



## Ukraine - Will sending weapons lead to peace? | Medea Benjamin

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**Zain Raza (ZR):** Thank you guys for tuning in today and welcome to another episode of The Source. I'm your host Zain Raza and today we'll be talking to Medea Benjamin. She's the co-founder of the women's led peace group called *Codepink*, as well as the human rights group called *Global Exchange*. She's the author of ten books, the latest being the *War in Ukraine Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict*. Medea Benjamin, thank you so much for your time today.

**Medea Benjamin (MB):** Wonderful being with you.

**ZR:** Let us begin with a fundamental discussion that has failed in the corporate media, especially in Germany. We had a wide range of opinions on this matter, from Noam Chomsky to Jill Stein, Vijay Prashad, Chris Hedges, so it'd be really interesting to get your perspective as well. Russia provided denazification and demilitarisation as its reasons for going to war. Do you think these reasons had any legitimacy?

**MB:** Certainly there is some legitimacy to say denazification because the neo-Nazi elements in Ukraine, well, they have been small in numbers, they have been large in their impact. Especially from the military point of view, because they were a powerful paramilitary group that was part of the reason that the Minsk II Agreements didn't get implemented. And then in terms of demilitarisation, with the US particularly, but the West in general, has thrown so many weapons into Ukraine, not just since the Russians invaded, but since 2014, and not only pouring weapons in, but training and getting Ukraine ready for a confrontation with Russia. So certainly there are important elements to recognise when it comes to those concepts. I still don't think it justifies the invasion.

**ZR:** Exactly. Even though what you said made it clear that it doesn't justify the invasion it will still be interpreted in Germany as justifying the war. How would you counter the points that are made using the corporate media, for example, when it comes to the military aspect that Ukraine is an independent sovereign state and it has, like any other state, the right to make military alliances with countries like the United States.

**MB:** Well, I think there's larger issues at stake in which the communities that are part of Europe and the larger community have to also have a say. And if we know that by bringing Ukraine into this aggressive military alliance of NATO, that Russia said was a red line, that Russia saw as a provocation, that that's something that the rest of us have to say, Wait, this is not going to work for the security of all of Europe. And so those things have to be weighed together. You know, I've been fighting US imperialism for most of my life, and I've been fighting this concept of the Monroe Doctrine that the US has had for 200 years now: That Latin America is the US backyard and we will not let other powers come in and have a say. And we saw what happened in 1962 when the Russians put missiles in Cuba, how the US reacted. And we almost came to a nuclear war because of that. I'm not saying I like that the US has decided what kind of alliances Latin America can have, but to recognise that large powers have spheres of influence that they want to protect. And if it's one right on the border, which is what Ukraine is, we have to take that into consideration. And there are people like Macron from France, who have said we have to recognise that Russia does have legitimate security interests and those have to be taken into account.

**ZR:** Another counter argument that is usually made is that countries such as Latvia, Lithuania and Poland also share a border with Russia and a part of NATO. So if NATO were stationed there, it never posed a threat to Russia. I mean, there were no plans to invade Russia. How would you counter the argument that NATO was not really a threat and was simply there as a security umbrella to protect freedom and democracy in Europe?

**MB:** Well, those are small countries that you're talking about. And Ukraine is a huge country with a huge border along Russia and a country that has been militarised in a very precarious way for the last eight years. And so to see Ukraine becoming a centre for Western military build-up right along the border certainly did pose a threat to Russia. And then you have to take into account the fact that once there was an uprising that transformed a government in 2014 in Ukraine from one that was pro-Russia to one that was anti-Russia, and the fighting breaking out then in the Donbas and Russia taking over Crimea, then you have a totally different situation that happened as of 2014. So it's wrong to think of this war as just starting last year. This war really started in 2014 and makes the Ukraine case a very different case from those other countries.

**ZR:** I want to take a step back, and I know we're talking about Ukraine right now, but I want to provide some more context from a global perspective. Saudi Arabia's war against Yemen;

is it fair to compare these wars? And could you also provide an update there, given that you're pretty active on that front as well?

**MB:** It's fair to compare the wars in several ways. One, for example, is how little the international community has cared about the war in Yemen, how little money has gone into helping people who have been displaced by this war, people whose infrastructure has been knocked out, including so many hospitals, that the health care system that was a very poor one to begin with is being barely functioning. And the world community has gone on for the last eight years basically ignoring this. And on top of that, even worse, providing weapons to the Saudis that have been causing this catastrophic situation in Yemen. So the US companies have been profiting off the suffering of the Yemeni people, and the world community has said very little about it. Groups like ours that have been involved really have had a very difficult time finding resonance, whether it's in the political structures or in the larger humanitarian community. So in that way, you can compare them. And I would say that, it's very sad, I think, for the people of Yemen, the people of Somalia, the people of Libya, the people of other countries where a war has been going on to feel that their wars and their suffering is not as high on the level of concern for the international community as the war in Ukraine is.

**ZR:** Let us now move to recent developments. President Macron stated in December that the only way to end the war is with negotiations. He also had a joint press conference with President Biden in which Biden also said that he would consider diplomacy if Putin decided to end the war. But instead, we are seeing the opposite develop. Russia bombed Ukraine throughout New Years, including residential areas, whereas NATO secretary, Jens Stoltenberg, recently stated and I'm quoting him here from a recent speech: "Weapons are - in fact - the way to peace". France, Germany and the US have announced plans to send more tanks, while the US is sending Patriot defence systems. Do you think this approach of sending more weapons will yield peace and stability in this war?

**MB:** I think we have to quote something else that Jens Stoltenberg said recently, which is that his "greatest fear this winter is that this war spins out of control". And he said "if things go wrong, they could go horribly wrong". Those are his words. And we have to really reflect, what that means. I think what that means is this could become a nuclear war. And so we have to recognise that and say that we are putting Russia in a position that that is something that John F. Kennedy said at the time of the talks with Khrushchev: Never put your adversary if they are a nuclear power in a position where they're either facing a humiliating retreat or the use of a nuclear weapon. And it seems to be exactly what the West is trying to do right now, is to put Putin in a corner where there is no, quote, "off ramp" and yet think that somehow he is not going to use a nuclear weapon. I think this is folly and that we have to come to our senses that the more we send weapons into Ukraine, the more we are not only prolonging this war, but the more we are putting the world on the brink of a nuclear Armageddon.

**ZR:** Shortly after midnight on New Year's Day, Ukrainians strike the city called Makiivka where Russian troops were stationed and according to Ukrainian sources, 400 Russian soldiers were killed, according to Moscow 89 soldiers were killed. It was the highest single death toll since the war began for Russia. We also saw Russia face some major setbacks in the fall of last year, losing 54% of the territory that they previously controlled, including strategic cities like Kherson. The counter argument would be that military aid, as well as sanctions, are having an effect in driving Russia out of Ukraine and bringing this war closer to the end. How do you respond to this?

**MB:** You know, I heard for 20 years from US media sources and the US government that victory in Afghanistan was around the corner, that all we had to do is send in more weapons, send in more troops, and we would defeat this poor ragtag group of the Taliban. And, you know, the US is supposedly the number one fiercest military power in the world. And after 20 years, we left and the Taliban is back in power. I think today we should understand that for all the gains that Ukraine has made, they are not able to defeat Russia on the battlefield. And this is something we're hearing in the United States from the number one military adviser to President Biden, who is Mark Milley, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when he said that victory is unlikely on the battlefield, that it is best to seize the moment and go for negotiations. So I think every time there is a defeat for Russia, Russia will lash out again at the Ukrainians. And now with the very cruel, cruel tactic of destroying the infrastructure, that means tremendous suffering to the Ukrainian people during the winter months of knocking out their electricity, their access to heating and water. So it will just be a back and forth, that will only entrench this war further because victory is not going to be had on the battlefield. Russia is not going to pull up its troops and say, Sorry, we made a mistake. They're not going to give up Crimea and all of the Donbas. But it has to be done at the negotiation table. And I think it's so interesting now that it's people inside the militaries of our countries in the West that are putting out these cautious voices. And it's the politicians, most of the politicians, not all of them, who are the hard liners, who are saying, Nothing for Ukraine without Ukraine. And if Ukraine wants to take back every single inch of its territory, well, all power to them and we will provide them with the weapons to do that.

**ZR:** What do you think the United States policy is at the moment? We are seeing divisions, maybe not in terms of what political expressions are happening, but at least in terms of economics. Europe is suffering economically. The United States is benefiting somehow through LNG [Liquefied Natural Gas] supplies and also through its military industrial complex. What do you think is happening behind the scenes that is driving US policy to support Ukraine in this war?

**MB:** It's very complicated. I think that there is certainly the ideological perspective that we are fighting to preserve this democracy, and it's democracy versus autocracy, which I find quite ironic. We did bring up the issue of Yemen and US support for Saudi Arabia, for example, and there are many other ones that we could cite. You have a Democratic President

in the United States that has been quite anti-Russia for a lot of his career. You have a build up in the United States since the time that Hillary Clinton lost her bid for President, that it was because of Russian interference that Trump came to power. And so there has been a build-up for many years in the Democratic Party of anti-Russia sentiment, and there is the power of the war. It becomes a force of its own. And once the US starts to support Ukraine, there is this element that we've got to see them through. On the other hand, the Republicans in the United States have been war hawks for many decades now. It's so ironic that the far right of the Republican Party are the ones that are questioning this war, calling for an audit of where all this money is going, where all these weapons are going. And yet it's the progressives on the left who are following now in lockstep with the Democratic administration's policies. So politically, there is not a lot of momentum for changing course. And yet, as I said earlier within the Pentagon, we're hearing these rumbles about, Let's cool this down, let's make sure it doesn't extend. And that's why instead of Anthony Blinken, who is supposed to be the number one diplomat of the United States, he's the head of the State Department, instead of him talking to his counterparts in Russia to try to see how we can move towards negotiations, you have the head of the CIA, the National Security Council and the Defence Department that are talking to their counterparts in Russia because they are so afraid that this will spin horribly out of control. So it seems like the US is content to have the war drag on and have Ukrainians keep dying while the US provides the weapons. But it is afraid of it getting outside the confines of Ukraine into a NATO country where the US would have to step in more directly militarily or into a nuclear war. So that seems to be the dynamic now in terms of a build up from the grassroots to call for a change of policy. We are just at the beginning of that. It's been a year and we've had a very hard time in this country building up that antiwar sentiment. But we're starting to do it. We've just had about 1200 leaders in the faith based movement who signed a letter calling for a Christmas truce. We now see the Russians have agreed to a 36 hour truce that Zelensky has not agreed to. But from our perspective here in the United States, it's a movement on the part of the community in the United States to start putting pressure on our government, to put pressure on Zelensky, to say, Seize the moment, go to the peace table.

**ZR:** What is little mentioned is the exuberant profits that are made by the military industrial complex. You have written a lot of books mentioning this term. For our younger viewers, what is this complex and what role are they playing in this war? Especially that you mentioned that the political situation on the progressive side has turned in favour of hawkish policies.

**MB:** Yes. Well, this is something that was coined by a former President of the United States and a General, Dwight Eisenhower, in his farewell speech in 1961. He warned about the undue power of the military industrial, and he also called it the congressional complex. And it is this monster of many heads that has crept into the power structures of this country in a number of different ways. For example, look at the Secretary of Defence, General Lloyd Austin, who himself came directly from the board of one of the largest weapons companies in

the world, Raytheon, to his position now at the head of the Pentagon. And so many people in the Pentagon have worked there is what we call a revolving door between these weapons manufacturers; they go in and out of government to the private sector. And we have that not only in the Pentagon, but in the State Department. The Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, himself, came from a lobby group that helped companies get defence contracts. And then we have the phenomena that I would call bribery, but is seen as American democracy, which is the open way that these lobbyists for the weapons industry give money directly to members of Congress for their election campaigns. This is something that should be outlawed because there is obviously a conflict of interest when it's those members of Congress that go around and then allocate billions of dollars that go directly to these companies. And let's look at the case of Ukraine, where you have \$61 billion for weapons that have been allocated so far. The majority of that money does not go to Ukraine. It goes to these weapons companies. So they are making out like bandits while the Ukrainians are fighting and dying. And it's now become a permanent fixture of our economy here, that must be turned around. And my hope is that with the young generation being so concerned about the existential threat of the climate, that they are beginning to understand that the only place that this money for addressing the climate crisis can come from is the almost \$1,000,000,000,000 a year now that we are spending on the military. So the hope is to take money from there and put it into the climate crisis. And at the same time, I would say making us and the world safer because this extreme militarism that now fuels the US economy is bad for the entire world.

**ZR:** In a book I read written by Professor Kuznick and Oliver Stone called *The Untold History of the United States*, after World War One in the United States, there was talk of taxing 100% of the profits made by arms manufacturers in order to take out the incentive to influence policy in favour of war. Is there anything like that being discussed in the corporate media in the United States, or is there any initiative to ensure that no profits are made during war? Because perhaps a lot of this weaponization is happening and militarisation is happening due to the profits made?

**MB:** Unfortunately, now it's even harder than it was before the Russian invasion because we were starting to make some headway into showing how greedy and dangerous these what the Pope calls "merchants of death" are and showing how in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, they were profiting off of very unjust wars. But with the war in Ukraine, which is seen as justified by so many people in this country and in the West, these weapons companies have now had a facelift. They are now being portrayed as the saviours of democracy in Ukraine. So it will be more difficult in the short term to introduce any kind of ability to curb their profits. But I have optimism that in the longer run this will have to be done if nothing else, but to save the economy of the United States that is looking at China as its enemy. But it's really because China does not put so much money into its military and instead puts it into economic endeavours that the US is going to have to do if it wants to maintain a decent economy at home and abroad.

**ZR:** You mentioned the political situation in the United States. How is the progressive end of politics happening in terms of Ukraine right now? There are voices like Alexandria Cortez, Bernie Sanders, for example, voicing for peace and diplomacy?

**MB:** No, it's quite remarkable. We now only have literally one member of the Democratic Party that is voicing a call just for negotiations, just for that. He's not even saying stop the flow of weapons. And that is California Congressman Ro Khanna. There were 30 members of Congress who signed a letter saying, in addition to all this other aid to Ukraine, maybe it's time for negotiations. They were so pilloried that they retracted that within 24 hours. And only one of the people that signed Ro Khanna said, Wait a minute, that was a very rational letter. Calling for negotiations is the most obvious thing to do to try to put an end to this war. So imagine, Bernie Sanders is not calling for negotiations. Bernie Sanders is basically taking the position that you cannot negotiate with Putin. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was one of the signers of the letter, but the letter was withdrawn and she never came back and said, Wait a minute, that letter was good. What she did do was vote against the recent Pentagon budget, which was part of a much larger bill that passed. And she was the only Democrat in that case that voted against it and cited the huge military budget as one of her reasons. But it is pretty remarkable. Now, we are putting a lot of pressure on the progressive members of Congress. I just walked the halls of Congress yesterday giving out copies of my book to those 30 members of Congress who had called for negotiations and then withdrew their call, saying: "You were right the first time, please come back into the fold. Come back into the realm of peacemakers. Don't make us go with these far right extremists in the Republican Party as our 'allies in Congress', since they are the only ones that are questioning the blank check and are asking where all this money is going."

**ZR:** You already mentioned the cease fire that Putin has put into place, a 36 hour cease fire coinciding with the Eastern Orthodox Christmas, which Ukraine and its allies have called a propaganda aim for political advantage. What is your assessment on this cease fire and what would peace look like if we were really serious about negotiating?

**MB:** It would mean that there would have to be a message from the NATO countries and particularly the United States, that there was not going to be a blank check and all of the weapons that Ukraine wants. That they should, as the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, seize the moment when they're in a relatively good position to sit down at the negotiating table. It would mean neutrality for Ukraine. It would mean guarantees from powerful countries. It would mean negotiations around the Donbas and Crimea leading towards internationally monitored referendums in those places. And it would mean that the US and Russia would have to go back to the table to talk about things like arms reduction, where the US has pulled out of very important treaties that need to be revived. It would have to be clear to Russia what they would have to do in terms of not only pulling out their troops, but what else to have the sanctions lifted. And I think there needs to be talks about the US nuclear weapons that are based in five countries in Europe, and that should be on the table as well.

There have to be some concessions that the US makes in terms of demilitarising as well. And lastly, I would say what really has to happen is that Europe has to have what President Macron has been saying, its own security architecture. That it can't rely on the United States, that this has to be done by the Europeans themselves. So those kinds of things would have to be discussed at many different levels at the negotiating table. And this cease fire, it's a shame that Zelensky did not agree to be part of this cease fire, did not say, yes, let's stop the killing for 36 hours. But it is a start. And any time any of the sides says for any amount of time that we should stop the fighting is a tiny ray of light in a very desperate, dark situation. And I am excited that we, in the build up to Christmas in the United States, were able to get a large number of faith based leaders in all different religions to come together to call for this Christmas truce. Now we're going to go back to them and say, Okay, we need you to have a meeting at the White House. You all have influence with this White House. You've been there. You've done prayer services in the White House. We need you to talk to Biden. So these kinds of pressures from below have to increase. And I think we are starting to do that.

**ZR:** Medea Benjamin, activist, author and the co-founder of Codepink. Thank you so much for your time today.

**MB:** Can I just say one more thing before we go?

**ZR:** Sure. Please go ahead.

**MB:** I think it's really up to the Europeans and the people in the US, us on the grassroots to come together. We have to do more to bring our people together who care about the future of humanity and want to end this war and do more joint things to show that the global opinion, and especially in those nations that are giving the weapons to Ukraine, are coming together to say: Enough!

**ZR:** Thank you. And thank you guys for tuning in today. Don't forget to subscribe to our YouTube channel by clicking on the bell below, including turning on notifications, joining our alternative channels on Rumble and Telegram. And last but not the least, take part in our crowdfunding campaign, which ends in just a few days by donating. We can not continue our independent journalism without you. I'm your host, Zain Raza, see you guys next time.

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