

Name of the Publication: Global Gandhi International Half-yearly e-journal published by Shanti Sahyog Centre for Nonviolence, New Delhi, India (CFN)

Volume No: Volume 1 Issue 1

Year of publication: July-Dec 2023

Page numbers: 1-7

An Open Letter to President Putin Cc: President Biden

– by Dr. Suman Khanna Aggarwal



Esteemed President Putin ji,

Warm greetings from the Shanti Sahyog Centre for Nonviolence, New Delhi, India (CFN)!

Allow me to address you with the affix, 'ji,' a gesture of deep respect and courtesy that reflects our cultural norms. I trust this message finds you in robust health and indomitable spirits. As a keen observer of global affairs, I am acutely aware of the arduous juncture you and your nation are traversing. In this hour of challenge, my heart goes out to you and the brave people of Russia – as well as the victims of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.

Amidst the complexities you navigate, your decision to engage in war with Ukraine stands as an unequivocal testament to your leadership. Your assertions eloquently articulate your stance, and while I may not fully grasp the intricacies of your perspective, I wholeheartedly acknowledge your nation's sovereign right to safeguard its vital interests.

Your resolve to shield your populace from eight years of Ukrainian oppression and the scourge of genocide, culminating in the deployment of 2,00,000 valiant soldiers to Kyiv, Ukraine, on that fateful day of February 24, 2022, to “demilitarise and denazify” the region, remains etched in global consciousness. So does your endeavour, seeking to thwart the encroachment of NATO's influence and secure the eastern territories via proxy forces, perhaps even herald a transformation in Ukraine's leadership. While initial aspirations to swiftly seize Kyiv and effectuate regime change encountered obstacles, giving rise to an evolution in objectives, the sustained campaign now stands as a testament to your nation's territorial accomplishments, including the strategic land bridge to Crimea.

Yet, amidst these deliberations, taking into account the toll exacted in lives and livelihoods, the unfathomable sacrifices borne by your nation and its citizens, families sundered, the fabric of communities and infrastructure rent apart—these indelible marks upon a nation's soul serve as a stark

reminder of the magnitude of such conflict. No wonder Sun Tzu cautions us in his magnum opus on Warcraft, *The Art of War*:

“He who wishes to fight must first count the cost. Anger may in time change to gladness; vexation may be succeeded by content. But a kingdom that has once been destroyed can never come again into being; nor can the dead ever be brought back to life. There is no instance of a nation benefitting from prolonged warfare.”

Further, the theatre of war begets immeasurable suffering, whose echoes resound long after the final echoes of gunfire faded into silence. The suffering of the combatants of the Russo-Ukrainian war, as well as of innocent infirm senior citizens, women and children, has been streaming daily into our living/dining/bedrooms for the past 531 days, affecting the appetite and sleep of many sensitive souls. In addition to this, colossal expenditure was incurred in this war. According to the Kiel Institute² for the World Economy, a German research Institute, the Biden administration and the US Congress have directed more than \$75 billion in assistance to Ukraine. So, as much as I admire you, a weighty question haunts me:

Is the human & financial price of the war worth paying?

Here, as a Gandhian scholar, would you agree with Gandhi’s following views in your heart of hearts?

I cannot but think of

- The opening lyrics of one of Mahatma Gandhi’s favourite hymns, *Vaishnav Jan to Tene Kahiye*, which in essence means, ‘The pain and suffering of others will deeply touch every sensitive human being, would want to do good to others selflessly...’
- Further, since Gandhi’s heart bled for the poor masses in India and was so much pained by their suffering, one of the expressions he

used for God was, *Daridranarayan* (God of the Poor); the intent being true worship of God implies caring for the poor and needy.

- Another essential guidance for all, especially relevant for those who are at the helm of affairs today, is Gandhi's Talisman:

“Whenever in doubt, think if (your) decision would empower the marginalized and the poorest...”

Provides an ethical test to judge everyday actions. Gandhi's talisman champions the cause of '*sarvodaya* through *antyodaya*', implying all welfare through the weakest person in society.

- Finally, the main tenet of Gandhi's nonviolent conflict resolution is to protest against the wrong-doing but in love with the wrong-doer, akin to Jesus Christ's injunction to hate the sin but not the sinner'. Gandhi is confident that when we protest against any wrong action but with love and compassion for the person who has done wrong, one appeals to the kernel of goodness inherent in all human beings, which stirs their conscience, impelling them to repent and right the wrong.

As history teaches us, leadership often stands as a crucible of agonizing choices, where national interests can dictate a 'just war' or invasion of another country. But, even a so-called 'Just War' leads to unfortunate, unintended and devastating outcomes even when fought for seemingly justifiable ends. In this context, Gandhi's views on the means-ends question are worth considering:

“They say 'means are after all means'. I would say 'means are after all everything'. As the means so the end. There is no wall of separation between means and end ... Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means. This is a proposition that admits of no exception.”

“The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. . . . means and ends are convertible terms.

“Impure means result in an impure end.”

The difference between Marx and Gandhi is that whereas for Marx, the end justifies the use of violent means, for Gandhi, only nonviolent means are used to achieve a just end.

As an observer from afar, I can but begin to fathom the profundity of humanity’s cost in this tumultuous saga. In the pursuit of peace, it is crucial for all parties involved to seek avenues for dialogue and understanding. True strength lies in defending one’s interests through negotiation and finding diplomatic solutions that can lead to lasting stability and prosperity. No wonder then that Gandhi points out ‘the beauty of compromise’. He avers, *“The truth that we see is relative, many-sided, plural and is the whole truth for a given time.”* He acknowledges: *“But all my life through, the very insistence on truth has taught me to appreciate the beauty of compromise.”* Compromise, for Gandhi, seems to be when two individuals/parties

, despite their differing points of view or ‘truths’, attempt to find an acceptable, common ground that enables and empowers them to live/work together.

I write this letter not to censor, judge or criticize but to express my genuine concern about the human cost of war. A concern is etched in the understanding that the path to progress lies in fostering cooperation, building bridges, and finding common ground between nations, even in the face of adversity. Otherwise, as Gandhi warns:

“An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind!”

May my letter, cc'd to President Biden, resonate, not as a judgment passed, but as an appeal to the shared humanity that binds us all. Within that shared humanity, in the corridors of nonviolence, understanding, compassion, and empathy, shall we uncover the dormant seeds of enduring peace and unrivalled advancement?

I want to conclude with a quote from Gandhi on why human beings should always choose nonviolence to resolve conflict. In his own words:

“The Law of Nonviolence, which is The Law of Love, is The Law of Our Species.”

With sincerest regards,

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– About the Author

A former Professor of Philosophy at Delhi University, India, Suman Khanna Aggarwal, obtained her Ph.D. in Gandhian Philosophy in 1978 and went on to do 3 Post-Doctoral Research Projects in India (1984), Sweden (1987-88) & Canada (1990-91).

In 1992, she founded the Gandhian NGO – Shanti Sahyog, which works in 17 South Delhi slums & in Tughlakabad Village, New Delhi, providing Quality

Education, Healthcare, Vocational Training, & Legal Aid to the underprivileged – including Domestic Violence Victims. In 2018, she set up the Shanti Sahyog Centre for Nonviolence to promote Gandhi's legacy of Nonviolent Conflict Resolution and Vision of a World Beyond War.