

Opinion: A negotiated peace is the only way to end Russia's war on Ukraine

Opinion by Jeffrey Sachs

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(CNN) - **There is only one answer to the war in Ukraine: a peace deal.**



Jeffrey D. Sachs

The two-pronged US strategy, to help Ukraine overcome the Russian invasion by imposing tough sanctions and by supplying Ukraine's military with sophisticated armaments, is likely to fall short. What is needed is a peace deal, which may be within reach. Yet to reach a deal, the United States will have to compromise on NATO, something Washington has so far rejected.

Putin started the war in Ukraine and has said negotiations have reached an impasse, without slamming the door on them. But before the war started, Putin presented the West with a list of demands including, most notably, a halt to NATO enlargement.

The US, pointedly, was not willing to engage on that point. Now would be a good time to revisit that policy. Putin also would have to show a willingness to make concessions for negotiations to succeed.

America's arms-and-sanctions approach may sound convincing in the echo chamber of US public opinion, but it doesn't really work on the global stage. It [enjoys little support](#) outside of the United States and Europe, and eventually may face a political backlash inside the US and Europe as well.

Opinion: Putin is planning a victory parade on May 9 — no matter what

To anyone familiar with the Russian war effort and the horror it has unleashed on civilians, it may seem obvious that Russia would be relegated to pariah status globally. But that's not the case: Developing countries, especially, have declined to join in the West's campaign of isolation, as seen most recently in a US-led vote to remove Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. It's true [that 93 countries supported](#) the move, but 100 other countries did not (24 opposed, 58 abstained, and 18 did not vote). Even more striking, those 100 countries are home to 76% of the world population.

Countries may well have had nonideological reasons for opposing the US initiative, including trade ties with Russia. But the fact remains that much of the world has rejected isolating Moscow, especially to the degree Washington would like.

Sanctions are a big part of the US strategy. They are not likely to defeat Russia, but they are likely to impose high costs around the world. At best, they can push Russia toward a peace agreement and therefore should be deployed in conjunction with an intensive push for a negotiated peace. There are countless problems with economic sanctions.

The first is that even as sanctions cause economic distress in Russia, they are unlikely to change Russian politics or policies in any decisive way. Think of the harsh sanctions the US has imposed on Venezuela, Iran and North Korea. Yes, they've weakened these economies, but they've not changed the politics or policies of these countries in the ways the US government has sought.

The second problem is that sanctions are easy to evade at least in part, and more evasions are likely to emerge over time. The US sanctions apply most effectively to dollar-based transactions involving the US banking system. Countries seeking to evade the sanctions find ways to make transactions through non-bank or non-dollar means. We can expect a rising number of transactions with Russia in rubles, rupees, renminbi and other non-dollar currencies.

The third and related problem is that most of the world does not believe in the sanctions -- and also does not take sides in the Russia-Ukraine war. Add up all of the countries and regions imposing sanctions on Russia -- the US, UK, European Union, Japan, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and a handful of others -- and their combined population comes to just 14% of the world population.

The fourth problem is the boomerang effect. Sanctions on Russia hurt not just Russia but the entire world economy, stoking supply-chain disruptions, inflation and food shortages. This is why many European countries are likely to continue to import gas and oil from Russia, and why Hungary and perhaps some other European countries will agree to pay Russia in rubles. The boomerang effect will also likely hurt Democrats in this November's midterm elections as inflation eats away at the real earnings of voters.

The fifth problem is the inelastic (price-insensitive) demand for Russia's energy and grain exports. As the quantity of Russian exports is reduced, the world prices of those commodities increase. Russia can end up with lower export volumes but nearly the same or even higher export earnings.

The sixth problem is geopolitical. Other countries -- and most importantly China -- see the Russia-Ukraine war at least in part as a war in which Russia is resisting NATO enlargement to Ukraine. That's why China repeatedly argues that Russia's legitimate security interests are at stake in the war.

The US likes to say that NATO is a purely defensive alliance, but Russia, China and others think otherwise. They look askance at the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, NATO forces in Afghanistan for 20 years after 9/11, and the NATO bombing of Libya in 2011, which toppled Moammar Gadhafi. Russian leaders have been objecting to NATO's eastward enlargement since it began in the mid-1990s with the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. It is notable that when Putin called on NATO to stop its enlargement into Ukraine, Biden pointedly refused to negotiate with Russia over the issue.

In short, many countries, certainly including China, will not back global pressures on Russia that could lead to NATO expansion. The rest of the world wants peace, not a victory by the United States or NATO in a proxy war with Russia.

The US would love to see Putin defeated militarily, and NATO armaments have dealt a huge and heavy blow to Russian forces. But it's also true that Ukraine is being destroyed in the process. Russia is unlikely to declare defeat and retreat. Russia is much more likely to escalate -- even, potentially, by using nuclear weapons. Thus NATO arms can inflict huge costs on Russia but cannot save Ukraine.

All of this is to say that the US strategy in Ukraine can bleed Russia but can't save Ukraine. Only a peace deal can do that. In fact, the current approach will undermine economic and political stability throughout the world and could divide the world into pro-NATO and anti-NATO camps to the deep long-term detriment of the United States.

American diplomacy is therefore punishing Russia, but without much chance of real success for Ukraine or for US interests. Real success is that Russian troops return home and Ukraine's safety and security are achieved. Those outcomes can be achieved at the negotiating table.

The key step is for the US, NATO allies and Ukraine to make clear that NATO will not enlarge into Ukraine as long as Russia stops the war and leaves Ukraine. The countries aligned with Putin, and those choosing neither side, would then say to Putin that since he has stopped NATO's enlargement, it's now time for Russia to leave the battlefield and return home. Of course, negotiations might fail if Russia's demands remain unacceptable. But we should at least try, and indeed try very hard, to see whether peace can be achieved through Ukraine's neutrality backed by international guarantees.

All of Biden's tough talk -- about Putin leaving power, genocide and war crimes -- will not save Ukraine. The best chance to save Ukraine is through negotiations that bring the world onside. By prioritizing peace instead of NATO enlargement, the US would rally the support of much more of the world and thereby help to bring peace to Ukraine and security and stability for the entire world.