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Tuomas Forsberg & Heikki Patomäki

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The shape of things to come: a further dialogue

Tuomas Forsberg ^a and Heikki Patomäki ^b

^aHelsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, Helsingin Yliopisto, Helsinki, Finland; ^bFaculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki City Centre Campus: Helsingin Yliopisto, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

Here we continue our debate about how the war in Ukraine might come to an end. Our differences indicate how background assumptions, anticipations of possible and likely futures, and normative assessments of the present actions are intertwined. Apart from warning about the escalatory potential, HP stresses the immense human and socio-economic costs of the war. He proposes that negotiations for a peace deal could revolve around concepts such as a ‘demilitarised zone’ and an ‘UN-managed territory’. TF expects a protracted war going on for several years because the conditions for a just peace are absent. At this point, our dialogue turns towards uncovering and criticising some of each other’s background assumptions and discussing the available evidence about who can be trusted. Here we see a possible role for third-party facilitators and mediators. Brazil, China, India, or Turkey may be decisive in terms of mediating the conflict and facilitating an agreement.

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HP: It is now more than a year since we finalized the first version of our dialogue in Finnish, and some ten months since we concluded the last chapter of *Debating the War in Ukraine*, ‘The Shape of Things to Come’ (Forsberg & Patomäki, 2023). Militarily, the war in Ukraine is in stalemate. The war of attrition continues at high intensity and while estimates of the casualties vary widely, on average the toll has so far been roughly about 1000 dead or wounded every day. This burden is shared relatively evenly between the warring parties, although almost all civilian casualties (perhaps 10,000 dead and more than 12,000 injured) are Ukrainian. In contrast, the socio-economic costs of the war are primarily felt only in Ukraine. Many millions have lost their homes or their jobs, and Ukraine’s GDP shrank by more than a third in 2022. Already before the war, Ukraine was the poorest country in Europe, with the lowest GNI/capita in dollar terms, and because of the war, poverty has increased enormously.

When thinking about the costs of war, one must also take into account the effects of violence and warfare on the human psyche and society. Post-war societies are characterized by massive traumatization, and under the prevailing circumstances, long-term rehabilitation and social recovery are far from easy. When traumatized servicemen and women return home, they bring their nightmares, violence, and moral decline with them, and the consequent tendencies shape not only their personal and working lives but also political ideologies and activities. These post-war effects will be much harsher on Ukraine than on Russia – even though *The Economist* (2023), for instance,

CONTACT Heikki Patomäki  heikki.patomaki@helsinki.fi

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reports that the life expectancy of Russian males aged 15 has fallen to the same level as in Haiti, as a result of disease and the war (in addition, at least half a million Russian men have fled the country for political reasons or to avoid the mobilization of conscripts and thus the war).

Meanwhile, the global situation has worsened, with four-star US General Mike Minihan even going as far as to warn his troops about China: ‘My gut tells me we will fight in 2025’ (Campbell, 2023). This begs the question of whether we are heading for a new world war. It is pertinent to bear in mind that World War II did not start in one go. It took years before it became a truly global war. In Asia, WWII started in 1937, and in Europe in 1939, and these beginnings were preceded by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935–1937) and the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). The Asian and European theatres of war were not effectively connected until December 1941 when the United States entered, both as a result of Pearl Harbour and Hitler’s ‘American gamble’ (Simms & Laderman, 2021). Is the war in Ukraine merely a step in a process that is leading towards a global military catastrophe?

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists¹ has moved the hands of the Doomsday Clock closer to midnight than ever and largely (albeit not exclusively) because of the dangers that the war in Ukraine is causing. According to the Bulletin, it is now just 90 s to midnight, indicating that the global situation is worse than it has ever been, even during the height of the Cold War (including in 1953, 1963, and 1984). It is in this light that I think we should reflect further on the worst- and best-case scenarios, starting with the former. The worst-case scenario concerns the escalation of the war. The military stalemate is a result of mutual escalation. Both sides have stretched their ethical and political constraints. While still refusing to call this a war, the Kremlin has already mobilized hundreds of thousands of additional men to fight in it; and the West led by the US is supplying ever heavier and more sophisticated weapons to Ukraine and trying to tighten the sanctions, which have thus far proved much less efficient than expected despite their unprecedented scale. The idea that Ukraine can ‘win’ this war with Western economic and military assistance largely appears to be a recipe for further destruction and escalation.

China’s President Xi Jinping’s November 2022 plea to stop making threats and to prevent the use of nuclear weapons in Europe and Asia may have eased the nuclear sabre-rattling temporarily, but is no substitute for the de-escalation of the conflict itself and did not prevent the collapse of bilateral US-Russian nuclear arms control. Given the global situation, it seems evident that the possibility of nuclear annihilation is regarded on both sides (albeit in different ways) with an unbearable lightness – making our very existence dangerously fragile.

We can talk about reflexive self-regulation when knowledge about the way a social system functions is applied recursively in interventions, aiming at avoiding unwanted – or achieving desired – outcomes. Future-oriented reflexive self-regulation may also intervene – recursively – in the social processes that constitute and shape the possibilities of acting more rationally. From a moral and thus rational perspective, the anticipation and increasing likelihood of a global military catastrophe imply a (post-)Kantian categorical imperative to de-escalate the war in Ukraine and to mitigate the conflict around Taiwan. From a critical realist perspective (Patomäki, 2019), they also indicate the importance of shaping the underlying causes of these processes.

TF: Since the first month of the war when we started our dialogue, and since autumn 2022 when we updated and enlarged our dialogue for the Routledge book, the situation has definitely not improved, but in my opinion, it has not dramatically worsened either. The fear of a nuclear war has not disappeared, but the anxiety was much more palpable at the start of the war when the danger of a sudden escalation in the conflict seemed more imminent than at the moment. Various

incidents outside of the war zone in Ukraine, such as the explosion of the Nord Stream pipelines, the missile gone astray in Polish territory, acts of sabotage, assassinations or strikes in Russian territory, or the downing of the US drone over the Black Sea have not lead to escalatory action.

Good forecasters of the future are open to new information and can update their assessments accordingly (Tetlock & Gardner, 2015). At the moment, there does not seem to be any unified view among the research community and foreign policy pundits about the outcome of the war, but views are widely dispersed (Foreign Affairs, 2023). Moreover, they are not dispersed along the lines of theoretical commitments, but established realist and liberal scholars can have similar judgments and differ from those sharing the same theoretical position. This reflects the difficulties in applying any general IR theory to a single case, such as the war in Ukraine. Ole Wæver (2023) is quite right in his contribution to this forum when saying that most scholars and policy-makers have relied on a very rude theoretical worldview, eschewed theoretical reflection and seem to focus more on how events and trajectories leading to Russia's invasion of Ukraine are interpreted. Knowledge about how Russia or Putin has behaved in the past typically counts more than corresponding knowledge about states or state leaders in general.

Looking back at our assessments of the war in spring and autumn 2022, how would we revise them now in spring 2023? As neither of us made a firm bet on one specific outcome but thought that many scenarios can materialize with some likelihood, we can update these assessments. I believed that a protracted conflict leading to a stalemate was more likely than either a clear victory over the other side that would end the war, or a peace deal on the basis of negotiations. I think the situation in the war theatre since autumn 2022 has approximated that assessment (see e.g. Charap, 2023). Yet, the war has not transformed into a less intensive conflict, by contrast there have been numerous casualties but little military progress on either side. The parties have, however, not been willing to see the situation as a stalemate, and have continued their war efforts in the hope of achieving a major turn at the front. While this cannot be ruled out, the likelihood that either side would quickly cave in has diminished.

Russia has underperformed in the war and major losses have affected its war-fighting capacity, but it is not collapsing. In autumn 2022, the Kremlin mobilized more troops to the front, fortified the frontline, and was able to halt Ukraine's counteroffensive. The Kremlin and the Russian armed forces learned from the mistakes of the early stage of the war, but some of the weaknesses are rather chronic (see Barany, 2023). One striking factor is the apparent disunity of command. The sheer force and material superiority has, therefore, not led to any major breakthroughs at the front. Shelling the Ukrainian energy and transport infrastructure as well as civilian targets has not given the Russian troops any significant advantage. They are still unable to take initiative at the lower echelons or concentrate their offensive effectively.

Yet the Ukrainian side does not appear strong enough to win the war on the ground either. The Ukrainian army regained significant parts of Russian occupied territories in the north and the south in the autumn, but this was partly because Russian troops were ill-prepared to fight and decided to retreat. The Ukrainians are also much better at holding their positions than engaging in mobile offensive warfare. Despite the Western weapon deliveries, Ukraine is still an underdog materially, suffering in particular from a constant shortage of ammunition.

Expectations of a major political change in Russia were downscaled during the course of the war. President Vladimir Putin's diminished charisma notwithstanding, he has been an unrivalled leader of the country at least until June 2023. At this writing, the repercussions of the attempted mutiny by the Wagner troops remain unclear. Although the mobilization waves sparked protests throughout

Russia, leading to many young men fleeing the country, the stability of the regime did not seem to be seriously threatened. Economic experts disagree over what the real effect of Western sanctions and the costs of the war on the Russian economy are, but according to most analysts, Russia can muddle through despite general uncertainty, shortages of Western components and consumer items, and occasional hardship (see e.g. Demarais, 2023; Eckel, 2023). The majority of the population seem to support both the war and the regime, at least passively. The prolongation of the war has served to normalize it and a revolution from below would require either a major split in the ruling elite or a major shortage of food. Basic trust in the Kremlin's authority and the only gradual worsening of living standards do not amount to a situation that would be ripe for revolutionary collective action. The protests against the war and mobilization, in particular, have been local and the repression has curtailed the possibilities of any united and visible protest movement. In this respect, the behaviour of the Russian people does not differ from usual human inclinations but displays the common pattern of the bystander effect (Sanderson, 2020). The Kremlin has been preparing Russian citizens for a 'forever war' that is no longer just about Ukraine but about the world order and Russia's existence (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz, 2023). The indictment of President Putin by the International Criminal Court in March 2023 is just one additional factor that inhibits change.

Nor can we anticipate any major changes on the Ukrainian domestic front. The Western media has focused more on Ukraine's heroic battle against the invader than on reporting on internal weaknesses and disagreements. Since the start of Russia's invasion, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's position as the leader of the country has prevailed, and his popularity has remained at a high level. National unity and the resolve of the people show no major fractures. The Russian-speaking population in Ukraine does not see Russia as a liberator and the regime has purged the administration of disloyal incumbents. The Ukrainian people have suffered hugely as a result of the war, but they have remained motivated to continue the fight despite the losses.

Third parties aligned with or supporting the warring parties are also unlikely to change their policies to the extent that the war in Ukraine would come to an end soon. The Western countries are continuing their economic aid and weapon deliveries to Ukraine, but the support has been slow and cautious, helping Ukraine to defend itself rather than win the war. Although the Western countries have decided to deliver more efficient weapons to Ukraine, such as battle tanks, the pace and quantity are unlikely to change the big picture at the front. China has been cautious in its support of Russia. Russia has received weapons from both Iran and North Korea, but this has not given Russia any major advantage either. The fear – and in the Russian case the hope – that the weapons deliveries from the West would radically decrease due to political changes and reassessments are not entirely unfounded, but the commitment of the West seems to be enduring and efforts are made to remedy shortages. A Republican victory could lead the US to focus more on China and to distance itself from Ukraine, but the majority of Republican congressional representatives have supported the policy of assisting Ukraine and see Russia in antagonistic terms (see Laruelle, 2023). Europeans could conceivably increase their military assistance to Ukraine if the US share – now more than half – should decline. China has regarded Russia as its ally but has not been willing to deliver major military aid, partly out of fear of further disruption. Paradoxically, for both the West and China, the key interest is that Ukraine or Russia respectively would not lose the war rather than win it, which means that the war has been prolonged.

What should be done at this very moment is a different question, but it is not entirely unrelated to views of the war's projected outcome. One of the major issues dividing the Western community is between those who, so to speak, prefer peace over justice and those who prefer justice over peace

(Krastev & Leonard, 2022). This dichotomy is, of course, a euphemism that reflects the opinion of whether Russia or Ukraine should make more concessions to stop the war. Those who fear military escalation are more willing to see Ukraine make concessions even if key issues of justice would be compromised, while those who fear Russia more than escalation think that Russia should not be rewarded for its military invasion. Moreover, between these two camps is a third one that is not necessarily the mainstream but which seems to be the position guiding the current Western response: to avoid the risks of major escalation and a fragmented Russia, Ukraine should not be helped too much to win big in the war against Russia. Yet Ukraine should not be forced to sign a peace treaty against its will. If issues of justice are swept aside, such a peace treaty would not bring about a durable peace either (see Druckman & Wagner, 2022).

As long as the West supports Ukraine within the margins so that it can defend itself but not launch a major offensive to win the war, the war is likely to continue until a mutually hurting stalemate is reached. To date, third-party mediation efforts have lacked any concrete steps towards a peace agreement, and the stated conditions have been too abstract and lacking in credibility. A less intense military conflict or a 'frozen conflict' with some kind of truce is most likely the best possible outcome in the short term. Yet things can change and wars are inclined to take unexpected turns. We should not abandon hopes of an enduring peace even if the chances of it happening seem slim right now.

HP: Thanks for your reflections although, regrettably, I cannot help feeling that they seem rather empiricist, on the one hand, and fairly bleak, on the other. Knowing how this may sound, let me start by elaborating somewhat while stressing that you are not necessarily true to your own methodological commitments, which I appreciate very much. First, as you know, futures studies are not about prediction, but reflexive anticipation. Anticipations can fail in two ways: they may get the principal structures, powers, mechanisms, and processes wrong; or they may fail to harness resources and activities in trying to avoid an undesirable outcome, or in trying to realize a more desirable one. For some reason, in this context, however, you are content with 'predictions' and some unspecified empirical (or media-generated) impressions at each historical moment, thereby ignoring the underlying tendencies and real causal processes, which involve further escalation of the conflict. This escalation not only concerns the mobilization of additional resources on both sides (albeit in different ways), but also the total breakdown of all remaining nuclear arms control systems. Finally, we cannot ignore the implications of Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership, which inevitably reinforce the military confrontation between Russia and NATO and thus contribute to the escalation of the conflict to some degree, regardless of how provoked the decision to join NATO was or how unintended these effects may be.

Secondly, your approach seems rather bleak because it implies that in the absence of regime change in Russia for the better (apparently meaning more liberal and Western-minded), there is nothing to negotiate. Thus, the war must continue into the foreseeable future, given that regime change in Russia seems unlikely and that neither side is capable of resolving the war by military means. Ten years of war at the current rate of destruction would mean 3.5 million casualties, among many other costs incurred by the war. At the end of such a process, we would have another Afghanistan in the middle of Europe. Alternatively, perhaps the idea is ultimately to resolve the problem through further escalation by the Western side, no matter what the risks may be? To reiterate, your extrapolation ignores the consequences of further escalation that may even lead to a nuclear war.

Nuclear deterrence relies on the assumption of ‘rational actors’ in the narrow and specific sense of self-regarding instrumental rationality: no rational actor would ever start a nuclear war that would lead to its own annihilation. In another more ethical meaning of rationality, the use of nuclear weapons is never justified, not even for the purposes of retaliation or revenge. If nuclear weapons can never be used, they do not deter. Therefore, there must be a willingness to use them at least under some circumstances. Of the established nuclear powers (the US, Russia, the UK, China, and France), only China has a no-first-use policy (India also has such a policy). All the others are thus ready to use nuclear weapons in conventional conflicts. There is only a relatively small difference in degree between the use of powerful conventional weapons and the smallest tactical nuclear weapons. This entails the very real possibility of escalation from conventional to nuclear war, which may be precipitated by internal turmoil and changes within a nuclear weapons state.

Many seem to think that history proves that nuclear deterrence works. History can be our guide to the future, however, only if nothing in the future can be realized differently than in the past. This presupposes closed systems and event regularities (for these concepts, see Patomäki, 2019). The world indeed survived the looming risk of a nuclear war in 1950–1991, during the so-called Cold War, but it is a fallacy to think that nuclear deterrence worked well by preventing a hot war. Nuclear weapons may have ‘deterred’ in some sense, while they also risked the future of humanity.

Consider a person who puts two rounds in a six-cylinder revolver, plays Russian roulette, and survives. To conclude from this that Russian roulette is not a dangerous game is an obvious fallacy. I have analysed various probability assessments of nuclear war during 1950–1991 (Patomäki, 2023, Ch 6). Even if we only look at the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the Able Archer episode in 1983, and the probability of an accidental nuclear war, we arrive at a probability estimate of 1/3. The situation is equally serious now. For example, Matthew Bunn from the Harvard Kennedy School estimated in October that the probability that the war in Ukraine will end in a nuclear war is 10%–20%.² As already mentioned, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has set the doomsday clock closer to midnight than ever, largely because of the war in Ukraine. Research also indicates that the greatest danger lies in a situation where trust has collapsed (for a classic analysis of nuclear war probabilities, see Avenhaus et al., 1989). An acute crisis can precipitate the first use of nuclear weapons, especially if a party faces a desperate situation and believes that only nuclear weapons can provide an escape from certain defeat. The assumption of instrumentally rational self-regarding actors is far from reality, especially in times of acute conflict.

Anticipations of a possible and likely undesirable outcome indicate the importance of harnessing resources and activities to avoid the undesirable outcomes and realize a more desirable one. This means the articulation of alternatives and, in this context, the possibility of peace negotiations. You mention the dichotomy between those who ‘prefer peace over justice and those who prefer justice over peace’ and then hastily add a third option, which concerns success on the battlefield and implies a prolonged war. I think the aim of the third option should be peace. Both peace and justice are needed, while we need to reframe the key issues in non-territorial terms as far as possible and acknowledge the plurality of perspectives and different conceptions of justice (cf. Patomäki, 2006).

Every peace deal is a compromise that is hard to swallow. As I have argued with Tapio Kanninen in January (Kanninen & Patomäki, 2023), the peace agreement should be acceptable both to Ukraine and to Russia, meaning that it should offer more perceived benefits than losses to both. The lessons of the failed Minsk I and II agreements should be taken into account. The West in general and the US in particular are decisive when it comes to convincing the victims of the invasion

that peace negotiations make sense. For the Ukrainians, who might resolutely demand a total victory over the invaders, there should be assurances that the Russian invasion will not be rewarded and that a deal will not lead to the destabilization of the international system as a whole.

On the other hand, it must be recognized that Russia has legitimate security interests and concerns and that some or many of its demands have been and are reasonable. While the US and NATO categorically rejected new Russia-NATO and Russia-US treaties presented by Russia, it is plausible to argue that some proposals could have been negotiated and agreed to, while others would have been difficult to agree to, and the rest were nonstarters.

Concepts that might be highly useful in considering the eventual peace deal are a ‘demilitarised zone’ and a ‘UN-managed territory’ (a somewhat similar proposal has been made by Indonesia in early June 2023).³ The UN has a long history of dealing with conflicts in terms of peacekeeping and peacebuilding to assist and administer demilitarized zones and trust territories. Often the idea of demilitarization has been to build a neutral zone between the parties of a violent conflict. The UN has also directly managed entire territories, at least temporarily, such as the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor from 1999 to 2002. The tasks in East Timor included maintaining security and order, providing relief assistance, assisting in rebuilding physical infrastructure, administering the territory based on the rule of law, and assisting in the drafting of a new constitution and conducting elections.

A possibility that should be seriously considered is to demilitarize the contested territories in Eastern Ukraine and take them temporarily under the auspices of the UN. Following a period of necessary back-channel diplomacy and negotiations, the UN Security Council could declare – or the parties could directly negotiate – a binding ceasefire, with the deployment of a peacekeeping force and other UN personnel. The areas of Ukraine occupied by Russian forces would become demilitarized and governed temporarily by the UN, with some flexibility in specifying the boundaries of these territories.

Compared to East Timor, a longer period of transition would be required, anything from 10 to 20 years. Eastern Ukraine is also a large land area and would require major peacekeeping and other resources and administrative personnel. ‘The UN Transitional Administration of Eastern Ukraine’ would also have the task of assisting in negotiating and drafting a new legal basis for the status of these regions and conducting regular elections, as well as a possible referendum in the future.

Ukraine’s military non-alignment remains a key issue and must be part of negotiations. Moreover, as a part of the core UN Security Council resolution, other confidence-building actions could also be foreseen, such as a resumption of Russia-NATO Nuclear and Other Military Risk Reduction talks and official disarmament talks. As in many peace deals, the warring parties need outside assistance in making the first overtures for peace. Third-party facilitators and mediators should come primarily from countries that are seen as outsiders to the conflict by both parties, and be able to mediate between different conceptions of justice. The NATO area is thus excluded, while countries such as Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, South Africa, and Turkey are likely to be decisive in terms of mediating the conflict and facilitating an agreement (see Motta & Succi, 2023; Waslekar, 2023; Yanik, 2023; Zhang, 2023). Third-party involvement may also include representatives from institutions such as the International Court of Justice or the Permanent Court of Arbitration.

TF: Thanks, Heikki. Arguing that my analysis is bleak is not a valid criticism if the reality is indeed bleak. Do not shoot the messenger! Moreover, I do not think it is that bleak. It may be bleak when it comes to the present possibilities for a durable peace, but it is much more hopeful about the future. I think that Russia and Ukraine have a chance to find solutions that enable peaceful relations

between them, although rebuilding trust will take time. Nor do I believe that Russia – together with the other so-called rising powers – and the West were doomed to some destructive confrontation in an anarchic world. By contrast, I think that your views on the ominous nuclearisation of the conflict are much gloomier.

I understand your point about anticipation rather than prediction being a more meaningful goal for future studies, but anticipation requires that we get the ‘principal structures, powers, mechanisms, and processes right’. If the predictions embedded in the analysis of such factors are constantly wrong without any major intervention, we have to adjust our analysis. Saying that empirical developments matter does not make one an empiricist. An empiricist would ignore underlying structures, tendencies, dispositions, and powers that are not directly observable.

So let us discuss these and think about the possibilities for peace (see Powell, 2023). I agree with much of your analysis but in some respects, I think that it is not based on an accurate understanding of underlying factors and does not take into account possible unintended effects. When you say that ‘every peace deal is a compromise that is hard to swallow’, it is either trivially true or only partly true. Not every peace is really a compromise, and compromises are not necessarily equally hard to swallow for both parties. Therefore we should be more careful when thinking about who should swallow what and why. I feel that the conditions for peace and the possibilities of implementing a peace deal are too hazy for your optimism to be warranted. It is unclear to me on which grounds you think the parties would agree on a certain peace deal and what would need to happen before they accepted it.

A peace deal can be achieved through three different kinds of reasoning. One is the traditional power political settlement, the other is based on a trade-off of interests, and the third is argumentation and sharing some principles of fairness and justice. Even if a peace deal were based on a combination of the above-mentioned logics, it does not seem very likely that the parties of the war in Ukraine would be able to find an agreement: there is no shared understanding of power, very little room for swapping assets, and no basis of trust for genuine argumentation based on any normative principles. Digging deeper into the underlying structures and tendencies, I do not see much that would change this pattern in the short term.

If the power relations and understanding thereof do not change dramatically and if sufficient trust cannot be built quickly for argumentation to succeed, some kind of a trade-off could be possible. It could involve some kind of territorial rearrangement, for example on the basis of accepting the *de facto* borders of 2021. However, Russia regards the newly annexed oblasts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, in addition to Donetsk and Luhansk within their administrative borders, as part of its territories, while Ukraine regards the internationally recognized borders of 1992 as valid. In this framing, both parties would regard a deal based on the *de facto* borders of 2021 as ceding territories, not as exchanging them. This was the option that was perhaps available in the early stages of the war but now it has become more complex (Weller, 2023). A temporary truce could therefore be negotiated at some point, but the idea of achieving a more permanent peace deal through a trade-off does not seem to be very plausible for the time being.

I do not entirely foreclose the option that a peace deal could be achieved, but it would require a lot of time and changes in the structures, such as in the mindset of the Kremlin leadership, which currently seems extremely closed. Hence I have been arguing that without a regime change in Russia, a peace deal that would lead to an enduring peace is not very likely. The future regime does not need to be particularly liberal or Western-oriented to conclude a durable peace and to rely on cooperative security – but it has to accept Ukraine as a sovereign state, be willing to adhere to basic

principles of international law, relax its pathological fear of encirclement and perhaps also have a more realistic worldview concerning its ambitions for shaping the future world order. I am not arguing that the Ukrainian side or the West are particularly open to various possibilities, but there is more flexibility in their positions and also a greater likelihood of change in the leadership through normal political mechanisms such as elections. The underlying fundament, counterfactually speaking, is still that the war would be over should Russia stop fighting and retreat from Ukraine. However, if Ukraine stops fighting, large-scale violence and repression will continue and no enduring peace will be achieved.

Your argument that certain interests are legitimate and therefore more valid is not necessarily something that would be shared by the parties. We can, of course, continue our discussion on the reasonableness of certain demands, but 'legitimate security interests' are often just power political arguments in disguise. Why should Ukraine's military non-alignment (which is a matter of Ukraine's sovereignty also on the basis of principles that Russia had previously committed to) rather than Russia's war crimes or the status of its naval base in Crimea, which was used for aggression, be a key issue in the negotiations? In the peace talks held in March 2022 after Russia had launched its invasion, Ukraine was willing to accept a neutral status, but then the problem concerned how Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity could have been internationally guaranteed (see Weller, 2023).

This is just one reminder that some problems are related to implementation rather than agreeing on the principles of the peace deal in the first place. As we have seen, the Minsk treaty also failed because of disagreements related to its implementation. All of these suggestions about how a peace deal could be implemented are worthwhile elaborating, but first, we should have created the pre-conditions for a peace deal. In my view, the role of the UN in this conflict can be problematic because Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council and has veto power. One of the biggest problems with the negotiations in the early stages of the war was that Russia wanted to control the implementation of the peace treaty. This dual role raises doubts that Russia might be willing to spoil the peace whenever it deems it beneficial for itself. Moreover, the idea of a transition period after which the territorial issues could be settled on the basis of a referendum, or expression of preferences by the locals, has become much more difficult since Russia has displaced, repressed, and killed Ukrainian citizens who used to live in these now contested areas.

Finally, it can be difficult to find any credible impartial mediators in this conflict between Russia and Ukraine. China and Turkey, or India and Brazil for that matter, which have been involved or at least seen as possible mediators, all have their own stakes in the conflict. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing. For a high-intensity conflict, the idea that a purely facilitative mediator would be able to bring about peace can be illusionary. Rather, the mediator should be strong enough to convince the stronger party, in this case Russia, to abstain from further escalation of the conflict and to settle for peace while giving sufficient guarantees to the weaker party that its security interests will be taken into account (see Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009).

A final word about nuclear weapons. Again, I agree with much of your analysis. I do share your concerns and would like to see greater efforts towards nuclear disarmament in the future, but I do not think the probability for their use is as high as in the heyday of the Cold War. Although there is only a small difference between the most powerful conventional weapons and small tactical nuclear weapons, there is still a huge qualitative threshold that also explains why the latter have not been used. Part of the threshold is the fear that even a single use of tactical nuclear weapons can lead to full-scale nuclear war. Nuclear deterrence is no panacea (see e.g. Rauchhaus, 2009) but it plays a role: a state cannot think that it can use nuclear weapons and get away with it. Abandoning credible

deterrence would increase rather than decrease the likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons. The risk has more to do with their inadvertent or accidental use (see Johnson, 2022). Moreover, the war in Ukraine has implications for the global nuclear order (Budjeryn, 2022). The erosion of the nuclear taboo through loose rhetoric is dangerous even if Russia does not use nuclear weapons. Indeed, Russia is the one that has been ‘sable-rattling’ with nuclear weapons. Although the goal of nuclear disarmament should apply to all nuclear states, de-escalation of the military conflict in Ukraine is primarily Russia’s responsibility, including restraining its nuclear rhetoric and manoeuvres.

HP: Thanks, Tuomas. It is good to remember that in ancient Greece, the best-known messenger was Hermes, an Olympian deity. In the modern world, Hermes is associated with the art and science of interpretation, hermeneutics. All of our perceptions and experiences are concept- and theory-laden, and all of our concepts and theories are part of wider horizons of possibilities constituting what we can and cannot see. Gloominess can characterize this horizon.

As briefly discussed in the last chapter of our small book (Forsberg & Patomäki, 2023, especially pp. 64–65), even when A and B struggle violently against each other, they tend to share a number of the same, similar, or analogical background assumptions. Public disagreements require conscious public airing. Politics and violence both fall within the sphere of conscious, purposeful conflicts. For a peace researcher, in a violent conflict the aim is to facilitate the transformation from violence to politics and this requires two things simultaneously:

- (1) At the level of the process comprising both A and B, the task must be to build consensus by drawing on shared background assumptions (the explication and acknowledgment of which takes time and is highly contingent), and to devise compromise settlements in what could be called bargaining situations, involving interests, resources, and power. This includes the three different kinds of reasoning you mention, while reframing the situation often helps in facilitating the negotiations and reaching an agreement.
- (2) Within A and B, however, emancipation from violence characteristically requires the starting of dissensus. A conflict can be seen as a clash of *orthodoxies* that stem from the concepts of identity, actions, and history buried deep within the taken-for-granted background, involving assumptions, stories, and mystifications. The peace researcher located in A or B often needs to problematize and question these.

As we have discussed in some detail in the book, the war in Ukraine involves a long process of conflict escalation between Russia and the West. To summarize a lot of complex argumentation, it seems that you are quite perceptive when it comes to the problems concerning the assumptions, stories, and mystifications on the Russian side (suggesting that their stories are false), but ignore any such on the Western side (meaning NATO, the US, the EU, and most EU member states). If in a violent conflict, an observer thinks that A is wrong and B is right, and the only way out of the conflict is for A to humble itself and accept that B is right, then violence must continue until A surrenders and submits itself to the will of B. The attention turns to predicting what may be happening on the battlefield. This is the Clausewitzian logic of war, except that Clausewitz warned that the slippage from politics to violence is often beyond anybody’s control because of the decisive roles of passionate hatred and chance (involving risks understood in terms of probability).

Perhaps my interpretation is too strong, but it may well be that your commitment to (and my criticism of) the prevailing Western assumptions and interests explains our different horizons. You write for example that ‘why should Ukraine’s military non-alignment [...] be a key issue in the negotiations’, indicating that NATO should continue to expand no matter what. You also indicate that a peace deal is likely to require changes in the mindset of the Kremlin’s leadership, or regime change in Russia. You also mention in passing that ‘not every peace is really a compromise’. It is difficult to avoid reading this in a Clausewitzian manner, indicating the possibility of total surrender, namely the idea that the war will end when Russia submits itself fully to the will of the neo-liberal West. From this perspective, the real danger of escalation into a nuclear war is a disturbing detail in the argumentation, the importance of which it is therefore better not to emphasize.

Again, I may be wrong, but this reading seems largely consistent with your view that ‘de-escalation of the military conflict in Ukraine is primarily Russia’s responsibility including restraining its nuclear rhetoric and manoeuvres’. These kinds of remarks may be taken to indicate that if the conflict escalates into a nuclear war, it is Russia’s fault, and therefore there is no problem in pushing Russia harder. This vision seems a bit gloomy to me, as the knowledge about whose fault the nuclear war may or may not have been is unlikely to be of much comfort to post-apocalyptic humans fighting for their survival amid a nuclear winter and collapsed civilization.

If I may reiterate my key point: we have a strong moral obligation to de-escalate the war. You are right of course about the development of a closed and highly securitized and authoritarian system in Russia. Thus, peace researchers in Russia cannot act in the public realm, and this complicates the task. We should acknowledge, however, that also on the Western side, it is not easy to function as a peace researcher. Fear, hatred, Manicheanism, and militarism have gained ground, and media representations are one-sided. In the West, criticizing the concepts of identity, actions, and history buried deep within the Western taken-for-granted background is more often than not strongly condemned as a sign of ‘Putinism’, leading among other things to targeting in social media, hate mail, and various acts and campaigns of exclusion. Even more importantly, on both sides of the conflict, whatever the other party says is framed as misinformation and in terms of cyber warfare.

Tapio Kanninen’s and my peace proposal (Kanninen & Patomäki, 2023) is intended as a potential basis for a process of negotiation, providing a possible direction. It is not a blueprint for the final agreement, which is up to the participants to negotiate. Rather, as said, the idea is to reframe the key issues in non-territorial terms as far as possible, and to acknowledge the plurality of perspectives or horizons and different conceptions of justice, and so on. I take it as a task of a peace researcher to contribute to the transformation from war to violence. Various peace negotiations have failed in the past and there is indeed a deep lack of trust – as in all violent conflicts – between Russia, Ukraine, and the West, but this should not be seen too one-sidedly. Russia has failed to respect the Budapest 1994 Memorandum, for instance, and bluntly violated international law in 2014 and 2022. On the other hand, in light of new evidence, the Minsk II agreement failed because there was no general intention on the Ukrainian or Western side to implement it.⁴ Moreover, the OSCE documents do not grant an absolute right to ally militarily or, for that matter, to enlarge NATO, but rather to emphasise common and cooperative security. Moreover, when Putin’s invasion plan failed in February–March 2022, namely when Ukraine was able to stop the Russian advance, it seems that Putin would have been ready for a ceasefire and to withdraw from most of Ukraine if Zelenskyy had agreed not to join NATO. It was the then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson who wanted the war to continue, acting like his role model Churchill, thus once again misusing the analogy of Munich 1938.⁵ The Biden administration seem to have sided with Johnson.

TF: Thanks again. There are indeed crucial differences in the ways we interpret the processes and events of the war. To what extent they can be traced back to different assumptions, perspectives, or sources of information is another matter. Much is still blurred and particularly in the context of a war, we are surrounded by a plethora of unintended misinformation as well as purposeful disinformation, as we both know. Still, acknowledging uncertainty and the need to preserve pluralism, we have to navigate through the complex reality without believing that all claims are equally true or all perspectives valid. Although it is impossible to eliminate all biases, a sober, balanced analysis should be our joint aim and hence disagreements are also needed: we need to provide grounds for our views and policies. We have managed to avoid many typical fallacies that burden much of the public debate, such as accusing the other of being supportive of either Western or Russian propaganda. Such accusations are not a proper form of empirical criticism, although even factual statements can be seen as ethical commitments of sorts. We have to be careful not to misinterpret each other. Although I may be leaning towards the Western positions, there is plenty of variation in that 'camp'. Most certainly, I am not advocating NATO expansion 'no matter what' or thinking that only a total Ukrainian victory over Russia would bring about peace.

I cannot go through all the factual or perspectival disagreements here but I think both the Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015 and the peace talks in March 2022 deserve a final comment. Ukraine signed the Minsk Protocol at gunpoint and was surely not fully committed to it, at least not in the sequence of implementing it that Russia insisted on (see e.g. Potočňák & Mares, 2022). It is difficult to know to what extent Angela Merkel's statement about the Minsk agreement having been a means of buying time reflects her and François Hollande's motivations at the time. If it really was about 'buying time', it could be reminiscent of Neville Chamberlain's tactics in Munich in 1938. There is some indication that Russia was not really expecting the Minsk agreements to be implemented either (Vedomosti, 2023). Furthermore, as far as the peace talks in March 2020 are concerned, the interpretation that the almost ready agreement was rejected primarily because Boris Johnson encouraged Zelenskyy to do so is not very plausible. Rather, Johnson told Zelenskyy that the UK could not give any full security guarantees to Ukraine as designed in the draft treaty (Weller, 2023; see also Reuters, 2022). Moreover, the much more fundamental reason why an early truce between Russia and Ukraine became impossible in early April 2022 was the atrocities committed by the Russian troops in Bucha, which were discovered by the Ukrainians after the Russian forces had retreated.

HP: Well yes, our dialogue about the war in Ukraine in general and the future possibilities in particular is a process that, at least so far, has not ended in a rational consensus, although we have both learned many things during the process. For one thing, it is important to understand that the same available evidence can be interpreted in many different ways, while, as you say, much haziness, confusion, and uncertainty surrounds the available evidence. Our discussion, which has not led to an unequivocal consensus, also tells us something essential about the difficulties of peace negotiations: no time and space seems to suffice for reaching a rational consensus even among friends. And yet, all wars eventually come to an end – usually with negotiations and a peace treaty.

Notes

1. The full statement can be read at <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/current-time/>. The statement continues:

And worst of all, Russia's thinly veiled threats to use nuclear weapons remind the world that escalation of the conflict – by accident, intention, or miscalculation – is a terrible risk. The possibility that the conflict could spin out of anyone's control remains high.

What is worse, since the statement was released in January 2023, Putin has announced that Russia will suspend its participation in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

2. This view was expressed in an NPR interview broadcast on 4 October 2022 – summary available at <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/04/1126680868/putin-raises-the-specter-of-using-nuclear-weapons-in-his-war-with-ukraine>. NPR (National Public Radio) is an American privately and publicly funded non-profit media organisation headquartered in Washington, D.C. and established by an act of Congress.
3. Indonesia's defence minister Prabowo Subianto called on defence and military officials from around the world, gathered at the Shangri-La Dialogue defence meeting in Singapore on Saturday 3 June 2023, to issue a declaration calling for a cessation in hostilities (e.g. <https://www.reuters.com/world/indonesia-proposes-demilitarised-zone-un-referendum-ukraine-peace-plan-2023-06-03/>). Subianto proposed establishing a demilitarized zone by withdrawing 15 kilometres from each party's forward position, observed and monitored by a peacekeeping force deployed by the UN. The point of my and Kanninen's proposal is not only to establish a demilitarized zone like in Korea, but apply the concepts of demilitarized zone and UN managed territory to all areas occupied in the war, the long-term status of which can be specified later in diplomatic and democratic terms, following the principle of rule of law.
4. It was previously thought that the Ukrainians had refused to implement Minsk II and the Americans were averse to it, but it turned out that the German leadership was also somewhat ambiguous from the start. In December 2022, former Chancellor Angela Merkel told the weekly *Die Zeit* that a ceasefire and the Minsk agreement had served to buy time, among other things to rearm Ukraine. 'The 2014 Minsk agreement was an attempt to give Ukraine time'. 'It also used this time to become stronger, as you can see today' (Hildebrandt & di Lorenzo, 2022).
5. Boris Johnson was consistently in favour of 'radical measures' and war, while the leaders of France and Germany were hesitant, and the US agreed with both. Reportedly (Semonsen, 2023), in March 2022, the Western countries blocked the negotiations that had started well. Moreover, Boris Johnson visited Kyiv in April 2022, urging Zelenskyy not to negotiate with Russia. He said that even if Ukraine was ready to sign a deal with Russia, Kyiv's Western backers were not. For Johnson invoking Churchill's 'finest hour' in his remote speech to the Ukrainian parliament in spring 2022, see <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1357493701412148>. Studies on the use of precedent cases and historical analogies in foreign policy decision-making have indicated that 'analogies have almost invariably misguided' the decision-makers (Khong, 1992, p. 7). Typical misused analogies have been based on accounts of dramatic instances or events such as 'summer 1914', 'Munich 1938', 'Pearl Harbour 1941', 'Cuba 1958–59', rather than on systematic analyses of long-term historical processes and their meaning.

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Notes on contributors

Tuomas Forsberg is Director of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki until August 2023, then resuming his Professorship in International Relations at the University of Tampere. Apart from *Debating the War in Ukraine*, his most recent book in English is *The Psychology of Foreign Policy* (with C. Pursiainen, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Heikki Patomäki is Professor of World Politics and Global Political Economy at the University of Helsinki. Apart from *Debating the War in Ukraine*, his most recent books in English are *The Three Fields of Global Political Economy* (Routledge, 2022) and *World Statehood: The Future of World Politics* (Springer, 2023).

ORCID

Tuomas Forsberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1182-4991>

Heikki Patomäki  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9255-6783>

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