

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

Zelensky's muddled neutrality plan is not the answer for Ukraine

Security arrangements that fall short of Nato membership risk brokering only a dubious peace with Russia

JAMES SHERR



People gather in Tel Aviv to watch Volodymyr Zelensky address the Knesset. It is puzzling he believes security can be guaranteed by a country whose interests are inimical to his © Maya Alleruzzo/AP

James Sherr APRIL 3 2022

The writer is senior fellow at the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute

In his address to the Israeli Knesset on March 20, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky [quoted](#) Golda Meir, Israel's late premier: "We want to live, our neighbours want to see us dead."

For a president who characterises Russia's aims in such terms, Zelensky's search for a neutrality agreement is puzzling. More puzzling still is his belief that security can be guaranteed by a country whose interests are inimical to one's own. Yet that is what Ukraine's [blueprint for neutrality](#), presented last week, proposes.

Before the first world war, neutrality was a recognised legal status, painstakingly negotiated and largely respected. Belgian neutrality, enshrined in the 1839 Treaty of London, endured until [Germany denounced it](#) as a "scrap of paper" and invaded the country in 1914. The 1815 Treaty of Paris recognised "armed neutrality", the basis of [Switzerland's status](#). France became a guarantor of that arrangement, and the overall Concert system, after Napoleon Bonaparte's final defeat.

The fate of neutral countries in the 20th century, such as Belgium and [Norway](#), was far less fortunate. [Finland](#) was an exception that proved the rule. Its neutrality held up because the Soviet Union realised that Finland's independence had become indestructible.

Can Ukraine secure Finnish-style neutrality? Like Finland, it has fought Russia to a standstill. But the routing of its forces is far from impossible, and Russia's stakes in Ukraine well surpass its interests in Finland. Without Ukraine in tow, the [myth of a "Russian world"](#) collapses. For Vladimir Putin, it is a personal obsession to undo what he considers the crime of the [separation of Russia and "Little Russia"](#).

In view of these factors, Zelensky's motives for pursuing negotiations remain a matter of speculation. But they are discernible. First, 14 years after [Nato declared](#) that Ukraine would one day join the alliance, its assurances have acquired all the majesty of the emperor's clothes. When it comes to defences needed to prevent defeat, Ukraine's Nato partners have supplied them in abundance. When it comes to those needed to halt the carnage, it has dithered. Plainly, Zelensky has decided that Ukraine needs a different foundation of security.

Second, the scale of Russia's reverses since February 24 is not lost on him. He has concluded that hard bargaining can expand Russia's willingness to compromise. Already, Russia has [abandoned its insistence](#) on "denazification" (regime change) and "demilitarisation" (Ukrainian disarmament).

Third, the one goal that Russia has not abandoned — Ukraine's recognition of the breakaway [Donbas](#) statelets (to the full extent of their "administrative" as opposed to temporary borders) and Moscow's annexation of Crimea — is anathema to Ukraine. Zelensky has not wavered on this.

At least four questions need to be posed. First, regarding Nato-Ukraine co-operation: the cross-fertilisation of military networks and a vast web of training and assistance have played a significant role in Ukraine's military culture and national security since the [Charter on a Distinctive Partnership](#) was signed in 1997. Is Zelensky prepared to forgo these relationships for the sake of a dubious peace with Russia?

Second, what is meant by [security guarantees](#) "stronger than those of Nato Article 5" granted by countries as far afield as the US, Russia and Israel? Individually or collectively? By what means? Article 5 does not derive its strength from words but from common interests, tight integration, elaborate command and control mechanisms and habits of co-operation developed over decades. Without these, guarantees are little more than pieties.

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Are you from Ukraine? Do you have friends and family in or from Ukraine whose lives have been upended? Or perhaps you're doing something to help those individuals, such as fundraising or housing people in your own homes. We want to hear from you. Tell us via a [short survey](#).

defence ministries. The stamp of amateurism is all too visible. Solace can be derived from Zelensky's assurance that the [Ukrainian people will be given the last word](#). He might be surprised by what they say.

Third, why should countries unwilling to extend Ukraine security guarantees as part of Nato grant them outside of Nato? The reason Ukraine is not offered Nato membership is not because it is deemed unworthy of it — as Zelensky appears to believe — but because Nato allies are unwilling to go to war with a nuclear-armed Russia on its behalf.

Finally, once Ukraine is formally at peace with Russia, who in the west will argue the case for providing more military support to Ukraine, keeping sanctions in place or raising the costs to Russia? Today, those who wish to wash their hands of Ukraine are confused and discredited. A Ukrainian proclamation of neutrality will bring them back to life.

It is no secret that Kyiv's terms were drawn up largely by Zelensky's presidential office, with little input from the foreign and

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