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IDEAS

How to save Ukraine

The war with Russia shows no signs of abating and the threat that the US might be drawn into the conflict remains real. To attain peace, Washington has to stop pretending it can dominate the world.

By **Trevor Corson** Updated June 26, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



A child played as women rested on a bench in front of destroyed residential buildings in Kostyantynivka, in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, on June 22. ROMAN PILIPEY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Everything about the war in Ukraine is changing. Tragically, Ukraine is losing ground and men so relentlessly that its deputy head of military intelligence has [concluded](#) Ukraine might be unable to win. The United States and Europe are rightly looking for new ways to help. But they are escalating

toward direct war with Russia, by permitting Ukraine to use [American missiles](#) on targets in Russia, by possibly [basing fighter jets](#) in NATO territory, and by considering deployments of [more US personnel](#) and [NATO “trainers”](#) into Ukraine, even though these risky moves are [unlikely](#) to [turn](#) the tide.

President Biden at the D-Day commemoration in early June said the United States would continue to support Ukraine “[completely](#).” In turn, [the United States and Europe](#) could get pulled into [another “forever war,”](#) this time against a Russia that now possesses a potent war machine and the world’s [fourth-largest economy](#) by purchasing power, and that is backed by manufacturing superpower China. And all this escalation is eroding an 80-year taboo against combat between nuclear-armed superpowers, even though [Biden](#), his White House team, the Pentagon-affiliated think tank [RAND](#), and the [US intelligence community](#) worry Russia could go nuclear.

As the risks rise and Ukraine’s plight worsens, Biden’s [low approval ratings on foreign policy](#) could fall further, jeopardizing the entire Democratic Party. The United States’ own [intelligence agencies](#) don’t believe Russia wants to attack Europe, barring additional escalation from the West. So further tragedy could be avoided if there were an alternative for Ukraine.

In fact, there’s long been an alternative, supported by heavyweight US foreign-policy veterans. And Biden has just hinted that he might be open to it.



People visited the Lychakiv military cemetery on a Day of Mourning and Remembrance for the Victims of War in Lviv on June 22. YURIY DYACHYSHYN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The prospect of neutrality

In 2018, before the current war began, I moved from the United States to Finland, a country pressed against Russia for 800 miles. My neighborhood here, next to a military base, could be wiped out by Russian hypersonic missiles within minutes of launch. And Finns are still alive today who were my own Finnish daughter's age when, like Ukraine, [Finland was invaded by Russia](#) in 1939. After 90,000 Finns died fighting, the Finns surrendered territory to save their sovereignty. Because Finland had been a conduit for [repeated](#) European [attacks](#) on Russia, thereafter Moscow required Finland to commit to [military neutrality](#).

Today Finns fiercely oppose Russia, and last year they finally joined NATO — mainly in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Finns also do not look fondly on their early neutrality, a period called "[Finlandization](#)," when they were abandoned to the Soviets. Still, as the Cold War thawed, Finland [bolstered](#) its sovereignty and army and joined the European Union, while staying militarily nonaligned. Under this better model — independent neutrality — Finns for decades succeeded in

building one of the most stable democracies in the West without joining NATO, earning respect as a [peacekeeper](#) and [ranking](#) every year as the happiest country on earth.

For Ukraine, [independent neutrality](#) like Finland's has long been a viable alternative to NATO membership and, in fact, was already agreed to in principle by Kyiv and Moscow in the first weeks of the current war. According to a recent [investigation](#) by experts at RAND and Johns Hopkins University, and [confirmed](#) by The New York Times, instead of Ukraine continuing to fight in hopes of joining NATO, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and key officials in his government in March 2022 [asked](#) that members of the UN Security Council [guarantee](#) Ukraine's neutrality to end Russia's invasion. The arrangement would have enabled Ukraine to join the EU, like Finland. But leaders in Washington and London weren't interested and the plan died.

After more than two years of a worsening war, though, Biden has now [suggested](#) that peace in Ukraine "doesn't mean NATO" and that he doesn't necessarily "support the NATOization of Ukraine." So UN Security Council guarantees for Ukraine's neutrality could now be viable instead, and would be popular: Negotiating to end the war is supported by [94 percent](#) of Americans, [88 percent](#) of Western Europeans, and [72 percent](#) of Ukrainians, despite their continued hopes for victory. To get there, though, Washington would have to start thinking again with more than just one half of its foreign-policy brain.

One way to understand America's foreign-policy establishment, especially in relation to Russia and Ukraine, is that it's like a brain with two sides: one wired for diplomacy, the other for dominance. The results have been, well, unstable. Figures such as former president Ronald Reagan and former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who advised presidents from Lyndon Johnson to Jimmy Carter to Barack Obama, used both sides of the brain but eventually tilted toward diplomacy. The diplomat George Kennan under President Harry Truman, and Obama himself, favored diplomacy. Under former president George W. Bush, Paul

Wolfowitz and Dick Cheney pursued dominance.

The diplomacy side has long supported neutrality for Ukraine and coexistence with Russia. Reagan was a hawk, but after the Soviet Union and United States came [perilously close](#) to nuclear war in 1983, he negotiated the pioneering [Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty](#) in 1987, which restored the stability of nuclear deterrence and helped end the Cold War. Reagan's legacy was carried on by [many key figures](#) in Washington, who encouraged diplomacy with Russia and neutrality for countries such as Finland and Ukraine as their best defense. Ukraine's own original [Constitution](#) endorsed neutrality.



Ukrainian soldiers in the Donetsk region of Ukraine last August. TYLER HICKS/NYT

America's own provocations

But after the Cold War, the other side of America's foreign-policy brain pursued dominance, threatening Ukraine's neutrality. First Wolfowitz and Cheney developed a plan for [global US military supremacy](#). When Vladimir Putin became the Russian president in 2000, he was keen to build his country back into a superpower. But he also tried to [strengthen relations and treaties](#) with the United

States and was supported by [key figures in Washington and Europe](#). The dominance camp, however, had other ideas.

Bush and Cheney began pulling out of treaties with Russia while building [a new nuclear arsenal](#) and doctrine for [a preemptive first strike](#) against Russia — even at the risk of millions of American deaths and nuclear winter. In 2005, the Bush administration also started [“retooling” NATO](#) from a defensive European alliance into an out-of-area “deployable, modern, and responsive” fighting force. George W. Bush, [with Cheney’s backing](#), then went against the [advice](#) of almost everyone in the West by [pushing](#) in 2008 for this retooled NATO to [enter](#) Ukraine, even though Ukrainians themselves were, according to [Gallup polls](#), “more than twice as likely to see NATO as a threat than as protection.”

In 2009, during Obama’s first term, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a holdover from the Bush administration, also announced the installation of [US Aegis missile sites](#) that eventually would go in Poland and Romania. Clearly, similar missile launchers could go into Ukraine, too, if it joined NATO. The Aegis launchers were billed as “defensive,” but in fact they created a [new threat](#) to Moscow [more dangerous](#) than the weapons Reagan’s treaty [had outlawed](#). Meanwhile, the militaries of the “retooled” NATO also [alarmed Moscow](#) in 2011, when they demonstrated their new mission by helping to destroy Muammar Qaddafi’s government in Libya at Washington’s request.

The majority of Ukrainians [wanted](#) to stay militarily neutral, but many also wanted to join the EU. Pro-EU protests in Kyiv in 2013-14 precipitated a [crisis](#) that resulted in a new, ad hoc Ukrainian [government more aligned](#) with the United States. In response, Russian military forces swelled into Crimea, and Russia annexed the territory without firing a shot. This, many [American analysts concluded](#), didn’t signal imperial expansion but rather an improvised effort to secure Russia’s main naval base against future US and NATO encroachment.

The diplomacy-minded Brzezinski, whose own homeland of Poland had been invaded by Russia, assessed the risks of pushing Ukraine into NATO [and](#)

[repeatedly urged](#) a Finnish-style alternative — not “Finlandization” but independent neutrality. Henry Kissinger [weighed in](#) to support Finnish-style neutrality and its “fierce independence.” At the Harvard Kennedy School a similar plan was [proposed](#); at the Brookings Institution, Michael O’Hanlon issued a book-length study in 2017, [Beyond NATO](#), detailing the value of neutrality for Ukraine, Finland, and other countries as well.

And though he condemned the annexation of Crimea and imposed sanctions on Moscow, Obama, just before leaving office, [advised](#) against confronting Russia over Ukraine.

By then Ukrainians themselves [were favoring](#) the security NATO seemed to offer. The trouble was, the domination side of the US foreign-policy brain had itself become too dominant. In 2018, although the United States was being defeated by low-tech militias in Iraq and Afghanistan, the new [National Defense Strategy](#) set out to “win,” militarily if necessary, in a global strategic contest against Russia and China, both nuclear superpowers.

The United States, its goals ambiguous, [deepened](#) military cooperation with Ukraine during 2021, advancing a de facto NATOization. [According to](#) the former head of Russia analysis at the CIA, George Beebe, soon “the US military would become firmly entrenched inside Ukraine” — roughly the equivalent of the Russian military installing itself in Toronto. For Moscow, not responding would be, in Beebe’s assessment, “risky.”

Indeed, Russia by late 2021 [was massing troops](#) on the Ukraine border. But Putin also took a page from Ronald Reagan’s playbook, proposing in December 2021 a new [peace treaty](#) with the United States and NATO, to pull back offensive weaponry and reestablish the stability of defensive deterrence.

Curiously, the reaction from the United States and NATO was broad dismissal, even though in principle, the proposal was not unlike the landmark [INF Treaty](#) Reagan had signed. The former CIA analyst, Beebe, considered Moscow’s proposal [“a basis](#)

[for negotiations](#)” with “potential middle grounds on many of the issues.” And a core element was the same as the proposals by Brzezinski, O’Hanlon, and many others in the West: neutrality for Ukraine. But astonishingly, given the risks to the people of Ukraine, Biden’s foreign-policy team flatly [rejected](#) any discussion of Ukrainian neutrality.



A Ukrainian soldier near the front line at Chasiv Yar in the Donetsk region on June 21. OLEG PETRASIUK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A fresh vision for Ukraine’s survival

Now that Biden has opened the door to alternatives to NATO, however, and with the conflict getting more dangerous by the day, the Democratic Party leadership could endorse a fresh foreign-policy vision that champions not just the past successes of Finland but also the huge rewards of [strong neutrality in general](#).

For Ukraine, updated neutrality proposals have already been developed at the [University of Oxford](#) and by a [Harvard–University of Cambridge initiative](#). Russia is unlikely to freeze the fighting under current US policy, but [in mid-June](#), Moscow continued to signal interest in the kind of [larger, neutrality-based](#)

[settlement](#) it pursued in December 2021 and March 2022. Once again Washington's response has been dismissal, despite that such a settlement would ultimately be [in everyone's interest](#).

A heroic first step the United States could urgently take, and which would entail a deeper commitment to Ukraine's survival than sending more missiles, would be to lead the UN Security Council in collaborative guarantees for Ukrainian security as the basis for a ceasefire. This collaborative, more multilateral, and more global approach to Ukraine's security would address Russia's stated concerns about NATO. A ceasefire could then open the possibility for Zelensky, whose term has expired, to restore elections, and for Ukrainians to vote on restoring their neutrality.

Endorsing neutrality for Ukraine would also be a chance to rewire Washington's foreign-policy brain. Our dominance-driven wars and interventions have been [disasters](#). The "unipolar moment" of US primacy is [over](#) and the global majority is [aligning](#) away from Washington's presumption to control their fates. Yet our drive for dominance continues to suck us deeper — in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia — [toward potentially suicidal defeats](#).

The United States, too, was [once](#) a neutral country. Today the United States heads a vibrant global coalition of democracies. A retreat into isolationism would be a mistake. That said, this larger collective could declare [permanent defensive armed neutrality](#) on the world stage. Instead of trying to "win" against everyone else, maybe we could, for a change, as Finland did, try investing in and strengthening ourselves, and lead by example.

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