

Ukraine needs a peace plan – and someone to champion it



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A residential building is damaged during the Siege of Chernihiv in March 2022. *Photo by [ADifferentMan](#) - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0*

Well over a year into the devastating armed conflict in Ukraine, discussions on how to end it are disconcertingly absent from public and political discourse. Such silence not only indicates the fractious state of global affairs but constitutes a disservice to the people who continue to suffer in this brutal war. It also perpetuates a perilous gamble, with the very real risk of nuclear escalation.

Both Ukraine and Russia persist in pursuing a decisive military victory that can only prolong the fighting. At the same time, the fervour for a battlefield win stands in stark contrast with a lack of clarity and consensus on what victory would entail in practice – or what all the ongoing sacrifice and pain and loss are ultimately for.

Rather than clinging to the notion of military triumph, the international community must shift the focus to an exploration of diplomatic and negotiated solutions. It is crucial for all parties involved in the war – including allies – to engage in meaningful dialogue, recognize the limitations of military force, and seek a negotiated settlement that is built on the principles of fairness, justice, mutual security, and respect for territorial integrity and the right to self-determination.

Ukraine is in dire need of a comprehensive peace plan that is championed by a credible party who is willing to invest the necessary political and diplomatic capital. Unfortunately, after hundreds of thousands of casualties, no one has stepped forward to shepherd such a plan.

For there to be any hope of ending the fighting, the international community must recognize a negotiated settlement as the primary objective and begin to sketch out its details. Immediate progress must be made on establishing key supports.

A credible third party

In theory, Ukraine and Russia could engage in direct negotiations, with no third party. But bilateral talks usually occur when the parties have established channels of communication, trust, and a shared willingness to resolve conflict peacefully. These conditions do not exist.

A credible third party can act as guarantor and assist in establishing communication, facilitating dialogue, and guiding the negotiation process. This party must be demonstrably impartial and able to garner broad-based support and trust from all parties with a stake in the conflict.

The United Nations (UN), with its resources and experience in conflict resolution, could serve as a trusted mediator. It has facilitated peace talks in conflicts around the world and possesses the diplomatic channels to engage with both Russia and Ukraine.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), a regional security organization that includes both Russia and Ukraine, is also well placed to facilitate negotiations. The OSCE's experience in conflict resolution, its extensive network of diplomatic contacts, and its commitment to promoting dialogue and cooperation could provide a solid foundation for the negotiation process.

The European Union (EU) has capacity and could draw on its mediation experience and economic influence to facilitate peace processes. The EU's history of mediating conflicts

between member states, as in the Balkans, demonstrates a capacity to engage in peace processes. Moreover, the EU has a stake in the stability and security of the region and in a stable Ukraine and Russia.

The Normandy Format – comprising Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine – was instrumental in previous peace talks and could continue to play a significant role. Building on the Minsk agreements, this format brings together key stakeholders with a vested interest in resolving the conflict and could be expanded to include additional international actors.

Undoubtedly a global diplomatic power, the United States has, on paper, the potential to contribute significantly to peace negotiations in Ukraine. It is well positioned to facilitate dialogue, provide resources, and exert diplomatic pressure.

However, extensive American military support of Ukraine has further strained already tense relations with Russia, which would be unlikely to accept the United States as a neutral mediator. The same would be true for some of the groups mentioned above, which have members that align firmly with Ukraine, providing it with military and other support.

China also has the necessary diplomatic influence and global stature. However, China's diplomatic efforts have been met with profound skepticism in the West, as was seen in the dismissive response to the Chinese peace proposal for Ukraine this past February. Its failure to garner significant support from Western nations reflects underlying concerns about China's geopolitical motivations and potential influence on the negotiation process.

Setting the stage

Each passing day of the conflict in Ukraine exacts a growing toll and increases the likelihood of nuclear disaster. To stop the carnage and avoid the worst consequences, it is critical that negotiations begin without delay. At this point, it should be abundantly clear that the determination of both Ukraine and Russia to pursue military gains will not secure real peace. At a minimum, a parallel commitment to negotiations is needed.

However, for negotiations to be effective, leaders in both Russia and Ukraine must be willing to engage in meaningful dialogue. At present, there is no indication that either side is open to a diplomatic solution.

It is up to the international community to create an environment that fosters dialogue, builds trust, and displays a sincere commitment to resolving the conflict through diplomatic means. Only in such an atmosphere can effective negotiations begin.

The status of battle lines

One of the key hurdles in initiating peace negotiations is the fear that agreeing to talks would result in accepting or freezing the battle lines as they then exist as permanent borders. Ukraine, the state whose territories have been illegally annexed by Russia, is, naturally, unwilling to make such a concession.

However, this fear should not and cannot deter the pursuit of negotiations. It should not be assumed that negotiations automatically signify the acceptance of existing battle lines as

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A building in Lebedyn, in southern Ukraine, destroyed by shelling on March 9, 2023. Photo by [ADifferentMan](#) - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0

permanent borders between states. National borders must be determined through negotiations, not force.

In the current conflict, battle lines and territory won and lost carry historical, political, and emotional significance. At the same time, the illegal annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine have created complex challenges that cannot and will not be resolved by sheer military force.

Negotiations can explore various options, including ceasefire lines, power-sharing arrangements, and semi-autonomous governance. The focus should be on finding a sustainable resolution that addresses, to the greatest extent possible, the concerns and interests of all parties involved, and one that might realistically be accepted by both Russia and Ukraine.

Balancing a ceasefire and peace negotiations

In certain scenarios, negotiations only begin after a formal ceasefire or a significant reduction in hostilities. The ceasefire establishes a more stable environment and reduces the risk of disruptions by ongoing violence. It creates a conducive atmosphere for negotiations, enhancing the prospects of reaching a meaningful and sustainable resolution to the conflict.

But there are arguments for the commencement of negotiations during ongoing conflict – especially if the only alternative is continued fighting. In a situation in which violence is out of control, negotiations can de-escalate conflict and decrease bloodshed. This approach takes advantage of any opportunity to lay the groundwork to tackle the substantive issues that contributed to hostilities in the first place. However, without a comprehensive cessation of hostilities, it is difficult to build trust and sustain progress in negotiations. As well, ongoing violence can undermine the confidence and commitment of the parties involved.

It is essential that the appropriate sequence of ceasefire and negotiations be agreed to so that progress toward the cessation of violence can be achieved. Sooner or later, of course, it will become necessary to establish a sustainable ceasefire so that negotiations can be successfully concluded.

Participants in the peace process

Achieving a comprehensive and inclusive negotiated settlement in Ukraine requires the active participation not only of Ukraine and Russia, but of all the stakeholders involved, including neighbouring countries, the populations of the illegally annexed territories, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Although NATO insists that it is not a party to the conflict, its consequential role in assisting Ukraine militarily cannot be overlooked. Ukraine has used the military assistance provided by NATO members to strengthen its defence capabilities and put up a formidable resistance to Russia's invasion. Such assistance has also heightened preexisting tensions between NATO and Russia.

It is important to consider the implications of NATO's support and the potential impact on prospects for a negotiated settlement. However, it is also difficult to conceive of a robust negotiated agreement without NATO's involvement and approval. An agreement opposed

by NATO would face significant challenges and could be rendered virtually ineffective.

While Western capitals publicly claim that the terms and direction of any resolution to the current conflict will be determined by Ukraine and its people, it would be disingenuous to discount the influence and interests of other stakeholders. A successful process to resolve conflict will both prioritize Ukrainian agency and recognize the interconnectedness of regional and global security challenges. Both perspectives are necessary to address the valid security concerns of all parties – including Russia – and to mitigate the risk of further escalation or future armed conflict.

Topics for negotiations

While it is impossible to predict the exact agenda for eventual negotiations, clearly the process will be complex and multifaceted. The specific circumstances and the interests of the parties involved will determine some topics. However, it seems likely that negotiations will touch upon some or all of the following.

1 Ukraine's NATO membership bid

Ukraine's bid to join NATO must be addressed as part of any negotiations. The current conflict in Ukraine is deeply influenced by geopolitical dynamics, particularly the competing security interests of Russia and NATO. Any solution designed to achieve a sustainable and lasting peace must consider the concerns and security interests of all parties involved.

A viable path might be for Ukraine to take a neutral stand and renounce any intention to join any military alliance, including NATO, while upholding its independence and sovereignty. This neutral status could help to address the security concerns of both Russia and NATO, fostering a more favourable environment for constructive dialogue and diminishing the potential for further escalation.

In this context, it will be crucial to distinguish the proposed neutrality from Ukraine's status prior to the invasion. The previous situation lacked sufficient safeguards and failed to protect Ukraine's sovereignty. The new neutrality should entail a comprehensive framework that ensures Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity, while also addressing the concerns and security interests of all relevant parties, including neighbouring Russia.

Given the current regional and global conditions, maintaining Ukraine's neutrality would require robust mechanisms and international guarantees. This could involve the establishment of an international monitoring mission composed of representatives from Ukraine, Russia, and NATO, along with other relevant stakeholders.

Ukraine's desire to join NATO could hinder negotiations; opting for neutrality could help to kickstart the talks. However, it is essential to recognize the complexities and challenges associated with maintaining neutrality in the current context. Exploring related dimensions, such as regional dynamics and global security concerns, can provide valuable insights and contribute to the development of a viable and sustainable solution for Ukraine's neutrality as well as regional and global stability.

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Settlements on the left bank of Dnieper River in Ukraine are underwater after the Kakhovka Dam was breached in June 2023.
Photo by [Armyinform](#) - CC BY 4.0

2 Illegally occupied territories

Resolving the status of Ukrainian territories currently occupied by Russia will require careful navigation around longstanding tensions. The occupied regions of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk hold immense strategic, economic, and symbolic significance for Ukraine. The Ukrainian government and citizens rightly view the return of these territories as an indispensable condition of a lasting and just peace.

However, it must be acknowledged that a pragmatic approach is needed, one that balances the pursuit of justice with an objective view of the sort of settlement that is feasible. Because Russia also views control of the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine as critical to its own security interests and geopolitical ambitions. The demographic shifts, economic dependencies, and parallel governance structures established in the occupied territories have already had profound effects. In the end, a viable and sustainable agreement will require compromise.

Finding a resolution to the status of the occupied territories may involve various approaches related to autonomy and decentralization, or a combination of political arrangements that respect the interests and aspirations of the local populations while upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. Achieving a sustainable agreement will require a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved and a willingness to explore innovative solutions.

3 War crimes

There have been calls for the prosecution of individuals, including Russian president Vladimir Putin, for war crimes. But the pursuit of this form of justice, at this time, could well render a negotiated settlement impossible. Instead, a pragmatic measure of amnesty might be necessary.

Offering the possibility of amnesty would acknowledge the reality that the participation and support of all parties involved are needed to resolve the conflict. Amnesty incentivizes armed parties to engage in the peace process and contributes to the overall stability and sustainability of the agreement.

Amnesty provisions in peace agreements are almost invariably controversial, with many critics seeing them as rewards for aggression. One recent example is the inclusion of amnesty provisions in the Colombian peace process between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Critics argued that granting amnesty to individuals involved in grave human rights violations would undermine justice and accountability.

While such criticisms are valid, it is important to acknowledge that some level of amnesty has proven to be a necessary trade-off to achieve successful negotiations. The inclusion of amnesty provisions in the Colombian peace process aimed to facilitate the transition from conflict to peace, promoted reconciliation, and ultimately ended the protracted violence. While controversial, the strategic use of limited amnesty was viewed as a pragmatic approach that achieved the broader objectives of stability and long-term peace.

The provision of amnesty for war crimes must balance justice with reconciliation. Striking

the right balance requires careful consideration and a nuanced approach that takes into account the needs and concerns of all stakeholders. Ultimately, the goal is to achieve a just and lasting resolution to conflict.

4 The risk of nuclear weapons use

A top priority of negotiations must be defusing the risk that nuclear weapons will be used. The risk of such use is only too real in the current conflict, with most of the world's nuclear arsenal potentially in play by Russia and NATO's nuclear-armed members. So far, most of the threats to employ nuclear weapons have come from Russia and have been soundly rejected and denounced by the West. But the mere presence of nuclear arsenals on both sides keeps the threat of use alive, even when unexpressed.

Beyond this, it is crucial to consider the reaction of Russia to certain versions of a decisive Ukrainian military victory. It seems only too possible that some scenarios could push Russia into a last-resort attempt to gain a victory by using nuclear weapons. There is some evidence that Russian leaders – and the president in particular – feel that this is a war they cannot lose. Military defeat would likely be seen to threaten not only Putin's leadership but Russia's national security.

From this perspective, the pursuit of a military solution that backs Russia into a corner does not guarantee peace for Ukraine. Engaging in further escalation without a clear path to de-escalation could have unintended and dire repercussions, not only for Ukraine and its allies but also for regional and even global security. Any use of nuclear weapons would result in unimaginable devastation and loss of life. Such a catastrophic outcome must be prevented.

5 Security assurances

All parties in eventual peace negotiations will expect security assurances that in some way address the concerns and interests of each side, while also ensuring stability, trust, and a sense of security moving forward.

Ukraine must be confident that its territorial integrity, sovereignty, and population will be safeguarded. Ukraine would seek guarantees that its borders will be respected, and that Russia will not engage in further encroachments or aggression against it. Assurances could include provisions to demilitarize the conflict zones, establish effective border control measures, and provide robust mechanisms to monitor and enforce compliance.

Even the invader, Russia, would seek security assurances. They could include measures to alleviate Russia's apprehensions about Ukraine's joining NATO or the deployment of foreign military forces close to its borders. Russia could insist that Ukraine pledge not to join any military alliance and that Russian strategic interests would not be compromised in the aftermath of the conflict.

Beyond bilateral security assurances between Ukraine and Russia, international actors would need to recognize and accept these assurances. A respect for the agreement by all significant parties would help to foster an environment of stability and trust.

The horse before the cart

Ukraine is at a critical crossroads, with the mounting humanitarian toll and the constant spectre of escalation demanding urgent action. The international community, including NATO, must actively pave the way to a peace process, while supporting Ukraine and contributing to the development of a comprehensive and inclusive negotiation framework.

A comprehensive peace plan, backed by ample support and resources, is needed. The international community must shift its focus from providing military aid to supporting diplomatic activities that establish a favourable environment and framework for productive negotiations.

Because setting predetermined outcomes will hinder progress, negotiators must embrace the complexity and uncertainty inherent in negotiations. Successful negotiations require flexibility and compromise; rigid expectations are destined to result in failure.

A commitment to diplomacy, realistic expectations, and international support for the negotiation process – these are what will finally silence the guns in Ukraine.



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