Opinion Column

How to help Ukraine defeat the Russian Invader and Aggressor

Caspar ten Dam with Ab de Buck

Introduction

One of our worst fears—as mentioned in our earlier opinion pieces on Bosnian-Serb separatist plans in Bosnia—has come to pass: on 24 February 2022, Russia invaded (the rest of) Ukraine. This invasion is utterly unjustified, based on the false pretexts of ‘denazifying’ the Ukrainian government and society and ‘rescuing’ the pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donbas region from alleged attacks. For one thing, neo Nazi and other extreme rightwing parties have been unable to gain any seats in the Ukrainian parliament in recent elections.

The unwarranted and brutal Russian invasion is characterised by shelling of residential areas and deliberate maltreatment and killing of civilians. The Western response—repeated warnings by particularly the Americans and the British, strong condemnations, stiff sanctions, substantive military aid to the Ukrainian armed forces, etc.—has shown more resolve, initiative and imaginative measures opposing ‘Putin’s war’ than some of us have initially feared and expected.

The fierce, smart and thereby effective Ukrainian resistance stymieing and even reversing Russian advances toward the capital Kiev and other places have been according to our expectations however.
Thus we predicted that “despite the military disparities, the Ukrainian armed forces would not be a pushover if Putin does decide to invade Ukraine”. The currently slow progress at best by heavily concentrated Russian and pro-Russian forces in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region—particularly in the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces already partially controlled by pro-Russian breakaway republics since the preceding war in 2014—should surprise no one either. Indeed the entire invasion is “about to run out of steam”, according to Richard Moore, the head of Britain’s foreign intelligence service MI6.

Actually, Ukrainian forces have been (re)taking the initiative through successful counteroffensives toward Kherson in the south and into the Donbas region from Kharkov in the north. These setbacks clearly have surprised Russia’s President Vladimir Putin, who masterminded and ordered the invasion of Ukraine with much higher ambitions of territorial conquest and regime change.

Russian vis-à-vis Ukrainian battlefield losses, behaviours and accomplishments

The Russian invasion force has suffered staggering losses. Since the start of the war the Ukrainian Defense ministry regularly releases casualty figures which are generally considered reliable—at least far more so than those released by its Russian counterpart. Thus already by June 20, 2022 the once 150,000-strong invasion force lost on land 38,750 men (killed, wounded, missing or captured), 1700 tanks, 3908 armoured vehicles, 221 planes, 188 helicopters, 856 artillery systems, 250 multiple rocket systems, 703 drones and numerous other vehicles and weapon systems.
These losses are massive and debilitating, given that on February 24, Russia’s entire land army “consisted of 280,000 full-time active soldiers compared with Ukraine’s 125,600”. However, the Ukrainian Defense ministry refuses to give Ukrainian army losses; on this website and in public statements it suffices with the battle cry ‘Heroes don’t Die’. This is emotionally understandable—and strategically, as it does not wish to show the Russian enemy its own losses.

Reportedly the losses among the Ukrainian armed forces have been high too, but much lower both in relative and absolute numbers, at least until recently. These certainly pale in comparison to those among their Russian counterparts: “According to Western estimates, Russia has suffered between 45,000 and 75,000 wounded and killed personnel, from junior enlisted soldiers to generals”. At any rate, the number of civilian casualties and the damage inflicted on Ukrainian infrastructure and civilian objects have been enormous.

One wonders whether Putin is such a self-isolated autocrat that he is genuinely unaware of his country's and army's weaknesses. Think of the Russian army's stultifying hierarchy, incompetence and brutality—as shown by its lack of junior officers allowed to take the initiative and harsh treatment of raw recruits—and the consequent reliance on artillery and air-to-surface missiles against civilian targets. This is comparable to the performance of the Russian army in e.g. the Chechens wars of independence during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the Syrian War in more recent times.

Similarly the Russian invasion force in Ukraine has destroyed in part or in whole multiple cities and villages by indiscriminate shelling and
bombed, and committed countless other atrocities against civilians and combatants alike. The Russian army systematically bombs residential areas; cities like Mariupol and Severodonetsk have been completely destroyed. Russia is waging a war of terror against Ukraine and bombing targets that have nothing to do with an ‘ordinary’ war wherein the warring parties mainly targets combatants and at least try to uphold humanitarian law, as shown by the following examples:

- On June 1, 2022, the Russians threw missiles at Serhiivka. On June 27, such a rocket hit a supermarket in Kremenchuk, in central Ukraine.
- Terror is also the appropriate word for the attack on Chasiv Yar on July 10, 2022. Amnesty International showed that the Russians used cluster bombs that are militarily nonsensical, but cause many civilian casualties.
- Extremely concerning is also the mass kidnapping of Ukrainian citizens (estimated 900,000 to 1.6 million, 260,000 of whom are children). There are so-called ‘filtration camps’ in Russia, where thousands of deported Ukrainians are being interrogated, tortured and raped. Russia already has used such atrocious filtration camps against the Chechens in the 1990s and beyond. As Dutch defense analyst Ko Colijn puts it, “this is no longer a war, but state terror”. That is to say, state terror against civilians rather than a war between combatants.

These acts show that the Russian army grossly violates the rules of war, as set out in the Geneva conventions. As a consequence of these acts, millions of Ukrainians have fled their homes, either to countries abroad or inside their own country.

Even so, the prospects of Ukrainian victory are considerable. Unlike
Chechnya and Georgia, Ukraine is a large country with a large professional army—while in Syria Russian forces merely buttressed Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The Chechens, Georgians and Syrians fighting for their freedom have been equally proud and fierce (if occasionally brutal), just like the Ukrainians fighting for their country now. But unlike the former, the Ukrainians possess sufficient manpower, motivation, professionalism, territorial depth and outside political and military support to survive Russia's incompetent-yet-brutal onslaught—and conceivably even win the war waged against them. These differences explain the disparities of Russian losses in these wars compared to the far higher ones in Ukraine.

Therefore the following claims by the Ukrainian Defense ministry are credible and revealing: “In 146 days of war in Ukraine, [the] Russian Army has already lost more than 38750 soldiers. That’s 177% more casualties than in [the] two Chechen wars, which lasted 4 years. And [it’s] 158% more than the Soviet army lost during the 9 years of the war in Afghanistan”. 12

Proposals to deal with the war in Ukraine

But for Ukrainian victory to happen in the near future—to stop Russia's brutal tactics and even reverse its territorial aggression and initial gains like the cities of Kherson, Mariupol and Severodonetsk—we believe the following actors should undertake the following steps as quickly and effectively as possible:
A speedier, more massive and better coordinated humanitarian, financial, economic and particularly military aid to Ukraine from NATO, EU and their member states and other countries, including heavier and longer-range weaponry to offset and overcome Russia’s current superiority in artillery and other heavy weaponry—including offensive weapons to take back the occupied territories. This aid should go in tandem with far-reaching, effective sanctions against Russia, including especially a total halt in buying Russian gas.

If heavy long-range weapons had been delivered en masse to the Ukrainian armed forces months earlier than happened eventually and partially—instead of incrementally and haphazardly supplying such weapons out of a misguided fear of escalating the conflict vis-à-vis Putin’s Russia—then the Russian invasion force might have been fully thwarted, defeated and even expelled altogether by this time. Worryingly, deliveries and pledges of aid to Ukraine’s armed forces including its International Legion of foreign volunteers have been slowing down, according to the Ukraine Support Tracker. According to most outside observers, this ‘foreign legion’ has been highly or at least broadly effective. At any rate the slowing trend of military assistance should be reversed i.e. speeded up rather!

The massive bombing of residential areas and ruthless killing of civilians does allow in our opinion the elimination of the launchers, even if those terror bombings do come from Russia proper. Thus one should deliver longer-range weaponry that may hit targets inside Russia that directly threaten Ukraine’s society. This means for example MLRS missiles with a range of 200 miles instead of only 50 miles.
Wider escalation of the war across Europe is highly unlikely—unless Putin's aggression is rewarded, encouraging him to do the same against e.g. the Baltic states. Fears that supplying Ukraine with heavy and long-range weaponry would escalate the war beyond its borders should not be an excuse for inaction and defenselessness against brutal aggression.

Curtailing military aid would only satisfy a false sense of security, as it would encourage Russian aggression and land grabbing elsewhere in Europe in the future. Besides, it should be left to the Ukrainians to decide whether they would accept the possible risks of ‘escalating’ the war with long-range counterattacks. At any rate, a country has a right under international law to defend itself against foreign aggression, full occupation, genocide and/or other devastations—including attacking the aggressor on its home ground.

Therefore, Ukraine should be allowed to retake all its lost lands from the Russian aggressor if it is able and willing to do so, however long it would take. The international community in general and the West in particular should not openly or secretly press the government of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to settle for anything less, by for instance curtailing military aid. Such a policy would simply reward brutality and aggression. At the very least Ukraine should be allowed to regain all the territories it lost to Russia since the start of the latter's invasion in February 2022.

However if the Ukrainians, without outside pressure, wish to stop fighting even when the Russians still occupy some parts of their lands—because they wish to stop further bloodletting on both sides and are unable or too fatigued to expel the aggressor even with maximum outside
help, one should not oppose a ceasefire and an interim peace agreement between Kiev and Moscow. In the meantime the only way to stop the aggression of Putin and his cohorts is by confronting them with a strong adversary, and making them realise Russia will not win. Only then Putin might start serious negotiations.

However, even a durable cessation of hostilities with maintenance of former battle lines should never lead to international recognition of occupied and breakaway regions in Ukraine, let alone a Greater Russia at the expense of Ukraine, through naked, unwarranted and brutal aggression.

One might conceivably hold new, fair and mutually agreed voluntary plebiscites on secession for e.g. the Crimea and the Donbas in the distant future (according to the Minsk accords and a reformed Constitution these regions should get autonomy and full minority rights anyway)—without any pressure and interference by Russia or other outside powers. One could hold such plebiscites only once Ukraine is restored and recovered after the war however, with war reparations from Russia and war crime trials at e.g. the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

• The granting of EU candidate membership status to Ukraine by EU’s European Council on June 23, 2022 is welcome and crucial in helping the country to survive and overcome the Russian aggression—and maintain and enhance its democracy and security in the more distant future; however, we call for accession of Ukraine to the European Union within a half a decade rather than a full decade or more, if only to forestall future disruptive acts by Putin or his successor. Of course Ukraine must take the final steps of securing a lasting democracy within this period.

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The same should be true for other EU accession candidates like Bosnia, Kosovo and Northern Macedonia.

Generally we call for speedier accession of candidate states with more flexible application of the EU membership criteria to enhance democracy and rule of law—while more stringently enforcing those same principles enshrined in European Union law on existing EU member states. Ukraine should be free and allowed to join both the EU and NATO—as should a hopefully democratic Russia in a post-Putin era, in the spirit of the Common European Home concept propagated by the recently diseased last President of the Soviet Union, Michael Gorbachev.

Recent developments

Counter-offensives versus sham referendums in Russian occupied territories

On September 30, 2022 Putin announced Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizzhia regions—after forced, intimidating and manipulated mock referendums in only parts of those regions it still actually occupies. The Ukrainian government of President Zelensky has indicated that it does not care about this and will continue unabated offensives to liberate these areas—even though Putin would regard these as belonging to Russia and thus falling under Russia's nuclear umbrella. We believe there should be no overt or covert pressure on Zelensky to limit or cease its successful counter-offensives—which fortunately continue to this day, like the liberation of Lyman, a strategic rail hub in the east.
Ergo: help Ukraine with additional military aid and intelligence to push through the counter-offensives as quickly and as far as possible, even during the winter months. With such help it is quite possible that even a large city like Kherson can be liberated in the immediate future. In any case, Ukraine has the right to retake all occupied territories, even if the circumstances make it slow and grinding, and the war would last longer as a result. It is up to Ukraine to determine its priorities and what will be feasible on the battlefield. At the most we can provide her with advice and assistance.

Nuclear threats from Putin

We deem it of vital importance to take Putin’s nuclear threats seriously, just to be on the safe side, and at the same time not to be blackmailed by them. NATO and/or individual NATO countries must provide adequate conventional and nuclear deterrence against Putin’s threat to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine. The prospective NATO member states Sweden and Finland already have informal Article 5 protection from the United States and the United Kingdom in particular against both conventional and nuclear aggression by Russia against these countries.

We therefore believe that the European Union and the United States should give full support to Ukraine in the event of a nuclear attack. In fact, we believe that Ukraine is now entitled to a publicly stated Article 5-like guarantee—preferably from NATO or its member states—against nuclear threats and aggression by Russia. In the conventional field, this is not necessary—Ukraine is clearly able to hold its own on the battlefield.
We also deem it wise to immediately send a NATO or EU observation force to Ukraine as an extra deterrent, to show Putin that if he fires one or more nuclear weapons, NATO soldiers or other international observers could be hit by these weapons.

Were Putin to drop one or more nuclear bombs on Ukraine despite such additional deterrence, then the gloves are off regarding military aid to Ukraine. In such an eventuality, NATO and the EU should also help to i) combat nuclear fallout and help its victims; (ii) restore infrastructure as much as possible; and iii) assist Ukrainian troops. In addition, the West and NATO especially should seriously consider the following emergency steps at once if such a nuclear catastrophe were to take place:

a) maximum sanctions against Russia, including a complete stop of gas imports and access to international payments;
b) supplying Ukraine with long-range weapons capable of hitting targets in Russia itself; should one or more nuclear bombs fall on its territory resulting in countless deaths, Ukraine has every right to hit military targets in Russia;
c) actively promote the overthrow of the Putin regime; Ukraine—and the West as a whole—has every right to pursue democratic regime change in Russia should the latter actually use nuclear weapons;
d) facilitating Ukraine’s ‘fast track’ NATO membership; that country will need extra protection in the future, if only because of the risk that an even more unpredictable dictator could unfortunately come to power after Putin.
Concluding observations

Unsurprisingly the relations between the Russian and Ukrainians governments and (most of) their respective peoples have soured deeply since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine since February 2022—to put it very mildly. Even so, some long-term solutions to the conflict may still be feasible.

Thus perhaps one could approach the status of Crimea more leniently vis-à-vis Russia than the self-declared People’s Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk. This may be defensible—if only because Crimea has been part of Russia from 1783 (albeit through colonial conquest) until 1954 when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred it from the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) i.e. Russia to the Ukrainian SSR i.e. Ukraine. One even could wonder whether Crimea should have been given back to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Be that as it may, one should accompany any internationally recognised transfer of Crimea back to Russia with a properly and fully democratically held referendum this time—in contrast to the manipulated and enforced annexation referendum in 2014.

Last but not least, such a referendum would be valid only if a clear majority of the indigenous Tatar minority would approve such a transfer as well. Currently most Crimean Tatars—once they can freely express their opinions without duress—prefer to live under Ukrainian rule again, however shaky its democracy, rather than continue living under Russian rule given its repressive autocracy under Putin.
Moreover, we believe that durable peace and reconciliation between Ukraine and Russia are highly unlikely and indeed virtually impossible as long as Putin remains in power, the main instigator of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Otherwise, apart from a full Ukrainian victory, a temporary ceasefire and perhaps an interim peace deal are the best outcomes one could hope for.

Hopefully, an utter collapse of the Russian invasion will precipitate Putin's fall from power—by a coup, a popular uprising by the Russian people or a combination of those. Just like his onetime Serbian colleague Slobodan Milosevic, Putin should eventually answer for his crimes before either a domestic or international tribunal, accompanied by all those in the Russian government and military who are responsible for the atrocities and terror carried out in Ukraine. In this way one should reverse and punish autocracy, brutality and aggression.

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July in The Hague as boardmembers of the former Political Committee Stari Most (PCSM) until 2017. We thank Hein van der Hoeven, Jolies Heij, Marcel Buurman and other (former) members and sympathisers of CHI and PCSM for offering their feedback and thereby helping to improve the quality of our article—even if they do not agree with all the standpoints taken in it.  

Endnotes—Sources

1. This article is based on several opinion pieces on the Russo-Ukrainian War published at www.committeehumanitarianintervention.org & https://committeehumanitarianintervention.wordpress.com.
2. Ab de Buck & Caspar ten Dam, ‘Bosnian-Serb separatist plans threaten peace in Bosnia—we can still stop this’ CHI, 31 March 2022; Ab de Buck & Caspar ten Dam, ‘Prevent the division of Bosnia by Dodik and Putin—and give it a truly democratic constitution’ CHI, 30 September 2022; see for the online versions www.committeehumanitarianintervention.org (esp. webpage News); or https://committeehumanitarianintervention.wordpress.com (ibid).
4. Ibid, p.11.
6. See for these and other figures https://uawar.net/stats (last acc. 20-07-2022).
8. See https://uawar.net/stats.
11. Ibid.
12. See https://uawar.net/stats.
13. See International Legion of Ukraine, https://fightforua.org. Incidentally, CHI argues that “it can be the case that non-state organisations are needed to defend people, such as the foreign legion currently established by the Ukrainian government to help defend its country and people against the brutal onslaught of the Russian invasion forces” (https://committeehumanitarianintervention.org/goals-of-the-international-committee-for-humanitarian-intervention).

NB: do you have any comments on Ten Dam’s & De Buck’s article? Please send these to info@ethnogoeopolitic.org or by contactform at www.ethnogoeopolitics.org. To reiterate, we at the Editorial Board state in our ‘Call and Guidelines for Contributions’ in every issue of our journal that any controversial and contestable article published here “does not necessarily mean that we approve of everything that these contributors may say. The contributors themselves are responsible and accountable for their statements”—even if any of them happen to be editors of our journal.