



Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (KJSSH)

ISSN: 2616-8707 (P) 2958-9908 (O), Journal homepage: kjsch.kardan.edu.af

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To cite this article: Safi, Ismail and Matiullah Aryanpor. "Russia-Ukraine War: Role of Neutrality for Ukraine in Ending the Conflict." *Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, (2024), 7 (2), 53-66.

DOI: [10.31841/KJSSH-7.2-2024-76](https://doi.org/10.31841/KJSSH-7.2-2024-76)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31841/KJSSH-7.1-2024-76>



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Published online: 30 December 2024



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Kardan Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

7 (2) 53 – 66

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Kardan Publications

Kabul, Afghanistan

<http://dx.doi.org/10.31841/KJSSH-7.2-2024-76>

<https://kardan.edu.af/Research/CurrentIssue.aspx?j=KJSSH>

Received: 16 Nov 24
Revised: 05 Dec 24
Accepted: 20 Dec 24
Published: 30 Dec 24

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Abstract

Weak states located in the backyard of great powers need to handle their foreign policy carefully and calculatedly. Neglecting such a system can trigger the reaction of the great powers, resulting in major conflict and fragility. For vulnerable states, neutrality is the best foreign policy option to avoid being trapped in competition between great powers. Neutrality saves the weak states from being the battleground of the great powers. Ukraine is in a similar position today, but its foreign policy-makers failed to consider the circumstances. They did not opt for neutrality in their relations with Russia and the West. Russian officials, including President Putin, warned Ukraine to be neutral and not welcome NATO in their territory, calling it a security threat to Russia. Ukraine today is at full war with Russia as they chose NATO membership vis-à-vis peace with a major power. Joining NATO was not worth destroying Ukraine; rather, a neutral relationship could help save Ukraine. Indeed, there is a need for peace in Ukraine; neutrality can still play a significant role in bringing peace. Withdrawal from their application for NATO membership is what Ukraine can do to save itself from further destruction. A peaceful Ukraine is beneficial for Europe, Britain, and the United States, which spend large amounts of money on the defence of Ukraine against Russia. The paper aims to evaluate the importance of neutrality in Ukraine's relations with Russia and the U.S. since the end of the Cold War. Based on the findings, the paper provides policy recommendations for small states like Afghanistan to adopt neutrality in their foreign policy.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, Great power, NATO, Neutrality, West, Europe, the United States

1. Introduction

The potential for war started to emerge after the Bucharest Summit in 2008 when Ukraine committed its membership in NATO¹, and Russia reacted to it. This marked a break of Ukrainian neutrality and the start of troublesome relations with Russia. Neutrality is having no supportive relations with either side and remaining a buffer zone. In

¹ Bucharest Summit Declaration, April 3, 2008, accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

international relations, from the realist perspective, for a country, the buffer zone has to be wide enough to protect its borders from a long-range missile attack.²

Article 1 of The Hague Convention V October 18 1907, explained the core of international law for state neutrality. It defines a neutral state as one that does not allow its territory to be used as a base of military operations, as a sanctuary, or as a means of passage for a belligerent.³ In neutral relations, states do not go for equal or unequal relations but almost no relations with the existing blocs. Regarding the Ukrainian case, preventing the existence of a military coalition like NATO in their territory and avoiding any high degree of relations and reliance upon either side is neutrality for Ukraine.

Cold War was not a direct war and fighting but an indirect competition between the two existing blocs, the West and the Soviets. The era of this war officially ended in 1991. All the former Soviet socialist states emerged as independent states soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ukraine, which was a part of the Soviet Union, obtained its independence on July 1 1990. The conflict over Ukraine started after the rising concern about whether Ukraine should establish a liberal democratic government or remain in the Russian orbit after the 1990s. In the first presidential election, a communist party won the election to lead the country, but democrats continued to strengthen their influence.⁴

When the Cold War ended, a unipolar international system emerged, with only the U.S. as a great power. It was unipolar because no other great powers apart from the U.S. were in the International system. The U.S. then moved to establish a new world order based on liberal ideology. The U.S. had three main objectives in establishing a new liberal world order. First, to create international institutions based upon liberalism and expand their membership; second, to establish a capitalist international market based on free trade; and third, to spread liberal democracy around the world.⁵

In his book, an offensive neorealist like John Mearsheimer argued that the aim of NATO expansion to eastern Europe by the U.S. and their allies is not only to contain growing Russia but to enrich a liberal international order with enriching liberal institutions. NATO's expansion towards Eastern Europe is a good example of promoting liberal international order, which the U.S. believes can maintain global peace and stability. The West, therefore, aims to pull Ukraine out of Russia's sphere of influence and integrate it into the Western sphere, with Ukraine's membership in NATO being the key strategy to achieve this.⁶

With the end of the Cold War, Ukraine emerged as an independent state with the world's most fertile soil and various agricultural products and mineral resources. Geographically, Ukraine is located in the heart of regional political and cultural activity. It holds strategic importance for Russia, connecting Russia to Europe and allowing Russia to enter the European market. The legacy of Soviet-controlled industry includes outdated power plants, which are one of the issues of concern inside Ukraine.⁷ Linguistic and

² Ray McGovern, "Russia China Ukraine," interview by Judge Napolitano, *Judging Freedom*, May 20, 2024, YouTube video, 29:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQeFzUKmCrc&t=1002s>.

³ Ben Saul and Dapo Akande, *The Oxford Guide to International Humanitarian Law* (London: Oxford University Press, 2020), 57.

⁴ Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 44–47.

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *Foreign Affairs*, 2021, 21–22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷ Catherine W. Cooper, *Modern World Nation Ukraine* (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 8–12.

cultural differences between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian are the issues in Ukraine. Concern was there about the presence of a large Ethnic-Russian minority in eastern Ukraine that is now captured, annexed, and controlled by Russian troops. The end of the Cold War established the potential for a war between Ukraine and Russia that later broke out, and still today, this war is going on with many destructions in place. This paper examines the impact of NATO expansion led by the U.S. on Eastern European politics, including Ukraine's relationship with Russia and the West. It will discuss establishing Ukraine as a buffer state on the border of Russia immediately after the end of the Cold War and a shift in their foreign policy from neutrality to reliance upon the West.

There is a notable research gap on the role of neutrality by Ukraine that could have eased the tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Also, there is little literature on neutrality as a requirement for Ukraine's foreign policy to function for ending the current war in Ukraine. This paper aims to fill the research gap through an in-depth study of the consequences of neutrality in Ukraine's relations with Russia and the U.S. since the end of the Cold War if they had adopted it. It will also look at the role of Ukraine's neutrality in establishing a peace deal to end the current war. The paper has secondary data collected from libraries, websites, online platforms, books, academic papers, articles, interviews, and professors' lectures.

The paper has addressed the importance of neutrality for states in international relations. It will also function as a proposal for a conflict resolution to the states that are dragged into great power competition with the help of foreign policy analysis of Ukraine, which is located in the backyard of a great power. In addition, the findings of the paper can be used and applied by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to avoid being entangled further in great powers rivalry, especially in our neighbourhood.

2. Bucharest Summit and NATO Expansion

If we look at the recent past, Europe has been the most important region for the U.S. because of the location of some potential great powers in the last decade. There are some arguments by neorealist scholars that NATO expansion to Eastern Europe is to liberalize and democratize the region, and that can be proven by the wetness of the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia 2003.⁸

Stephen M. Walt mentioned the objectives of the U.S. in NATO expansion to Eastern Europe in his book "The Hell of Good Intentions." It says that expanding NATO to Eastern Europe instead of following security objectives, pursuing a spreading of liberal values, and strengthening democracy in Europe was a key justification for NATO expansion by the U.S.; examples of it are the orange revolution in Ukraine and the colour revolution in Georgia.⁹

Mearsheimer argued that the aim of the U.S. in NATO expansion to Eastern Europe is to contain Russia and enrich a liberal international order. NATO's expansion towards Eastern Europe is a good example of promoting liberal international order, which the U.S. believes can maintain global peace and stability. Russia was already contained with

⁸ John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 60-163.

⁹ Stephen Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 63.

the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the U.S. thought they could expand NATO membership to the Eastern European countries, even Russia, one day.¹⁰

Liberal democratic international order prospected upon the perpetual peace idea of Immanuel Kant. They value that democracies are less likely to engage in war with other democracies. The expansion of liberal institutions and the spread of liberal democracy worldwide by the U.S. are based on this perspective. They favoured establishing all democracies and considered it the only peaceful, stable world without contestation, but this became a tough job with time.¹¹

The NATO expansion was a part of the expansion of liberal international order beginning after the end of the Cold War. Aim has been cleared for that expansion, and NATO expanded in three basic phases: first, the admission of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999; second, the subsequent entry of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004 and third the U.S. proposal for Ukraine and Georgia NATO membership in April 2008 Bucharest Summit. The Bucharest Summit was the beginning of practical steps towards Ukrainian NATO membership. A U.S. political scientist, George F. Kennan, warned that expanding NATO to the east would be a “tragic mistake that made a future conflict with Russia far more likely.”¹²

The Bucharest Summit was held mainly to spread NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. During the summit, the member states of NATO supported the proposal for Ukraine and Georgia’s NATO membership. At the same time, Germany and France opposed it due to their concern that it would unduly antagonize Russia, and it did.¹³

In a reaction to this summit, Russia’s deputy foreign minister Alexander Grushko said, “Georgia’s and Ukraine’s membership in the alliance is a huge strategic mistake which would have most serious consequences for European security.” Putin, on the other hand, called it a direct threat to Russia. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia as a reaction to the proposal of Georgia’s NATO membership. This invasion should have clarified Putin’s resolve and determination to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO, but it did not. Despite Russia’s warning and reactions, the U.S. and its allies continue pushing NATO to Ukraine.¹⁴

Richard Sakwa, a Russian and European politics professor at the University of Kent, stated that the problem originated from Ukraine’s NATO aspirations. During the Bucharest summit, the Americans and Ukrainians were warned about Moscow’s concern about potential NATO enlargement to its borders. Putin often warned the Ukrainians not to bring Western dominance into the backyard of Russia.¹⁵

To understand why the West, especially the United States, failed to understand that Russia cannot tolerate NATO in their backyard, one must refer to the 1990s when the U.S. policy-makers during the Clinton administration began advocating NATO expansion. Liberalist policy-makers won the argument to expand NATO membership, and later on, after the Russian reaction, even if they understood it, it became very difficult to change their policy now. One can argue that the U.S. shifted its policy of containing Russia with

¹⁰ Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” 23–24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 31–33.

¹² Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions*, 34.

¹³ John Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Richard Sakwa, *The Front Line Ukraine Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2015), 95.

NATO expansion because Russia began to grow again after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This needs a comprehensive analysis to understand.¹⁶

3. Neutral State: Meaning, Concept and Origins

The meaning of a neutral state is contemplated alternatively as a non-bloc or non-aligned state. The law and model of practising neutrality mostly developed at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries. According to Article 1 of Hague Convention V October 18 1907, in order to remain neutral, a state must not engage in any direct or indirect hostilities nor involve in military support to any conflicting parties, whether through personnel, material, or financial means; nor permit its territory to be used as a base, sanctuary or passage for military operations. The law of neutrality infers rights and duties on a neutral state: it grants the right of inviolability and requires the duties of impartiality and abstention.¹⁷

Neutrality should be distinguished from the concept of balanced relations. Balanced relations mean equal relations in which a state builds an equivalent relationship with the existing blocs. In neutral relations, states do not go for equal or unequal relations but almost no relations with the existing blocs. In 1993, the Swiss government published a report on neutrality which explained the role of neutrality in state security. It says, "Neutrality needs to be interpreted in light of the requirements of international solidarity and should be used to serve the international community and world peace." That is why the Swiss form of neutrality is considered a vital model of neutrality that can be proposed for Ukraine.¹⁸

The former American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles 1956 argued that "neutrality has increasingly become an obsolete conception, and this will prove true because the very rare number of states are neutral. Only two European countries are neutral under international law, Austria and Switzerland. It does not mean the need for neutrality does not exist. However, there is a requirement for a neutral policy for many states, basically in a multipolar international system for small states. Small states with little power and limited capacity to influence others in the international system for their objectives need to be neutral and remain a buffer."¹⁹

States like Ukraine may argue that to secure their borders and protect their autonomy, they need to join an alliance, and the best one is NATO. However, The United Nations (UN) charter Article 2(4) calls on all member states to refrain from using force and military means in international relations against any other state's territorial integrity, borders or political independence. However, realists reject it, saying that the UN accounts for the job of protecting borders and the autonomy of states.²⁰

Regarding Ukrainian neutrality, remaining as a buffer zone between the West and Russia means neutrality for Ukraine. Ukraine can remain a buffer zone if they do not join NATO and the EU currently, how Russia legalizes its war in Ukraine by arguing to defend its border from a potential threat of NATO. Russia favoured neutrality from Eastern

¹⁶ Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," 6.

¹⁷ Ben Saul and Dapo Akande, *The Oxford Guide to International Humanitarian Law* (London: Oxford University Press, 2020), 57.

¹⁸ Thomas Greminger and Jean-Marc Rickli, "Neutrality After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Institute for National Strategic Security National Defense University* 10, no. 3 (2023): 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27–28.

²⁰ Greminger and Rickli, "Neutrality After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," 28–30.

European states regarding their relations with the West. Russia considers it a policy of denial for the region to the Western powers.²¹

4. Key Aspects of Neutrality under International Law

Although the United Nations Charter does not clearly explain neutrality with description, articles 2(4) and 2(7) indirectly point to the contexts for neutrality, such as principles of non-intervention, peaceful resolution of conflicts, and prohibition of using force.²² The Hague Convention V of 1907 talked about the rights and obligations of a neutral state as follows²³:

1. Non-participation in armed conflicts: a neutral state should restrain from participating in any armed conflict and use of force or military involvement in any armed conflict. This helps a neutral state to stay away from wars and participation of their territory in physical disputes.
2. Impartiality: a neutral state must treat all sides equally or not be involved in an imbalanced relationship with one side. Ukraine, for example, is in an imbalanced relationship by having close ties with the U.S. and no space for Russia.
3. Inviolability of territory: a territory of a neutral state must not allow any military activity from belligerent states. It involves prohibiting the movements of troops, conducting military operations, and the existence of military bases of belligerent states. Ukraine is inviting NATO, a military coalition, to their soil, which is the real concern of Russia.
4. Duty to prevent violating its neutrality: a neutral state is responsible for maintaining its pledge of neutrality and not breaking its role. Ukraine was established as a neutral country in 1991 but could not maintain that role, breaking the tension.

5. Ukraine as a Neutral State

As the concept of neutrality discussed previously, regarding Ukraine, staying away from NATO membership is a key argument for remaining neutral. From a Russian perspective, Ukraine should stay away from NATO, the EU, and any military coalition membership. There was a big debate over Ukraine's declaration of state sovereignty on July 1 1990, mentioning Ukraine as a permanently neutral state away from any military bloc and why it did not maintain it for the latter years.²⁴

Austria's neutrality is a proposed form of neutrality for Ukraine. After the end of World War II, Austria adopted a constitutional, non-aligned foreign policy and neutrality, which helped Austria maintain its sovereign status. To consider neutrality, Ukraine would have to engage in such a non-alignment neutrality policy and not favour NATO membership.²⁵

²¹ Roy Allison, "Russia, Ukraine, and State Survival through Neutrality," *Oxford University Press*, 98, no. 6 (April 28, 2024): 1-3.

²² Greminger and Rickli, "Neutrality After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," 33.

²³ ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law Databases*, (last accessed December 12, 2024), <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hague-conv-v-1907/article-5?activeTab=>.

²⁴ Allison, *Russia, Ukraine and State Survival through Neutrality*, 5-6.

²⁵ Greminger and Rickli, "Neutrality After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," 38.

Russia does not want Ukraine, a country on its immediate border, to be a member of its adversary military coalition NATO. In the international system, states great powers are very careful of the actions taken by other states or great powers. The way the U.S. reacted to Russia's action in its sphere of influence when they put missiles in Cuba in 1962 was similar to Russia's reaction to the potential existence of NATO in their backyard. Russia wants Ukraine to avoid NATO membership and remain neutral.²⁶

This is a usual policy of great powers in international relations not welcoming other great powers in their backyard. The U.S., under the Munroe Doctrine, does not allow other great powers to deploy military forces in the Western hemisphere because it is their backyard and is important for their security. Similarly, Ukraine matters to Russia because it is their backyard.²⁷

The answer to the question of whether Russia wants a neutral Ukraine or not is clear from the intentions and claims of Vladimir Putin and his political elites. Putin and other Russian political elites unequivocally claimed that Russia would not tolerate the existence of NATO in their backyard. Putin stressed that admitting Ukraine into NATO would represent a "direct threat" to Russia. Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 clarified the intentions of Russia against NATO if it extant into their borders. Despite the clear warning from Russia, NATO never abandoned its goal of bringing Ukraine into the alliance, and this is what most neorealist scholars blame NATO for.²⁸

On the other hand, there is a big debate on the ambitions of Russia in its war in Ukraine. Some Westerners, including liberal scholars, believe in the imperialistic aims Russia is fighting for. Scholars such as Francis Fukuyama and Stephen Kotkin believe that Putin has some imperialistic objectives, conquering more land, starting from Ukraine and will continue to invade other neighbours too, if not contained. What President Joe Biden claimed to CNN is that Putin has imperialist ambitions, and it starts with conquering Ukraine and if we do not contain it will continue conquering the whole region.²⁹

In contrast, many scholars oppose this argument and believe in Putin's defensive ambitions. John Mearsheimer calls it a myth created in the West to generate support for perpetual assistance with Ukraine. Conquering the whole of Europe, Mearsheimer calls it a non-sense argument by arguing Russia has no military capacity even to capture the whole of Ukraine. There is no evidence that Russia is interested in conquering even the whole of Ukraine. There is little to no evidence to prove Putin's imperialistic ambitions, but there is some evidence suggesting that he is defending their border from the threat of NATO.³⁰

Russians were very happy to get out of Eastern Europe in 1989 because they experienced that occupying and managing Eastern Europe was a nightmare. They had plenty of experience invading this region - Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, East Germany in 1953. They understand and pay attention to the issue that occupying those

²⁶ Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," 1-3.

²⁷ Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, 165-166.

²⁸ Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," 2-3.

²⁹ CNN, "Watch the Best Analysis Moments of CNN's Presidential Debate," YouTube video, 17:23, June 28, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CKZtGZsX7Vk>.

³⁰ John Mearsheimer, "Things Are Going to Get Worse in Ukraine, Middle-East and South-East Asia," interviewed by Paul Buitink, *Reinvent Money*, April 18, 2024, YouTube interview, 51:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y789SugNiA0&t=1330s>.

countries in this region that do not like you is a constant burden, and it should be avoided. Blaming imperialism on such a Russia is not a valid form of argument.³¹

Moreover, the West has been blamed for hypocritical acting in the Ukraine war by many scholars. The Western media coverage ran the discourses in favour of the West and to express Russia as an imperialistic great power raised again for imperial ambitions. The Ukraine war news is blatantly biased compared to other conflicts like Israeli-Palestinian. For example, on July 19 2022, BBC News reported that the Ukrainian army resisted Russian occupation; it called them the “resistance fighters.” It derives the meaning of resistance force for the Ukrainian army, which means they are resisting the violent imperialistic action of Russia and consider Russian troops as occupiers.³²

5.1 Ending Ukraine War with Neutrality

Almost every conflict finally reaches a stalemate and is solvable only by conflict resolution mechanisms. Deriving objectives only by military means is impossible in international relations, and conflicting states must always resolve their issue via talks. This was also agreed upon and discussed for the Russia-Ukraine war. Although the situation is worse now, and each side uses full force in ground fighting, a stalemate is also applicable. There are many discussions on how peace in Ukraine can be maintained and how the Russia-Ukraine war can end.³³ The conflict became an economic waste of wealth for the Western countries and Europeans; thus, it will investigate how these countries can find a way to get out of this wastage.

5.2 Neutrality Leading to a Possible Peace

Solving the Russia - Ukraine conflict is a tough job because it involves the great powers, and great powers are less likely to defeat and find it hard to reach a stalemate. The argument is that we can reach a possible peace deal in the aftermath of Ukraine adopting neutrality rather than relying on the West. Ukraine is now considered a state that completely relies upon the West for its security and relations, including war with Russia.³⁴ Wang Wen, executive dean of the Renmin University of China, urged Ukraine to rethink its reliance on the West and said that since the past half century, no county has survived relying solely on the West. Ukraine should return to the world and build relations with all the countries rather than being an ally of the West.³⁵

The West, on the other hand, is blamed for escalating the conflict by providing military aid to Ukraine, including a package of \$3.5 billion in military supplies approved by the U.S. Congress in March 2023 and a further \$3 billion to deploy U.S. forces in allied countries in Europe. Ukrainian elites demand a higher amount of aid for fighting with Russia.³⁶ The peace process may become more tough if they continue providing military aid. Neutrality is a mechanism for smaller states to remain detached from contentious geopolitical dynamics. Consequently, in the context of Ukraine, it remains possible for

³¹ Ibid., 51:36.

³² Awad Slimia and Mohammad Fuad Othman, “The Double Standards of Western Countries Toward Ukraine and Palestine: Western Hypocrisy,” *Central European Management Journal* 30, no. 4 (2022): 476–485.

³³ Greminger and Rickli, “Neutrality After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” 38.

³⁴ Per Ekman, “Painful Moments and Realignment: Explaining Ukraine’s Foreign Policy,” *Taylor & Francis Online* 71, no. 3 (September 13, 2023): 9–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2253358>.

³⁵ Wang Wen, “Chinese Scholar Urges Ukraine to Rethink Its Reliance on the West,” interviewed by CGTN, November 8, 2023, YouTube interview, 0:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnHk_C2QOvA.

³⁶ Joseph Choonara, “The Devastation of Ukraine: NATO, Russia and Imperialism,” *International Socialism* 174 (June 2022): 22.

the country to provide assurances to Russia during negotiations regarding its abstention from joining NATO.³⁷

Bringing peace to Ukraine is possible only if we make sure to have a neutral Ukraine without any influence and hands of Westerners. Peace for Russia is acceptable if Ukraine promises to keep its ties away from NATO.³⁸ At the beginning of the Russia - Ukraine war, it seemed like Ukraine was willing to adopt a neutral role, especially when President Zelensky announced in March 2022 that he had come to accept that NATO membership for Ukraine is unlikely. However, it was followed by President Zelensky's announcement of Ukraine's plans to apply to NATO officially.³⁹

Scholars argue that a neutrality model for Ukraine must be negotiated to fit Ukrainian security requirements and its national identity and grand strategy. However, staying away from NATO is the core of neutrality for Ukraine, which maintains Ukrainian security by not giving reason for Russia to fight with Ukraine. It also fits Ukrainian national interests by not going towards further destruction. By mid-March, Vladimir Medinsky, Russia's top negotiator at peace talks with Ukraine, claimed that 'Ukraine is proposing an Austrian or Swedish model of a neutral and some Russian political elites including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Kremlin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov considered it could be compromised.⁴⁰

The real problem now is the requirement of guarantor states that Kyiv is stressing. They asked for guarantor states to be established for any bilateral agreement negotiated with Moscow. On the other hand, there is a discourse that Moscow also views the EU as a kind of threat to Russia and wants Ukraine to stay away from the EU as well, as Foreign Minister Lavrov welcomed Ukraine's readiness to declare a neutral non-aligned status, but criticized its wish to become an EU member, since the EU he called, had transformed itself into an aggressive militant player. However, Putin subsequently altered this narrative, asserting that, unlike NATO, the European Union is not a military organization or a military-political bloc. Thus, Russia had no objections to the sovereign decision of any country to join such an economic association.⁴¹

Now, the Ukrainian Political leadership should be convinced that the abundance of its country's NATO membership can help Ukraine to be peaceful in the future; otherwise, a frozen conflict can continue, and further destruction of Ukraine is most likely, which would be worse for Ukraine.⁴² Western leaders should acknowledge that Ukraine matters a lot to Putin and should not support an anti-Russian regime in Ukraine. The United States and its allies should cease to support and westernize Ukraine and instead aim to make it a neutral buffer zone between NATO and Russia, similar to Austria's position during the Cold War.⁴³

³⁷ Greminger and Rickli, "Neutrality After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," 37.

³⁸ John Mearsheimer, "Is China the Real Winner of Ukraine War," interviewed by Gita Wirjawan, April 28, 2023, YouTube video, 1:12:41, https://youtu.be/Yl7goPRw_eE?si=57CA88bJqDjBU9q.

³⁹ Greminger and Rickli, "Neutrality After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," 38.

⁴⁰ Allison, "Russia, Ukraine and State Survival through Neutrality," 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴² John Mearsheimer, "What's Behind Biden's Blank Check Support for Israel," interviewed by Gita Wirjawan, March 21, 2024, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39_bpaai01U&t=220s.

⁴³ Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," 10.

5.3 Outcomes of a Neutral Ukraine for Russia and The West

There is much dissatisfaction from the political leadership in the Western countries, including Europe and the U.S., for their policy in the Ukraine war. This dissatisfaction led to the loss of the election in France for Immanuel Macron and in Britain for the Conservative Party, and the same situation will continue in other countries, even the U.S.⁴⁴ It shows that people are not happy with the foreign policy decisions of their country instead of other dissatisfaction.

Economically, European countries suffer from inflation due to the large amount of aid given to Ukraine. In Britain, inflation is, to a large extent, driven by escalating food and energy costs. A recent surge in oil and gas prices has exacerbated the risk of stagflation. According to economist Goldman Sachs, a complete ban on EU imports of Russian energy would cut production by 2.2 per cent, enough to trigger a recession across the Eurozone. Together, Ukraine and Russia produce nearly one-third of global wheat exports and about half of the grain provided by the UN World Food Programme. The contest will likely impact 44 million worldwide who are already on the brink of famine.⁴⁵

It is argued that the West played a major role in escalating the conflict by providing indirect military support to Ukraine, including a package of \$3.5 billion in military supplies authorized by the U.S. Congress in March and a further \$3 billion to deploy U.S. forces in allied countries in Europe and to provide intelligence support.⁴⁶ The sanctions programs that the West imposed on Russia, in one way, damaged the Russian political structure; on the other, it also damaged many Western countries, including the EU. It helped other countries like China and India to enhance their muscles by taking advantage of the Russian market.⁴⁷

As discussed previously, Russia tends to have a neutral Ukraine in its backyard, and this could be the end of its war. Russia has no further interest in the Ukraine war besides its security ambitions. If a neutral Ukraine can maintain that, thus Russia may no longer fight a war. The Russia-Ukraine war made China and Russia closer to each other, and China has a deep interest in supporting Russia and making sure that Russia does not lose the war in Ukraine. This was a strategic failure for the U.S., and instead of creating a gap between its rivals, it made the country closer to each other. The U.S. is required to contain China, but the Ukraine war limited the U.S.'s ability to focus on East Asia, and this is a good opportunity for China to grow more and more. Due to this argument, one can say that the Russia - Ukraine war can benefit China more than anyone.⁴⁸

China is a greater rival for the West than Russia, and they should not waste their ability to focus on Russia. Russia is the weakest great power in the current international system. At the same time, China is the principal rival of the U.S., but they focus again on Russia, which is why the Russia - Ukraine war is called a failure of the U.S.⁴⁹ A neutral Ukraine can free up the U.S. to focus on China and East Asia. If the U.S. wants to contain China

⁴⁴ John Mearsheimer, "Prof. John Mearsheimer: China in the Wings," interviewed by Andrew Napolitano, *Judge Napolitano - Judging Freedom*, July 3, 2024, YouTube interview, 13:02, <https://www.youtube.com/live/sc9hKg7bqBY?si=jAtecjN83PjTWj1j>.

⁴⁵ Choonara, Joseph, "The Devastation of Ukraine: NATO, Russia and Imperialism," *International Socialism*, 174 (June 2022), Pp.22-23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁴⁷ Mearsheimer, "What's Behind Biden's Blank Check Support for Israel," 27:00.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 41:00.

⁴⁹ John Mearsheimer, "Ukraine, Taiwan and The True Cause of War," Interview by John Anderson, John Anderson Media, Dec 8, 2023, YouTube Interview, 16:00 https://youtu.be/huDriv7IAa0?si=WxLZj_K4J_11Acmk.

more deeply, first, they should withdraw from Eastern Europe. Convincing Ukrainian political elites for neutrality is key for the U.S. to end this war and free up the region.

Conclusion

A state located in the backyard of great power from North, East, and South and linked with the adversary of that great power in its West must be double-checked in its foreign relations. Building relations with one side and ignoring the other side can cause trouble. Maintaining a balance between two great powers is also a tough job for a weak state, and it is less likely to happen due to her weakness. The two great powers, Russia and the U.S. know this, and that is why they signed a pledge to establish Ukraine as a permanently neutral state away from any military coalition before exactly the collapse of the Soviet Union occurred. However, the policy of the U.S. changed, and liberalist policy-makers won the argument for expanding NATO towards Eastern Europe in 1991. NATO expansion started in three big phases. It adopted the Ukraine and Georgia NATO membership proposal during its second expansion phase at the Bucharest Summit 2008. Putin and their administration reacted to it and called it a direct threat to Russia. In response to this move of NATO, Russia conquered Georgia and warned the West that NATO expansion to Ukraine could also cause war. With all these, the U.S. and their allies continued pushing NATO to Eastern Europe, and finally, another war broke out.

Many neorealist scholars are blaming the U.S. for bluntly expanding NATO to that level that raised the war. They make Russian concern for NATO in their backyard a true concern and put the accountability of war on the U.S. Overall, NATO expansion played a major role in the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, and it is the primary reason why Russia legitimized their war against Ukraine. A neutral Ukraine can satisfy the demands of all war sides. Russian security concerns can be solved by having Ukraine away from NATO. Ukraine will no longer be in destruction, and EU countries that are now spending huge amounts of money for the defence of Ukraine will keep this money for other necessary expenses. The U.S. will also be able to contain its important rival, China, deeply.

After Ukraine gained its independence, it had two alternatives: first, to join NATO and end up with destruction by Russia; second, to pay serious attention to Russia's security ambitions and be a neutral state. What Ukraine chose is to join NATO, and they are now in destruction; thus, it is considered a failure for Ukraine. It is because famous scholars and political elites across the globe signalled the destruction, and Ukraine had enough to believe, along with the geo-strategic location they had. German leader Angela Merkel and French leader Nicolas Sarkozy did not favour Ukraine's NATO membership in a Bucharest summit and later signalled that it could raise a war with Russia. In 1990 it was people like George Kenon, the secretariat of defence Bill Pery, General Mark Milley, and some others warned that if the U.S. expanded NATO too far eastward and Ukraine, it would blow up a war by Russia. However, the U.S. refused to believe and did expand NATO. Ukrainian political leadership should have believed it to avoid the distraction of its country, which they are wrecked today. International politics is all about choosing among the bad alternatives, and Ukraine chose the worst bad alternative.

Lastly, let us consider Afghanistan as in place of Ukraine and place Pakistan and India in place of the United States and Russian Federation, for Afghanistan is a weak state. It is compulsory to remain neutral in the struggle between Pakistan and India. Afghanistan has suffered a long half a century of destabilization, poor economic conditions and weak

security. It suffered the most during the Cold War era, and after the withdrawal of the USSR from Afghanistan, it became home to extremism. The civil war further devastated state building and caused huge international attention and presence in the new century. During the two-decade-long international presence, the government could not remain neutral in the struggle for influence in all the 3 rounds of political tenures. During Karzai's two tenures, Afghanistan was more tilted towards India than toward its immediate neighbour, Pakistan. This created serious insecurity within Afghanistan. India had a great influence on government decisions, and it was aiding state expenditure and infrastructure. During the last half of the decades, Ashraf Ghani remained positive towards Pakistan, but that did not achieve real outcomes. In later years, Afghanistan could not maintain a neutral status between two rival countries. The option for neutrality might be very complex, but it is the only choice the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has before it. Considering the situation, if the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan becomes friendly with one of these countries and ignores the other one, or vice-versa, the result would be the same as in the case of Ukraine.

Recommendations

The paper conclusively presents the following recommendations to the foreign policy analysts and decision-makers of the countries that are located in the backyard of great powers:

1. Small states located in the backyard of the great powers should always be cautious of their foreign policy and ensure that their foreign policy will not hurt the great powers. The political leadership of such a state should always pay serious attention to the contest and relationship of the existing great powers in international relations, basically in a bipolar international system. They should observe the actions and reactions of the great power in the region, and a neutral position should be obtained in such a case.
2. When a small state like Ukraine is confined in the centre of the competition between the two great powers, a neutral role can help keep them out of such a situation. The political leadership is responsible for adopting such a neutral policy and staying away from the coalition with both sides. Expressing interest and ambitions to the membership of the military bloc of one side can raise tension with the other side.
3. Neutrality can play a major role in conflict resolution to end a war that is raised due to the imbalanced relations of a small state by adopting a membership of one side of the military coalition and ignoring the security concerns of the other.

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