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The Global System Has Failed. Ukraine Is Showing the World How to Build A Better One



Ukraine's presidential advisor Andriy Yermak photographed in Kyiv on April 19 Alexander Chekmenev for TIME

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APRIL 28, 2022 11:00 PM EDT

The current international security system has nearly expired. It's rotted through. Its remains have collapsed and buried the world order beneath. Trying to revive it is futile.

Most of all it resembles a broken automaton: its limbs are still able to move, but its gears are worn out, its springs are stretched. And the synchronicity that used to give perfection to its movements, has long gone.

Clockwork toys, robots' mechanical ancestors, became fashionable with the European royal courts during the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century. But the first world conflict in European history, a series of interconnected wars, resulted in something even more important: creation of the first world order ever.

Since then, the system of international relations has been based on the Peace of Westphalia 1648 and its core principles: national sovereignty, foreign and domestic policies separation, compromise as a means of reconciling conflicting national interests, equality of sovereign states, and negotiating relations between them.

All the subsequent systems were in fact more or less successful attempts to amend this order to ensure the balance of interests of leading states (known as the Great Powers).

This tendency was clearly traced from the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the Potsdam Conference in 1945. Between the dates, attempts to reject any of the principles of the Peace of Westphalia would inevitably lead to new conflicts. The Great Powers' aspirations to impose their own will on the rest of the world by force brought the nightmare of two world wars. Or, as some historians rightly point out, the Second Thirty Years' War of 1914-1945.

Now history repeats itself. Russia's war on Ukraine is a rejection of all Westphalian principles. We are denied the right to sovereignty. We are under pressure to change our domestic policy. Under the guise of compromise, we are

offered surrender. We are denied subjectivity and therefore equality. Our civilians are being tortured and killed en masse for simply being Ukrainian citizens.

It is a crusade against Ukraine in the literal historical sense—it's a sheer aggression, accompanied by sadism, raping, marauding, looting and systematic malicious destruction, under the guise of serving a greater purpose. The purpose that Russian propaganda, statesmen, and religious leaders define as a fundamentally false narrative of “protecting the spiritual ‘Third Rome’ from the spiritless and treacherous West breaches.” And the Patriarch of Moscow blesses with his own hand Russian soldiers to conquer Ukraine.

The aggression against Ukraine is a natural consequence of the continuous series of conflicts in which Russia took part after the collapse of the USSR. This is the decisive phase of the Third Thirty Years' War. No one can predict how long it will last.

There is one thing we can be sure: Moscow has consciously chosen the path of international relations archaization. It has chosen to consistently deny the primacy of international over national law, systematic violations of agreements, and withdrawal from any rules contradicting its aggressive ambitions. It has chose to disrupt the international bodies—these are all signs of the drive to replace the rule of law with the right of force. We should clearly understand that the Russian regime is not the only one in this endeavor.

Russia is at the forefront of the forces intent on rolling back the international relations system. How far will they go? That is the key issue.

Prior 2014, an opinion was popular among some experts that Russia was counting on a second “Yalta” – in the sense of the world redistribution by blocs. However, Russia is currently unable to create influential international bodies, and all such efforts under Moscow's auspices are purely instrumental. However, the Kremlin is also reluctant to become a junior partner in international bodies.

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So where does it go? Its goals move even further into the past to the pre-bloc era

of the Vienna Congress. The European concert as a prototype of the world concert, playing the music chosen by the Great Powers—the concept is very tempting for Russia. After all, its leadership is still guided by the principles of the Holy Alliance (the League of the Three Emperors), and is using ‘legitimacy’ to deny the right of nations to self-determination and independent foreign policy. Just like the Romanovs did.

The current Russian regime is not a restorer. It does not need to recreate either the Romanov Empire or the USSR. It is not restoring the empire, but creating a fantasy based on the true story, the way Hollywood does. It is an attempt to replay history turning moments and cancel or offset unsatisfactory results, including the Caribbean crisis, the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, and subsequent NATO enlargement.

The Kremlin has been successfully doing this for a long time. It has accomplices. We know their names.

Some, like the Hungarian authorities, are still willing to do business with Russia on Kremlin terms. We know how European elites have consistently undermined European values in exchange for Russian money and energy. We remember how Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy neglected the interests of the whole of Europe to strengthen the positions of Germany and France. Back in 2008, they transformed the NATO Bucharest Summit into a Congress of Vienna look-alike.

The refusal to let Ukraine and Georgia into NATO was a de facto consent to Russia’s aggression against both countries. The era of hybridity in modern international relations started. Since then, Russia has resorted to realpolitik to cover up the purely ideological motivation of its actions. And the West, meanwhile, has been using ideology as a facade for realpolitik. The fact is that the values-interests conflict deepens the crisis. That’s what is happening now.

International organizations have shown a complete inability to stop the aggressor. The E.U. consensus decisions aimed at deterring and punishing Russia are systematically weakened by national governments. The U.N. is unable to work effectively. The Security Council is in need of reform—a country resorting to annexation, aggressive wars, and genocide should definitely not be its permanent

member.

NATO still allows Russia to intervene in the enlargement issue, both directly and through cautious and amnesiac politicians. As current events show, NATO continues to pursue a policy of double standards. Its readiness to accept Finland and Sweden against the uncertain signals and constant delays on Ukraine's bid.

The two states' drive to join the Alliance is a direct consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which remained de facto neutral precisely because of NATO's refusal to provide it with a clear path to membership. The results are clear. Russian missiles are destroying Ukrainian cities. Russian soldiers by thousands are raping and killing Ukrainian citizens, even children. And some of the allies are still trying to avoid confrontation despite the Russian leadership threatening them.

Against the background of the helpless Budapest Memorandum, the signal is obvious: if invaded, the states having no weapons of mass destruction and having failed to get under the collective security umbrella can count on unlimited concern. Humanitarian aid and allowing refugees are likely, too. But the perspective of punishing the aggressor gets uncertain for those countries. This was the case in 2014, when Russia occupied the Ukrainian Crimea and Donbas. Many in Europe would like to retain the status quo even now.

NATO still has a chance to show responsibility and independence. Instead of talking about "the doors open for everyone," it's the right time to open them for Ukraine. Right now the Russian leadership is confident it's got the right to destroy Ukraine.

But the Ukrainian people's fierce resistance spoiled the game. Our longing for freedom has proven to be stronger. Only after the tragedies of Mariupol, Bucha, Gostomel, Chernihiv, Kharkiv and dozens of other places did the international community start to understand what we are dealing with. Each passing day brings horrible footage of the inhumane crimes of the Russian Army. But these tragedies could have been avoided if there were leaders who could defend the world order.

Otto von Bismarck said: "We live in a wondrous time, in which the strong is weak

because of his scruples and the weak grows strong because of his audacity.” It’s now again. The time of leaders who act decisively, making the dreams possible and realizing possibilities. Such people have been in business for a long time—those active visionaries like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk, bringing the future to humankind. Until recently, such people were very scarce in politics, because leadership is a burden of responsibility you take on voluntarily while everyone else shuns it.

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Volodymyr Zelensky had to bear this burden. The Ukrainian President brought seemingly forgotten virtues into world politics. In the greatest ordeal of war, he became the conductor of the Ukrainian philosophy of freedom in the whole world. So, today Ukraine is not just a country near Russia. Not a weak and corrupt state, whose leaders used to buy handshakes and minute meetings on the sidelines. Volodymyr Zelensky is different. He is sincere. He is brave. He is popular. It’s a politician of a new formation. And Ukraine is a state of a new formation. Ukrainians are a model of courage for the whole democratic world.

The time of our loneliness is over. The article size prevents me from listing all those who came to our aid, but be sure: Ukraine is very grateful to all of you.

But there have been too many martyr heroes in our history. Each generation of Ukrainians had its own 300 Spartans and its own Thermopylae. So now is the time for the winning heroes. Heroes who will live long and happily in their free state. We have proved we are worth it. As did Israel back in 1948. And, like Israel, we need, with all means available, to obtain weapons to defeat the outnumbering enemy. Without the support of the U.S., U.K., Poland, the Baltic States, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and many others, it would be much harder for us to hold on. Yet, at first, we had to struggle to get the support. The same way as Israel. Apparently, over the years, the world’s democracies have forgotten that someone can be eager to destroy states and nations.

Mariupol, Bucha, Irpin, and dozens other places have proved it that they can. So, Ukraine needs reliable, comprehensive, and binding security guarantees. The world needs such guarantees. Without them, any agreement with Russia will only

be a truce, temporary, and fragile.

But to make Russia sign it, we need to hold.

“Give us the tools, and we will finish the job,” said Winston Churchill, urging the United States to launch the lend-lease. It responded then, and the Allies defeated Nazism. Today, we repeat the same call—and we see that we are heard. Lend-lease will help Ukraine survive. Restore the state’s integrity. Bring back our people. Punish the aggressor decisively and severely. This will be our victory. But there is an issue that needs to be addressed now.

We need to understand how the world will live afterwards. We need to make sure that the ambition to conquer gets too costly and painful to pursue.

Obviously, the key provisions of the Peace of Westphalia cannot be questioned. Therefore, we need a conceptual return to it with the heavy baggage of experience we have and with the understanding that talking rationality with fanatics is senseless.

Several years ago, Richard Haass put forward the concept of responsible sovereignty, providing a quantitative rather than absolute model of state sovereignty depending on the regime’s behavior. That is, the sovereignty may be limited if the regime poses a threat to others.

However, a fundamental question arises here: how to avoid the transformation of the world order into equilibrium, the constant balancing of the interests of the same old Great Powers, which due to their force will remain untouchable? Obviously, such a scenario is wrong, and the Russian case has proved it clearly.

Henry Kissinger explained why: “Any system of world order, to be sustainable, must be accepted as just—not only by leaders, but also by citizens. It must reflect two truths: order without freedom, even if sustained by momentary exaltation, eventually creates its own counterpoise; yet freedom cannot be secured or sustained without a framework of order to keep the peace. Order and freedom, sometimes described as opposite poles on the spectrum of experience, should instead be understood as interdependent”.

Following Mr. Kissinger, I'd like to ask: Can today's leaders rise above the urgency of day-to-day events to achieve this balance?

Russia is losing strength. The atrocities the Russian soldiers commit are a sign of weakness, a sign of degradation, overstrain of the empire's forces and its inevitable collapse. So now is the right time for such reforms. Now is the right time for a combination of interest and justice, values and realpolitik. Time to reform international institutions. To create an effective security format in the event that NATO does not dare to show determination—the determination that created it back in 1949. The determination of the Alliance member states' citizens to support our Euro-Atlantic aspirations and our just struggle.

We propose a new collective agreement on security guarantees for Ukraine—as a basis for a collective response to global security challenges. It is obvious that neutrality cannot be the key issue in this agreement.

This agreement should ensure the status of Ukraine as a democratic, sovereign and integral state—without putting the issues of Donbas and Crimea in brackets. The conditions for securing such a status are a matter for discussion, but it is clear that there is room for both the West and the East among the guarantors. For the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa. For the U.N. Security Council members, Poland, Italy, Germany, Turkey, Canada, Israel... The club is open. Ukraine is one of the leading guarantors of world food security, so securing it is not only a moral issue, but also a purely practical one.

Moreover, Ukraine is the shield protecting Europe from invasion, which Russian officials frankly speak of. You may not believe them, as we did not believe until 2014—but history clearly shows that empires have two states only: expansion and disintegration.

In the future, the Ukrainian security platform should become the basis for the U-24, United for Peace multilateral format. A kind of rescue service responsible states would provide for the countries in need. The service, which, despite the U.N. paralysis and the unbeatable vetos will be able within 24 hours to provide aid—humanitarian, financial, material and military-technical—to a state that suffered aggression. A service that will punish the aggressor within 24 hours by

imposing sanctions.

After all, crushing exports is more sobering than freezing the aggressor state officials' assets.

Ukraine has been paying a very high price for its leading position in this system. The Moscow-centric world's inevitable collapse is a chance for new leadership. Democratic. Humane. Human-centered. The leadership of a state whose people value liberty above all.

Ukrainians are as capable of creating as of fighting. We will definitely rebuild our beautiful country. Post-war recovery will give a powerful boost to our economy. Today it is the right thing to invest in Ukraine's defense. Tomorrow it will be a profitable thing to invest in its development. You can bet on it.

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