

# Where are the peacemakers?

The tragedy of war in Ukraine shows the need for globally respected statesmen who could act in the cause of peace.



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The Russian invasion of Ukraine is illegal and has to be condemned by the international community. And it has been condemned. As a former ambassador to the United Nations, I fully understand and support the need to protect the principles of the United Nations Charter.

Yet, in geopolitics we must always do two things simultaneously. We must moralise. And we must analyse. Since geopolitics is a cruel game and follows the cold and ruthless logic of power, we must be cold, dispassionate and hard-headed in our analysis. The only iron law of geopolitics is that it punishes those who are naive and ignore its cold logic.

So could we have predicted this war in Ukraine? And could we have prevented it? The simple answer to both these questions is yes. Indeed, many leading statesmen in the West correctly predicted this disaster in Ukraine.

Probably the greatest strategic thinker that the US produced in the 20th century was George Kennan. He fashioned the famous containment strategy which ultimately succeeded in defeating the Soviet Union. He died on March 17, 2005.

On Feb 21 last year, New York Times columnist Tom Friedman regrettably at great length what Kennan told him in 1998. When asked about the impact of the expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation into former areas of the Soviet Union, he said, very presciently: "I think it is the beginning of a new Cold War. I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the

founding fathers of this country turn over in their graves."

## EXPANSION OF NATO

So why did Nato continue expanding despite the clear warnings of Kennan? In some ways, the correct answer was also endorsed by Prof Kennan. On Dec 1, 1997, the editor of *The National Interest* magazine, Owen Harries, wrote an article explaining why Nato expansion was unwise and then gave the reasons why it was happening.

He cited several reasons, but let me just quote the first two: "The strength of the Polish-American vote, as well as that of other Americans of Central and East European origin" and "the enormous vested interests – careers, contracts, consultancies, accumulated expertise – represented by the Nato establishment, which now needed a new reason and purpose to justify the organisation's continued existence".

In short, short-term domestic political interests of gaining voters and narrow economic interests trumped geopolitical wisdom.

Immediately, after Harries published this article, Kennan wrote a letter endorsing all the points made by Harries. He said: "It was in some respects a surprise because certain of your major arguments were ones I myself had made, or had wanted to make, but had not expected to see them so well expressed by the pen of anyone else."

What is striking about the project to expand Nato is that many leading American thinkers, both liberal and conservative, opposed it, including Paul Nitze, James Schlesinger, Fred Ikle, John Mearsheimer, Jack Matlock, William Perry, Stephen Cohen, Bill Burns, Vladimir Pozner, Robert Gates, Robert McNamara, Bill Bradley, Gary Hart, Pat Buchanan, Jeffrey Sachs and Fiona Hill, among others.

The greatest living strategic thinker in the US today is Henry Kissinger. He didn't oppose the expansion of Nato to the former Warsaw Pact states of Eastern Europe. But he strongly counselled against admitting Ukraine into Nato.

As a good student of history, Kissinger pointed out why Ukraine was viewed differently by Russians. In a 2014 article published in the *Washington Post*, this is what he said: "The West must understand that, to Russia,



Ukraine can never be just a foreign country. Russian history began in what was called Keivan-Rus. The Russian religion spread from there. Ukraine has been part of Russia for centuries, and their histories were intertwined before then. Some of the most important battles for Russian freedom, starting with the Battle of Poltava in 1709, were fought on Ukrainian soil."

As a wise statesman, Kissinger proposed a sensible compromise solution. On the one hand, he said: "Ukraine should have the right to choose freely its economic and political associations, including with Europe." On the other hand, he said (in 2014): "Ukraine should

not join Nato, a position I took seven years ago, when it came up."

The real tragedy about Ukraine is that if the then American President Barack Obama (a Nobel Peace Prize winner) had heeded the advice of Kissinger, the war in Ukraine could have been avoided.

Kissinger's formula emphasised that the Ukrainians would be free to choose their own political system and regional associations. Indeed, the strong Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion was not anticipated. This strong resistance confirms their strong desire to join the European Union. And they should be allowed to do so. And, as advised by Dr Kissinger, Ukraine can stay out of Nato and

remain "neutral".

In the past "neutral" states were allowed to join the EU. Ukraine could follow that precedent. Such a win-win solution could have prevented a war. Indeed, two days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky (who has emerged as a real hero after the invasion) said: "We are not afraid of Russia, we are not afraid of engaging in talks with Russia, we are not afraid of discussing anything, such as security guarantees for our state, we are not afraid of talking about neutral status." If neutral status had been agreed to, the war could have been avoided.

When future historians write about this Ukraine episode, one big question they will surely ask is why the clear and explicit warnings of leading Western statesmen, like Kennan and Kissinger, were ignored? They will also ask why our world doesn't have distinguished peacemakers today who could have prevented the conflict.

This may well be the most important lesson that the world should learn from the Ukraine episode. Wars are tragic, as they always have been. Peace must be preserved. And the world needs to develop a class of globally respected statesmen who could emerge as global peacemakers.

Curiously, we used to have such globally respected statesmen, including people like Nelson Mandela, Kofi Annan and Desmond Tutu. Many of them were members of a council of "The Elders" which has tried to provide calm and sensible advice from time to time. Clearly, we seem to lack such distinguished statesmen today.

And the risks continue to grow. Recently, the former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in Taiwan that the US should "immediately take necessary, and long-overdue, steps to do the right and obvious thing, that is to offer the Republic of China (Taiwan) America's diplomatic recognition as a free and sovereign country". One doesn't have to be a geopolitical genius to figure out that his prescription would lead to a war over Taiwan.

Since his provocative suggestion could lead to a war, a war that could be even more destructive than the war in Ukraine, one would expect a global chorus of voices to emerge and condemn the reckless statement of Pompeo which could lead to a war.

So far I have not heard any leading voice condemn his statement. And that's the nub of our global problem. Where are the global peacemakers when we need them more than ever?

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