

# Lord Skidelsky: "We're not helping Ukraine by continuing to support a war it cannot win"

We need negotiations to end the war as quickly as possible



THOMAS FAZI  
24 SET 2023



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Speech by Lord Robert Skidelsky — economist and award-winning biographer of John Maynard Keynes — in the House of Lords, September 21, 2023:

“My Lords, I thank the government for giving this all too rare opportunity to discuss the most fateful foreign policy issue of our day. I see that I have been bracketed with one or two other notable troublemakers; I am very happy to be speaking after the noble Lord, Lord Balfe.

I feel more isolated in this House when I speak on foreign policy than on any other subject, despite my strong feeling that what I am saying urgently needs to be said. I was one of a handful of Peers who opposed NATO’s bombing of Serbia in 1999 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The three main parties supported both policies. I managed to avoid speaking about Afghanistan in this House, though not writing an article in the *Guardian* headed [‘Seven pointless years in Afghanistan’](#), in which I argued that a negotiated settlement with the Taliban was the only way to bring an unwinnable war to an end. I clearly have an excellent track record in what my noble friend Lord Owen calls appeasement.

Before staking out my distinctive position on Ukraine, let me emphasise one point on which I think we are all agreed: that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was an act of aggression against an independent state contrary to the UN charter and fully deserving of the condemnation it received in this country and around the world. I would go further and say that it was worse than a crime; it was a blunder, since it achieved the exact reverse of what Putin intended, alienating Ukraine irretrievably

from Russia. As I said a year ago, you do not call Ukrainians your brothers and then try to bomb them into submission. That is common ground.

Where I deviate from the consensus is in rejecting the possibility of a Ukrainian military victory at the present level of economic and military deployment. This leaves three alternatives: economic and military escalation, a long stalemate — a period of frozen war — or negotiations to end the war as quickly as possible. I favour the last. Supporters of the present policy are committed to the first option, a complete defeat of Russia, which means escalation, or they are resigned to a continuation of the present position. Let us be clear about this: driving the Russians out of all the territory lost since 2014, plus reparations for all the damage they have caused, is Zelensky's war aim, and it is the stated objective of our government as well. They are very cagey about it if one asks what the end game or the condition for ending is, but it is clear what it is. As [Foreign Secretary] James Cleverly stated on 23 August:

Be in no doubt, the UK and the international community will never recognise Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, or any Ukrainian territory, and will stand with you for as long as it takes.

That is the government's official position.

Complete victory, in this sense, is the key to what all supporters of the present policy want — such as the Nuremberg court, suggested by the noble Baroness, Lady Kennedy, which depended, as she knows, on the complete defeat and occupation of Germany — reparations by Russia for its aggression and, of course, regime change in Russia and an end to the Putin system. Short of a complete defeat of Russia, I do not see how any of these goals of holding Russia to account can be achieved. They are the necessary premise of the policy, and it is not surprising that this is the official policy.

A lot of the moral force behind it depends on viewing the Russian action in Ukraine as unprovoked — 'brutal and unprovoked aggression' is the commonly used term. Yet, how can you take the notion of unprovoked aggression seriously? As the noble Lord, Lord Owen, and I noted in a [co-signed letter](#) published in the *Financial Times* soon after the outbreak of the war, Russian hostility to NATO expansion has been constant since 1991. We wrote:

NATO Governments have rightly said they are willing to address Russia's security concerns, but then say in the same breath that Russia has no legitimate security

concerns because NATO is a purely defensive alliance.

This has been the contradiction at the heart of Western policy on Russia and, in my view, eventually provoked a Russian response.

To say that the Russian attack was provoked is not to say it was justified; that is an important distinction for clear thinking about peace prospects. The only point I make is that a careful look at the background to the war is needed to judge the scale of Putin's ambition, to judge whether he is a Hitler — an increasingly common comparison — and therefore what a justifiable endgame might be like.

There is evidence that our government have not only endorsed President Zelensky's war aims but helped define them. There is so much that we do not know about this and so much misinformation on both sides. I agree that there is much more misinformation on the other side than on our side, but there is a hell of a lot of misinformation on our side as well. Is it true, for example, that on a visit to Kyiv in April 2022, Boris Johnson strongly advised Zelensky not to sign any peace agreement, assuring him of continuing Western support, come what may? I do not know, but it has been widely said that it aborted what were then promising peace negotiations.

Behind the government's reluctance even to whisper the language of peace is their failure to recognise the extent of Ukraine's victory. Ukraine has fought for its independence and won, much as Finland did in 1939-40, although Finland's independence did come at the cost of some territory. If we could think of the Ukrainian achievement in these terms, we would be much less hung up on defining victory in terms of the reconquest of every inch of territory it has lost since 2014.

Apart from these general considerations, the war aims espoused by our government are unachievable. Ukraine is not in a position to fight the kind of war it can win. Its overhyped counteroffensive has stalled, and most military experts believe that inconclusive trench warfare will be the order of the day for months to come. In those circumstances, there will be a strong temptation on our side to break the stalemate by progressive scaling up of warfare. Escalation has already started. At his meeting with Zelensky at Chequers in July, our Prime Minister confirmed that we have provided Ukraine with long-range cruise missiles and attack drones with a range of 200 kilometres. The longer the war goes on in its stalemated form, the greater the temptation to supply Ukraine with longer-range weaponry that could hit targets deep

inside Russia and involve NATO military forces in direct attacks on Russian military positions.

I and others have warned about the danger of nuclear escalation. We all hope that China's veto on the use of nuclear weapons will be binding on Russia, but it would be very imprudent to expect it to hold in the event that the Russians face a catastrophic military defeat or failure on the ground as a result of NATO support for Ukraine. An important contribution by the defence analyst Charles Knight argues that the Ukraine war presents a greater nuclear risk than the Cuban missile crisis, calling for careful rationality and restraint by Russia and the United States. Can the Minister assure us that the government have not broken off all contact with Russia's leaders and that behind official policy façades and smokescreens, Putin and other Russian leaders know that there are feasible endgames that avoid either total Russian defeat and humiliation or inexorable progress to Armageddon?

My dream is of a congress of London to bring peace to Ukraine as the Congress of Berlin pacified the Balkans in 1878, but we await our Disraeli".

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Best regards,

Thomas Fazi

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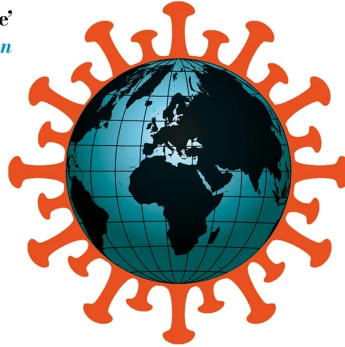
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Rob 17 hrs ago ♥ Liked by Thomas Fazi

Please consider the "Club of Rome" map drawn up in the 1970s in my link proves as they are using this war to kill and then Russia will possess Ukraine as the 5th kingdom of their 10 kingdom division of the whole earth by the midst of this decade!:

<https://sumofthyword.com/2021/01/07/mystery-babylon-the-great-and-her-beast/>

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James E Keenan Writes Political Economy Watch 18 hrs ago ♥ Liked by Thomas Fazi

Thanks very much for posting this. I particularly appreciate Skidelsky's noting that, "To say that the Russian attack was provoked is not to say it was justified; that is an important

distinction for clear thinking about peace prospects." Too many of the people on the Left who are critical of Ukraine slide very quickly from provocation to justification.

You can read Skidelsky's remarks in the context of the larger Lords debate here:

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2023-09-21/debates/8E5EA572-5CCC-412A-AF22-8D71BBBE5E25/details#contribution-74607DD0-C7FD-4D85-99DF-23E8B12BDDDC>

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