



Western experts urge US to start talks with Russia before “it’s too late”

Description

USA/RUSSIA/UKRAINE: With the war in Ukraine waging since February 24 and no immediate end in sight, Western commentators and experts have begun urging the US and its allies to start talks with Russia over the situation in Ukraine before its “too late.”

Samuel Charap, senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, and Jeremy Shapiro, research director at the European Council on Foreign Relations, urged in an opinion piece published in the New York Times for the West to continue providing material support for the Ukrainian military, but in close consultation with Kiev to “begin opening channels of communication with Russia” as “an eventual cease-fire should be the goal, even as the path to it remains uncertain.”

With the US having pledged about \$24 billion in military aid to Ukraine, more than four times Ukraine’s 2021 defence budget, in addition to other countries pledging another \$12 billion, the authors claim that although the West are committed to helping Ukraine, they do not want to escalate the conflict into a major power war.

“For as long as both Russia and the West are determined to prevail over the other in Ukraine and prepared to devote their deep reserves of weapons to achieve that goal, further escalation seems almost preordained,” the experts wrote.

They stress that discussions are absolutely necessary, despite being politically risky, as the war in Ukraine has the potential to bring Russia and NATO into direct conflict. An argument can be made that Russia and NATO are already in direct conflict as the Atlantic bloc already provides weapons and training to the Ukrainian military and encourages former soldiers and volunteers to fight against Russian forces. This is in addition to espionage and surveillance assistance, diplomatic and political support, and medical aid.

According to the authors, Russia has red lines, which although are not exactly known in their entirety, they can be assumed. The experts give the example that if the Ukrainians are given particular systems or capabilities that could directly target Russian territory, it is likely that Moscow will consider that as a red line being crossed. It is for this reason that when US President Joe Biden recently announced that

Ukraine would be supplied with multiple-launch rocket systems, the longest-range munitions that could strike Russia were withheld.

“The premise of the decision was that Moscow will escalate — i.e. launch an attack against NATO — only if certain types of weapons are provided or if they are used to target Russian territory,” they claimed. “The goal is to be careful to stop short of that line while giving the Ukrainians what they need to ‘defend their territory from Russian advances,’ as Mr. Biden said in a statement in June.”

To the experts, this creates a conundrum as for now the West is unwilling to send their military forces directly to Ukraine, but a Russian victory is unacceptable. At the same time, if Ukraine somehow succeeded in halting Russia’s advance thanks to the help of Western weapons, that would constitute an unacceptable defeat for Moscow, which could compel the Russian military to “double down” in its operation.

Charap and Shapiro stress that “The determination of both the West and Russia to do whatever it takes to prevail in Ukraine is the main driver of escalation” and that only through talks can a de-escalation begin. As they say, “The best way to prevent that dynamic from getting out of control is to start talking before it’s too late.”

Although the pair are undoubtedly correct in their analysis that talks are the best way to resolve the conflict, what they do omit is the complete unwillingness from the Ukrainian side since 2014 to discuss issues, as well as the encouragement Kiev receives from Washington and London to not engage in negotiations with Moscow. The very crisis in Ukraine today is because of Kiev’s refusal to negotiate and discuss, whilst committing towards a path of ultra-nationalism, militarisation and even nuclearization.

The two analysts in this way do not necessarily say anything profound as discussions were always the way to resolve the issues between Moscow and Kiev, even before the events of 2014. The problem is that they do not highlight that Kiev, with encouragement from Washington, is completely unwilling to engage in discussions despite Moscow’s willingness.

There may be some gaps in their analysis, but more importantly, having experts from RAND and the European Council on Foreign Relations urging in the New York Times for discussions to begin to end the war in Ukraine is a major narrative shift from the encouragement for prolonged fighting usually found in influential Western think tanks and media outlets, including by these three aforementioned institutions.

With the special military operation continuing for half a year and with no end in sight, Western analysts grossly underestimated Russia’s determination, overestimated Ukraine’s capabilities and miscalculated the effectiveness of sanctions. Now there is a growing acceptance in the academic and media sphere that Russia is in full control of the situation in Ukraine and it alone decides when its military operation will conclude. Because of this reality, it may be in the best interest of the West to open serious negotiations as it could be the only way to have any influence over the outcome of the conflict. The political classes of the West are yet to accept this reality though.

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