

UKRAINIAN WARTIME DIPLOMACY: WRESTING PEACE, SECURITY, AND DEVELOPMENT

War changes everything. It has dramatically changed modern Ukraine and every single one of us twice: first, in 2014, and later, in February 2022. Russia's war against Ukraine has also changed Europe and the entire world. Changed forever.

Predicting an individual's behaviour under ordinary, peaceful circumstances is relatively easy; conversely, doing so is practically impossible amidst a crisis, let alone during a full-scale war: the largest war in Europe since World War II.

Once facing a war, someone who may seem strong and brave in peacetime might suddenly prove weak, unfit to take up the fight. Someone might even turn a traitor.

This is equally true for states since they perform differently in times of peace and war.

No one even expected Ukraine to hold out for as little as 3 days or 3 weeks. What could even be said about almost 3 years of full-scale war and the 10 years of overall Russian aggression?

Even fewer expected Ukraine to be able to not only muster military resistance but also continue rolling out structural reforms, consolidate the Ukrainian society and preserve unity, manufacture our own weapons and use them to hit targets across record-breaking distances, and harvest crops under air attacks, continuing to supply Ukrainian food to the entire world and remaining a guarantor of global food security.

Also, very few expected Ukraine to reinvent modern diplomacy and achieve such convincing results in the international arena.

The international coalition in support of Ukraine incorporating almost 150 countries in the UN General Assembly; maintained reliable support from our key partners; initiation and start of the negotiations on Ukraine's EU membership; more than 50 states systematically supplying weapons to Ukraine; pressure on the aggressor via sanctions; the first Global Peace Summit involving 100 delegations from all continents and — as of August 2024 — 93 signatures under its final communiqué. This is but a short list of Ukraine's wartime diplomacy accomplishments.

Ukrainian diplomacy simply had no other choice but to reinvent classic approaches and methods in light of the dire situation in which our state ended up in February 2022. Our diplomacy has always been centred around Ukrainian citizens and soldiers. They are the reason diplomacy has worked in full swing

for the last 30 months. It is to them — Ukrainian men and women in military uniforms — that we owe the very option to have an independent state, foreign policy, and diplomacy.

Ukraine's wartime diplomacy would not have been possible without President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's leadership. He set it in motion during the first hours of the full-scale invasion. His telephone conversations, statements, and addresses might have initially come across as too stern, but that is what the situation called for. Ultimately, the non-classic methods yielded the results that Ukraine needed.

The methods of wartime diplomacy still work today. They enabled us to cut decision-making timeframes, break through countless walls, overcome our partners' numerous fears, turn hundreds of 'no' into 'yes', and prove that Ukrainian diplomats do not speak the word 'impossible'.

So, what makes wartime diplomacy different from peacetime diplomacy, other than diplomats becoming fluent in military jargon and acronyms?

Working under extreme conditions day after day, we developed a set of principles. It may seem like those principles sometimes substitute for and sometimes complement classic diplomacy, but that is not the case. Depending on each situation, the wartime and peacetime diplomacy principles have to be appropriately combined and balanced.

The first principle of wartime diplomacy is stubbornness. It is impossible to count how many times since the start of the Russian invasion, our diplomats heard, 'No, that is impossible' in response to one request or another. All of Ukraine's negotiations to secure weapons started with a firm and unequivocal 'no' — absolutely all of them. After such categorical refusals, a peacetime diplomat would have long since stopped trying and put the issue aside, at least for a while.

Yet a wartime diplomat does not have such a right. He has to stay the course until he hears a 'yes'. That is why, throughout the last 3 years, we have been breaching the walls of misconception and artificial barriers time and again, pursuing eventual positive responses. Anti-tank weapons, NATO artillery, rocket artillery systems, modern air defence systems, tanks, long-range missiles, and the F16 jets — all these types of weapons were eventually unlocked at the political level thanks to the collective efforts of President Zelenskyy's whole team.

The stubbornness of wartime diplomacy applies not only to weapons but to almost all international initiatives or negotiations. No sabotage, no intimidation against us or others, and no attempts to discredit us managed to prevent Ukraine from organising the first Global Peace Summit, where we and our partners gathered 100 delegations.

The second principle of wartime diplomacy is not to be afraid to put friends in uncomfortable positions when facing situations of extreme urgency. True friends will understand, albeit perhaps not right away.

Typically, we treat our friends with particular respect. Especially since one of the core pillars of Ukrainian diplomacy is the idea of a mutually beneficial partnership in which we can count on our allies, and they can count on us. But in times of war, the difference between your country and its friends is that if it dies, they may lay flowers on its grave, reminisce on the friendship, make heart-wrenching speeches, and move on with their lives. Yet your country will not — it will be dead, remember.

History has proven this rule many times over; it applies to any country facing a war of extermination. Once we recognise this fundamental difference between Ukraine and its partners, criticism against Ukraine or any other country in a similar situation, accusing it of demanding the impossible and pushing too hard or, to quote Habermas, outright engaging in ‘moral blackmail’, will look like nothing more than a display of the critics’ moral bankruptcy. When life and death are at stake, one should not pretend to care about the life of another when actually wishing them dead.

So, if the price of our survival is to push our friends outside their comfort zones and make them act in line with the challenges, no matter how inconvenient that might be, then we need to do it.

This has been and continues to be the most controversial principle of Ukrainian wartime diplomacy. People still ask, ‘How can you speak like this, say things like that, keep pressuring this way?’ We can. In fact, we must if we are to survive.

I remember a moment ahead of one of the decisive EU votes on the then-latest round of sanctions against Russia, including the disconnection of its banks from SWIFT. Then, I had to address my colleagues by first names — something unacceptable in classic diplomacy. I did it for the sake of securing a crucial decision. One of the people I had criticised harshly later called me and admitted that my harsh words were precisely what tipped the scale in favour of that decision.

By now, we have a long track record of such undiplomatic moments. Most remain known to a select few people. In those years, we gave a lot of scolding, in particular, to our German partners, who have gone through an unprecedented evolution of views. Armoured vehicles, tanks, air defence systems, and other types of German arms were often unlocked in the wake of, putting it mildly, very fierce debates, both public and behind closed doors.

Today, Germany is among Ukraine’s largest lethal weapon suppliers, second only to the US. However, Ukrainian diplomacy and I still have more convincing to do. Above all, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of a country at war is responsible before his country’s armed forces.

The third principle is diplomacy without a Plan B. This is the approach that makes career diplomats especially uneasy. After all, classic diplomacy is built on the idea that there must always be an alternative path, an exit strategy.

However, diplomacy without a Plan B is not about us failing or running out of time to devise such a plan. The reasoning is much simpler. With wartime diplomacy, you either achieve the required result or are doomed.

A Ukrainian soldier in command of a company once told me a curious story. He said, 'Whenever I assembled the commanders of my platoons to set them a Plan A — let's say, to capture a bridge — they would always specify what do they do next should they fail.' He then said, 'In that case, we will gather at the junction a kilometre from the bridge.' Those operations would always result in the rendezvous at the bridge — the Plan B. The commander then changed tactics and, from then on, would only communicate Plan A to his troops. This is not to say he no longer had backup plans. War demands a different mentality. A war is an extremely violent confrontation. Under such conditions, it is vital to remain utterly focused on executing Plan A above all else.

Once you decide — even if just for yourself — that you have a Plan B, then, like in the soldier's story, the safe junction a kilometre from the bridge starts to weigh on you psychologically.

I have seen this in situations with our diplomats. I remember our discussions with ambassadors about the supply of the Patriot systems and other air defence means that are so critically needed in Ukraine. I noticed which of our team members went straight to counting on Plan B instead of focusing on the goal: 'Get the damn Patriot'.

Therefore, the wartime diplomacy chief's objective is to work with the team on devising a well-thought-out core plan and convince everyone that the plan must be executed to the tee and, thus, we don't need a Plan B.

The fourth principle is the acceleration and compression of decision-making processes. What mostly makes diplomats love their profession? They love its unhurriedness, the possibility to take an issue through all the filters, let it 'sink in', and go through the whole procedure. They usually do all that out of consideration that the circumstances might change, bringing new subtleties to take into account. That is how I once acted.

During a war, a diplomat has no time for all of that. In a country at war, circumstances constantly change at lightning speed, bringing subtleties abound. Try taking all of that into account, or at least start thinking inside this box, and you run the risk that either no decision will materialise, or each one will suffer catastrophic delays.

That is why wartime totally changes protocols and procedures. When people are dying, we don't have the time to care about the protocols or procedures.

In the last three years of Russian aggression, I have often heard both my colleagues at the MFA and our partners say, 'We cannot do it that quickly because there is a procedure.' In reality, it turns out that if we correctly establish a process looking for a clear-cut result, we will find that any country and any institution

has a lot of leeway for cutting and compressing the time needed to make decisions.

The fifth principle of Ukrainian wartime diplomacy is flexibility and inclusivity of menu-style decisions.

Anyone who has at least once worked in diplomacy or international relations heard a phrase like ‘It is not an à la carte menu’. That is to say, you cannot pick and choose from the list of principles and requirements given to you — either accept them all or none at all. Ukrainian wartime diplomacy has reframed this approach because nowadays, we require the art of combining strictness and integrity with flexibility and inclusivity.

According to Sun-Tzu, war consists of attacks and manoeuvres. Attacks happen when you maintain strictness and integrity. Manoeuvres happen when you show flexibility.

When President Zelenskyy revealed the idea of the Peace Formula, it already had an element of flexibility. Out of its 10 points, everyone was free to choose those they could support unreservedly and were ready to work on fulfilling for the sake of achieving just peace.

It is a unique feature of our peace plan, and it was intentionally designed that way to attract as many countries as possible. The Peace Formula will go down in the history of diplomacy, not only because it is the first instance of a war’s outcome being dictated by the attacked country and not its attacker or a third party but also as an example of constructive selectivity or diplomatic inclusivity.

The sixth wartime diplomacy principle is ‘everyone talks to everyone’, or ‘total diplomacy’.

In a country at war, the classic ‘everything goes through the MFA’ diplomacy model doesn’t work. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs alone, no matter how well-staffed it is, cannot physically handle the sheer volume of all the ongoing communication.

First Lady of Ukraine Olena Zelenska regularly participates in complex diplomatic negotiations, pays visits to important countries, speaks in the US Congress, and develops the global coalition in support of Ukraine through diplomacy of first ladies and gentlemen. Head of the Office of the President Andrii Yermak develops diplomacy of national security advisors to promote the Peace Formula and other important issues. Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Ruslan Stefanchuk is building up parliamentary diplomacy, having recently initiated the parliamentary track of the Crimea Platform. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal has relaunched our relations with Slovakia’s new Robert Fico-led government following the principles of pragmatism. Head of the Zakarpattia RMA Viktor Mykyta is building bridges of understanding with Hungary, appealing to the common interests of good neighbourly relations and the security and welfare of Ukraine’s Hungarian community.

The Office of the President, Cabinet of Ministers, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other ministries, and even the regional and municipal authorities all communicate directly with their counterparts in other countries at all levels. Everyone must communicate with everyone else, like in Valerii Lobanovskyi's style of Total Football.

The main problem arises when everyone says different things. That is why the MFA's function during the war transitions from coordinating who talks with whom to coordinating what they all talk about. If we are to win, we need to have one voice, communicating with the world in unison.

An essential element of this principle of wartime diplomacy requires us to involve civil society, experts, religious communities, and Ukrainian citizens living abroad. Today, they must all recognise themselves as Ukrainian diplomats whose voices carry weight. The MFA is working on this a lot.

Finally, the seventh principle is clarity and straightforwardness of statements and their relevance to specific contexts.

Everyone can easily spot a classic diplomat whose speech is so full of courtesy that it is hard to understand what it is actually about. That is not just out of homage to tradition; it is also a convenient tactic of embedding multiple scenarios in a single sentence. After all, you never know what life might bring next, and no one wants to end up sounding crude.

However, during a war, it is better to sound crude than speak in a manner that is either not immediately understood or misunderstood, with your words, at best, having no effect.

Verbal fencing suffices during peacetime. During a war, however, one needs to communicate a message to the right audience as clearly and quickly as possible. That requires an excellent understanding of a given audience and speaking to it concisely, directly, and bluntly while remaining aware of the context.

This principle of wartime diplomacy also largely relies on proactive and creative communication with new audiences. Even when such audiences may at first appear negatively biased against you and the country you represent.

You need to seize every opportunity to convey the desired message. I can share an example from my experience. Before embarking on my visit to the PRC, I recorded a short video message with Mandarin subtitles, addressing the users of Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Facebook) — China's most popular social network, mostly unknown to the Western world's population. The Embassy of Ukraine in China has a Weibo page that regularly posts our President's addresses and other content with Mandarin subtitles.

That video contained nothing sensational — it may as well be an example of classic diplomatic communication. I announced my visit and talked about Ukrainian and Chinese cultures, people-to-people ties, respect for territorial integrity, and Ukraine's desire to put a just end to Russian aggression. Yet it

led to something unexpected... after arriving in Guangzhou, we found out that 1.2 million users had already viewed it. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive. The video set a positive backdrop for all negotiations and meetings. Our interlocutors would start discussions by mentioning that they had seen the video before the meeting.

Another integral element of the seventh principle of wartime diplomacy is the right to publicise what the other party says during the negotiations but does not publicly state in its official position. This is like diplomatic neurosurgery. The price of a mistake is catastrophic. We must carefully assess everything.

This seven-point list of wartime diplomacy principles is not comprehensive. I think we will need to devise and implement a few more principles to win this war. Furthermore, we will need such principles to prevent future global crises of the same kind as the unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine and ensure just peace.

Ukraine and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's diplomatic team are ready.