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Paths to a Ceasefire in Ukraine: America Must Take the Lead

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Executive Summary

Barring an improbable complete victory for Ukraine or Russia, the conflict in Ukraine will end, or more likely be suspended, in the form of a compromise. The fighting is therefore now essentially about the geographical and political lines along which this compromise will be drawn. These will become much clearer once the results of the forthcoming Ukrainian counter-offensive are known, and the aftermath of the offensive will be the time for an intensive diplomatic effort to bring about a ceasefire.

Ideally, this compromise should take the form of a peace settlement like Northern Ireland's in 1999, that would end the war and allow the creation of a stable, consensual and peaceful security order in Europe. More likely, however, is a ceasefire that (as in the cases of Kashmir, Korea, and Cyprus) will freeze the existing battle-line, wherever that runs. Such a ceasefire will in any case be necessary if talks aimed at a formal peace settlement are to take place; and even if such a treaty cannot be reached, such a ceasefire, if far from ideal, might still prove reasonably stable and permanent.

Both the U.S. and Ukrainian administrations stated after it began that the war would inevitably end in a negotiated peace. In the first month of the war President Volodymyr Zelensky put forward peace proposals that included suspending the issues of Crimea and the eastern Donbas for future negotiation. Since then, however, both Ukraine and Russia have adopted positions that make any agreement between them exceptionally difficult. Given these circumstances, the United States must play the greatest role in achieving a ceasefire.

The Biden administration should therefore:

- Immediately commence preliminary talks with other major states on the need for a co-ordinated international effort to seek a ceasefire in the autumn or winter, whatever the outcome of the next round of fighting.
- Be prepared to enlist China as mediator, as Beijing has significant influence with Moscow. Key Global South states such as Brazil and India should also be consulted.
- Draw up provisional and alternative plans for a ceasefire to be discussed with other actors.
- Begin discussions with the United Nations Secretariat on the potential deployment of U.N. peacekeepers to Ukraine.
- Continue military and financial support to Ukraine for the duration of this year, while also telling Kyiv that future U.S. and European assistance on this scale is not guaranteed.
- Change its public discourse to emphasize the extent of the victory that Ukraine (with Western aid) has already won.

Introduction

Serious thinking by the Biden administration on the path to a ceasefire and peace talks should begin immediately, as should the extension of “back channel” diplomatic feelers to all the relevant parties. A full-scale effort can only begin when the results of the forthcoming Ukrainian offensive are known, by the winter of 2023–24. On the other hand, whatever these results prove to be, a diplomatic initiative by Washington will be urgently required. As Rajan Menon has written, “This much should be evident: no party

will get everything it wants unless it wins an outright victory – and that is not in the cards.”¹

The public rhetoric of President Zelensky’s administration has nailed it to the position that the return of all the territory lost by Ukraine since 2014 is essential and non-negotiable, which implies that the only acceptable outcome is total Ukrainian military victory.² This – like Russia’s insistence that its “annexation” of territories occupied last year is non-negotiable – rules out a formal peace settlement for the foreseeable future. However, as numerous cases in modern history demonstrate, an unwillingness to sign a peace treaty is not an insuperable bar to a ceasefire, if military and political realities suggest this.³

Some leading members of the Ukrainian government believe that the reconquest of Crimea is not necessarily possible; but it will take a serious diplomatic effort by Washington to allow them to escape from the corner into which their government has talked itself.⁴ Russia, too, will only trust an agreement that is brokered by Washington and to which the United States is committed. This does not mean that the United States should act alone. On the contrary, the Biden administration should reach out to China for help in mediating an agreement.⁵ Additionally, major Global South states, such as Brazil and India, can also be consulted for ideas that help lead to a solution. Ukraine and Russia’s agreement to a ceasefire is obviously essential.

A strong U.S. commitment will be central to a peace process and a stable outcome. The alternative to such a U.S. diplomatic effort would be a tacit acceptance by Washington

¹ Rajan Menon, “Ukraine’s Best Chance,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 12, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/ukraines-best-chance>.

² “Ukraine must regain all its territories, this will be a victory of justice,” President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, September 28, 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-maye-povernuti-vsi-svoyi-teritoriyi-ce-stane-peremo-78069>.

³ Oxana Shevel, “Russia Can’t Win This War,” *Boston Review*, April 26, 2023, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum_response/russia-cant-win-this-war/.

⁴ Peter Beaumont, “Ukraine may be willing to hold talks on Crimea, suggests Zelensky advisor,” *The Guardian*, April 6, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/06/ukraine-talks-crimea-russia-zelenskiy>.

⁵ Gideon Rachman, “China could play a crucial role in ending the war in Ukraine,” *Financial Times*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/5c9b6e15-afce-4747-8ad1-ff9aa24b6dc3>.

that this war will go on indefinitely – which would be a thoroughly bad prospect for the world, the United States, Europe, and, above all, to Ukraine itself.

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As Zachary Paikin has written for the Quincy Institute:

If Ukraine cannot retake all its territory by force, perhaps victory for Ukraine should be viewed not in territorial terms, but rather with respect to whether it can survive as a sovereign and viable state, capable of charting a path toward a “European” future. Although not a perfect parallel given the different geopolitical situation across Europe at the time, Finland retained its sovereignty after World War Two and became a prosperous democracy well-positioned to join the EU, despite having been forced to cede territory to the USSR.⁶

Different military scenarios

All three possible results of the Ukrainian offensive point to the need for a ceasefire.⁷

A Ukrainian breakthrough

If the Ukrainian military succeeds in breaking through to the Sea of Azov, cutting the Russian position in two, and isolating Crimea, then – as Biden administration officials have indeed suggested – on the one hand, Ukraine will be in a very strong position to

⁶ Zachary Paikin, “The Ukraine War and European Security; How Durable is America’s Strategy?” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Quincy Brief no. 39, April 25, 2023, <https://quincyinst.org/report/the-ukraine-war-european-security-how-durable-is-americas-strategy/>.

⁷ Dan Sabbagh, “Win, lose, stalemate or a shock: how might the Ukraine war end?” *The Guardian*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/24/how-might-the-ukraine-war-end>.

call for a provisional agreement whereby Russia would leave all the territory it has occupied since last year's invasion (most of which it would have lost already), while the status of Crimea and the Donbas would be left for future negotiation. Of course, Russia might escalate towards nuclear war in these circumstances – but this would be much less likely if continued de facto Russian control of Crimea and the eastern Donbas were guaranteed.

If Ukraine, emboldened by its success, were to attempt to reconquer Crimea, this could lead Russia to engage in a drastic escalation: not immediately to the use of nuclear weapons, but on a path that would point in that direction.

On the other hand, if at this point Ukraine, emboldened by its success, were to attempt to reconquer Crimea, then – as some U.S. officials also fear – this could lead Russia to engage in a drastic escalation: not immediately to the use of nuclear weapons, but on a path that would point in that direction.⁸ For example, this could take the form of a more-or-less covert attack on Western infrastructure, justified in Moscow's view as retaliation for the alleged U.S. destruction of Russia's Nord Stream pipeline.⁹ Alternatively, Russia could knock out the U.S. satellites, which have provided the intelligence that has done so much to help Ukrainian military operations.¹⁰

Such attacks would have the advantage of not leading directly to the deaths of Western citizens and so not leading to immediate NATO military retaliation. They would, however,

⁸ Carol E. Lee, Courtney Kube, and Dan de Luce, "A Biden admin official recently told members of Congress that Ukraine has the military capability to take back Crimea," NBC News, December 16, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/biden-official-told-congress-ukraine-can-retake-crimea-rcna61755>; Bryan Frederick et al., "Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO From the Ukraine War," RAND, July 2022, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1971-1.html>.

⁹ Seymour Hersh, "How America Took Out the Nord Stream Pipeline," Substack, February 8, 2023, https://seymourhersh.substack.com/p/how-america-took-out-the-nord-stream?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

¹⁰ "White House vows response if Russia attacks US satellites," Reuters, October 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/white-house-vows-response-if-russia-attacks-us-satellites-2022-10-27/>.

put the United States and NATO in the position of having to choose between moving to a ceasefire, accepting further Russian attacks without retaliation, or retaliating in ways that could lead to a spiral of escalation. If it was not prepared to face either of the last two alternatives, the Biden administration would also have to step in quickly with a diplomatic initiative to end the fighting, along lines that would guarantee Ukraine not a total, but a very substantial and historic victory.

A Russian breakthrough

If, on the other hand, the Ukrainian offensive is defeated so badly that the Russian military is in a position to launch a successful counter-attack, seizing more Ukrainian territory, then Washington would have to choose between seeking a ceasefire that would leave existing occupied territory in Russian hands, or greatly increasing military aid to Ukraine.¹¹

In this scenario, however, such aid would probably not arrive quickly enough to save Ukraine from further territorial loss. The United States would then either have to commit itself to helping Ukraine launch a new counter-offensive next year, and if that fails the year after that, and so on; or of intervening in the war directly by sending U.S. military forces (something the Biden administration has strongly resisted), or – perhaps – of allowing Poland to intervene.¹² The latter option would virtually guarantee Russian escalation per one of the scenarios described above.

For example, the use of Polish air bases (whether by the United States, Poland, or both) to attack Russian forces in Ukraine would almost certainly lead to Russian missile attacks on those bases. An attack on a NATO member would bring Russia and NATO to the very brink of war – something that the Biden administration and the great majority of European governments have said they are determined to avoid.

¹¹ Jonathan Lemire and Alexander Ward, “Biden’s team fears the aftermath of a failed Ukrainian counteroffensive,” *Politico*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/04/24/biden-ukraine-russia-counteroffensive-defense-00093384>.

¹² Joseph R. Biden Jr., “President Biden: What America will and will not do in Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/biden-ukraine-strategy.html>.

The direct involvement of U.S. forces on the side of Ukraine would also risk the end of Chinese refusal to give serious military aid to Russia. The Chinese government does not seem to have wanted the Russian invasion, and has lost much respect for the Putin regime as a result of Russian military failures, but Beijing cannot afford to see Russia completely defeated, eliminated as a great power and perhaps broken up as a state.¹³

The defeat of Russia would greatly damage China's own position in the world, cripple its energy security plans, and leave China without a single major security partner. China's officials see a Russian defeat as a threat to the vital interests of the Chinese state. Should China start openly supporting Russia, then the war in Ukraine would become a proxy war between China and NATO, and Chinese military and strategic power would appear on the frontier of Europe; this scenario would not serve the interests of the West.

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Of course, the Biden administration could use the threat of increased aid or intervention to get Russia to stop its advance and negotiate. However, for such a strategy to work the threat would have to be credible, but so too would the incentive; the incentive being a U.S.-endorsed ceasefire that would freeze the existing battle-line and areas of Russian territorial control.

A continued stalemate

The third scenario for the outcome of the Ukrainian offensive is that while it fails to gain much ground, Russia is also not able to counter-attack successfully, leading to a military stalemate roughly along the current front line. This would also point towards negotiations for a ceasefire. The West's willingness to continue providing massive

¹³ Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, "How China Could Save Putin's War in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/how-china-could-save-putins-war-ukraine>.

support to Ukraine without real prospects for success would diminish; so, too, would both Russia and Ukraine's hopes for early victory.¹⁴

If neither side makes significant gains and the stalemate of recent months continues without a ceasefire, this will point towards a very protracted conflict, with deeply negative consequences for Ukraine, the United States, Europe, and the world.¹⁵ Ukraine's path towards the E.U. will be blocked. The risk of Western support collapsing at some point is real; in which case Ukraine would suffer a crushing defeat.

Intensive talks on a ceasefire, initiated by the United States but garnering the support and involvement of other leading states, should begin as soon as the outcome of this year's Ukrainian offensive is clear.

On the other hand, there will be the perpetual risk of unintended escalation to nuclear annihilation. Russia will be pushed further into the arms of China. A further deterioration in relations between the United States and China could lead China to give massive military assistance to Russia, which could shift the situation on the battlefield in Russia's favor. The disruption of world trade and finance would continue.

Intensive talks on a ceasefire, initiated by the United States but garnering the support and involvement of other leading states, should therefore begin as soon as the outcome of this year's Ukrainian offensive is clear. If the result of the Ukrainian offensive is an ongoing stalemate, achieving a ceasefire will be less urgent. All the same, there will be no excuse for delay. If neither side has succeeded in breaking through by late fall of this year, it is very unlikely that they will be able to do so next year either. In this case, there

¹⁴ Mark F. Cancian, "What's the future for aid to Ukraine?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 21, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/whats-future-aid-ukraine>.

¹⁵ Anatol Lieven, Sarang Shidore, and Marcus Stanley, "Avoiding the Dangers of a Protracted Conflict in Ukraine," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Quincy Brief no. 23, March 25, 2022, <https://quincyst.org/report/avoiding-the-dangers-of-a-protracted-conflict-in-ukraine/>.

would be no point in prolonging a conflict that will lead to more death, suffering, economic loss and risks of escalation without a realistic goal.

There are admittedly some downsides to achieving a ceasefire within the timeframe suggested. Unless Ukraine is able to recapture all the territory Russia has conquered since February 2022 (a highly unlikely prospect), at least some of this territory will remain in Russian hands, possibly for a longer time. This is not ideal, but as outlined above, stretching this war for much longer beyond early next year with no realistic prospect of success brings greater risks. And as discussed below, alternative approaches – such as intervening directly to achieve the complete defeat of Russia – are even worse.

The Biden administration should therefore start thinking and planning immediately for negotiations to achieve a ceasefire by the end of this year, perhaps beginning with a truce over the New Year, between the Latin and Orthodox dates of Christmas. This truce could then be used for talks on a more lasting and stable ceasefire, together with the start of negotiations on a permanent peace settlement.

Drivers and barriers to a ceasefire

The most important motive for a ceasefire in both Ukraine and Russia is likely to be simple exhaustion. Estimates of casualties differ, but according to leaked documents, the Pentagon believes that Ukraine has suffered up to 131,000 dead and wounded and Russia up to 223,000 – much higher, but from a population more than three times greater than Ukraine's.¹⁶ In addition, Russia has suffered especially heavy losses among its elite troops, especially in the first months of the war; while the conscripts recruited later are of very questionable quality.¹⁷ According to the Pentagon estimate, Russia has

¹⁶ Guy Faulconbridge, "Ukraine War, with already up to 354,000 casualties, likely to last past 2023 - U.S. documents," Reuters, April 12, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-war-already-with-up-354000-casualties-likely-drag-us-documents>.

¹⁷ Mark Urban, "The cost of the Ukraine War for one Russian regiment" BBC, April 6, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-65179074>.

lost 2,068 tanks — more than four times Ukraine’s losses; and these tanks were mostly Russia’s latest models.

Ukraine has a population strongly motivated to resist the Russian invasion, but its reserves of manpower are not endless; nor is the West’s willingness to provide massive support for the Ukrainian war effort.¹⁸ As of April 2023, Western financial aid accounted for well over half of Ukraine’s state budget, exclusive of military equipment and ammunition. Even so, Ukraine is running a budget deficit of around \$5 billion per month. According to official figures, Ukraine’s GDP dropped by 29 percent in 2022 as a result of the war.¹⁹

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Furthermore, if the war continues to move from Ukrainian defense against Russian attacks to repeated Ukrainian attacks to drive Russia out completely, the motivation of the Ukrainian population to fight could diminish. At the start of the war, Ukrainians in the towns north of Kyiv that were occupied by Russia or menaced with Russian occupation showed a tremendous determination to resist. Local defense groups were formed spontaneously and fought with immense courage and success despite overwhelming Russian superiority in firepower and often in numbers. However, a willingness to fight and die in immediate defense of your home is not necessarily the same thing as a willingness to risk death to recapture territory hundreds of miles away, populated by

¹⁸ Karoun Demirjian, “Lawmakers question Pentagon on Ukraine funds, signaling fresh concerns,” *The New York Times*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/28/us/politics/ukraine-congress-military-spending-republicans-democrat>; Ralph Schoelhammer, “German public support for Ukraine is falling,” *UnHerd*, February 2, 2023, <https://unherd.com/thepost/german-public-support-for-ukraine-is-falling>.

¹⁹ Wilhelmine Preussen, “Ukraine’s GDP crashed by 29.1 percent in year of Russian invasion,” *Politico*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-gdp-crashed-29-percent-2022-economy-russia-invasion/>.

people who generally speak Russian and remain significantly influenced by Soviet traditions.

Ukrainian morale has been sustained to date in part by victories on the battlefield: the Russian retreat from the areas north of Kyiv and Chernihiv in April 2022; the Russian defeat in eastern Kharkiv in September; and the Russian retreat from Kherson city in November. Even the spirit of the very finest troops can, however, fail in the face of repeated disappointments.

The French army in World War One launched offensive after bloody offensive for almost three years in the face of almost unimaginable losses; but in May 1917, when the latest French offensive ended in failure, the soldiers mutinied. At one point or another in the war, the morale of the Russian, Italian, Austro–Hungarian, and German armies also collapsed. While soldiers with whom I spoke in Ukraine expressed strong determination to fight on to complete victory, there have also been reports of channels on Telegram where people in Kyiv can tip each other off about places where the police are carrying out sweeps for potential conscripts, so that they can avoid them.²⁰ The Ukrainian government has also imposed a ban on young men of military age leaving the country, which suggests that not everyone is anxious to serve.

In Russia, evasion of service has been on a much larger scale. After the government announced a call-up of conscripts, an estimated 700,000 people left Russia, a large proportion of them reportedly young men of military age.²¹ As is clear from the Russian government’s long delay in extending conscription, and continued unwillingness to declare full mobilization along Ukrainian lines, the Kremlin is also worried about a public backlash if the sacrifices imposed on the population become too great. Both Ukraine

²⁰ “SBU blocks 26 Telegram Channels that helped men evade mobilization,” *Kyiv Independent*, March 8, 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/sbu-blocks-26-telegram-channels-that-help-men-evade-mobilization/>.

²¹ Doyinsola Oladipo, “Where have Russians been fleeing to since mobilization began?” Reuters, October 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/where-have-russians-been-fleeing-since-mobilisation-began-2022-10-06/>.

and Russia have taken steps to suppress public opposition to the continuation of the war.²²

In terms of munitions, Russia retains a very considerable advantage over Ukraine, judging by reports of the expenditure of shells by the two sides in the battle for Bakhmut (though according to reports and from my own observations, Russian fire is often very inaccurate).²³ However, the Russian armed forces do appear to be experiencing shortages of heavy missiles. This has led them to use S-300 air defense missiles in a ground bombardment role, for which they are not designed and in which they have proved largely ineffective. Due to the limited scope and inaccuracy of the Russian air campaign against Ukraine's energy infrastructure, as well as the effectiveness of Ukrainian air defenses, as of April 2023 this campaign had failed to have any really significant and lasting impact.²⁴

Russia's economic situation has withstood the war and Western sanctions much better than many observers expected, in part because of the willingness of the non-Western world to continue buying Russian energy. According to World Bank estimates, GDP fell by only 2.1 percent in 2022 and is expected to drop by only 0.2 percent in 2023.²⁵ There are, however, reportedly serious concerns among Russian economists and state

²² Thomas Graham, "Ukraine Needs To Pursue Victory Without Sacrificing Its Democratic Future," Council on Foreign Relations, March 6, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/ukraine-needs-pursue-victory-without-sacrificing-its-democratic-future>; "Russia: War's Supersized Repression," Human Rights Watch, January 12, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/12/russia-wars-supersized-repression>; Anatol Lieven, "Crimea Has Become a Frankenstein's Monster," *Foreign Policy*, April 11, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/11/crimea-has-become-a-frankensteins-monster/>; Robert McMahon, "Russia is Censoring News on the War in Ukraine," Council on Foreign Relations, March 18, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/russia-censoring-news-war-ukraine-foreign-media-are-trying-get-around>.

²³ David Axe, "Russia has more artillery than Ukraine. But Russian gunners have a bad habit of shelling...nothing," *Forbes*, December 18, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2022/12/18/russia-has-more-artillery-than-ukraine-but-russian-gunners-have-a-bad-habit-of-shelling-nothing/?sh=71779053aed7>.

²⁴ Anatol Lieven, "Lieven inside Ukraine: Some real breaks, and insights," interview by Kelley Vlahos, *Responsible Statecraft*, April 17, 2023, <https://responsiblestatacraft.org/2023/04/17/lieven-inside-ukraine-some-real-breaks-and-insights/>.

²⁵ "World Bank upgrades Russia's 2023 growth forecast to 0.2 percent contraction," *BNE IntelliNews*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.intellinews.com/world-bank-upgrades-russia-s-2023-growth-forecast-to-0-2-contraction-275331/>.

officials about the long-term sustainability of the Russian economy in the face of Western pressure, at least without significant aid from China.²⁶

For all these reasons, at some point this coming autumn or winter sheer exhaustion may lead both sides to accept a ceasefire. On the Russian side, our ability to assess the chances of the Kremlin doing this are limited by lack of clarity about Russia's present war aims. However, the Russian withdrawal from the city of Kherson and the right bank of the Dnieper river last November would seem to indicate that Moscow has abandoned its most ambitious territorial claims, unless it achieves a complete transformation of its military situation, which is highly improbable. Without a bridgehead to the west of the Dnieper, it is impossible for Russia to pose a credible threat to the Ukrainian cities of Mykolaiv and Odessa and to Ukraine's access to the sea.

At some point this coming autumn or winter, sheer exhaustion may lead both sides to accept a ceasefire.

Unless the territories "annexed" by Russia last year are already recaptured by Ukraine, returning them will be politically impossible for Russia. However, Russian officials have indicated that the precise borders of these provinces might be negotiable – which would seem to indicate a willingness in principle to accept a ceasefire that would leave parts of these provinces in Ukrainian hands.

Russia is extremely unlikely voluntarily to return southern Zaporizhia and eastern Kherson to Ukraine as part of a ceasefire, because these areas make up the "land bridge" between Russia and Crimea; without it Crimea will be linked to Russia only by the Kerch Bridge, which has proved vulnerable to Ukrainian bombardment.²⁷ This would leave Crimea itself in acute danger of being reconquered by Ukraine in the event of a resumption of hostilities – and the Russian establishment is absolutely determined that

²⁶ "Russia Privately Warns of Deep and Prolonged Economic Damage," *Bloomberg News*, September 5, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-05/russia-risks-bigger-longer-sanctions-hit-internal-report-warns>

²⁷ James Glantz and Marco Hernandez, "How Ukraine Blew Up a Key Russian Bridge," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/11/17/world/europe/crimea-bridge-collapse.html>.

Crimea and the naval base of Sevastopol remain in Russia's hands, as indeed are most ordinary Russians (and, apparently, most Crimeans).²⁸

Such a Russian withdrawal from Kherson and Zaporizhia is therefore only imaginable (and even then, only after further defeats) as part of a final peace settlement involving Ukrainian and international recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea and the separatist Donbas republics on the territory that they controlled as of February 23, 2022, that would rule out future Ukrainian attempts to reconquer these territories.

It is possible to achieve a lasting and at least relatively stable ceasefire while the underlying political and territorial issues remain unresolved.

The Zelensky government has, as noted above, categorically ruled out a formal territorial compromise and has the support of the Ukrainian political elites and a majority of public opinion. However, as with the cases of Cyprus, Korea, and Taiwan (and, to a lesser extent, Kashmir from 1947 to the present and Northern Ireland from 1922–99), it is possible to achieve a lasting and at least relatively stable ceasefire while the underlying political and territorial issues remain unresolved.

In the first month of the war, President Zelensky did indeed propose a compromise whereby Ukraine would declare neutrality (in return for strong security guarantees), Russia would withdraw to its pre-invasion de facto line of control, and the issue of sovereignty over Crimea and the eastern Donbas would be shelved for future negotiation. Under this proposal, both sides would have promised not to use either military or economic pressure (like the Ukrainian blockade of water supplies to Crimea) to change the situation on the ground.

²⁸ Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov, "My Country, Right or Wrong: Russian Public Opinion on Ukraine," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 7, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/07/my-country-right-or-wrong-russian-public-opinion-on-ukraine-pub-87803>; John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal and Kristin M. Bakke, "To Russia With Love: A Majority of Crimeans are Still Glad for Their Annexation," *Foreign Affairs*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2020-04-03/russia-love>.

The willingness of at least some elements in the Ukrainian government to accept a de facto and provisional territorial compromise could be increased by the fact that Kyiv has no strategy for the peaceful political and cultural reintegration of Russian-speaking Crimea and the eastern Donbas into Ukraine. Instead, as former Zelensky advisor Oleksiy Arestovych has warned, many of the signals coming out of Ukraine point in the opposite direction.

These include the banishing of the Russian language from public use, and racist insults (like Nyeliudy, “non-humans”) hurled by politicians and the media at all Russians and Russian culture as a whole.²⁹ As to hardline members of the Ukrainian government, one of the most prominent, Mykhaylo Podolyak, has spoken openly of the need to drive out of Crimea all members of the local population who have supported Russian rule and want to go on using the Russian language in public.³⁰

The need for U.S. diplomatic engagement

Even at the time, Ukraine’s hardliners were strongly opposed to Zelensky’s March 2022 peace proposal; since then, Ukraine’s official position has hardened greatly as a result of both Russian defeats and Russian atrocities against Ukrainian civilians. As a result of its victories, the political influence of the Ukrainian military has also grown greatly, and its chief commanders appear strongly opposed even to a provisional and de facto territorial compromise. Ukrainian officials have publicly warned that for Zelensky to attempt a peace deal with Russia would mean his “political suicide.”³¹ Political

²⁹ John Lee Anderson, “How do Ukrainians think about Russians now?” *The New Yorker*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/how-do-ukrainians-think-about-russians-now>; Jeffrey Gettleman and Olha Kotiuzhanska, “Zelensky signs ban on Russian place names in struggle over national identity,” *The New York Times*, April 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/22/world/europe/zelensky-russian-ban-ukraine.html>; Anatol Lieven, “The rise and role of Ukrainian ethnic nationalism,” *The Nation*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/ukraine-russia-nationalism-war/>.

³⁰ Mykhaylo Podolyak, “The war will continue until Crimea is liberated”: Five forecasts of Mykhaylo Podolyak for Crimea in 2023,” interview by Angelika Rudenko and Igor Tokar, Radio Liberty, April 5, 2023, print, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/viyna-krym-podolyak-prohnoz/32349163.html>.

³¹ “Peace deal can mean end of #Zelenskyy : ‘If Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky proposes peace talks between Kyiv and Moscow, he will commit “political suicide,”’ (@l_katchanovsky on Twitter, April 7, 2023), https://twitter.com/l_katchanovsky/status/1644408895073394693; Anatol Lieven, “Crimea Has Become a Frankenstein’s Monster,” *Foreign Policy*, April 11, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/11/crimea-has-become-a-frankensteins-monster/>.

observers in Kyiv have predicted that at some point the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian military, General Valery Zaluzhny, will run for president, either to succeed Zelensky or in opposition to him.³²

Agreeing to a ceasefire would therefore be politically extremely difficult for President Zelensky, unless Ukraine were to suffer a very serious and obvious defeat, was in danger of losing much more territory, and could not expect increased help from the West.

This is one key reason why Washington's strong engagement in any ceasefire process is so essential. For the Ukrainian government to agree, Zelensky will probably need to be able to claim to his own people both that he was placed by Washington under irresistible pressure to agree to a ceasefire, and on the other hand that Washington had given really strong guarantees of future help to Ukraine if he did agree. The European Union would also have to guarantee continued large-scale economic aid.

This should not, however, be linked to promises of an accelerated route to full EU membership. As the recently imposed restrictions on Ukrainian grain imports to the EU (demanded among other states by Poland, which is otherwise Ukraine's greatest supporter within the EU) indicate, the nature of Ukraine's economy and internal politics will make the process of EU accession a very long and complicated one, and it is important not to make promises that cannot be fulfilled.³³

Nor should Washington seek to use European countries as mediators in a ceasefire process. France under President Macron has sought to play this role, but the only result has been that the French government is now deeply distrusted by both Ukraine and Russia.³⁴ The Ukrainian government regards France as a potential Russian ally in Europe. In Russia, by contrast, France's failure to support the Minsk II agreement and to

³² Interviews conducted by the author in Kyiv and Dnipro, March 2023.

³³ Leonie Kijewski and Bartosz Brzezinski, "Eastern European countries strike deal with Commission to clear Ukraine grain glut," *Politico*, April 28, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eastern-europe-poland-deal-with-eu-clear-ukrainian-grain-glut/>.

³⁴ Ariane Chemin and Philippe Ricard, "Macron's Lone Ranger Diplomacy on Ukraine," *Le Monde*, December 13, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/12/13/war-in-ukraine-macron-s-lone-ranger-diplomacy_600768_0_4.html.

block future NATO expansion to Ukraine has left the impression that France's expressions of desire for compromise with Russia are entirely mendacious.³⁵ Viewed from Moscow, only an agreement fully and publicly backed by the United States can be relied on.

The collapse of Minsk II is an object lesson in the centrality of the United States to any Ukrainian peace process. This agreement was brokered by France and Germany in 2015 to try to end the Donbas conflict. It provided for the return of the separatist areas of the Donbas in return for guarantees of full autonomy. There were several reasons for its failure, including Russia's reluctance to make the separatists disarm as part of a settlement, but among the most important reasons was the refusal of successive Ukrainian governments and parliaments to provide that guarantee, and the West did not pressure them to do so.³⁶

Viewed from Moscow, only an agreement fully and publicly backed by the United States can be relied on.

On their own, France and Germany were simply too weak, and too afraid of the reaction both from the United States and from other EU countries, to help make the Minsk II agreement stick by putting pressure on Ukraine as well as Russia. Only the full engagement of the United States could have achieved this – and no such engagement was forthcoming. By 2021, newly-appointed Biden administration officials were privately declaring Minsk II “dead” without suggesting (privately or publicly) something to replace it.³⁷

³⁵ Andrei Korybko, “Russia Needs To Once Again Brace for Itself for a Prolonged Rivalry with Germany,” April 27, 2023, <https://korybko.substack.com/p/russia-needs-to-once-again-brace>; Anatol Lieven, “For years, Putin didn’t invade Ukraine. What made him snap in 2022?” *The Guardian*, February 24, 2023.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/24/vladimir-putin-invade-ukraine-2022-russia>.

³⁶ Anatol Lieven, “Ending the Threat of War in Ukraine: A Negotiated Solution to the Donbas Conflict and the Crimean Dispute,” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, Quincy Paper no. 6, January 4, 2022, <https://quincyinst.org/report/ending-the-threat-of-war-in-ukraine/>.

³⁷ Conversations with U.S. officials, 2021.

Nor in the years between 2015–22 did Washington do anything to rein in Ukrainian bombardments of the eastern Donbas and its attempts to pressure Crimea into submission through a blockade of its water supplies from Ukraine.³⁸ This left Russians with the impression (rightly or wrongly) that the real Biden administration policy was simply future Ukrainian military reconquest of these territories, and may have contributed to Putin’s eventual decision to invade.

The Biden administration should, however, try to enlist China’s help in persuading Russia to accept a ceasefire – but without the hectoring tone adopted so far, which has only served to anger Beijing.³⁹ China has made clear that, while it does not wish to give significant military and economic aid to Russia, it will also not take sides against Russia. However, an agreement to end the fighting without a humiliating defeat for Putin could well seem attractive to Beijing.⁴⁰

The Biden administration should try to enlist China’s help in persuading Russia to accept a ceasefire.

Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has correctly stated that one reason why China’s involvement in a peace process might be desirable is to prevent a situation in which Russia rebuilds its forces and attacks Ukraine again in future.⁴¹ This is entirely true, but also implies that Washington will have to promise Beijing sincerely that it will use its influence with Ukraine to prevent a future Ukrainian offensive. Given present levels of distrust between the United States and China, many in the Chinese government will suspect that Washington is using China to take responsibility for a ceasefire for which the United States itself will feel no responsibility. This, after all, was pretty much the

³⁸ Sharon Udasin, “How a Ukrainian dam played a key role in tensions with Russia,” *The Hill*, March 12, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/equilibrium-sustainability/597910-how-a-ukrainian-dam-played-a-key-role-in-tensions-with/>.

³⁹ Rachman, “China could play a crucial role in ending the war in Ukraine.”

⁴⁰ Stephen Walt, “Ukraine and Russia Need a Great-Power Peace Plan,” *Foreign Policy*, April 18, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/18/ukraine-russia-china-united-states-peace-ceasefire/>.

⁴¹ “Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and top journalists on global press freedom,” *Washington Post*, May 3, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/washington-post-live/2023/05/03/secretary-state-antony-blinken-top-journalists-global-press-freedom/>.

story of U.S. policy towards the 2015 agreement brokered by France and Germany to solve the Donbas conflict.⁴²

Washington should also involve the United Nations in the search for peace in Ukraine. In the short term, as Ukrainian historian Taras Bilous has written, U.N. peacekeepers could play an essential role in stabilizing a ceasefire:

On the one hand, if Russia is expelled, peacekeepers could be a soft capitulation to Russia. On the other hand, if the Ukrainian counteroffensive this year is less successful than Kyiv would like, a ceasefire will be necessary at some point. In this case, UN peacekeepers can also come in handy – not on the de-occupied territory, but on the demarcation line. But it's important that this should entail not the recognition of annexed territory but rather the transfer of the confrontation over this issue to the diplomatic plane.⁴³

Why alternative policies are worse

Opponents to a ceasefire argue that it would allow Russia to rebuild its forces and its economic base for a future invasion, which is indeed a possibility. This leads to the next argument: that to eliminate this possibility, Russia must be completely defeated in Ukraine, including the loss not just of the territories occupied in 2022, but Crimea and the eastern Donbas. Russian hardliners make almost a mirror image of this argument, that the United States is determined to use Ukraine as a base to weaken or even destroy Russia, and that only the complete defeat of Ukraine can eliminate this threat.

The problem is that Russia has proved it is militarily incapable of conquering most of Ukraine, and that the strength of Ukrainian nationalism means that even if Russia could do so, it would find Ukraine as impossible to govern as Poland was in the past. The

⁴² Lieven, "Ending the Threat of War in Ukraine."

⁴³ Taras Bilous, "The Prospects for Lasting Peace," *Boston Review*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/how-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

problem with this Western argument is that a complete Ukrainian military victory on Ukrainian soil would not in itself end the possibility of a future Russian invasion.

On the one hand, Russia would retain a 1,226 mile-long border with Ukraine, across which it could once again invade the country. On the other, the loss of Crimea in particular would be extremely likely to lead to a mood of “revanche” in Russia that (like the French obsession with the recovery of Alsace–Lorraine after 1871) would mean that all subsequent Russian administrations would make its recovery the pivot of their entire international strategy. This would mean that the United States and Europe in turn would have to make the defense of Ukraine the pivot of their entire international strategy, regardless of the impact of this on arguably far greater interests and dangers elsewhere.

The loss of Crimea in particular would be extremely likely to lead to a mood of “revanche” in Russia that would mean that all subsequent Russian administrations would make its recovery the pivot of their entire international strategy.

The only way in which the risk of a future Russian invasion could be completely removed would be by the destruction of Russia as a united state — and that is indeed the ambition of many of those, both in Ukraine and the West, who are calling for complete Ukrainian victory. Their hope is that the crushing humiliation of complete defeat in Ukraine and the loss of Crimea would lead to the fall of the Putin regime, and that given the underlying weaknesses of its state system, the Russian Federation would then break up, just as the Soviet Union did once the power of the Communist Party

evaporated.⁴⁴ According to Oleksiy Danilov, Secretary of Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council:

[Russia is] a monstrous entity with cave instincts and an anti-human essence that has no place in the modern world order. Russia with its autocratic regime, resource-based economy and neo-fascist ideology once again has failed to pass the civilization test, remaining a territory of continuous violence and evil, a threat to Ukraine and the world...

Given the negative historical experience, there is a danger that after some time Russia will again return to the old bloody pattern. Therefore, the process must be much deeper and more complex, with results that guarantee high reliability. This can only be the disintegration and fragmentation of the fake [Russian] federation.

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The reasoning here suffers from numerous dangerous flaws.⁴⁶ Unlike the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation contains a large majority of ethnic Russians, bound together (as the public response to the war in Ukraine indicates) by a strong sense of Russian nationalism and attachment to the Russian state. Unlike in the Soviet Union, the most important non-Russian ethnic republic, Tatarstan, is situated not on the geographic periphery of the state, but at its center, making secession exceptionally difficult and dangerous, even if a majority of the local population desired this.

To judge by my own travels in the more distant Russian regions, in Siberia and the Far East, the great majority of their populations are far too worried about domination by China to risk independence. These are the same reasons Russia did not break up in the 1990s, despite the crippling weakness of the central Russian state during that time. Unlike the former “union republics” of the USSR, the constituent parts of the Russian

⁴⁴ Anne Applebaum and Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Counteroffensive,” *The Atlantic*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/06/counteroffensive-ukraine-zelensky-crimea/673781/>

⁴⁵ Oleksiy Danilov, “How to Decolonize Russia: List of Steps,” *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, February 11, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2023/02/11/7388917/>.

⁴⁶ Alexey Gusev, “Why Russia Won’t Disintegrate Along Its Regional Borders,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 20, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89581?mc_cid=e4eef57c9d&mc_eid=a854a7e91d.

Federation have no constitutional right of secession, and no automatic right of recognition by the international community.

Equally importantly, to attempt the destruction of a nuclear superpower (or even its regime) would be the most dangerous enterprise ever embarked upon by a U.S. administration. Faced with complete defeat in Ukraine, radical escalation by the Putin regime would seem not only possible but likely, if they believed their own survival was at stake. This would most likely take the form not of an immediate recourse to tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield in Ukraine, but rather steps that would begin a spiral of escalation, the logical end-point of which would be a full-scale nuclear exchange and the destruction of the world as we know it.

To attempt the destruction of a nuclear superpower would be the most dangerous enterprise ever embarked upon by a U.S. administration.

Finally, Beijing has so far refrained from giving serious military and economic aid to Russia, fearing this would drive Europe into full support for sanctions against and economic decoupling from China. However, while Chinese respect for Russia has diminished greatly as a result of Russian military failures in Ukraine, China's government still regards Russia as an essential partner against the United States, as well as an essential and secure supplier of energy to China.

There is no reason to doubt, therefore, that China would regard the elimination or radical weakening of the Russian state as a threat to Chinese vital interests, and that in consequence it would feel obliged to give massive help to Moscow to prevent this happening. This would transform Ukraine into the site of a proxy war between the West and China, with extremely negative consequences for everyone concerned and Ukrainians above all.

Conclusions

Given that the alternatives are so dangerous, the Biden administration should begin immediately to lay the diplomatic groundwork for ceasefire negotiations, to begin in earnest once the results of the Ukrainian offensive are clear. This should involve reaching out to all countries that can bring positive influence to bear, including most notably China, but also major Global South states such as India and Brazil. However, it is also very important for the administration to recognize that it must be fully involved in the ceasefire process.

Whatever happens, by far the greater part of Ukraine will now be aligned with the West and deeply hostile to Russia. This reverses the pattern of almost 400 years of Russian–Ukrainian history and represents a crushing defeat for Russia.

The administration should also back up the process with a shift in its domestic rhetoric that would acknowledge the extent of the victory that Ukraine, with U.S. and Western help, has already won – as indeed EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has boasted.⁴⁷ Putin’s original plan to subjugate the whole of Ukraine has already been comprehensively defeated, and almost certainly cannot be revived. Whatever happens, by far the greater part of Ukraine will now be aligned with the West and deeply hostile to Russia. This reverses the pattern of almost 400 years of Russian–Ukrainian history and represents a crushing defeat for Russia.⁴⁸

Continued internationally–unrecognized control over relatively limited areas of eastern and southern Ukraine is a very poor consolation prize for Moscow. A ceasefire that

⁴⁷ “Russia has already dramatically failed,” BBC World News, May 9, 2023. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-europe-65528705>.

⁴⁸ Anatol Lieven, “What a victory for Ukraine should look like,” *Time*, November 14, 2022. <https://time.com/6257285/ukraine-war-victory/>.

allowed this, while not a complete Ukrainian and Western victory, would still, in historical terms, be a very severe Russian failure. On the other hand, allowing the Kremlin to claim (however mendaciously) to the Russian people that it had achieved a measure of success, could be enough both to end the fighting and prevent large-scale clashes in future.

Given the extent of Russian losses and defeats in this war, it seems highly unlikely that, given a reasonably stable ceasefire backed by the United States and continued control over Crimea, a future Russian government would wish to launch a new invasion – unless Western aid to Ukraine were to cease altogether. But for that to happen, the United States would have had to lose or abandon its superpower position – and at that point, everything would have changed, not just in Ukraine but in the world in general.

As Oxana Shevel wrote in an article for Boston Review:

A stalemate on the battlefield might lead to an armistice—an outcome that would not “end the war” but would be more advantageous to Ukraine and to the West’s goal of achieving stability in Europe.⁴⁹

Shevel points out that such an armistice would allow the West to begin the massive task of rebuilding the Ukrainian economy and helping Ukraine move towards EU membership. She also argues that it should be used to allow Ukraine to join NATO. This is in fact extremely unlikely in circumstances of a legally unresolved conflict. However, it is also irrelevant. The U.S. and NATO have repeatedly said and shown that they will not send their own troops and go to war with Russia in order to defend Ukraine. This is due above all to well-based fears that this could lead to nuclear annihilation; and these fears and resulting constraints will remain even if Ukraine becomes a member of NATO. This being so, how in practice would NATO membership actually help to defend Ukraine more than it is being helped at the moment by huge NATO aid?⁵⁰ On the other hand,

⁴⁹ Shevel, “Russia Can’t Win This War.”

⁵⁰ Press Point with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, September 23, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_207788; Zachary B. Wolf, “Here’s what Biden has said about sending

NATO states have also demonstrated that they are willing to give massive military and civil assistance to help Ukraine successfully to defend itself – and that will be a strong deterrent to any future Russian aggression.

Above all, U.S. officials and elected representatives need to remember that their primary responsibility is to the sovereign people of the United States, to whom they have sworn an oath of loyalty. There are certainly very important issues at stake in Ukraine; but the most critical of these – the preservation of Ukraine as an independent state – has already been achieved. The next great task is to help Ukraine achieve the most important aspect of integration into the West, namely EU membership. But that process cannot even begin as long as the war continues. No remaining American goal is worth unending war and the risk of a nuclear exchange that would destroy the United States.

There are certainly very important issues at stake in Ukraine; but the most critical of these – the preservation of Ukraine as an independent state – has already been achieved.

The kind of ceasefire agreement outlined in this paper will be both unsatisfactory and extremely difficult to achieve and to sell. It will require considerable political courage on the part of the Biden administration; but, in the old drill sergeant's phrase, "Nobody ever said this was going to be easy."

US troops to Ukraine," CNN, February 24, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/24/politics/us-troops-ukraine-russia-nato/index.html>.

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