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On Ukraine, Biden Outshines Macron, Scholz — and DeSantis

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To President Emmanuel Macron of France, a suggestion:

If, as a report in The Wall Street Journal suggests, you are convinced the war in Ukraine is destined for a bloody stalemate, and would like to encourage Kyiv to enter “peace talks” with Moscow that would leave Russia in possession of large tracts of conquered territory, why not lead by example? Publicly suggest the return of Alsace to Germany as evidence that you, too, believe that territorial sovereignty should be negotiable.

To Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany, another suggestion:

If you’re going to dangle the prospect of closer ties between Ukraine and NATO (but not full membership) as a way of pushing Kyiv into a diplomatic settlement with Moscow, why not invite several battalions of Russian armor to the vicinity of Berlin? That would demonstrate that you, too, are willing to adjust the verdict of 1991 to mollify the Kremlin’s resentment, greed and paranoia.

These are preposterous suggestions. That’s the point. Those who now argue that President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine needs to be “realistic” or “pragmatic” — that is, that he should stop short of pursuing a complete Russian withdrawal from all occupied Ukrainian territories — are proposing a solution they would never countenance for their own countries under ordinary circumstances, let alone during a struggle for national survival.

That’s why, as the war in Ukraine enters its second year, I feel grateful for Joe Biden. Fault him all you want on many issues, particularly his gradualist approach to arming Ukraine, but on the most consequential question of our time he has the big thing right. “Appetites of the autocrat cannot be appeased,” he said last week in Warsaw. “They must be opposed.”

That’s not a voice of fusty morality. It’s one of experience, foresight, military realism and political prudence.

Experience, because the world has come to know Vladimir Putin very well over his 23 years in power. We know he does not honor the terms of any agreements to which Russia is bound, from the Cold War-era I.N.F. Treaty to the more recent Minsk agreements. We know that he has launched unprovoked invasions in the past and will, if not checked, launch them again in the future.

Foresight, because a negotiated settlement would create more problems than it would solve. Iran would see that nuclear blackmail works. China would draw the lesson that, if there are limits to what America and our allies are prepared to do for Ukraine (which fights for itself and shares a land border with NATO), there will be much sharper limits to what we are prepared to do for Taiwan. Russia would conclude that, fumbled though its invasion was, it nonetheless gained territory, froze the conflict in place, and could still have another go at Ukraine in a few years.

Military realism, because the lesson of the first year of war is that Moscow can be defeated. The Russian Army was beaten in the battle for Kyiv, the counteroffensive near Kharkiv, and the fight for Kherson. The Ukrainians did all this without the benefit of Western tanks, Predator drones or fighter jets. Imagine how swiftly they could win if they had all three in adequate quantities.

As for prudence, musing openly about the need for eventual negotiations harms Ukraine’s solidarity and morale, both key factors for its survival and success. An overwhelming majority of Ukrainians want to retake all the territory seized by Russia, including Crimea. How is it pragmatic or realistic to demand that Zelensky ignore the wishes of his own people, forsake their sacrifices, and abandon the Ukrainians still living under Russian occupation?

Calls for negotiation also undermine public support for Ukraine in the United States. When it comes to foreign policy, Americans will sooner pay heavily for great causes and high principles than they will for smaller causes and realpolitik. To arm and finance Kyiv in its fight for freedom and independence against an evil tyrant is a great cause. To arm and finance it for the sake of a shaky cease-fire is a small one.

That political fact should weigh on the minds of Biden's foreign policy team. Public support for Ukraine is eroding, particularly among Republicans, and conservatives who know better, including Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, are shamefully hedging their bets.

President Biden likes to say that the United States will support Ukraine for as long as it takes. But that promise could expire on Jan. 20, 2025, if he doesn't win a second term. He owes it to his own legacy not to hazard what is potentially the most historic accomplishment of his presidency on next year's race.

That's why it makes no sense for the administration to slow-roll arms deliveries to Ukraine or drop heavy hints that Ukraine is unlikely ever to retake Crimea. Biden's goal for 2023 should be clear and direct: victory for Ukraine. He can accomplish it through the rapid delivery of game-changing military equipment combined with a diplomatic offensive in which we propose Ukrainian membership in NATO if Russia *doesn't* withdraw. Maybe that could even give Putin his off-ramp for surrender.

After a year of war, I'm more confident than ever that Biden will make the right choice. That's more than can be said for Macron, Scholz and the other pale shadows of what passes for statesmanship in the free world.

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