children and the safety of food transports with the participation of as many countries as possible, is an important initiative that should be supported. The internal opposition to Putin – as weak as it currently appears – must be encouraged. This includes support for exile media and organisations, the offer of political asylum to Russian conscientious objectors and deserters, but also the message that there is a way back to Europe for a Russia that frees itself from Putin.

In terms of foreign policy, countries outside the NATO structures must be persuaded to contribute to the resolution of the conflict. That these countries have so far shown little or no commitment is due to the fact that their national interests and priorities differ from those of the West. An impassioned appeal by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock is unlikely to change minds here. Especially when German foreign policy is unimpressed by overwhelming majority decisions of the international community in other cases.

Bridging interests

In order to win over countries of the Global South to support Ukraine, there must be a willingness on the part of the West to understand their interests. Without the will of the rich countries to overcome the structural injustices that are in many ways woven into the rules-based international order, it will not be possible to convince the Global South to show solidarity with Ukraine in the name of the rules-based international order.

Whether Germany and the EU can persuade China to influence Russia in the interests of peace seems doubtful; the People's Republic has so far been the big winner of this conflict, both economically and geopolitically. Xi Jinping's statement against the use of nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine during German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Beijing in autumn 2022 shows that there are nevertheless still possibilities. Even if, despite intensive efforts, it has not yet been possible to dissuade China from de facto siding with Russia, it remains important to make it credibly clear to China that a Chinese contribution to resolving the crisis would have a positive impact on Sino-European relations.

How to possibly freeze the conflict as a first step on the road to peace is a legitimate and necessary question.

As the second most important arms supplier to Ukraine, Germany can explore initiatives beyond a protracted war of attrition in confidential talks with Kyiv and its allies. If Russia accepts NATO membership or equivalent Western security guarantees for a free Ukraine *and* agrees to a UN-controlled referendum in the occupied territories on whether they belong to Russia or Ukraine, could a Ukrainian proposal be conceivable that in no way recognises the Russian annexations, but offers to renounce the military reconquest of the occupied territories? Such or similar considerations could put diplomatic pressure on Russia and show the world that Ukraine, despite the unambiguous situation under international law, is prepared to negotiate peace with the aggressor. Diplomatically, the focus must be on initiatives and proposed solutions that will isolate Russia even more internationally than before and increase global pressure on the country to cease hostilities.

Western military escalation potential is another option to increase

pressure on Russia to negotiate. But escalation always means playing with fire. Only the US has the real power to escalate in a truly deterrent manner. The fact that the US has been reluctant to do so up until now is probably due to the fact that it wants to protect Ukraine for geopolitical reasons and in line with Western values, but at the same time wants to prevent the risk of the war spreading and a possible nuclear escalation. To criticise this cautious approach, which is also being pursued by the German government, as fearful dithering does not do justice to the seriousness of the situation.

It is to be hoped that the release of the $60 bn package by the US Congress and the massive European and especially German support will stabilise the front, deprive Russia of the prospect of a 'more favourable position' and increase its willingness to seek solutions based on a military stalemate.

How to possibly freeze the conflict as a first step on the road to peace is a legitimate and necessary question. If it is not to remain abstract and hypothetical, the question must be followed by an answer as to what combination of political pressure, military support, diplomatic alliances, negotiating frameworks and compromise proposals could start the process of freezing and ending the war. This requires confidential diplomacy — and public debate.



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