



# **Blessed are the peacemakers: Making a ceasefire agreement in Ukraine stick**

**Policy brief**

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# About the Author

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## **Edward Ifft**

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Edward Ifft is a retired member of the Senior Executive Service and has been involved in negotiating and implementing many of the key nuclear arms control agreements of the past 50 years. He has a PhD in physics from Ohio State University, where he was a National Science Foundation Fellow. Dr Ifft's career was primarily in the State Department, with assignments in the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, NASA and the Department of Defense.

Early in his career, he served on the US delegations to the negotiations on SALT and TTBT. He then served as Senior State Department Representative to both the START and CTBT negotiations in Geneva. After START concluded, he became Deputy Director of the On-Site Inspection Agency (OSIA). When OSIA was incorporated into the new Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) in 1998, he became Senior Advisor and State Department liaison to DTRA. As a U.S. START Inspector, he participated in inspections of many sensitive military installations in the former Soviet Union. He also served as the last U.S. Commissioner (Acting) for the ABM Treaty until the U.S. withdrew from the Treaty in 2002. He participated in the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Field Exercises in Kazakhstan in 2008 and Jordan in 2014.

Dr Ifft is the author of many articles in scholarly journals published in the US, Europe and Russia, as well as of chapters in two books published by the United Nations. He is a member of several professional organisations, including the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Institute for Nuclear Materials Management and the American Physical Society. He continued to work part-time as a member of the Foreign Service in the State Department until 2017 and was an Adjunct Professor in the Security Studies Program of the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University for 13 years. In 2010, he was an Annenberg Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, and he is currently a Distinguished Visiting Fellow there.

# Executive summary

The war in Ukraine has been going on for three years and has reached a stalemate. Huge losses are being sustained by both sides in fighting over small villages and metres of ground. Most of the West's policy effort has gone into how to fight the war and support Ukraine. Comparatively little thought has been devoted to how to bring the war to a fair and stable conclusion. The primary reason for this is that the West—in particular the U.S.—has deferred to Ukraine on all such matters and Russia as well as Ukraine have shown little interest in negotiations toward a settlement/peace agreement. This situation has changed dramatically with the arrival of President Trump in the White House. He has signalled less support for Ukraine and a strong push for a rapid end to the war. Trump has cast aside the Biden policy of no talks about Ukraine without Ukraine in the room and begun high-level bilateral negotiations with Russia on the problem. The immediate effect of this appears to be an improvement in U.S.-Russia relations, which might well be a prerequisite for finding a satisfactory end to the war. Obviously, interested European nations, and especially Ukraine itself, must have a role in finding this solution and in its implementation.

Trump will probably quickly find that there are huge obstacles to negotiating a comprehensive solution, and negotiations will be both long and difficult. Without waiting for such negotiations to bear fruit, it is important and urgent to implement a ceasefire, both to stop the massive and largely indiscriminate destruction and killing and to improve the atmosphere in which to carry out these comprehensive negotiations. This article focusses on achieving such a ceasefire.

**A primary task will be drawing a line of control/line of contact.** It must be made clear that this line will be drawn without prejudice to a final territorial solution. However, any interim boundaries will inevitably influence the final demarcations, as well as being of considerable importance to people living in these disputed areas. Since nearly all the disputed territory is legally Ukrainian, efforts should be made to favour Ukrainian control as much as possible. However, the facts on the ground indicate that Crimea and most of the Donbas will be under Russian control during this interim period. These are the areas with the greatest separatist tendencies and the strongest support for the Russian language and culture. Some of these areas are also already receiving substantial Russian reconstruction efforts and Russian passports..

**The other major task will be to ensure that the agreed ceasefire will be observed and both sides can feel secure.** The obvious way to achieve this would be the deployment of a substantial Peacekeeping Force under UN, or perhaps OSCE, supervision. It will be essential that the composition, rights and obligations of this force be clearly spelt out and agreed upon. Ukraine wants such a force to be drawn exclusively from its Western supporters—i.e., NATO. Even in the unlikely event that Russia agreed to this, it would likely lead to a highly militarised border with risks of a direct NATO-Russia confrontation and extremely dangerous clashes. The Peacekeeping Force should be neutral and multilateral (although much of the world would view its role as primarily protecting Ukraine). Any aggression by Putin against this force would put him into conflict with essentially the entire world, including China.

It is important and urgent to implement a ceasefire, both to stop the massive and largely indiscriminate destruction and killing and to improve the atmosphere in which to carry out comprehensive negotiations.

# Victory in Ukraine?

It has been three years since Russia's February 24, 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> It has been clear for some time that the conflict, the largest and most destructive in Europe since World War II, has reached a bloody stalemate. Huge casualties have been incurred on both sides in fighting over metres of land and small villages. Neither side wants to call it a stalemate, preferring to hold out hope for "victory."<sup>2</sup> In the case of Ukraine, this would apparently mean the expulsion of all hostile foreign military forces, recovery of all its former territory, including Crimea, and credible guarantees that it would be safe from future attack from Russia. Victory for President Putin is more difficult to define. "Denazification" was the original stated goal, but extensive territorial gains (currently about 20% of Ukrainian territory) and prevention of a strong Western orientation for Ukraine, especially membership in NATO, would appear to be the current goals.<sup>3</sup> Both sides have put forward some form of these as "preconditions" for even entering a negotiation for an end to the war. This clearly confuses realistic preconditions for beginning any negotiation with the goals for such a negotiation.

It seems clear that "victory," as defined above, is well out of reach for either side. It would be more realistic to say that everyone loses in this war.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt or ambiguity about Russia's responsibility in this war, with Russia clearly the aggressor. Of course, after the expenditure of so many lives and much treasure, leaders must be able to point to the achievement of some goals and avoidance of the worst-case outcome, and any negotiable agreement will need to include some face-saving aspects for each side. In view of the fact that continued fighting promises only further death and destruction for both sides with only minimal gains for either, the logical first negotiation in the direction of achieving a realistic and stable peace would be for a ceasefire. This is the first step in ending most conflicts of the magnitude of this one and support for such an effort is growing. President Trump appears to expect a quick resolution of the entire situation. It is likely that this will prove much more difficult and lengthier than he expects. If so, the sides should first arrange a ceasefire.

Western analyses of the war frequently pose two possible outcomes. One posits a long continuation of the war, with greatly increased assistance from the U.S. and other NATO countries for Ukraine, resulting in a crushing defeat of Russia and a triumphant Ukraine. The other involves the U.S. imposing a deal on Ukraine which amounts to a capitulation, Ukraine disappears from the map as a sovereign, independent state and autocrats around the world are emboldened to attack their peaceful neighbours.<sup>5</sup> These two extremes are by no means the only options—just the least likely ones. The most likely outcome would appear to be that Ukraine remains an independent, sovereign state, but with less territory (at least on an interim basis) and security assurances from other states and organisations against further Russian attack. This outcome would be monitored and enforced by a strong, but politically neutral, Peacekeeping Force.

Recent ceasefires between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon are instructive. The Gaza ceasefire is described as a 6-week "pause" in fighting, accompanied by the release of some hostages and the beginning of negotiations for a permanent settlement. This was difficult to negotiate, involved mediators and compromise and contains useful lessons for Russia and Ukraine.

# Long-term core issues

**A more prudent approach would be to focus initially on those issues directly related to the ceasefire. Other major issues that must be resolved to achieve a true peace agreement should be identified and worked on separately, but not allowed to delay a cessation in the fighting.**

In theory, it is possible to envision agreement on a cessation of active hostilities with no further progress on resolving the underlying causes of the conflict, an agreed path for moving forward or even a plan for monitoring the ceasefire itself. This could work if both sides were strongly committed to making it work and had strong control over elements that wanted to continue fighting. However, such a minimalist approach would involve a significant risk of misunderstandings, violations and claims of violations, with dangerous consequences, including making further negotiations even more difficult. A more prudent approach would be to focus initially on those issues directly related to the ceasefire. Other major issues that must be resolved to achieve a true peace agreement should be identified and worked on separately, but not allowed to delay a cessation in the fighting.

“Enlarging the pie” might sometimes offer a way out when agreement proves to be very difficult.<sup>6</sup> In this case, negotiators (primarily Trump, Putin and Zelensky) will almost certainly need to reduce the size of the pie or risk delaying the needed ceasefire under the frequently expressed principle that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.” A very minimalist approach—i.e. there is no agreed monitoring or enforcement of the ceasefire by outside parties— is not recommended here, but is the one taken in negotiating a ceasefire in the Gaza conflict with most of the serious long-term issues left for future resolution.

The list of contentious issues which need not be completely resolved in the immediate future is long:

- Permanent boundaries
- Ukrainian membership in the European Union
- Ukrainian membership in NATO<sup>7</sup>
- Security guarantees<sup>8</sup>
- Black Sea and Sea of Azov issues
- Elections in Ukraine, including in disputed territories
- Economic and political sanctions against Russia
- Disposition of \$300B of Russian assets under Western control
- Access to Ukraine’s valuable rare earth mineral deposits
- Reparations
- Reconstruction
- Avoidance of ethnic cleansing
- War crimes
- Return of refugees, “kidnapped” Ukrainian children and internally displaced persons

These are all important and difficult issues. Some have been addressed in a preliminary way elsewhere, but need further study.<sup>9</sup> Negotiations on any of these could begin at any time, perhaps in different forums, recognising that there are linkages that will need to be considered.<sup>10</sup>

# Ready to negotiate?

Since direct communication between Russia and Ukraine has proven very difficult, mediation may be a useful tool. This was crucial in settling the Balkan Wars in the mid-1990s, but no Richard Holbrooke has emerged to knock heads together and compel an agreement. It appears that Trump views himself as playing this role. Of course, dealing with Russia is quite different from dealing with Bosnia-Herzegovina. As to countries that could play such a role, the list is rather short. There is the United Nations itself, of course, but among countries, Turkey and China both appear amenable to playing some diplomatic role.

China has tilted toward Russia, with its “no limits” relationship, and sale to Russia of weapons components. However, it must be somewhat uncomfortable in view of the fact that its partner Russia has clearly violated a fundamental part of Chinese foreign policy—i.e., respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Turkey has tilted toward Ukraine, supplying it with sophisticated drones. It has also facilitated an exchange of POWs and Ukrainian grain shipments in the Black Sea. Both countries have tried to walk a fine line, projecting a desire to present a balanced approach. India, another country that might qualify as a mediator, has shown no interest in such a role.

Sensitive bilateral talks between the U.S. and Russia, including Trump-Putin interactions, are probably a necessary part of a solution. The U.S. policy under Biden was no discussions about Ukraine without Ukraine in the room, but recent U.S.-Russia discussions in Saudi Arabia show that this policy is no longer in effect. Obviously, Ukraine must be part of and agree with any “decisions,” (as opposed to “discussions”), for a ceasefire to take effect. Interested European countries also clearly need to be consulted and included in key decisions.

Whether both sides and their supporters are ready for a ceasefire is not entirely clear. It is an obvious cliché that everyone wants to negotiate from a position of strength. If a ceasefire appears imminent, there will be a perverse incentive for each side to intensify fighting to optimise its position as negotiations begin. A side which is perceived to be winning may see little benefit to stopping the conflict, since an even better outcome beckons with further fighting. Conversely, a side which is losing may refuse to negotiate from a position of perceived weakness and believe that its fortunes can be reversed with further efforts. This could explain why each side has, at least until recently, appeared to be oscillating between escalation and negotiation. Some have hoped that a ceasefire would allow Ukraine to regroup and acquire more advanced weapons from its supporters, while stronger sanctions would finally damage the Russian economy more severely. Conversely, others claim a ceasefire would only allow Russia to regroup and resume its aggression later.

These perverse incentives make finding the ideal time for a successful end to the conflict elusive. Perhaps a stalemate—which this paper argues is the current situation—is the most favourable one for a negotiated ceasefire, improving the conditions for a full settlement later. Recent statements by the Trump administration may cause Russia to believe that it can achieve its primary goals at the negotiating table and thus avoid further fighting. Whether Putin is ready to negotiate in good faith (or can “win” even without doing that) remains to be seen.

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The question of whether either side is ready to negotiate in good faith is also in dispute.<sup>11</sup> Putin's views on the subject have been less than clear, but recent statements seem to indicate a receptiveness to negotiations.<sup>12</sup> Zelensky now speaks of a "fair peace," in contrast to his earlier mantra of "no negotiations, no compromise."<sup>13</sup> A further question is, even if Putin is willing to negotiate, how can Ukraine and its supporters be assured that he will abide by whatever is agreed? The arrival of Donald Trump in the White House points to early negotiations and the goal of an early settlement, probably preceded by a ceasefire. Clearly, Trump would like to claim credit for ending a difficult war (and has already claimed he can do this quickly).<sup>14</sup> He certainly does not want to be known as the President who lost Ukraine. No one is going to "lose" Ukraine, but perceptions matter. It should be noted that the U.S. view of a fair settlement was already being modified under President Biden, who stated that "winning means Ukraine is a sovereign, independent nation."<sup>15</sup> This is a much lower, and more realistic, bar than recovering all lost territory, securing massive reparations, and so on, put forward earlier as goals.

Given Russia's current advantage on the ground, plus the Trump factor, it seems clear that Ukraine could have achieved a better outcome if it had been willing to start negotiations in 2024 or 2023 rather than now or in the foreseeable future. Under current conditions, Ukraine will have to make painful concessions, both territorial and on policy, to avoid what would probably be even more ruinous fighting with reduced support from the United States.

Another principle of "getting to yes" is that, if a permanent solution cannot be agreed upon, it's necessary to find temporary arrangements that the parties can live with, while the search goes on. That is part of the function of a ceasefire. The hope is that a permanent solution can be found, or, over time, the temporary solution turns out to be tolerable. There are obvious problems with any ceasefire. The primary one is that the line of control/line of contact established by the ceasefire will probably be at, or close to, the current line. One might expect that a ceasefire line might leave Russia in control of somewhat less of Ukrainian territory than it now controls, but still a significant portion of Ukrainian lands. The portion of Russia in the Kursk region now under Ukrainian control would presumably be part of the bargaining process.

This could well turn into a frozen conflict if later adjustments cannot be agreed. Any ceasefire boundary may be illogical, "unfair", and difficult to monitor and defend. While a permanent settlement need not adopt this line, changing it could be difficult or come at a high cost to one of the parties. The transfer of large portions of the Sinai from Israel to Egypt in their peace treaty is a successful counterexample of revising the military results of a conflict. Another possible problem could be that the parties discover that they could live with unresolved issues for a time, but these eventually become unacceptable if further negotiations fail.

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# Monitoring a ceasefire

**When countries, or groups within countries, agree to stop fighting, and the whole world wants this to be successful, the answer has generally been peacekeepers.**

A third obvious problem with a ceasefire is assuring that the firing really stops and is not resumed by either side. This problem has been highlighted by Western observers, who point to Russia's dubious recent compliance record regarding arms control and other international security agreements. Little effort has been devoted to analysing possible solutions to this problem, perhaps because, at least until recently, talk of negotiations to deal with the war in Ukraine has not been fashionable, if not fully seen as a political 'taboo'. It is time to begin to think seriously about this, and the cupboard of tools and experience is far from bare.

When countries, or groups within countries, agree to stop fighting, and the whole world wants this to be successful, the answer has generally been peacekeepers. A more general category of professionals monitoring, and in some cases enforcing, compliance with an agreement would be inspectors, observers or some other euphemism. The United Nations, and, to a lesser extent, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have extensive experience in this area. An entire family of arms control agreements have vast and successful on-site monitoring experience, carried out by international organisations or the States-Parties themselves. These include the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), New START, Threshold Test Ban Treaty (TTBT), Argentine-Brazil Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC) and others.

The OSCE has experience monitoring the situation in the Donbas and gained some cooperation from both sides.<sup>16</sup> Of greater relevance is the fact that the UN has carried out over 70 Peacekeeping Missions over the past 76 years, of which 11 are active today. There are about 72,000 field personnel with 121 countries contributing.<sup>17</sup> UN Peacekeeping Missions are designed to maintain international peace and security, facilitate the political process, protect civilians, and assist in disarmament, demobilisation and the reintegration of former combatants. Of particular interest would be the Cyprus Mission, established in 1964 to monitor the border and keep the peace in Cyprus between Greece and Turkey--two NATO members. These UN missions have generally been successful, with the disastrous breakdown of security in Srebrenica, Bosnia-Herzegovina, in 1996 a notable exception.

A different model would be The Multilateral Force and Observers (MFO), established in 1982 to monitor the Sinai Peninsula under the Treaty of Peace between Israel and Egypt after the President of the UN Security Council announced that it would not be possible for the UN to provide a suitable peacekeeping force.<sup>18</sup> The MFO is unique in that it is outside the UN framework and reports directly to the treaty parties, Israel and Egypt. It divided the Sinai into four zones, and for over 40 years, has successfully operated checkpoints and reconnaissance patrols, monitored international boundaries and other specified areas and ensured freedom of navigation through the Strait of Tiran. Aspects of this experience are clearly relevant to the Russia-Ukraine problem. Useful lessons, both positive and negative, can also be drawn from the resolution of other recent violent episodes in Europe—for example, the Balkan Wars and the Troubles in Northern Ireland.



In contrast to the tiny area of Gaza, the areas of Ukraine and Russia to be monitored are huge. The Russia-Ukraine border is about 2,295 km (1,426 miles) long, of which about 1,974 km (1,227 miles) are land border. Including the Ukraine-Belarus border would add another 1,239 km (770 miles). Of course, a relatively small portion of these borders are active conflict zones, but some attention would need to be paid to all the border areas. President Zelensky recently told the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, that at least 200,000 European Peacekeepers would be needed to enforce any ceasefire deal.<sup>19</sup> This seems well in excess of what would be available or necessary. In addition, if this were a UN Peacekeeping Mission, it would likely include African and Asian forces, in addition to European ones. Putin has stated that the war is not about territory. We shall see how hard he bargains over Ukrainian territory. In any case, the media and many commentators will look at the map which results from negotiations and declare winners and losers based solely on that, though territory won and lost will be far from the whole story.

Both Ukraine and Russia might be receptive to the creation of some sort of buffer zones, probably demilitarised in some way, along portions of whatever border is agreed on a temporary basis between them. On the Ukrainian side, one could imagine two types of peacekeepers. One possibility would be a “tripwire” force made up of allies of Ukraine, presumably primarily from NATO countries. This would be similar to the U.S. forces deployed in Europe during the Cold War. Any attack from Russia across the agreed border would involve attacking Western forces, which would constitute a powerful deterrent. Ukraine would be free to pursue its goal of building the largest military force in Europe (respecting whatever demilitarised zones might be agreed). Under this scenario, to which Russia would probably never agree, Russian military assets would almost certainly be deployed in force on the Russian side of the border, creating a new and tense Iron Curtain. This would create a direct NATO-Russia confrontation with the risk of extremely dangerous clashes. This outcome would be provocative, wasteful and not lead to the sort of peaceful coexistence we are hoping for.

The other possibility would be a more customary Peacekeeping Mission, run by the UN, OSCE or perhaps a new organisation created for the purpose, framed like the MFO. The personnel would be international and neutral on both sides of the border or perhaps based in a neutral zone between the two countries. Its mission would formally be to protect both countries from attack, though most of the world would presumably view it primarily as protecting Ukraine. In contrast to the first option, this one would lead to a situation in which, if Putin attacked the Peacekeeping Force, he would create essentially a conflict with the entire world, including China. The first scenario could be implemented without any agreement from Russia, while the second would require the approval of both sides. Success for the mission could pave the way for the negotiation of a permanent resolution. Such a settlement could involve making the international Peacekeeping Mission of indefinite duration, as appropriate. Several such missions have been in operation for decades. Monitoring compliance with the agreement could also employ National Technical Means and drones, in addition to boots on the ground.

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# Core elements of a ceasefire

The core elements of a ceasefire should, at a minimum, include the following:

- **Clear obligation not to conduct attacks on the other party by air, land or sea and no violation of the other party's airspace,** including by drones. Language involving cyberattacks could be included, though this is difficult to define and monitor.
- **Clear delineation of the agreed boundaries, including any buffer or demilitarised zones.** This would be without prejudice to the legal boundaries emerging from a final settlement.
- **Clear delineation of any restrictions on military assets or activities in agreed zones.**
- **Obligations, rights and privileges of accredited peacekeepers and monitors.**
- **Duration of the ceasefire;** include procedures for extensions, if any.
- **Commitment to enter good-faith negotiations to agree on a final settlement of the conflict.**

Other provisions would be highly desirable and urgent. However, experience shows that agreement on them could require lengthy negotiations to achieve. Agreement to stop the destruction and killing should not be held hostage to such provisions:

- Restrictions on location and withdrawal of heavy weapons.
- Numerical limits on holdings of agreed categories of armament, and their reduction.
- Notification of certain planned military activities, including international military assistance and training programmes.
- Exchange of information and data, including on arms diversion which is a growing problem in wartime Ukraine.
- Demining.
- Procedures for the return of POWs and displaced persons.

# Conclusions

In view of the current stalemate in the war and its terrible toll on many levels, the sudden push toward a comprehensive peace agreement should be welcome news. At the same time, finding a settlement that is fair, durable and respects the legitimate interests of all parties will be difficult. President Trump clearly hopes for rapid success. Given the complexity of the issues and lack of trust among the belligerents and their supporters, this seems unlikely. Further fighting seems unlikely to change the situation on the ground in any substantial way. During the likely protracted peace negotiations, the sides will have the perverse incentive to intensify their military efforts to improve their positions in these negotiations. Thus, a quick and effective ceasefire should be the first step.

Perhaps the most difficult issue in achieving a ceasefire will be establishing the line of control/line of contact. This will almost certainly involve painful concessions by Ukraine—in particular, control of Crimea and the Donbas. While the details of this map will be important, they should be understood to be without prejudice to the provisions of a final peace agreement. A Peacekeeping Force, and perhaps demilitarised buffer zones, will be an important part of any ceasefire. This Force would best be a neutral one, agreed by all the parties and under UN, or perhaps OSCE, supervision. A partisan Peacekeeping Force drawn from NATO countries would likely lead to a highly militarised, tense and confrontational border not conducive to stability or a favourable atmosphere for the necessary comprehensive peace negotiations to follow. In contrast, any aggression by Putin against an international, neutral Peacekeeping Force would put him into conflict with essentially the entire world, including China.

During negotiations for a ceasefire, one could anticipate frequent admonitions using the old cliché that “no agreement is better than a bad agreement.” In this case, the agreement would have to be extremely bad to be worse than a continuation of this ruinous war.

The acrimonious public meeting President Trump and Vice President Vance had with President Zelensky at the White House on February 28 does not bode well for Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

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