

Jeffrey Sachs

# What Ukraine Needs to Learn from Afghanistan

The greatest enemy of economic development is war. If the world slips further into global conflict, our economic hopes and our very survival could go up in flames. The *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has moved the hands of the Doomsday Clock to a mere 90 seconds to midnight.

The world's biggest economic loser in 2022 was Ukraine, where the economy collapsed by 35% according to the International Monetary Fund. The war in Ukraine could end soon, and economic recovery could begin, but this depends on Ukraine understanding its predicament as victim of a US-Russia proxy war that broke out in 2014.

The US has been heavily arming and funding Ukraine since 2014 with the goal of expanding Nato and weakening Russia. America's proxy wars typically rage for years and even decades, leaving battleground countries like Ukraine in rubble.

Unless the proxy war ends soon, Ukraine faces a dire future. Ukraine needs to learn from the horrible experience of Afghanistan to avoid becoming a long-term disaster. It could also look to the US proxy wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

Starting in 1979, the US armed the mujahideen (Islamist fighters) to harass the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan. As president Jimmy Carter's national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski later explained, the US objective was to provoke the Soviet Union to intervene, in order to trap the Soviet Union in a costly war. The fact that Afghanistan would be collateral damage was of no concern to US leaders.

The Soviet military entered Afghanistan in 1979 as the US hoped, and fought through the 1980s. Meanwhile, the US-backed fighters established al-Qaeda in the 1980s, and the Taliban in the early 1990s.

The US “trick” on the Soviet Union had boomeranged.

In 2001, the US invaded Afghanistan to fight al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The US war continued for another 20 years until the US finally left in 2021. Sporadic US military operations in Afghanistan continue.

Afghanistan lies in ruins. While the US wasted more than \$2-trillion of US military outlays, Afghanistan is impoverished, with a 2021 GDP below \$400 per person! As a parting “gift” to Afghanistan in 2021, the US government seized Afghanistan’s tiny foreign exchange holdings, paralysing the banking system.

The proxy war in Ukraine began nine years ago when the US government backed the overthrow of Ukraine’s president Viktor Yanukovich. Yanukovich’s sin from the US viewpoint was his attempt to maintain Ukraine’s neutrality despite the US desire to expand Nato to include Ukraine (and Georgia). America’s objective was for Nato countries to encircle Russia in the Black Sea region. To achieve this goal, the US has been massively arming and funding Ukraine since 2014.

The American protagonists then and now are the same. The US government’s point person on Ukraine in 2014 was Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, who today is Undersecretary of State. Back in 2014, Nuland worked closely with Jake Sullivan, president Joe Biden’s national security adviser, who played the same role for vice president Biden in 2014.

The US overlooked two harsh political realities in Ukraine. The first is that Ukraine is deeply divided ethnically and politically between Russia-hating nationalists in western Ukraine and ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

The second is that Nato enlargement to Ukraine crosses a Russian redline. Russia will fight to the end, and escalate as necessary, to prevent the US from incorporating Ukraine into Nato.

The US repeatedly asserts that Nato is a defensive alliance. Yet Nato bombed Russia’s ally Serbia for 78 days in 1999 in order to break Kosovo away from Serbia, after which the US established a giant military base in Kosovo. Nato forces similarly toppled Russian ally Moammar Qaddafi in 2011, setting off a decade of chaos in Libya. Russia certainly will never accept Nato in Ukraine.

At the end of 2021, Russian president Vladimir Putin put forward three demands to the US: Ukraine should remain neutral and out of Nato; Crimea should remain part of Russia; and the Donbas should become autonomous in accord with the Minsk II Agreement.

The Biden-Sullivan-Nuland team rejected negotiations over Nato enlargement, eight years after the same group backed Yanukovich's overthrow. With Putin's negotiating demands flatly rejected by the US, Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

In March 2022, Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky seemed to understand Ukraine's dire predicament as victim of a US-Russia proxy war. He declared publicly that Ukraine would become a neutral country, and asked for security guarantees. He also publicly recognised that Crimea and Donbas would need some kind of special treatment.

Israel's prime minister at that time, Naftali Bennett, became involved as a mediator, along with Turkey. Russia and Ukraine came close to reaching an agreement. Yet, as Bennett has recently explained, the US "blocked" the peace process.

Since then, the war has escalated. According to US investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, US agents blew up the Nord Stream pipelines in September, a claim denied by the White House. More recently, the US and its allies have committed to sending tanks, longer-range missiles, and possibly fighter jets to Ukraine.

The basis for peace is clear. Ukraine would be a neutral non-Nato country. Crimea would remain home to Russia's Black Sea naval fleet, as it has been since 1783. A practical solution would be found for the Donbas, such as a territorial division, autonomy, or an armistice line.

Most importantly, the fighting would stop, Russian troops would leave Ukraine, and Ukraine's sovereignty would be guaranteed by the UN Security Council and other nations. Such an agreement could have been reached in December 2021 or in March 2022.

Above all, the government and people of Ukraine would tell Russia and the US that Ukraine refuses any longer to be the battleground of a proxy war. In the face of deep internal divisions, Ukrainians on both sides of the ethnic divide would strive for peace, rather than believing that an outside power will spare them the need to compromise.

