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Demonization, Danger and Diplomacy



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Last week, 30 Democratic members of the House signed a letter urging us to balance military support for Ukraine with sensible diplomacy. They were pilloried for their sober advice, and many of them quickly disavowed their call. In less than 24 hours, the letter was withdrawn.

This is a shame.

A brutal war grinds on in Europe, the continent with the greatest hope of being whole, free and humanitarian. Arguments abound in this country about whether to negotiate an end to this war, while preserving our commitment to the causes of democracy, liberty, rule of law, and the preservation of human life and happiness. The issues at stake are profound and demand careful deliberation and strategic thinking.

Diplomacy must work hand-in-glove with military force if we are to avert tragedy in Ukraine. Historically, vanishingly few conflicts have ended without a political settlement, and we should be wary of the assertion that Ukraine can achieve complete victory over Russia if only the United States provides sufficient military assistance. The siren song of total victory has produced decades of unending destruction in such places as Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. World War II, one of the few conflicts that produced unconditional surrender, required nearly 100 million deaths and the military occupation of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. And unlike Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, Russia has nuclear weapons. Finding a delicate balance between our yearning for justice in Ukraine and the imperative of averting a nuclear confrontation with Russia is essential.

Many believe that the time is not ripe for diplomacy. They argue that Ukraine and Russia now show little willingness to compromise, that Vladimir Putin will remain stubborn and unrelenting, and that Volodymyr Zelenskyy would put himself in political danger inside Ukraine if he were to pursue negotiations. But negotiated outcomes require careful preparation, including the creation of political space necessary to support compromises. Often, such preparation must

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begin long before the warring parties consider themselves ready for negotiations. Unless we prepare now, the United States may be unable to facilitate a settlement when the time comes for real bargaining, and we may discover that the constituencies for compromise in both Russia and Ukraine have disappeared altogether.

Others believe that diplomatic contacts constitute appeasement, and that signaling any openness to compromise would only fuel Russian aggression. This view reflects a growing tendency in the United States to demonize enemies, creating genuine barriers to opening contacts and building the kind of relationships that can produce settlements at the conference table. Had John F. Kennedy succumbed to the temptation to demonize Nikita Khrushchev and eschew talks, the Cuban missile crisis almost certainly would have ended in conflagration rather than compromise. That compromise did not result in a new era of Soviet aggression and nuclear blackmail, as many fear might happen today if Russia is not defeated altogether in Ukraine. Instead, it led to a new era of détente and arms control during which the Soviet bloc gradually withered from within.

Still others insist that diplomacy can only focus on delineating Ukrainian borders. But this is only one of many issues that must be addressed, and the inherent difficulties of any compromise over territory mean that it is most likely to be settled toward the end of any negotiation, not at its outset. The United States should not strong-arm Ukraine over sovereign decisions such as the delineation of its borders. But we have already seen that Ukraine and Russia can, with outside help, find compromises over securing grain shipments and exchanging prisoners of war. Other arrangements might be possible to reduce civilian casualties, build mutual confidence and lay the groundwork for an eventual cease-fire. Ultimately, both sides must come to believe that a negotiated settlement is preferable to the costs and dangers of continued fighting.

We should have no illusions about the immense difficulties we face in attempting to end the war in Ukraine. Many delicate balances must be struck in addressing the dangers we face. But our critical role in providing Ukraine with the weaponry, intelligence and military advice it needs for self-defense also carries with it great diplomatic responsibility to the American people and to the world. Only the United States can provide Ukraine with the assurances it needs that diplomacy can safeguard, not threaten, its sovereignty and independence. Only the United States can pair the firmness necessary to show Putin he cannot win on the battlefield with the flexibility to convince him that the right concessions can address Russia's core security concerns.

Could a combination of military stick and diplomatic carrot cause Putin to step back from the brink in Ukraine today? We cannot know unless we try. No one can promise success in either diplomacy or war. But operating as if they were two entirely separate spheres of activity in which war brings victory and negotiations mean defeat is a formula for disaster.

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