

Unfulfillable Promise: Mediation Efforts in the Russian-Ukrainian War since 2014

PART 2. WARTIME MEDIATION¹

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There is growing [support](#) for the argument that the war in Ukraine has reached a critical juncture at which both Ukraine and its Western partners may need to change their approach. With neither side having [made](#) any game-changing territorial or other gains in more than a year, one could argue that the time is ripe for a peace initiative.

However, prospects for negotiations, let alone a sustainable settlement, are bleak. Neither side has a credible path to victory, but each can likely continue to muster the resources necessary to deny victory to its opponent. In this situation, it makes more sense for Kyiv and its Western partners to dig in for the long haul: preventing further Russian territorial gains; sustaining Western political, financial, and military support; developing credible security guarantees for Ukraine; and making progress toward EU accession. This will require assessing carefully the strategy and timeline for achieving the full and immediate restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and matching these to the level of Western support available.

Peace Initiatives in the Russian-Ukrainian Conventional War: Mission Impossible?

The current debate over what is attainable on and off the battlefield – and how soon – involves a very public disagreement over strategy between the military and political

¹ This memo is the second in a two-part assessment of the effectiveness of mediation in the Russian-Ukrainian war during its gray-zone (2014-2022) and conventional (2022-present) stages.

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leaderships of Ukraine. The *Economist* published an [article](#) by, and an [interview](#) with, commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces General Valery Zaluzhny in which he argued that the Russian-Ukrainian war had turned into a positional form of war in which a victory is a function of the military power and (future) potentials of the belligerent parties. Responding during a joint press conference with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, President Volodymyr Zelensky [denied](#) the existence of such a stalemate, while his deputy chief of staff, Ihor Zhovkva, [reprimanded](#) Zaluzhny for his comments. Suggesting that the situation is even more complicated, an article in *Time* [painted](#) a bleak picture of deliberations in Zelensky's inner circle, while NBC [carried](#) a story about mounting Western pressure on Ukraine to consider a peace deal with Russia that would involve at least some territorial concessions.

Negotiations and concessions make sense in a situation in which, as I. William Zartman [put](#) it, the belligerent parties find themselves in a mutually hurting stalemate—that is, they are “locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them (although not necessarily in equal degree or for the same reasons).” While a burgeoning literature discusses ripeness theory in the context of internal conflicts, relatively little is known about its applicability to [blended conflicts](#) like the one in Ukraine, whose settlement prospects, [according](#) to Timothy D. Sisk, “may lie with the complexities of international coalitions more than [with] the within-country perceptions of protagonists, dynamics of power among them, threat, and sheer exhaustion after a protracted civil war.”

With the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the context for third-party mediation fundamentally changed. The Minsk accord of September 2014 and its two subsequent implementation protocols of September 2014 and February 2015 had until that point [provided](#) the broad framework for mediation, especially for efforts by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (OSCE SMM) and the Trilateral Contact Group.

Putin's announcement of Russia's so-called “special military operation” meant the Minsk accords were dead, thus drawing an official line under years of lackluster implementation efforts by both sides. Since then, we can observe three partially overlapping types of mediation efforts.

First, there were direct settlement negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv in the early stages of the conflict. These were held initially in Belarus, then in Turkey, with additional meetings taking place online. The negotiations [came](#) close to an agreement based on a series of Ukrainian [concessions](#) that were to be placed in a joint communique for subsequent elaboration.

One of the mediators in this process, former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett, recently [claimed](#) that the agreement between Moscow and Kyiv foundered because

Washington and London pressured Zelensky to continue fighting. Former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder made a similar point in a recent interview (summarized in English [here](#)), as [did](#) David Arakhamia, the leader of Zelensky's "Servant of the People" party in the Ukrainian parliament.

But it would be too simplistic to assume that nefarious great-power interests forced Ukraine to abandon an otherwise sound peace plan. For one, Ukraine's position on the battlefield significantly improved in April and May 2022. Russia's withdrawal from around Kyiv in late March 2022 may or may not have been a gesture of good will, as Russia's deputy defense minister Alexander Fomin [claimed](#) at the time, but it eliminated—for both sides—the pressures of a two-front war. The intensification of Western arms deliveries strengthened Ukrainian resolve, while Russia successfully achieved one of its war objectives: establishing a land bridge to Crimea. As a result, by the time official negotiations broke down in May, neither of the two belligerents, nor Ukraine's Western partners, likely perceived the situation as a mutually hurting stalemate. In addition, revelations of war crimes committed by Russian forces in Bucha and Irpin quickly eroded any public support in Ukraine (and among its Western partners) for making deals with Russia.

Second, there were negotiations on specific issues, particularly humanitarian ones such as the [release](#) of Ukrainian children abducted by Russian forces, [exchanges](#) of prisoners of war, and the [Black Sea Grain Initiative](#). These began in the summer of 2022 and have continued ever since, albeit with mixed success. These efforts were mediated by middle powers such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey (partly in [cooperation](#) with the UN). The resulting deals were possible, above all, because mediation did not impinge upon the core interests of the belligerents. Indeed, the grain initiative, at least, served some of both sides' economic and diplomatic objectives, at least for a time. Third-party efforts to bring Moscow and Kyiv to an agreement, often by shuttle diplomacy rather than direct talks, thus took place largely outside the parameters of mutually hurting stalemate calculations. These efforts affirmed the value of more or less neutral brokers, but also pointed out the limits of mediation.

Third, and this is the main focus of our analysis below, there have been attempts to kick-start the renewal of direct ceasefire and settlement negotiations since around the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The "2+6" Stalemate

The peace proposals to resolve the Russian-Ukrainian war since the breakdown of initial negotiations in May 2022 can be summarized as "2+6." The "2" represents the proposals made by the presidents of Russia and Ukraine. The Ukrainian proposal is clearly and concisely articulated in President Zelensky's [10 Essential Steps](#) plan, first announced at the G20 summit in Bali in November 2022.

The Russian proposal is far less concise and contains a number of spoken and unspoken assumptions. These include comments [made](#) by Putin to Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan in a March 2022 phone call and efforts by Moscow to entrench Russian control of Crimea and Donbas – that is, far-reaching territorial concessions by Ukraine. In his end-of-year press conference on December 14, 2023, Putin [reiterated](#) his “original” war aims – “denazification, demilitarization and a neutral status for Ukraine.” Additionally, Russia likely also wants some version of the two draft treaties proposed in December 2021 – with the [United States](#) and with [NATO](#) on new security arrangements and guarantees – to be agreed.

Two years since Russia issued these two ultimatums to the West, the Russian and Ukrainian positions are polar opposites, not only in relation to their respective substantive red lines on Ukraine’s territorial integrity and NATO membership, but also as regards the pathway to any negotiations – which Kyiv refuses to countenance before a complete Russian withdrawal from all illegally annexed Ukrainian territories.

Within these parameters, the “6” represents the peace initiatives by various third parties: [China](#), [Brazil](#), [Indonesia](#), the [Vatican](#), a group of [African states](#), and [Saudi Arabia](#). The Chinese, Indonesian, and African proposals all acknowledge the need to respect territorial integrity as a fundamental norm of international law but have proposed a ceasefire as a first step – an idea roundly rejected by Ukraine, as it would freeze the current frontlines and leave Russia entrenched in the illegally occupied territories. The Vatican initiative focuses on the return of the approximately 20,000 Ukrainian children abducted by Russia. The Brazilian and Saudi efforts center on a framework for mediation that could facilitate negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow. None of these proposals has received unequivocal Ukrainian or Western support.

The “6” are all non-Western proposals. This marks a significant change compared to the period of the gray-zone conflict before February 24, 2022, when France, Germany, and the OSCE played major roles in the efforts to mediate between Russia and Ukraine. Western insistence that Zelensky’s ten-point plan of November 2022 is the only credible basis for negotiations has created its own stalemate – and the void into which the “6” were launched.

This stalemate on the negotiation “front,” however, is not absolute. Ukrainian efforts to promote Zelensky’s plan have met with some success. Saudi Arabia’s initiative dovetailed well with the Ukrainian president’s diplomatic push, and he was [given](#) the opportunity to address all 22 member states of the Arab League in Jeddah in May 2023. The subsequent Jeddah Declaration of the Arab League [made](#), for the first time, explicit reference to Arab leaders’ “respect for ... the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of states.” The Jeddah meeting was the second in a series of three (so far) at the level of national security officials dedicated to preparing a global peace summit on Ukraine that would

bring together heads of state and government. The first of these—in Copenhagen at the end of June 2023—[involved](#) G7, EU, and U.S. officials, as well as representatives from Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey. The Jeddah meeting, crucially, [included](#) Li Hui, China’s special representative on Eurasian affairs and point-man for China’s own—thus far largely inconclusive—mediation efforts. Li was, however, absent from another summit in [Malta](#) at the end of October 2023 that was overshadowed by the escalating war between Israel and Hamas.

The “collective West”—essentially the G7, NATO, and the EU—has so far been steadfast in support of Ukraine and of Zelensky’s peace plan. That support was [reiterated](#) most recently in a November 8, 2023, G7 Foreign Ministers’ Statement that explicitly noted that a “just and lasting peace cannot be realized without the immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of Russia’s troops and military equipment from the internationally recognized territory of Ukraine” and reaffirmed that the members of the G7 “continue to support Ukraine in further developing President Volodymyr Zelensky’s Peace Formula.”

The G7 also declared that they “will each [...], in close coordination, [...] work with Ukraine on specific, bilateral, long-term security commitments and arrangements in line with the G7 Leaders’ Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine.” This [declaration](#), which now has over 30 signatories, was issued the day after NATO’s [Vilnius Summit Communiqué](#), which failed to provide a clear accession perspective for Ukraine beyond the vague promise that NATO “will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met.”

Taken together, these two declarations potentially pave the way for a reset of the parameters for future negotiations, providing Ukraine with credible security guarantees while kicking the thorny issue of NATO membership into the long grass. The West could continue to remain rhetorically committed to Zelensky’s peace formula, just as the Western allies insisted that the 1945 Potsdam agreement put in place temporary arrangements for Germany, while in effect scaling down, at least temporarily, its ambitions for the full and immediate restoration of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Such an approach would also allow for Ukraine’s continued progress, however slow, toward EU membership. And it would not explicitly contradict other peace initiatives, notably China’s, or preclude the continuation of Western political, economic, and military support, including for the reforms and reconstruction necessary for eventual EU membership.

Reset: Path toward Escalation or Settlement?

Resetting the parameters for future negotiations has many potential advantages. However, any such reset is predicated on the persistence of a military stalemate on the ground—not a mutually hurting one, but rather one that the two belligerents could accept

as a second-best solution. It is also predicated on the assumption that neither side is in a position to escalate militarily to achieve victory or to change the status quo to their advantage at the negotiating table. For the Vilnius reset to work, both sides (and their partners) would need to have grounds for believing that they have the political will and material resources to sustain the status quo and to be able to credibly signal this to the other side—if not publicly, then behind closed doors or through trustworthy intermediaries, such as Turkey or Saudi Arabia.

While desirable, this route forward therefore seems unlikely. It is also rendered moot by other developments. Over the next six months, we are likely to witness a seesaw of escalation-de-escalation associated with the presidential elections in Russia. During this period, neither side is likely to commit publicly to a ceasefire, nor to give up on their articulated maximum demands.

Zelensky's no-surrender stance [enjoys](#) clear majority support in Ukraine. It is conceivable that this support will diminish in the coming winter months with any additional hardship inflicted on the country's population by Russia. But even when coupled with a possible [decrease](#) in Western support, these conditions are unlikely to bring Ukraine back to the situation it faced just after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, when the country's very existence seemed in peril.

Furthermore, Ukraine has built up reserves of resilience. Despite huge losses, its military potential has not been completely exhausted, its domestic production of military equipment is being increased, and its mobilization programs are being strengthened. In the worst-case scenario, where the EU is unable to [sustain](#) its support of Ukraine due to Hungarian objections and/or the U.S. [stalemate](#) over aid to Ukraine worsens in the run-up to the November 2024 presidential elections, this increased Ukrainian capacity would be sufficient to deny Putin victory on the battlefield.

Kyiv's determination and ability to fight on, however, is matched by Moscow's. The Kremlin's motivation to continue its so-called "special military operation" is partly predicated on the belief that Western financial and military support for Ukraine will diminish due to the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, domestic economic problems in major G7 countries, and frustration in Western capitals and parliaments with the slow progress of the Ukrainian armed forces at the front in 2023. Crucial to this outlook is the prospect of a Trump victory and/or the election of an increased number of Trumpian congressmen in 2024. Western sanctions having been unable to curtail Russia's war effort, Moscow sees a path to victory that requires simply matching and outlasting Ukrainian efforts by absorbing larger losses on the battlefield. In the current war of attrition, as Zaluzhny put it in the *Economist*, time favors the belligerent with greater economic and demographic resources.

Conclusion

After almost two years of war and twelve months of limited gains on the battlefield, and with no major third-party peace initiative on the horizon that could change the belligerents' calculations, both Moscow and Kyiv appear to have pragmatically accepted the status quo of continued conflict. This implies an adjustment of both sides' war aims away from their public commitment to victory and toward a position of simply avoiding defeat. If that shared assumption extends to a prolonged stalemate, it will entrench a view in both camps that neither is capable of escalating to victory. In such circumstances, Kyiv and Moscow will look to protect what they already have. For Ukraine, this means the kind of credible bilateral security guarantees embodied in the G7 Leaders' Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine. For Russia, it means no NATO membership for Ukraine and keeping Western support below the level that would give Kyiv such a technological edge that it could contemplate defeating Moscow on the battlefield.

At this stage, all signs point toward both the belligerents and their supporters working to make the current stalemate sustainable by preventing it from hurting either side too much. If they fail to achieve this, both sides will keep fighting for fear of the consequences of stopping. If they succeed, all the parties will in effect be resigned to stabilizing the status quo. This will create space for other actors to pursue humanitarian issues and possibly enable the belligerents to return to negotiations on a ceasefire.

None of this is necessarily equivalent to the just and lasting peace that Ukraine and Ukrainians deserve. And while the parallels with the settlement after World War II are, in many ways, deeply flawed, they also embody the hope of ultimately achieving such a peace at the negotiating table, and not on the battlefield.

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