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A Plan for Peace Through Strength in Ukraine: Europe Must Step Up, but America Still Has a Role to Play in Ending the War

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There have been recurring strains in the U.S.-Ukrainian relationship under both Trump administrations. The recent Oval Office blow-up between the two presidents is only the most recent example. But such tensions need not derail a push for peace—which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian people clearly want. U.S. President Donald Trump and the American people also want peace, as do U.S. allies in Europe. Whether the same is true of Russian President Vladimir Putin is less clear. Despite enormous economic cost and a shocking level of casualties, his troops are making slow but steady progress, and he clearly thinks he can win.

The outcome that Putin wants would be a Ukraine that is permanently stripped of almost 25 percent of its territory, demilitarized, and barred from joining the EU and NATO. Agreeing to those terms would mean capitulating to Russian aggression and virtually guaranteeing Ukraine's future absorption into Russia. Trump has often lamented the Biden administration's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan and the weakness it suggested, and he has said that Putin's willingness to invade Ukraine in 2022 was encouraged by that weakness. Trump should seek to ensure that the outcome in Ukraine does not demonstrate, even implicitly, any comparable weakness. Accepting Russia's apparent terms for ending the war would not meet this test.

The best path to end the war will instead follow a "peace through strength" approach. Such an approach would substantially enhance Europe's role in supporting Ukraine militarily and economically, with a limited but important backup role for the United States; accept the current lines of control between Russian and Ukrainian forces, without recognizing Russian annexation or sovereignty over Russian-occupied areas; and prepare the path for a negotiated settlement—all while considering, in the likely event that negotiations fail, how to achieve a cease-fire through unilateral action.

To pave this path, Ukraine, Europe, and the United States must focus on four priorities: strengthening Ukraine militarily, applying additional economic pressure on Russia (but relaxing sanctions if it complies with an agreement), addressing Ukrainian security and economic needs through EU membership, and deterring Russia by granting Ukraine NATO membership. A negotiating position based on these four priorities will give Ukrainians the confidence to negotiate and Putin the incentive to make negotiations

successful. To reach an agreement, U.S. negotiators will have to avoid falling into a Russian trap that focuses first on improving U.S.-Russian relations while deferring the issue of Ukraine so that Russian forces have more time to take more Ukrainian territory.

Should the parties be unable to reach an agreement because of Russian obstinance, these four priorities would still be the best foundation for a Ukrainian, European, and U.S. strategy. By advancing the priorities unilaterally, the Western parties would pressure Putin either to return to the negotiating table or, more likely, to wind down a conflict he can no longer win and accept a de facto cease-fire. Such an outcome would echo the armistice that followed the Korean War in the 1950s, but with Europe leading the way in strengthening security guarantees for Ukraine, and limited but important support from the United States.

How the war is resolved, and specifically on what terms, is of utmost importance for Ukraine, Russia, and the future of Europe. The outcome is also of high consequence to the United States and will either set up the Trump administration for broader geopolitical success or burden it in the way that mishandling the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan burdened the Biden administration. A result that protects Ukrainian sovereignty and nationhood would also demonstrate the broader potential for Trump's peace-through-strength foreign policy. China, Iran, and North Korea are all supporting Russia's aggression in Ukraine. These countries present challenges for the Trump administration and potential military threats to their own neighbors. Each will be assessing U.S. actions with respect to Ukraine and what they say about America's strength and will to resist aggression. A peace that ensures a sovereign and secure Ukraine would send a clear message that Trump will stand strong against any use of force by these countries against U.S. allies and friends. It will significantly enhance Trump's credibility and the prospect for peace not only in Europe but also in the Indo-Pacific and in the Middle East.

KEEP UP THE PRESSURE

To end the war, Putin must be disabused of the notion that he can subjugate Ukraine militarily, which will require strengthening Ukraine's military position to stabilize the line of contact. Improving Ukraine's position will require Ukraine to reduce its conscription age to 18. Although Zelensky has argued that substantial increases in unmanned vehicles will allow Ukraine to avoid the need for expanded conscription, Ukraine's forces are seriously stretched.

Europe must also take more responsibility for supporting Ukraine's military. European states should provide additional Integrated Air and Missile Defense systems in Ukraine; a combination of European and Ukrainian IAMD could better defend both Ukraine's critical infrastructure and its population. The Europeans should also begin providing additional

logistical support to Kyiv, using a mix of European military personnel and contractors. The addition of European forces would strengthen Ukraine's military position and could convince Putin that a Russian military victory is out of reach.

These efforts should continue even during negotiations. Russia, after all, is unlikely to pull back its own military efforts or curtail the military support it receives from China, Iran, and North Korea. Greater military support to Ukraine from European partners would provide additional leverage toward reaching a peace agreement and would also be essential if peace negotiations were to break down.

European military assistance in Ukraine will have gaps that only the United States can fill. And Washington should provide them, backing up the European effort in areas including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, cybersecurity, and some elements of logistical support, but without stationing U.S. forces inside Ukraine. For example, European countries with U.S. support could organize IAMD protection against Russian attacks, similar to the way in which they have assisted the United States in defending Israel from Iranian attacks. The United States should also offer to provide backup IAMD support, if necessary, to European countries transferring IAMD systems to Ukraine. These would be tough but necessary decisions for the Trump administration to make. Any such arrangements would have to be worked out in advance among the United States, Ukraine, and participating European governments.

Ending the war will also require increasing economic pressure on Russia, to incentivize Putin to wind down the conflict while holding out the prospect of improved economic relations if a negotiated peace agreement is reached. Additional sanctions and economic measures (or threats) against Russia should include a general financial embargo, with licenses to cover trade exceptions for food, medicine, and other specified goods. They should also include squeezing Russian oil and gas sales that transit through pipelines or, in the case of oil, ships and, in the case of gas, as liquefied natural gas. The Trump administration should draw from its Iranian sanctions strategy by threatening secondary sanctions on countries that do not substantially reduce their purchases of Russian oil and gas.

OPEN ARMS

Yet even with stronger European defense support for Ukraine and continued pressure on Russia, Kyiv would need more formal security guarantees from its partners. The first way to provide them would be to quickly grant Ukraine immediate membership in the European Union with some special conditions that, during a transitional period, would ease some of the economic stresses that admission of such a large country would mean for EU resources. Fast-tracked EU membership would not only help address Ukraine's need for political integration into European institutions and economic assistance. It

would also bring Ukraine under the provisions of Article 42.7 of the European Union Treaty, which reads: “If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.” At the same time, Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom, and Turkey should provide parallel security guarantees for Ukraine.

Ukrainians, Europeans, and the Kremlin know that even together, Europe and Ukraine will not be able to deter or defend against resumed Russian military aggression and that Europeans may therefore be reluctant to bring Ukraine into the EU without the assurance of U.S. security support. The best way to provide this assurance would be for Ukraine to join NATO.

Accelerating Ukraine’s entry into NATO would deter future Russian aggression and give Ukrainian policymakers political cover to accept the current line of contact (without ceding sovereignty to Russia over any Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory). Any negotiated or de facto end to the conflict will require that Kyiv accept a de facto Russian occupation of Ukrainian territory for an indefinite period. This will be a bitter pill for Ukrainians. Zelensky will be able to sell it politically only if he can assure Ukrainians that such an outcome will lead to a permanent end to the war and not a later resumption of Russia’s attempt to conquer Ukraine.

Ukraine’s existing bilateral security agreements with European countries and the United States are not robust enough to guarantee a permanent end to the fighting. By contrast, Article 5 of the NATO treaty is powerful not just because of its language, “an attack against one... shall be considered an attack against them all,” but because of its credibility, having never been challenged in 70 years and having the full weight of 32 NATO members behind it.

Although Ukraine’s accession to the alliance has been controversial, there is precedent for members being brought in without lengthy delay or an elaborate preparatory process. Greece and Turkey joined quickly in 1952, West Germany in 1955, and Finland and Sweden in 2023 and 2024, respectively. And Ukraine is prepared militarily to make a positive contribution to NATO security. It has not only the most effective and battle-tested forces but also the most innovative defense industrial base in Europe.

That some of Ukraine’s territory is occupied by Russian forces should not be a barrier to NATO membership, just as Soviet occupation of one-third of Germany’s prewar territory was not for West Germany in 1955. The key would be to make clear that the protections of Article 5 extend only to the unoccupied portions of Ukraine. The line of contact would still not be treated as an internationally recognized border, and Ukraine and its partners would make clear that they did not accept or recognize Russian sovereignty over any

Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia. But if a peace agreement or cease-fire is achieved, Ukraine would likely have to renounce any “recourse to force” to secure the return of this territory, just as West Germany did in 1955. Ukraine would, of course, retain the right to self-defense if Russia again initiated hostilities—and NATO’s collective defense guarantee would also apply.

Russia will continue to object to NATO membership for Ukraine, but NATO’s decision should not depend on Russian acquiescence. NATO and Ukraine could consider offering reassurances to address Russian security concerns, but neither the United States nor NATO should seek to negotiate Ukraine’s accession with Moscow, and even if reassurances do not assuage Russia’s concerns, Ukraine’s accession should proceed.

In 1997, the NATO-Russia Founding Act stated that NATO would carry out its missions in new member states by means other than the “permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” under then-foreseeable circumstances that included Russia refraining from hostilities and constructively participating in the NATO-Russia Council. NATO could consider offering a comparable statement in peace negotiations between Russia and Ukraine or if such negotiations break down and NATO regardless proceeds with Ukrainian membership. Any limitations on the permanent stationing of non-Ukrainian NATO forces inside Ukraine should not bar NATO countries from giving Ukraine the forces, equipment, or training it needs for an effective territorial defense; the parties could follow arrangements such as the Defense Cooperation Agreements among the United States and NATO nations including Finland. Any restriction on NATO forces inside Ukraine would also be contingent on Russia’s adherence to the terms of any peace or cease-fire agreement and abstention from attacking or threatening to attack any NATO member, including Ukraine.

HOLDING THE LINE

If Russian intransigence blocks a negotiated end to the war, Ukraine and its partners should continue to take these four steps to strengthen Ukraine, pressure Russia, and bring Ukraine into the EU and NATO. Putin might return to the negotiating table in a more reasonable frame of mind. Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, he may decide that it is in Russia’s interest to wind down the conflict and over time accept a de facto cease-fire along the line of contact. Putin might still declare victory, but the full implementation of these four steps would deter him from resuming the war or prevent him from succeeding if he should be foolish enough to try.

The situation in Ukraine would then resemble the situation on the Korean Peninsula in 1953, where a negotiated armistice left forces in place along a line of control with an established demilitarized zone. In that case, the United States offered South Korea—a country at war and partially occupied by adversarial forces—a formal security

commitment as part of an effort to end the fighting and convince the South Korean leadership to agree to an armistice. For Ukraine today, EU and NATO membership and various bilateral security arrangements could offer security commitments similar to the U.S.–South Korean Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953. But just as that defense treaty did not cover disputed or occupied territories, security commitments following Ukraine’s accession to the EU and NATO would also be limited to the areas under Ukraine’s control.

The U.S.–South Korean treaty required Seoul not to use force to resolve its territorial disputes. Ukraine’s accession to the EU and NATO would include a comparable commitment on Kyiv’s part. Ukraine would not have to recognize or accept Russian sovereignty over that territory but could, with its partners, adopt a similar nonrecognition approach to the one the United States took to the Soviet-occupied Baltic states after World War II.

Such provisions would likely not prevent Russian violations of the cease-fire altogether. Indeed, North Korea has violated the 1953 armistice frequently, with sometimes violent and fatal results for U.S. and South Korean personnel. But Russia’s use of force would not compel escalation by Ukraine’s EU and NATO treaty partners. U.S. and South Korean responses to North Korean violations—including shows of force, sometimes proportionate retaliation, and efforts to deescalate—have been sufficient to deter North Korean escalation and to maintain the general peace on the peninsula and the overall credibility of the U.S. defense commitment to South Korea.

European forces in Ukraine would also mirror the deterrent effect of U.S. combat forces in South Korea. The European forces would enhance Ukraine’s combat capabilities, help ensure compliance with the terms of a cease-fire, and once Ukraine obtained EU and NATO membership represent the respective Article 42.7 and Article 5 guarantees.

MAKING PEACE LAST

Europe should take the lead in bolstering a cease-fire to demonstrate that it is taking more responsibility for its own security. But the United States would still have an important backup role, which it could carry out by employing limited but effective diplomatic and military assistance.

First, and most important, the United States would play a direct and critical role in backing up Ukraine’s security once it joins NATO. Even as Washington demands increased security commitments from other members of the alliance, it must continue to participate in NATO. This includes responding, under Article 5, to any attack against European nations that results from their activities in Ukraine. The United States could also work with Ukraine and European countries to define measures it would take to

deter Russian attacks on European military and contractor personnel on the ground in Ukraine.

The United States should also continue to provide Ukraine with various needed capabilities, even after a cease-fire, including weaponry, ammunition, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, logistics, cybersecurity, and air cover. Supplying such resources would allow the United States to reinforce European security and demonstrate its strength against aggression without putting its own forces on the ground.

Finally, the United States can bolster reconstruction funding, most of which should come from Europe and from currently immobilized Russian sovereign assets. If Trump and Zelensky continue to pursue it, a deal to give the United States access to Ukraine's natural resources would add to the multiple interests that the United States already has in ensuring an independent and sovereign Ukraine.

There is little doubt that the war in Ukraine should not continue on its current course. But peace through surrender would bring at best a temporary end to the fighting—and, at worst, would lead only to more Russian aggression. The only peace that can last is peace through strength.

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