

War in Ukraine: Possibilities for a Peace Settlement

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I. Intro

Thanks very much, John, and thanks also to Roy and Sarah and the Group of 78, for organizing this session and creating an opportunity for us to collectively focus on prospects for and efforts towards ending this costly, high-risk war.

The collective trauma of this war – the deaths and many more injuries, the extraordinary physical destruction, the material and psychological/cultural/political costs, and the threats of escalation, including to nuclear use – not only alarms us, but directs us to the logical conclusion that for this madness to end, talks must begin.

But in coming to that conclusion we face the reality that the conclusion we draw is not reflective of the prevailing mood. For many, the greater fear is that a ceasefire could come too soon.

Gwynne Dyer, a war analyst of unusual insight, well-known to us all, recently noted that the risk of an early Russia-declared ceasefire has subsided in the face of dramatic Ukrainian gains on the battlefield. A unilateral Russian ceasefire, he pointed out, would have put enormous pressure on Ukraine to enter into negotiations at a deep disadvantage, reduced to salvaging what it could while Russia remained in control of significant Ukrainian territory¹ (whether annexed or not, the territory under each party's actual military control at the time of a ceasefire promises to be hugely consequential – Putin's recent offer of talks were obviously not unrelated to Russia's loss of territorial controls on the battlefield in the south-east).²

So, there is a prominent public mood that figures Ukraine's struggles against the invader are likely to be more effective on the battlefield than at the negotiating table. The prevailing posture in our part of the world (the West) is oriented much more toward solidarity with Ukraine, including of course the shipment of major arms into the theatre of conflict, that too negotiations in the interests of an early ceasefire to save lives and stop the wholesale destruction. Notably, the enthusiasm for arms shipments is not simply a right-wing sentiment. Analysis from the venerable Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) argues, supported by post-Cold War experience, that imperial powers that attack smaller powers don't ultimately prevail (Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq). PRIO thus assumes that Russia's attack will be resisted, come what may, and concludes that the best way to shorten the war is to *increase* arms supplies to Ukraine, and thus to hasten the inevitable Russian retreat.³

What's left out in that analysis is the ugly fact that such wars against imperial powers don't produce winners – only devastating exhaustion, with mop-up operations then left to the humanitarians and the diplomats, searching for remnants of peace in the wasteland that war leaves in its wake.

To his credit, Turkey's Erdogan conveyed that simple truth to the UN in his Sept 2022 address when he said, "the war will never have a triumph." He added that a fair peace process would also "not have a loser."⁴ The latter claim is more of an article of faith, but it too is essentially true – even if not literally so. For even fair peace processes entail difficult compromises, and painful losses are endured. But if a process is truly fair, the tough choices will be freely made by the parties, even though they may well come to feel they have no good choices.

II. Ending the War:

Ceasefire proposals aren't currently of much interest to the parties to the conflict, but there are still regular calls for talks to end the fighting – especially by civil society groups (a recent Quincy Institute poll even suggests that 57% of US voters would support the pursuit of negotiations to end the war).⁵

Thus, ceasefire calls keep coming. China issued a welcome call for a ceasefire following Putin's announced mobilization, asking "the parties concerned to achieve a cease-fire and an end to the war through dialogue and negotiation, ...tak[ing] into account the legitimate security concerns of all parties...."⁶ In the same context, Indian Prime Minister Modi simply told Mr. Putin this is not the time for war.⁷

Civil society and analyst calls for talks and a ceasefire typically involve three basic components:

- measure toward demilitarizing the conflict zone;
- proposals to address governance challenges at the root of the discord in eastern Ukraine; and
- ideas for addressing Ukraine's unique position on the strategic fault line between Russia and the West.

1. So here is a brief sampling of proposals that do include details, and typically they include basic **demilitarization** ideas. The point is that in the wake of a ceasefire, measures need to be taken to separate warring forces as much as possible to reduce tensions and reduce the risks clashes and the inadvertent resumption of hostilities. A current civil society proposal being circulated on behalf of Richard Falk calls for a ceasefire to be accompanied by the phased withdrawal of Russian forces, and, notably, an end to the provision of lethal military aid to Ukraine.

The Ceasefire blog of the Rideau Institute, very helpful in its ongoing attention to Ukraine peace efforts, recently referred to Michael Klare's analysis,⁸ which sees a ceasefire accompanied by the return of Russian forces to pre-invasion positions. In addition it calls for gradual demilitarization of the Donbas region, guided by international peacekeepers.

The ceasefire objective at the centre the Minsk proposals⁹ included provision for international monitoring (some of which took place), as well as demilitarization measures such as the withdrawal of foreign forces and a pullback of heavy weapons from the frontlines.

2. The second main element of such proposals typically addresses Ukraine **Governance** issues. Looking at the same three proposals, the Falk statement is fairly vague and simply refers to "jurisdictional issues," notably for Crimea and the Donbas region, and the need to "heal regional, ethnic, and religious animosities." Klare calls for referendums in relevant regions of Ukraine to determine their preferred political status, and the key Minsk provisions include the restoration of Ukraine's international boundary with Russia (sovereignty and territorial integrity), as well as the promise of Ukrainian federalization, and constitutional reform toward decentralization (specifically regarding some form of autonomy or self-government for Donetsk and Luhansk).

Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution calls for internationally supervised referendums after a cooling off period on the status of relevant regions, with the promise of future negotiations on the return of other captured territory. O'Hanlon acknowledges the disadvantages of a ceasefire and negotiations when territory is occupied, but concludes they must still be pursued because the prospect of indefinite war is simply too "terrible" a prospect.¹⁰

These Governance issues are key to the long-term stability of Ukraine on two levels. First, even if all Russian troops vacated Crimea, the Donbas, and the other occupied regions, the issue of the ultimate status and governance of those regions would still be a problem to solve. Future stability would still depend on the people of those regions having a genuine say in their place within (or outside) the Ukraine state, and on Kyiv managing a national government that is respected and has the confidence of the regions – a sense that their interests would be served if they cast their lot with Ukraine.

The second way in which national governance is key is for the defence of Ukraine – protection against foreign intervention/interference. States that build a national consensus and national institutions that are supported and trusted across the entire population are much less vulnerable to interference and ultimately to attack. And in the absence of a national

consensus, mistrust leads to unrest – which in turn invites intervention (Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, Libya, Serbia, and so on).

3. Attention to **strategic stability** is the third key element in most ceasefire proposals. Of course, strategic stability questions have long been a prominent feature of the Ukraine conflict, with neutrality a widely proposed solution. The Falk letter proposes neutrality for Ukraine, and the Klare paper includes the familiar idea of a Ukrainian pledge to stay out of NATO. The Minsk process was built on the assumption that if the interests of the constituencies inside Ukraine that are more oriented to links to Russia were given more weight and were better taken into account in an effectively governed Ukraine, the likely result would be genuine accommodation among all groups, expressed through a policy of non-alignment.

[Tatiana Stanovaya](#), a scholar with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,¹¹ makes a strong case that regional stability and a peaceful Ukraine depend substantially on Western and Ukrainian respect for Russian security interests. She argues, as have many others, that the West has been ignoring Russian geopolitical concerns for 30 years, that if Russian concerns are chronically ignored, it will continue to have both the means and willingness to exact a price.

Solidarity with Ukraine can reinforce an unrealistic expectation that the security concerns of Russia can be ignored by Ukraine with impunity. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has spoken regularly of “the sovereign right of the Ukrainian people to write their own future¹² – a legitimate principle, to be sure, but writing a national future can’t ignore the dynamics of the neighborhood in which that is to happen. Geographic, political, and strategic contexts have a way of imposing limits on national options.

Canada, for example, must certainly have due regard for how its powerful neighbor might react to Canadian security policy. We do after all have a long tradition of “defence against help” – the idea that if Canada does not maintain defence measure sufficient to ease US concerns, the US will have both the means and willingness to come in and help us do it to their satisfaction, hence the pursuit of defence measures that ward off such help). Ukraine is no less in the shadow of a powerful neighbor, and even after the present war ends, Ukraine will still have to take into account the interests and preferences of its powerful, not to mention paranoid, neighbor.

That obviously can’t mean that Canadian security policy simply gets written in Washington or that Ukraine simply acquiesces to the dictates of Moscow. It does, however, mean that in both cases the key to recognizing the security interests of a powerful neighbor while still charting a reasonably independent path is intensified diplomacy in pursuit of mutually acceptable security arrangements.

So, in short, credible ceasefire proposals must point to mechanisms designed to reduce dangerous confrontation in the conflict zone through **demilitarizing** measures, give attention to effective domestic governance related to internal discord and building a national consensus that respects the interests of disparate regions, and offer measures to restore east-west relations that acknowledge mutual security interests in support of **strategic stability**.

But the mechanism that is missing is the one that will actually get us to a ceasefire in the first place. And here we run up against a prevailing mood that is currently very wary of both a ceasefire and peace talks.

III. Fear of the negotiating table:

While there were prominent, high-profile diplomatic overtures toward a ceasefire immediately before and after the February 24 invasion,¹³ by mid-summer communication between the two sides was “[practically non-existent](#),” with mutual charges that for both Ukraine and Russia there was “[no desire to discuss anything in earnest](#).”

Ukraine

Ukraine has certainly explored peace initiatives, and there have been persistent claims that its early peace overtures were deliberately quashed by Western interests.¹⁴ Past proposals have emphasized security guarantees, non-alignment, future negotiations on the status of Crimea, and more immediate governance measures related to Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

But by the September 22 speech Mr. Zelensky to the UN ([text](#)), such ideas had been rejected in favor of a “five-point peace formula” that presented a set of maximalist conditions:

- punishment (including sanctions, a special tribunal on war crimes, reparations);
- protection of life (defence, requirements for weapons and financial support);
- restored security and territorial integrity (now including Crimea¹⁵);
- security guarantees (that rejected neutrality); and
- a determination to keep fighting.

The analyst Anatol Lieven points out that Ukraine’s negotiating capacity is constrained by its understandable anger at “the Russian invasion and Russian atrocities; by pressure from Ukrainian hardliners, especially in the military; and, increasingly, by the government’s own rhetoric, which is committing Ukraine to goals (like the recovery of Crimea) that could only be achieved by total military victory over Russia.”¹⁶

Of course, there is a sense in which Zelensky is not asking for anything beyond the normal rights of a sovereign nation, but most observers (including Lieven) continue to assume that

when a ceasefire finally comes, it is likely that Russia still occupy parts of Ukraine,¹⁷ and that means the key challenge is ensure that a ceasefire is not a *de facto* acquiescence to territorial conquest. A ceasefire that freezes the conflict in order to stop the destruction and pave the way for talks, must come without any implied territorial concessions, and with an international commitment to relentlessly pursue the return of territory (or a change in status that is fairly negotiated and that Ukrainians endorse).

Russia

Russia also has obviously opted for maximalist demands. In his Sept 21 speech ([text](#)), Mr. Putin (without any apparent trace of irony) vowed to fight for the “territorial integrity of Russia,” in which he now of course includes the four claimed regions of southeast Ukraine, as well as Crimea. He famously promised Russia would “use all the means at [its] disposal,” assuring that he was not bluffing.

While Putin has tried out various rationales for his attack on Ukraine (e.g., protecting the “spiritual centre of the Holy Rus,” or that Ukraine is not a real country), but the real objectives are likely to be more familiar: like seeking a reliable buffer zone between Russia and NATO, and preventing Ukraine from being a spearhead for anti-Russian influences.

IV. The Mechanism

Maximalist demands of both Ukraine and Russia are what ceasefire proposals are now up against. The prevailing view in the West has been that negotiations are up to Ukraine, but that is not a credible position for a collective West that is obviously not a passive bystander, but is in fact a major contributor to the fighting, and that with the rest of the world faces the grave dangers of continuing and escalating war. With activist engagement in and support for the war (that includes Canada), come political and moral obligations to try to limit the devastation and sue for peace.

But how?

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador recently had an interesting and relevant idea – that “a [commission for dialogue and peace](#) be formed” and that it be led by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Pope Francis, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Not all find Obrador an influential or persuasive intervenor, but the idea is compelling because progress towards negotiations really depends on there being an effective and continuously operating negotiating forum – one that stays actively engaged with representatives of the parties (at whatever level of representation they are prepared to send at any given time), that regularly tests the parties’ openness to negotiations and particular formulas, and that continuously develops and explores settlement options. Such a forum

could, among its activities, maintain an inventory of credible negotiating ideas and proposals available to the parties.

So I leave that as my final point. Part of our discussion (and part of Canada's Ukraine policy broadly) could usefully propose to the Government of Canada that its support for a just outcome of the war in Ukraine and an early end to the devastation should include expending at least some material and political capital in support of a Ukraine ceasefire/peace platform – to promote early attention to the negotiations that will in the end be absolutely essential for ending the current crisis and building a basis for future stability.

Notes

¹ This scenario is set out by Gwynne Dyer in *Hill Times* (19 September 2022) – “Ukraine: the risk of a ceasefire dwindles.”

² “Putin wants to offer Ukraine a pause to prepare for a new offensive,” Yahoo News, 14 October 2022. https://news.yahoo.com/putin-wants-offer-ukraine-pause-122116747.html?fr=yhssrp_catchall

³ Tore Wig, [Steadfast Military Support for Ukraine Is the Route to Peace](#). Posted July 5, 2022.

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/20/world/united-nations-general-assembly>

⁵ <https://quincyst.org/2022/09/27/americans-support-u-s-diplomacy-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine/>

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/21/ceasefire-through-dialogue-china-says-after-putins-address>

⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/17/world/modi-putin-russia-ukraine-war-rebuke-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁸ <https://www.ceasefire.ca/ukraine-nuclear-risks-and-a-canadian-foreign-service-up-to-the-task/>

⁹ For easy reference, Wikipedia has a clear and well-documented summary of the process and agreements. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minsk_agreements#:~:text=The%20Minsk%20agreements%20were%20a%20series%20of%20international,Russian%20regular%20forces%20playing%20a%20central%20part.%20

¹⁰ Michael O'Hanlon, “Everyone’s talking about the endgame in Ukraine. Here’s how it might look,” *Washington Post*, 01 July 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/01/ukraine-endgame-scenarios-war-russia/>

¹¹ Tatiana Stanovaya, a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Foreign Policy 01 June 2022 “What The West (Still) Gets Wrong About Putin”

¹² Derek Scally, “US agrees to respond to Russian demands during Geneva talks,” *The Irish Times* 21 January 2022. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/us-agrees-to-respond-to-russian-demands-during-geneva-talks-1.4782648>

¹³ Wikipedia has a well-documented listing of the various rounds of [direct talks](#) between Russia and Ukraine.

¹⁴ Quashed peace initiatives:

Jake Johnson, “Boris Johnson Pressured Zelenskyy To Ditch Peace Talks With Russia: Ukrainian Paper,” <https://www.radiofree.org/2022/05/06/boris-johnson-pressured-zelenskyy-to-ditch-peace-talks-with-russia->

[ukrainian-paper/#:~:text=The%20Ukrainian%20news%20outlet%20Ukrayinska%20Pravda%20reported%20Thursday,progress%20toward%20a%20settlement%20to%20end%20the%20war.06 May 2022.](#)

Adam Schreck and Mstyslav Chernov, “‘Tortured’ Ukraine wants peace with Russia despite atrocities, says Zelensky,” The Associated Press, 09 April 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/zelensky-russia-ukraine-war-peace-interview-1.6414774>

Zelenskyy says Ukraine ready to discuss deal

The Associated Press

March 21, 2022,

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said late Monday he was prepared to discuss a commitment from Ukraine not to seek NATO membership in exchange for a cease-fire, the withdrawal of Russian troops and a guarantee of Ukraine’s security.

“It’s a compromise for everyone: for the West, which doesn’t know what to do with us with regard to NATO, for Ukraine, which wants security guarantees, and for Russia, which doesn’t want further NATO expansion,” Zelenskyy said late Monday in an interview with Ukrainian television channels.

He also repeated his call for direct talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Unless he meets with Putin, it is impossible to understand whether Russia even wants to stop the war, Zelenskyy said.

Zelenskyy said that Kyiv will be ready to discuss the status of Crimea and the eastern Donbas region held by Russian-backed separatists after a cease-fire and steps toward providing security guarantees.

<https://archive.ph/5YTF9#selection-1561.14-1855.202>

¹⁵ Ron Popeski, Natalia Zinets and Tomasz Janowski, “Russian missiles hit Odesa region,” *Globe and Mail*, 22 August 2022. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-zelensky-warns-of-ugly-russian-attack-ahead-of-ukraines-independence/>

¹⁶ Anatol Lieven, 22 September 2022, Quincy Institute.

¹⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, “Three Paths Toward an Endgame for Putin’s War,” *New York Times*, 20 September 2022.