



Setting the stage for a durable peace in Ukraine

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's abrupt mid-December visit to Washington dominated U.S. headlines and commentaries ahead of the holiday season. Reactions predictably ranged from the trite to the trivial (focusing, for instance, on the casual way Zelensky, a leader at war, was dressed for his meetings at the White House and in Congress). But most pundits failed to ask the most important questions prompted by the Ukrainian president's trip: What, precisely, would a durable peace between Moscow and Kyiv look like? Conversely, what conditions would be counterproductive, simply creating a tactical pause before prompting renewed Russian hostilities with Ukraine or Kremlin designs on other targets?

Even a casual reading of Russian history helps explain why this should be a paramount concern.

In 1263, the small city state of Moscow was a vassal of the Mongol Empire. Through repeated wars of aggression, it grew in size until it finally broke free of the Mongols in 1480. By the beginning of the 20th Century, additional conflicts had built an empire spanning 11 time zones, and that massive territory expanded still further under Soviet rule.

Every senior Russian official knows this history and has been taught, from an early age, that conquering foreign lands is a hallmark of national greatness. In this telling, peace is just a temporary condition — one that buys time for Moscow to become strong enough to once again make additional territories its own.

This imperial ideology was succinctly explained by Vladislav Surkov, a key Kremlin insider, who wrote in February 2019 that Russia “is growing in size and assembling land inhabited by people linked by a common heritage,” and that “this starring role... was assigned to our country by world history.” In other words, as Surkov and his boss, Russian President Vladimir Putin, see it, Russian imperialism is a matter of historical destiny.

This view, widely held in elite Russian circles, has unsettled many in Europe. This is especially true in Poland and among the Baltic states, whose geography and history put them at greater risk of potential Russian aggression, despite their membership in NATO. But it is also the case for the Nordic nations of Sweden and Finland, who must now seriously consider longstanding Russian claims on their respective sovereign territories. That is why, after long remaining neutral, both countries have opted to join the Atlantic Alliance in recent months. Quite simply, they understand that the Russian imperial impulse isn't likely to die off any time soon.

To be sure, such dreams are not unique to Russia. Imperial ideas have been slow to fade in all former empires. When they have (as in the United Kingdom and Belgium), they have done so because the country in question no longer has the political will or the military capability to maintain — let alone expand — its imperial holdings. That's a concern, because a resource rich, nuclear armed Russia could well emerge from the current conflict with lingering imperial aspirations, thereby setting the stage for yet another conflict.

What, then, is to be done?

First, the West needs to help Ukraine regain full sovereignty over its land. Should Russia's unprovoked aggression, war crimes, and nuclear blackmail result in unwarranted territorial gains, it would only serve to whet Russia's appetite for more of the same. Further, if Russia is seen having emerged from the current conflict as the victor, it would strengthen the hand — and fire the imagination — of hawks in other countries. Hardliners in Iran would have added ammunition to argue for accelerating their regional designs, while China's ruling Communist Party will see a takeover of Taiwan as more feasible. If Russia can back down the West and gain territory, these hawks will argue, why can't we do the same?

Second, even if the peace fully restores Ukraine's territory, the U.S. should nevertheless take the lead in developing a multilateral security architecture sufficient to deter Russian imperial impulses in the future — whether against Ukraine once more, or against other lands considered “lost” by Kremlin ideologues. Such preemptive investments would be prudent, despite the associated costs. In retrospect, if Putin knew how strongly the West would support Ukraine, would he have attacked in the first place?

Absent both, America's financial commitments can be expected to rise sharply in the future, as Moscow parlays the lessons of its brinkmanship in Ukraine into designs on other former territories, while additional hostile nations are inspired to follow suit.

In his address before the U.S. Congress, Mr. Zelensky correctly described American aid to Ukraine as an investment in world stability. It's a message worth heeding. Not all wisdom, after all, comes wrapped in a custom-tailored suit.

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