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LAND FOR PEACE?

Ukraine's Dilemma Between Territorial Integrity and the Quest to End War

The idea of a "land for peace" agreement in Ukraine has moved from an unthinkable scenario to a subject of intense international debate. Negotiations in Abu Dhabi involving Ukrainian, Russian, and U.S. envoys, has revived discussions about potential compromises, even as Ukrainian officials continue to publicly reject permanent territorial concessions. The tension between Ukraine's constitutional commitments, battlefield realities, and the strategic calculations of international allies has created a complex and evolving landscape in which the possibility of trading land for peace is simultaneously denied, explored, and politically fraught.

These negotiations come amid a volatile military environment, including massive Russian missile and drone strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure during an intense winter cold snap, events that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has described as evidence that Moscow is seeking leverage at the negotiating table while continuing the war.

The renewed diplomatic effort has inevitably revived discussions about the potential framework of a peace settlement. Although Ukraine has energetically rejected territorial concessions in the past, Ukrainian leaders have hinted at nuanced positions. In earlier remarks, Zelensky suggested that a ceasefire might be possible if NATO extended protection to areas currently controlled by Kiev, allowing Ukraine to pursue the eventual return of occupied territories through diplomatic means rather than immediate military reconquest. Such statements have fueled speculation that Ukraine might be willing to accept a temporary status quo in which certain territories remain under Russian control without formal recognition. But it is difficult to imagine how Russia could realistically accept a settlement of this kind? Are these proposals just a posture then?

Ukrainian officials continue to publicly emphasize that permanent territorial concessions remain unacceptable. Zelensky and his government have repeatedly insisted that Ukraine's constitution and national law prohibit the surrender of sovereign land without the consent of its citizens. Ukrainian political discourse consistently frames territorial integrity as a core principle of statehood and national survival.

The contradiction between public refusal and private negotiation has become one of the defining features of the current diplomatic moment. Ukrainian media outlets and analysts have increasingly described the concept of "land for peace" not as a straightforward concession but as a complex strategic debate about temporary ceasefires, demilitarized zones, and phased diplomatic solutions. According to Ukrainian sources, Kiev's negotiating strategy focuses on securing security guarantees from Western partners before considering any compromise on the battlefield reality. In this sense, the issue is less about giving up land permanently and more about determining how to end active combat while preserving Ukraine's long-term claim to occupied territories.

International pressure has played a significant role in bringing the "land for peace" question to the forefront. U.S.-drafted frameworks included proposals for Ukraine to relinquish parts of the Donbas or reduce its military capabilities as part of a settlement. Although Kiev amended or resisted elements of these plans, the fact that such proposals have circulated underscores the growing impatience among some Western policymakers seeking a negotiated end to the conflict. Ukrainian officials have responded by emphasizing that no agreement can be imposed without Ukrainian participation or consent, highlighting concerns about external pressure shaping the negotiation agenda.

On the battlefield, developments have further complicated the debate. Ukrainian officials believe Russia may be using ongoing offensives and intensified attacks to strengthen its negotiating position. Ukrainian reporting has suggested that Moscow has sometimes prolonged negotiations to seize additional territory, thereby increasing its leverage during diplomatic discussions. The recent surge in attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure during winter, which left thousands of buildings without heating, has reinforced Ukraine's skepticism toward Russian intentions and its concern that concessions might embolden Russia in the future.

Despite these challenges, Ukrainian leadership continues to signal cautious openness to diplomacy. Zelensky has indicated that a ceasefire may become possible as military dynamics evolve, suggesting that current Russian offensives could represent the last major ground operations before meaningful negotiations. The government has also accepted new security arrangements with Western allies designed to deter future violations of ceasefires, demonstrating a willingness to explore political solutions under the right conditions.

Public opinion within Ukraine remains a decisive factor. Polling and media commentary consistently show widespread resistance to any agreement that permanently cedes territory to Russia. Ukrainian political leaders are acutely aware that domestic backlash could undermine the legitimacy of any settlement perceived as surrender. At the same time, war fatigue, economic hardship, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis have created growing pressure to find a path toward peace. The result is a political environment in which leaders must balance competing demands: maintaining national unity and sovereignty while seeking an end to relentless military and civilian suffering.

The international context further complicates the issue. NATO's long-term support for Ukraine, combined with Western concerns about escalation and global security risks, has created incentives for compromise while also reinforcing Ukraine's confidence in continuing resistance. The expiration of key arms control agreements between major powers has added urgency to negotiations, raising fears of a broader security crisis if the war continues indefinitely. For some Western policymakers, a "land for peace" deal may appear as a pragmatic solution to stabilize the region, but Ukrainian leaders too, exactly like their Russian counterparts, remain wary of arrangements that might freeze the conflict without resolving its underlying causes.

Critics argue that concession would reward aggression and set a dangerous precedent. But a stark binary choice — total victory or capitulation — has until now hardly been a successful strategy, neither for Ukraine and the West, nor for Russia.

THE TRAGEDY OF UKRAINE: FROM CRISIS TO 'FORGETTING EVIL'

Reconciliation requires a system of justice based on compassion rather than vengeance

An Interview with Nicolai Petro

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Fabio Calzolari, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Mae Fah Luang University in Thailand interviewed Nicolai N. Petro, Professor of Political Science at the University of Rhode Island. Petro's most recent book, The Tragedy of Ukraine, demonstrated how classical Greek tragedy offers a conceptual framework for healing divided societies, revealing the emotional dynamics that precede violence and inhibit reconciliation.

FABIO CALZOLARI: Professor Petro, your research connects diplomatic history, church– state institutions, Ukrainian regional governance, and analysis of Greek tragedy. How did fieldwork and archival research in Eastern Europe lead you to analyze political clashes as processes driven by institutional misalignment within a divided polity?

NICOLAI PETRO: I feel that political institutions need to be understood within the context of their own political cultures. This is where political science training fails us because, as a project of modernity, it seeks to establish universal norms rather than culturally specific ones. This can lead to serious distortions when Western analysts look at non-Western political systems.

Critics sometimes refer to these distortions as "double- standards", pointing to behavior that is deemed acceptable for Western countries, but not for other countries. The problem, however, is more deeply rooted: In its dealing with non-Western nations the West regards itself as acting in the name of human progress, and therefore as above reproach... [B]lindness to the value inherent in other cultures can lead to serious analytical errors when evaluating the prospects for economic, political, and military success of countries deemed non-Western

Such blindness to the value inherent in other cultures can lead to serious analytical errors when evaluating the prospects for economic, political, and military success of countries deemed non-Western. We see this manifested in Russia's unforeseen resilience to West- ern sanctions, its growing popularity throughout the Global South, and the rise of the BRICS nations more broadly.

I first noticed this cultural blindness when I came to study in the US from Italy. My university courses on the Soviet Union were largely devoid of cultural, religious, and for the most part, even historical context. I knew of this context from growing up in the Russian emigration in Europe, and it led me to very different conclusions, which I discussed in my book The Rebirth of Russian Democracy.

After my doctorate I began to travel often to Russia, then to Ukraine. I continued to pay careful attention to cultural context, especially how it differed from region to region. These differences suggested to me that the same problem that we were seeing on the international level among states, were also being replicated between regions and their central government. Respect for local history and culture would therefore likely be just as important to domestic social stability as it is to international stability. My family and I arrived in Ukraine just as the 2013-2014 Maidan revolt was unfolding. We lived in Odessa, a Russian-speaking city where most people viewed the Maidan as a coup d'etat rather than a popular uprising. In my latest book, The Tragedy of Ukraine, I describe how cultural difference caused the political divisions we see today, and suggest that classical Greek tragedy can provide a healing social therapy.

FC: In The Tragedy of Ukraine, you show how societies fall into tragic cycles when dialog- ue between differently situated people and institutions loses legitimacy, and public humiliation becomes a routine signaling device. Which measurable indicators would you monitor in a divided polity to identify at an early stage the threat of this kind of internal conflict? Should conflict analysis formally incorporate discursive data–public media pronouncements of various sorts–as predictive variables?

NP: There is a problem with using discursive data for political prediction. It is the same problem that exists in common law—namely, that speech is not always translated into direct action. An angry parent might say to a child, "I'll kill you if you don't clean your room this instant!" But they rarely do. Despite not always being a reliable indicator of behavior, however, public discourse can provide some important clues regarding the likely behavior of elites, particularly when it is structured and promoted by governments. We see this structure in the rhetoric of public officials, and in the narratives of prominent media organizations.

Despite the seeming variety of such discourse, it is actually not that difficult to summarize and evaluate because the significance of what public officials say can be weighted to their position in government, and the significance of social media outlets can be weighted to their audience reach. Thus, we can get a pretty good sense of the most important discursive patterns from looking at the top five media sources in any community, since they are later replicated throughout all of society.

Finally, one should corroborate these findings with survey data, though I would not rely on surveys as my primary indicator. There are several reasons for this. First, people often hide their views on sensitive subjects (e.g., "would you approve if your daughter married a ...?"). Second, attitudes change over time, so one needs a long sequence of comparable data, especially on sensitive issues. Finally, before, during, and after major conflicts, attitudes become seriously distorted, thanks to social media and government manipulation.

FC: In The Tragedy of Ukraine, you demonstrate that estrangement between Western and Eastern regions (oblasts) did not originate in cultural difference but in the administrative treatment of language as a security variable. If linguistic practice and civic loyalty were stable at the local level until state policy re-built them, which post-1991 govern- ance structure would have prevented that phenomenon? Would constitutional regional auton- omy in education, or municipal authority over cultural regulation, have stabilized Ukrainian society without generating cleavages? Had the Crimean model been applied more widely in Ukraine, perhaps there would have been greater momentum for a transition to a federal system of government.

NP: Constitutionally enshrined regional autonomy was actually tried in Crimea from 1991 to 1995. Had the Crimean model been applied more widely in Ukraine, perhaps there would have been greater momentum for a transition to a federal system of government. This was the form of government supported by the leader of the People's Movement of Ukraine, or Rukh, Viacheslav Chornovil, who died in a car accident in 1999. During the current war, in addition to language usage, independent

media, regional political parties, and religious identity have all been securitized. This has exacerbated the conflict between Galicia and Donbass (the heartlands of Western and Eastern Ukraine), and made the Ukrainian government into one of the primary architects of the divisions in Ukrainian society.

FC: Critics might say that your tragic framework assumes minimal reciprocity for dialogue to regain legitimacy. How does your tragic model perform when one of the sides feels that its trauma is greater than the other's, and when, furthermore, that trauma is given institutional recognition by only one of the sides, resulting in unequal 'epistemic' authority?

NP: Trauma is too intensely personal to be independently adjudicated. Although some Truth and Reconciliation Commissions set themselves the goal of gauging trauma, assigning responsibility, and seeking compensation for it (Guatemala and South Africa come to mind), these efforts have typically been seen as unsatisfactory.

Emphasizing forgiveness and forgetfulness, so that personal trauma does not impede reconciliation, has proved more fruitful. As opposed to imposing institutional justice, forgiveness is a path that any individual can embrace, if they are willing to live alongside their former enemies after the war, and work together to create a better society for their children. This was the path chosen by Spain after Francisco Franco died. Known as the Pacto de Olvido, or Pact of Forgetting. Political parties in post-Franco Spain agreed to suppress movements seeking revenge (and separation from Spain). This has allowed future generations to revisit the trauma of the Spanish Civil War from a more distant perspective, and to view it in a far less vengeful and socially disruptive light. Such pacts can be traced at least as far back as 404 B.C., when Thrasybulus decreed that, in the interests of social concord, there be no vendetta taken by Athenian democracy against the oligarchs.

FC: You treat nationalism as a closure mechanism that limits reciprocal acknowledgement even inside democratic institutions. How does moral sincerity become an informal exclusion tool without explicit legal restriction, for example, through public-resource allocation or curriculum standardization? What criteria distinguish civic patriotism from identity absolutism when stereotyping is not formally or legally evident?

NP: Discrimination is very hard to prove in court. That is because the person accused of discrimination, say on the basis of race, can argue that he was not discriminating on the basis of race, but on the basis of economic status, which is not illegal. Intent is therefore critical. I distinguish between nationalism and patriotism, following the arguments of noted scholars like Maurizio Viroli, Mary Dietz, and John Schaar. The principle distinction between the two is very clear. Patriotism and nationalism both appeal to identity and values, but whereas nationalism excludes "who can belong to the nation" by equating civic identity with ethnicity and culture, patriotism includes "who can belong to the nation" by separating civic identity from ethnicity and culture.

Nationalism places the unity of the people, as manifested in their ideological attachment to blood and soil, above all other values; whereas patriotism places the individual liberty, enshrined in their equality before the law, above the unity that nationalist governments strive to manufacture. The proper question then becomes: what criteria would distinguish a nationalistic from a patriotic history or literature curriculum? One way to answer this question is to refer to the de-Nazification of the school curricula in postwar German, Italy, and Japan (as well as Hungary, Croatia, Romania and other countries) to see what was done in practice.

FC: In the Oresteia, the chorus is an internal audience that validates proper behavior and signals when both sides must be heard. Within current EU debates over the use of frozen Russian assets to finance the war in Ukraine, which European civil intermediaries still perform an Oresteian choral function? Which intermediaries have forfeited this listening capacity?

NP: The infamous "democracy deficit" that has plagued the EU since its inception has become more evident over the course of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. I am referring to the lack of checks and balances in the administrative process, and the lack of any electoral accountability. There is not a single body in the EU that is elected by all Europeans. As a result, The European Commission has created a parallel structure of govern- ment that increasingly conflicts with the governments of member states. In theory, the European Parliament has the ability to force the resignation of the Commission, but this has never happened. The Parliament could still serve as a forum for meaningful debate, but in order to do that, it would need to have the ability to influence policy. But since it does not have that ability, it is an empty sounding board. As a result, instead of encouraging dialogue, EU leaders impose uniformity of opinion through executive decisions and the Digital Services Act. Dissenters feel they are not heard within the EU, so instead of participating in such fora, they set up their own, distinct fora. This only promotes social divisions, and further EU repressions.

FC: The Eumenides creates the Areopagus not as legal machinery but as a ritual-political body that establishes epi- stemic parity, thereby extinguishing the cycle of retribution. For a postwar Ukraine, which institutional body could be endowed with similar Areopagus-type mixed legitimacy (professional expertise + civic guardianship + ritual recognition)?

NP: I have long argued that Ukraine needs a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that could serve as a vehicle for social healing, and begin the process of knitting together the components of Ukrainian society. For this to happen all sides in the current conflict need a public forum where they feel safe. After the war, there will be a great need to give voice to the anguish and grievances of all sides, to bestow recognition on the once-enemy Other, and to exorcize resentments that will otherwise metastasize into a never-ending cycle of hatred. To bring lasting peace after the war, Ukraine will need an instrument for nationwide catharsis. While this would not resolve individual grievances, it would give them a public voice.

FC: In the Eumenides, Athena resolves the conflict between Orestes and the Erinyes not by declaring one side ethically correct, but by allowing a split verdict in the Areopagus, so that neither party receives total vindication; subsequent legitimacy stems from institutional balance. For Ukrainian reconciliation, could a non-victorious constitutional settlement serve as the tragic analogue to Athena's solution? Can political science treat narrative humility as a constitutional principle so that it becomes an enforceable rule of coexistence?

NP: In Aeschylus' telling, the jury verdict condemns Orestes for murdering his mother, but by intervening to cast a vote herself, Athena induces a tie. This overturns this result and leads to Orestes' acquittal. I see Athena's intervention as an attempt by Aeschylus to start a new Athenian political tradition. Replacing tradition requires some new source of political legitimacy, in this case it is divine justice. But it is a different aspect of justice than before the trial, namely one based on compassion rather than vengeance. Athena makes explicit reference to her preference for "moderation," and that moderation should always be the outcome sought.

As for the second part of your question, the key issue is not who could play the role of Orestes in Ukraine, but - who would play the role of Athena? Who would have the power to lead the conflicting parties in Ukrainian society to com- passion?

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https://landmarksmag.substack.com/p/the-tragedy-of-ukraine-from-crisis

DON'T BLAME THE UN FOR THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS

The UN is weaker and more delegitimised than ever, but it would be a mistake to blame the institution for the world's problems: the UN simply mirrors our our fractured geopolitical reality

By Thomas Fazi

The United Nations is facing the deepest crisis in its eighty-year history. Its legitimacy has been eroding for years, attracting criticism from across the political spectrum. Critics of US and Western foreign policy denounce the organisation as powerless in the face of mass slaughter in Gaza and repeated unilateral US military actions carried out without Security Council authorisation. Liberal Atlanticists fault it for its inability to halt Russia's invasion of Ukraine or bring the war to an end. Meanwhile, the MAGA movement portrays the UN as an instrument of a "globalist elite" bent on eroding national sovereignty.

Today, however, the organ- isation confronts a more direct challenge: an open assault from the country that has long been its principal architect, sponsor and largest financial contributor — the United States. Donald Trump, a long-standing critic of the UN, has moved from rhetoric to action. Since returning to power, his administration has slashed voluntary contributions to UN agencies and withheld mandatory payments to both the regular and peacekeeping budgets. According to UN officials, the US currently owes billions of dollars in assessed contributions, prompting the Secretary-General to warn that the organisation faces the risk of "imminent financial collapse".

The pressure is set to intensify. Trump's proposed 2026 budget would drastically reduce or eliminate funding for several UN bodies, including the regular budget and peacekeeping operations. At the same time, he has launched a parallel initiative — the so-called "Board of Peace" — explicitly framed as an alternative to the existing multilateral system and chaired by Trump himself. So far, only a limited number of countries, largely US-aligned governments in the Middle East, Central Asia and Latin America, have signalled participation. Notably, Western countries have declined or hesitated, while major powers such as China, Russia and India have refrained from formal commitment.

For these reasons, the initiative is unlikely to displace the UN in the near term, as it is rightly perceived as little more than a tool for projecting US power — and legitimising Trump's cowboyish foreign policy. The UN system will thus probably endure, but in a weakened and increasingly contested form. This erosion of authority, however, cannot be attributed solely to institutional failure. The UN — like any international organisation — ultimately mirrors the global distribution of power.

This has always been the case. Despite the language of universal legality, international law has often been largely a myth, enforced selectively when it aligned with the interests of dominant powers and ignored when it did not. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq is a textbook example of this asymmetry. But it couldn't otherwise: inter- national law lacks an independent enforcement mechanism; there is no global police force capable of compelling compliance. Its force has therefore always been less coercive than normative — grounded more in legitimacy and shared expectations than anything else.

What distinguishes the current moment is not merely the persistence of power politics but the diminishing effort to cloak it in legal or moral justification. Previous US administrations at least sought the appearance of multilateral legitimacy; today, that veneer is gone. The UN has limited means to counter such unilateralism. Yet concluding that the organisation — or international law itself — is therefore obsolete would be a leap. Even without hard enforcement, international norms exert real influence. States, including powerful ones, remain dependent on alliances, trade and diplomatic recognition. Disregarding widely accepted norms carries reputational and political costs, as the global backlash against Israel and Trump illustrates.

A system in which states retain at least a normative incentive to respect shared rules is preferable to one governed openly by raw force. At the same time, it is unrealistic to expect the UN alone to resolve the world's crises. The fate of conflicts in the Middle East, Ukraine or any other region is ultimately shaped by the broader balance of power rather than by resolutions passed in New York.

Meaningful change therefore depends less on institutional reform than on geopolitical accommodation among major powers. Should they succeed in forging a new equilibrium — a kind of updated global Westphalian understanding — the UN could regain relevance. If they fail, its capacity to prevent escalation will remain limited. In this sense, the organisation reflects the fractures and alignments of the international system itself.

But we should be clear about who the outlier is. On a wide range of issues, the global majority frequently votes with remarkable consensus, leaving the US and its closest Western allies isolated. Far from being detached from reality, the UN often mirrors it — a "world minus one", as some have put it, or perhaps more precisely, a world minus the West.

What is clear is that a more balanced, cooperative and genuinely multipolar frame- work is urgently needed. The hope is that this systemic reconfiguration can occur through negotiated accomm- odation rather than the mass conflict that catalysed the UN's formation.

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ANTIAMERICANISM IS NOT A CRIME

Is it possible to criticise the Transatlantic world order? Is it admissible to question the legitimacy of a world order based on US hegemony? American hegemony does not come from the noble principles of freedom and democracy. Vietnam and Iraq were blunders of colossal proportions and should have damned the name of the United States for decades. Yet for some, the problem is anti-Americanism, not its causes.

In Search of Dialogue with Russia

A large group of travelers from Europe is certainly not an everyday sight in Russia today. For this reason alone, the visit of around thirty Swiss citizens to Moscow during the snowy final week of January attracted the attention of some Muscovites. Residents of the Russian capital are generally rather reserved and taciturn toward strangers. Yet within just a few days, the Swiss travelers were repeatedly approached by curious Muscovites who, upon hearing German being spoken, wanted to know which country the travelers came from. European tourists are currently a rare sight in Russia—paradoxically, even though from a bureaucratic standpoint and in terms of obtaining a Russian visa, it is easier to visit Russia now than it was before 2022.

But the thirty Swiss visitors are not ordinary tourists. Their trip was not motivated by a desire to escape boredom at home: it was a journey organized in the spirit of "people's diplomacy."

"Anyone who wants peace with their neighbour must listen to them and understand their arguments. That doesn't mean we approve of them. We simply want to listen and try to understand the concerns of the Russians as well," says Vital Burger, organizer of the initiative. "So far, we have heard the Western narrative extensively in all media, from politicians and the military alike." Vital Burger is president of the Eurasia Association and also vice president of the Switzerland–Russia Society, which, incidentally, celebrated its 100th anniversary last year.

In addition to visiting Russia and listening to Russia's arguments through conversations with various experts and people who live in Russia and have known the country for years, one of the most symbolic moments of the trip was a small action carried out on a sunny but bitterly cold afternoon in late January on the streets of Moscow. Equipped with trycheln—Swiss cowbells—the Swiss delegation set out to reach the official Swiss representation in Russia in order to hand a letter to the country's ambassador. A 300-meter march from the Chistye Prudy ("Clean Ponds") metro station to the seat of the Swiss Embassy in Russia was intended as a sign: many Swiss citizens do not agree with Switzerland's abandonment of neutrality. With the ringing of bells, they sought to drive away the evil spirit of conflict that has shaped relations between Russia and Switzerland in recent years.

"We stand here as representatives of a group of the Swiss population that takes neutrality seriously. For us, this means a willingness to treat both parties in a conflict with respect, to listen to their concerns and wishes, and to seek paths toward mutual understanding. [...] We simply hope that those responsible for Russia's fate do not abandon the hope for détente and for a new beginning based on solidarity. We ask you, Mr. Ambassador, to contribute to this as far as possible," read the letter to the Swiss ambassador.

The reception at the Swiss Embassy itself was an almost perfect exercise in diplomatic courtesy—and also proof that it is possible to conduct a discussion on fundamental issues such as neutrality and war in a completely civilized manner, even when there are profound differences of opinion.

For many Swiss people, neutrality is a question of national identity. Many of the Swiss who traveled to Russia in order to seek understanding with the country believe that neutrality was violated after 2022—an opinion the new Swiss ambassador to Russia does not share. Neutrality, he argues, is a precisely defined legal concept that Switzerland continues to uphold, since unlike most other European states it has supplied neither weapons nor intelligence information to Ukraine. Some, however, consider this definition of neutrality too narrow and believe that the sanctions imposed by Switzerland violate the country's neutrality. This is also the position of the Russian government, which has officially placed Switzerland in the category of "unfriendly countries."

Switzerland has frozen Russian assets worth 7 billion Swiss francs. In Moscow's view, this has caused Switzerland to lose its legitimacy as a mediator in the Ukraine war. According to Russia, Switzerland has violated its neutrality for the first time since 1815. On the other hand, Switzerland has been criticized by the United States for imposing too few sanctions.

The travelers from the Eurasia Association are not the only ones seeking to resume dialogue with Russia. The Swiss head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Ignazio Cassis, recently announced that he intends to visit Russia—something that until recently would have seemed unthinkable.

A New Concept of Neutrality?

Vital Burger remains optimistic. Nevertheless, restoring normal relations between Switzerland and Russia currently appears to be a distant goal. There are certainly many in Switzerland who seek dialogue with Russia. Many recall that Switzerland was recognized by the international community as a neutral country in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, thanks also to the efforts of Russian Tsar Alexander I.

Yet even though neutrality remains a fundamental element of foreign policy for the vast majority of Swiss citizens, a (slim) majority would, according to a recent survey, support military aid to Ukraine—an approach that is difficult to reconcile with the concept of neutrality. According to this new poll, 56 percent of respondents said yes or rather yes to arms deliveries to Ukraine. At the same time, 80 percent want to preserve neutrality, and 85 percent of Swiss people remain of the opinion that Switzerland should not take part in military conflicts.

The survey was reportedly commissioned by a small, previously unknown association called NeutRealität. The association was founded by Adrian Wiedmer, an entrepreneur. Wiedmer is locally active in the Green Liberal Party and is said to have often been outraged by Switzerland's Ukraine policy. For this reason, the founders of the association allegedly financed the survey with private funds.

Welcome to Moscow

The name General Suvorov may not mean much to most Europeans. In Russia, however, the general is still revered, even though he lived in the 18th century, between 1730 and 1800. Suvorov has become a symbol of Russia's military power. When people in Russia think of Switzerland, the name Suvorov is one of the first associations.

After defeating the French in northern Italy together with the Austrians, Suvorov and his army fought the French and the troops of the Helvetic Republic in Switzerland in 1799. One of the mosaics on the ceiling of the Komsomolskaya metro station depicts Suvorov on horseback against the backdrop of the Alps. Russia is a country in which military glory, regardless of the era, is still revered. The myth of Russia's nearly invincible military power forms a direct link from tsarist Russia, through the Soviet Union, to today's Russia.

In the Moscow metro, one passenger jokes after hearing that the travelers are from Switzerland: "You must have remembered Suvorov!" He then gives a short speech about how important it is to be proud of one's country—something that, in his opinion, until a few years ago was almost considered bad taste in Russia. When he hears that the visitors are here to cultivate friendship with Russia, he exclaims: "You can tell they are good people!" and bids them farewell with best wishes for a pleasant stay in the capital.

One might almost believe that spontaneous people's diplomacy can sometimes achieve more than official diplomacy with its rigid protocols.

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Endless Trouble with Iran

The recent protests in Iran immediately raised the very real possibility of a US-led regime change. Donald Trump oscillated between declaring support for the protesters, threatening war, and issuing more conciliatory statements. Regime change in Iran had already been one of the openly stated objectives of Israel's attack on Iranian targets last summer, later backed by the United States. After the failed Venezuela raid that sought to capture President Nicolás Maduro, Washington may have felt emboldened to try again elsewhere. For a few tense days, the Islamic establishment in Iran appeared to be experiencing one of its most dangerous and unstable moments since it came to power 47 years ago. The question remains whether this danger was real, or whether it was amplified—if not manufactured—by disinformation designed to make the Iranian leadership anxious and reactive.

The protests were sparked primarily by economic distress. The rial, Iran's national currency, lost around 90 percent of its value in a single year. Iran's economic troubles are not accidental; they are largely the result of years of US policy combining comprehensive sanctions with covert operations, cyberattacks, and occasional military strikes. Although officially aimed at the Iranian state, these measures have fallen most heavily on ordinary Iranians.

Against the backdrop of a harsh crackdown on protesters, which resulted in several deaths, many voices in the West called for stronger support for the "peaceful protesters" and a more aggressive stance toward Tehran. The debate, some argued, was no longer whether to strike, but why the United States had not struck earlier. Trump, who had campaigned as a critic of endless wars, proved more trigger-happy than promised and considerably more so than during his first term. Even then, he had ordered strikes on Syria in 2017 and authorized the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, bringing the two countries to the brink of open war.

Yet Trump had also shown restraint. In June 2019, in what now appears a far calmer era, he resisted heavy pressure to retaliate after Iran shot down an American spy drone. The United States was reportedly minutes away from launching airstrikes. "How many people will be killed?" Trump asked his military advisers. When told the figure would be around one hundred, he called off the attack at the last moment. He was widely criticized for inconsistency and indecision, but the episode remains one of the rare instances in which a direct military confrontation was deliberately avoided.

This was not the first time Washington and Tehran had come close to war. In early 2012, US officials accused Iranian operatives of plotting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington. Iran denied the allegations. At the time, Iran was led by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former mayor of Tehran, whom both the United States and Israel suspected of pursuing a nuclear weapons program. Ahmadinejad was frequently quoted as having said that Israel should be "wiped off the map of history," a phrase that became emblematic of his confrontational rhetoric.

Despite the tensions, the Obama administration sought to avoid another major conflict. Obama, who had campaigned as an anti-imperial candidate, famously described the Iraq war as a "dumb war," even though his presidency would hardly be free of military interventions, Libya being the most notable example.

The Golden Age of the Shah?

The Islamic Republic of Iran, established after the 1979 revolution, has long been accused of severe human rights violations: violently suppressing dissent, executing homosexuals, and curtailing women's freedoms. Against this backdrop, the reign of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, from 1953 to 1979, is often nostalgically portrayed as a lost golden age of secularism, modernity, and female emancipation. The Shah, who regained power after a CIA-backed coup in 1953, was a close ally of the United States.

Today, the Shah's era is frequently described as one of rapid modernization and economic growth. Yet while Iran earned billions from oil exports, many ordinary Iranians resented the fact that the main beneficiaries appeared to be the Shah and his entourage. "In terms of human rights, freedom, and democracy, the Shah's regime wasn't any better, in my opinion," says Richard Foltz, a Canadian historian of Iran, in an interview with Global Bridge. "In both cases, the benefits of the country's oil wealth were largely restricted to those close to the regime. Of course, the privileged class was different."

When the Shah introduced austerity measures in 1977 to combat inflation, the burden fell mainly on the poor and unskilled workers, among the most traditional segments of society. These groups would become the foot soldiers of the revolution, mobilized under the spiritual leadership of the exiled cleric Ruhollah Khomeini. The Shah attempted to crush the protests, and thousands were killed, but his regime proved incapable of delivering a decisive blow.

"The repression in 1978 was inconsistent," Foltz explains. "The Shah was seriously ill with cancer, unbeknownst to the public, and his actions became increasingly erratic. He also received conflicting advice from the US government, which alternated between urging a hard line and calling for restraint. Brzezinski was the one advocating repression."

Today, humanitarian concern is expressed for the victims of repression in Iran. In 1978, however, President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, assured the Shah of full US support in crushing the demonstrations by any means necessary. Thousands died. It was not enough. In January 1979, the Shah left Iran for good. Two weeks later, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile. The revolution had triumphed.

Narges Bajoghli, associate professor of Middle East studies at Johns Hopkins University, writes that the revolution succeeded not simply because Iranians were angry. "They had been angry for years," she notes. "The revolution succeeded because three critical power centers aligned: the people, the clergy, and the bazaar merchants. This coalition was built through years of organizing, through mosque networks, labor unions, and the economic leverage of the bazaar. When those institutions moved together, the monarchy fell."

The depth of resentment toward both the Shah and his American patron became evident in November 1979, when Iranian students stormed the US embassy in Tehran and took 66 American personnel hostage. The hostages would remain captive for 444 days, until their release on 20 January 1981, the day Ronald Reagan was inaugurated president.

The revolution had caught Washington off guard. As late as September 1978, US intelligence assessments still predicted that the Shah would remain in power for another decade. After the revolution, the primary American concern was that Iran might drift toward communism. The Soviet Union, already deeply involved in Afghanistan, had little interest in invading Iran, whose new rulers were fiercely anti-communist. As one CIA official reportedly observed, the United States now had "a plan to defend those who don't want to be defended against those who are not going to attack."

The regional power that did seek to exploit Iran's revolutionary turmoil was Iraq. Led by Saddam Hussein, who formally assumed the presidency in 1979, Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980. Donald Rumsfeld, then serving as a US envoy, famously remarked of Saddam, "He is a son of a bitch, but he is our son of a bitch." The

Iran-Iraq war lasted eight years, claimed nearly a million lives, and featured trench warfare and the widespread use of chemical weapons. The United States allegedly assisted Iraq in acquiring chemical agents, later used not only against Iranian troops but also against Kurdish civilians.

In July 1988, another trauma deepened Iranian mistrust. Iran Air Flight 655, a civilian airliner en route from Tehran to Dubai, was shot down by a US warship over the Strait of Hormuz. All passengers were killed. Washington claimed it had mistaken the plane for a military aircraft. Although the United States later expressed regret, it never issued a formal apology.

After the war and the death of Khomeini, Iran entered a more pragmatic phase under his successor, Ali Khamenei, who remains supreme leader to this day. Between 1989 and 2001, relations with the United States experienced a limited thaw. Diplomatic ties were not restored, but some sanctions were eased.

That fragile détente ended abruptly after the attacks of 11 September 2001. Iran's leadership condemned the attacks, and for a brief period even suspended the ritual "Death to America" chants. Yet in his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush labeled Iran part of the "Axis of Evil," alongside Iraq and North Korea. When Ahmadinejad became president, he sent an 18-page handwritten letter to Bush proposing dialogue, particularly on the nuclear issue. The letter went unanswered. "If they want to be isolated from the world, we will work to achieve that," Bush later remarked.

In 2007, Republican presidential candidate John McCain jokingly sang "Bomb, bomb, bomb Iran" to the tune of a Beach Boys song. Even so, the United States was too deeply entangled in Iraq to open another front. The invasion of Iraq had demonstrated the limits of regime-change optimism: removing Saddam Hussein did not bring democracy, but civil war, sectarian violence, and eventually the rise of the Islamic State. Iran, meanwhile, expanded its regional influence by supporting Shiite militias in Iraq and backing Bashar al-Assad in Syria from 2011 onward.

Against this background, the 2015 nuclear agreement came as a surprise. Iran agreed to strict inspections and limits on its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief and access to frozen assets. The deal represented the most serious attempt at rapprochement since 1979. It did not survive Donald Trump, who unilaterally withdrew from the agreement, shocking European allies such as France and Germany and re-imposing sweeping sanctions.

The current unrest in Iran, and the renewed talk of regime change in Washington, cannot be understood in isolation. They are the latest chapter in a cycle that has repeated itself for more than four decades: economic pressure, internal dissent, external threats, and mutual mistrust hardened by memory. For Iranians, US policy is not an abstract debate about democracy or human rights, but a lived history of coups, sanctions, war, and humiliation. For Americans, Iran remains the unresolved trauma of a revolution that defied expectations and produced a regime that refused to submit.

Today's Iran is neither on the verge of imminent collapse nor immune to internal fracture. The state is resilient, but brittle; the population is disillusioned, but wary of foreign intervention. Calls for regime change, whether sincere or instrumental, echo past miscalculations. The lesson of the last half-century is not that change is impossible, but that it rarely comes on the timetable—or in the form—imagined from abroad. In that sense, Iran remains trapped in an endless trouble not only with the United States, but with a history that continues to shape every present crisis.

This Week in History: February 7–20

On **7 February 1992**, European leaders signed the Maastricht Treaty, laying the foundations for today's European Union. The euro, EU citizenship, and common foreign policy ambitions all trace their origins to that winter day in the Dutch city of Maastricht.

On **9 February 1950**, when U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed — without evidence — that communists had infiltrated the State Department. The speech ignited years of political hysteria known as McCarthyism, during which fear replaced proof and suspicion became a civic duty. The damage to civil liberties and public trust would last far longer than McCarthy's career.

On **11 February 1858**, Bernadette Soubirous reported the first of several Marian apparitions in Lourdes, France. The site soon became one of the most visited pilgrimage destinations in the world. On 11 February 1929, the Lateran Treaty was signed between the Holy See and Italy, establishing Vatican City as an independent sovereign state.

On **12 February 1947**, U.S. President Harry S. Truman signed an executive order creating the Central Intelligence Agency, institutionalizing American intelligence structures during the early Cold War.

On **13 February 1945**, Allied forces launched the bombing of Dresden, causing extensive destruction and civilian casualties. The event remains one of the most debated military operations of World War II. On 13 February 1960, France conducted its first successful nuclear test in Algeria, becoming the world's fourth nuclear power.

On **15 February 1898**, the U.S. battleship USS Maine exploded in Havana Harbor, accelerating the path to the Spanish–American War.

On **16 February 1959**, Fidel Castro was sworn in as Prime Minister of Cuba following the revolution.

On **17 February 1600,** philosopher Giordano Bruno was executed in Rome for heresy.

On **19 February 1942**, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the internment of Japanese Americans.

On **20 February 1956**, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his "Secret Speech" denouncing Stalin's crimes at the Soviet Communist Party Congress. Though initially concealed, its contents soon spread, shaking communist movements worldwide and marking the beginning of de-Stalinization — a rare moment when an empire publicly acknowledged its own terror.

Neutrality Under Fire: Moral Evasion or Pragmatic Responsibility?

Is neutrality not only morally but also pragmatically acceptable in the face of a brutal conflict? What would an acceptable neutrality mean in such a case?

In times of brutal war, especially when one side appears clearly as the aggressor and the other as the victim, neutrality is easily framed as indifference, cowardice, or even complicity. Yet this caricature obscures a deeper and far more uncomfortable question: what, exactly, should a neutral state do when faced with extreme violence? Is neutrality merely the refusal to act, or can it be an active moral and political stance aimed at limiting destruction and hastening peace?

A neutral state, by definition, does not take sides in a conflict. But conflicts themselves are not all alike. Some are murky, multi-layered struggles with shared responsibilities and blurred lines of causation. Others present a stark asymmetry, with invasion, occupation, or mass violence that seems to leave little room for moral hesitation. In such cases, the pressure on neutral states intensifies dramatically. To remain neutral can appear indistinguishable from tolerating injustice. Yet to abandon neutrality risks feeding the very dynamics that prolong and escalate war.

This tension is not new. Since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, European political thought has oscillated between the rejection of war as an absolute evil and the belief that force is sometimes necessary to stop greater crimes. After 1945, and especially after the unprecedented destruction of the Second World War, war came to be regarded not merely as a tragic necessity but as a civilizational failure. Neutrality promised distance from great-power rivalries and, perhaps, a way to reduce suffering in a world that proclaimed peace while endlessly preparing for war.

Yet neutrality has never been morally neutral. The decision not to take sides is itself a political choice, shaped by interests, fears, historical memory, and power relations. The real question, therefore, is not whether neutrality is morally pure, but whether it can be morally and pragmatically defensible in the face of extreme violence.

Interventionists argue that it cannot. According to this view, brutal actors understand only force. Diplomacy, mediation, and appeals to international law are dismissed as empty gestures when confronted with tanks, missiles, and mass graves. To remain neutral, interventionists claim, is to allow the aggressor to proceed unchallenged. In their eyes, neutrality becomes a form of moral abdication: a refusal to name evil and confront it. Those who defend neutrality are portrayed as naïve idealists at best, cynical opportunists at worst—people who speak of peace while benefiting from others' sacrifices.

This argument has a certain intuitive power. One cannot stop an invading army with sermons, flowers, or carefully worded statements. History offers many examples where restraint by outsiders failed to prevent catastrophe. The memory of appeasement in the 1930s still haunts European political culture, reinforcing the belief that hesitation emboldens aggressors. From this perspective, neutrality in the face of clear aggression appears not only ineffective but morally bankrupt.

And yet, the interventionist critique rests on an assumption that deserves closer scrutiny: that taking sides militarily actually leads to quicker, more just outcomes. The record of recent decades suggests otherwise.

Ukraine presents the sharpest contemporary test of neutrality. Here, many argue, the lines are clear: invasion versus sovereignty, aggression versus self-defense. For neutral states, the moral pressure is immense. To refuse military support is interpreted as tacit acceptance of conquest. Is the only morally acceptable response to join the war effort, or can neutrality take an active form aimed at limiting escalation and creating conditions for a negotiated end?

This is where neutrality is most often misunderstood. Neutrality does not necessarily mean waiting out the conflict in silence. Historically, some neutral states have played crucial roles as mediators, facilitators of humanitarian aid, hosts of negotiations, and channels of communication between enemies who refuse to speak to one another. Such roles are not glamorous, and they rarely satisfy the moral desire for clear-cut justice. But they can have tangible effects.

From a pragmatic standpoint, neutrality can reduce rather than fuel conflict. By refusing to become a party to the war, neutral states preserve diplomatic space. They can maintain relations with all sides, gather information, propose frameworks for de-escalation, and, crucially, offer an exit ramp when exhaustion sets in. Wars rarely end because one side is morally persuaded of its wrongdoing; they end when the costs become unbearable and a face-saving compromise becomes necessary. Neutral actors are often best placed to help construct that compromise.

The moral critique of neutrality also tends to ignore an uncomfortable fact: intervention itself is rarely free of moral compromise. Military involvement almost inevitably leads to civilian casualties, destruction of infrastructure, and long-term instability. Interventions launched with humanitarian rhetoric can harden identities, radicalize populations, and prolong violence. To point this out is not to equate all sides or deny responsibility, but to recognize that moral clarity does not automatically translate into morally clean outcomes.

The realist interventionist view prides itself on understanding power dynamics. Yet power is not only military. Economic leverage, diplomatic isolation, legal accountability, and reconstruction incentives all shape behavior. Neutrality, when combined with these tools, can exert real pressure without adding fuel to the battlefield. It can also help prevent the transformation of local or regional conflicts into wider confrontations among great powers—a risk that has become increasingly acute in an interconnected and nuclear-armed world.

A neutrality that consists solely of protecting one's own comfort while ignoring massive human suffering is indeed morally hollow. Acceptable neutrality must be demanding. It requires active engagement, sustained diplomatic effort, and a willingness to invest political capital in unpopular initiatives. It may involve mediating with actors deemed unsavory, resisting domestic pressure for symbolic gestures that satisfy moral outrage but change little, and accepting criticism from both sides.

The accusation that neutralists are cowards or cynics often reflects frustration rather than analysis. It is easier to rally around the language of force than to endure the slow, uncertain work of negotiation. Yet history suggests that durable peace is rarely imposed at gunpoint alone. Even the most decisive military outcomes require political settlements to prevent renewed violence.

In a world that continues to speak the language of progress while normalizing permanent conflict, neutrality remains deeply unsettling. It challenges the belief that every moral problem has a military solution and forces societies to confront the limits of power.