

A UKRAINE PEACE PLAN THAT NEEDS A U THANT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Space for a settlement | Photo Credit: Getty Images

One of the questions long-time watchers of the United Nations like myself kept asking as the Ukraine crisis unfolded was what the UN Secretary-General, the able former Portuguese Prime Minister António Guterres, was doing. When the Americans were crying themselves hoarse about an imminent invasion for weeks before it actually happened, did the Secretary-General seek to use his “good offices” to resolve the crisis? Did he send an emissary to Moscow to find out its intentions and understand its irreducible demands, then have the same person try in Kyiv to get Ukraine to agree to the terms of a compromise?

While such efforts do not necessarily have to be public, there was no evidence of any “shuttle diplomacy” conducted by the UN Secretary-General. Indeed, there seems to have been no high UN official sent in the couple of months preceding the Russian invasion to either capital, nor even to Washington DC or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) headquarters in Brussels. Unlike the legendary U Thant, who intervened between Moscow and Washington during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 (albeit through telegrams rather than travel), Secretary-General Guterres seems to have limited himself to earnest exhortations to Russia to observe the peace it had already violated when he spoke. The implication that when a Permanent Member is a belligerent, the UN is reduced to helplessness, is inaccurate. The Secretary-General can act. In 1998, when the United States was about to bomb Iraq, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan unilaterally undertook a trip to Baghdad (I was with him) to stave off the resort to war.

If the UN thought that brokering peace was a hopeless undertaking, this does not seem to have deterred Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who did travel to Moscow and is reported to have proposed a 15-point peace plan to his interlocutors. It seems to include provisions that would deny Ukraine the right to join NATO, disallow any foreign troops on its soil, and enable the Russians to keep some presence in the east while withdrawing the bulk of their forces and stopping their assault. The Ukrainians are already saying that this is a catalogue of Russian demands and does not fully reflect their point of view.

I have long been of the view that having undertaken such a high-risk enterprise as launching a military invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to stop before his strategic objectives are realised. But what exactly are those objectives? Ending any prospect of NATO troops and weapons on his doorstep is obviously a priority. But to ensure that, does he aim to bring about “regime change” in Kyiv, replacing the defiant Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky with the pro-Russian deposed former President Viktor Yanukovich? Does he intend to annex some of Ukraine's territory? Is his aim to create a “buffer state” in Ukraine between Russia and the West? Or could he, as the Chinese did to India in 1962, declare that his enemies had been “taught a lesson”, decide to cut short his losses and unilaterally withdraw?

No one really knows, not even our omniscient mandarins in South Block. Russia is already paying a huge price, economically, geopolitically and diplomatically, for its Ukrainian adventure. The higher the price goes up, the greater will be Moscow's unwillingness to end the conflict without some tangible gains that it can point to, in order to demonstrate to its own people that the price was worth paying. What might the key gains be that would fulfil Moscow's war aims?

The first basic requirement for peace appears crystal clear: a declaration of formal, binding

neutrality for Ukraine. Finland and Austria already have such neutrality embedded in their constitutions, as do Switzerland and Sweden by long-standing policy, and this has worked well, allowing these nations to appear indistinguishable from other western democracies while at the same time having no military relationship with NATO. Russia had believed it had assurances of Ukrainian neutrality in the past, but Kyiv's flirting with NATO had raised the spectre of those assurances unravelling. Having them in writing, enshrined in Ukraine's Constitution and guaranteed by other powers, would seem to be a sine qua non for Moscow to end its military campaign.

But would neutrality alone (which President Zelensky has reportedly indicated his willingness to concede) be enough? I imagine that while Ukraine, as a sovereign state, would retain its army and related defence forces, Moscow would also want restrictions on the kind of weapons Ukraine could station on its soil, their power and range. Missiles that can strike Moscow, for instance, could be outlawed. Just before Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, Moscow officially recognised the independence of the two separatist provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region. Preserving that arrangement or at least ensuring de facto Russian control over the Donbas region, to which Luhansk and Donetsk belong, by retaining Russian "peacekeepers" there, would give Moscow the buffer zone it seeks. Moscow would probably also wish to achieve formal international recognition of its 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, which did not attract the kind of condemnation its current actions have — since Crimea's residents do largely see themselves as Russians, unlike the people of the rest of the country. A comprehensive peace settlement would probably have to include Crimea too.

A settlement covering the above elements would probably be enough for the Russians to declare victory and go home, but would Ukraine accept it? This is far from clear, as initial reactions to Mr. Bennett's efforts suggest. And if Ukraine did — just to stop the suffering and destruction — what would they want in exchange? Some suggest Kyiv would only accept formal neutrality provided there were assurances from powerful western countries (especially the United States) to come to its aid if it were attacked in future. That, in turn, is unlikely to be acceptable to Moscow, which would see western security guarantees as the thin end of a NATO wedge into its neighbourhood. Could the United Nations be an acceptable alternative as a guarantor of Ukraine's neutrality? That would have the merit, as well as the disadvantage, of involving Russia also, in committing itself to upholding such a guarantee of security.

Ukraine may also seek to trade a surrender on NATO membership for a path towards joining the European Union (EU). Russia has so far said no to Ukrainian adhesion to the EU as well, but if peace is in the interests of both sides, this could be the one issue on which Moscow would have to concede. After all, Austria, Finland and Sweden have stayed neutral while serving as flourishing members of the EU. Perhaps Russia could bargain for an end to sanctions that are currently crippling its economy and trade, in return for making this concession.

In other words, the elements of a viable peace plan exist. What is needed is for someone to step forward and pursue it with urgency. Russia is already paying a higher price than it expected to, suffering greater battlefield losses than it anticipated, and making much slower progress than most experts had predicted when the invasion began. It may soon realise that winning the war militarily will take too long and cost too much to be worthwhile. That is the moment for a skilled peace-maker to move.

Mr. Secretary-General, could you get on a plane please?

Shashi Tharoor, a third-term MP and prize-winning author, served as Under Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2001-2007, and was India's candidate to succeed Kofi Annan as Secretary-General. His 29-year UN career included substantial stints in peacekeeping and in the

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