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Engineer an Armistice in Ukraine

The United States must lead negotiations to end the fighting.

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TOPLINE

After a third year of fighting between Russia and Ukraine, neither side has proven capable of achieving a decisive military outcome. Instead, hundreds of thousands of casualties have mounted, the war has expanded into Russian territory, and more outside forces from North Korea and other countries have entered the conflict. While American and allied support to Ukraine has helped to avoid the worst outcomes, the current trend in the war is that Russian forces are advancing, often at great cost, and Ukraine is losing more troops and territory. Earlier concerns that a protracted conflict could lead to horizontal and vertical escalation have proven well-founded in light of recent reports of North Korea deploying several thousand troops, including “special forces,” to support Russia’s war effort. It is vital that the United States develop a strategy to prevent the further expansion of the war, and ideally to engineer an end to the fighting.

THE PROBLEM

The incoming Trump administration faces a number of challenges in dealing with the war in Ukraine. First and foremost is the vital strategic interest in preventing a direct conflict between the United States (and its allies and partners) and Russia (and its allies and partners). Second is the strategic and ethical necessity of bringing an end to the killing, thus sparing Ukrainians from as much unnecessary suffering and death as possible through more prudent and realistic statecraft. Third is the desire to uphold the principles of national sovereignty, self-determination, and territorial integrity—perhaps the most basic tenets of the international order—which Russia has clearly violated in this war.

A key dilemma is that all three challenges are of the highest priority, yet in some ways conflict with one another. The government of Ukraine is currently making difficult choices about the inevitable trade-offs between Ukrainian lives and Ukrainian lands, for example. However, even as the United States helps Ukraine defend itself, the Trump administration must remain focused on its first responsibility of ensuring the security of the American people, and thus must prioritize its vital strategic interest in preventing the war from expanding further and increasing the risk of a direct conflict with Russia.

Ukraine has every right to defend itself from foreign aggression and to insist that its sovereignty be respected, and its territorial integrity be restored. Unfortunately, that is unlikely to be the result of this war, and the governments in Moscow, Kyiv, and Washington know this. As such, while the United States should continue to support Ukraine in defending its rightful territory, it will be difficult to convince rational and informed people that sustained investments in the defense of Ukraine – even over many years – will eventually achieve Ukraine’s maximalist aims in the war. While high levels of military and financial support remain essential to Ukraine’s ability to defend itself, that support is likely to diminish over time as Ukraine’s supporters lose hope in the possibility of a military victory and as Kyiv’s declared strategy for achieving a just peace loses political salience.

Time is most likely not on Ukraine’s side. The Trump administration will need to find new ways to manage military assistance and diplomacy such that it helps to bring about an end to the fighting before attrition further diminishes Ukraine’s prospects. To achieve this will require moving toward an understanding of U.S. and allied objectives rooted in more realistic aspirations – for example, ensuring Ukraine’s survival as a thriving independent state – rather than stubbornly pursuing the unlikely goal of fully restoring Ukraine’s control of its internationally recognized territory. The United States must help Ukraine adopt more realistic ends in line with its actual means, without undermining the principle of inviolable sovereignty by countenancing Russia’s conquest of its neighbor.

ESSENTIAL CONTEXT

Since February 2022, the United States has provided Ukraine more than \$64 billion in military assistance. This assistance has ranged from artillery to advanced precision missile systems and missile defenses, and from tanks and armored vehicles to multi-role fighter jets. Beyond materiel support, the United States and its NATO allies have also provided Ukraine extensive technical support for its cyber defenses and command, control, and communications capabilities, along with intelligence and other more covert forms of support. While the robust campaign of support for Ukraine has enabled it to withstand Russia’s brutal invasion for nearly three years, it has not enabled Ukrainian forces to turn the tide in the war. Indeed, Ukraine has undoubtedly denied Russia the swift and easy victory that President Putin apparently hoped for, but it has not dissuaded

him from pursuing a drawn-out, costly war of attrition in which Russia holds a number of structural advantages. Over the long term, it is difficult to see how Ukraine can prevail without a major intervention by outside forces, leaving it with only one realistic option for long-term survival: a negotiated armistice or ceasefire. The sooner Ukraine reaches that outcome, the more territory it will retain and the more people it will save.

Ukraine has achieved significant military successes in the last three years. It continues to degrade and deter Russia's Black Sea fleet—thus defending key coastal cities like Odesa—and its surprise incursion in Russia's Kursk region allowed it to seize control of more than 1,000 square kilometers of Russian territory. Ukraine has also increasingly resorted to long-range strikes on Russian cities and military bases in an effort to push Russian forces back from airfields and staging areas near the Ukrainian border and to reciprocate some of the damage Ukraine has been forced to endure.

In response, Russia has recently increased efforts to retake control of Kursk and has apparently leveraged its new mutual defense pact with North Korea, signed in June, to gain some direct assistance from its ally. Russia has also continued to import significant defense articles and industrial equipment from countries like Iran, North Korea, and China. The current trajectory of the war indicates that Ukraine will likely continue to gradually lose territory as both sides attempt to improve their bargaining positions and carry out increasingly desperate attacks in a vain effort to compel the other to yield. At the same time, recent developments like North Korean forces joining the fight and the newly authorized use of U.S. missiles in support of Ukraine's occupation of Russian territory have already increased the risk of further escalation.

If a political decision is reached in Moscow to formally declare war – Russia's intervention has thus far been considered a “Special Military Operation” – Putin will have the option of a more significant mobilization campaign, leveraging Russia's larger population to try to overwhelm Ukrainian forces. To date, Putin has presumably been reluctant to do this out of fear that a major mobilization would be politically unpopular, but that does not mean that he won't decide to mobilize in the future. Further, while the involvement of North Korean forces may indicate that Russia's military is being strained by the war, it also signals an implicit threat and practical ability to further expand the war in order to meet Putin's declared objectives.

Since its failure to overthrow the Ukrainian government in the initial invasion, Russia's declared war aims have been largely consistent: It demands that Ukrainian forces be removed from Russian territory, including Kursk and the four Ukrainian provinces that Russia formally annexed in September 2022. Additionally, Russia demands that Ukraine declare neutrality (or that it be otherwise formally excluded from the NATO alliance) and that there be limitations placed on the Ukrainian military.

Ukraine's aims, on the other hand, are as righteous as they are unrealistic. For example, Ukraine's Peace Formula calls for the full restoration of its internationally recognized

territory, the withdrawal of all Russian forces from Ukrainian territory, and the establishment of a special tribunal to investigate and prosecute Russian leaders and soldiers for war crimes. Ukraine also cites the need for security guarantees, as well as its inclusion in a new post-war European security architecture, as essential components of a peace deal. Some of these goals may be achievable in negotiations; others seem less plausible. For its part, Russia also has little hope of achieving all of its demands through negotiations.

China and Brazil have put forward a joint “Peace Plan” that sets out some basic goals to guide all sides moving forward, including preventing the battlefield from expanding; avoiding further escalation or provocation; and resuming direct dialogue and pressing for de-escalation, with the aim of an eventual comprehensive ceasefire and international peace conference recognized by both Russia and Ukraine. While the proposal was poorly received by Ukraine and the U.S., it places appropriate emphasis on the need to deescalate to prevent further expansion or escalation of the conflict.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus far, the U.S. approach has been to provide Ukraine with large amounts of military equipment, financial assistance, intelligence support, and an organized international coalition of diplomatic and military supporters, all without taking an overt interest in how Ukraine defines its aims in the conflict. That approach is no longer viable, as international support has begun to show cracks, and the war of attrition has begun to tilt against Ukraine. As the National Security Council’s former Russia Senior Director Thomas Graham has rightly argued, it is time for the next administration to take seriously the idea that Russia may be more interested in reaching terms with the United States than with Ukraine, and that only a change in U.S. strategy can alter the fundamental dynamic of the conflict, which does not currently favor Ukraine.

Preserve the principle that territorial conquest is illegitimate. It is difficult to see how the war in Ukraine can be resolved militarily, and even harder to imagine how it could be resolved in Ukraine’s favor without a massive external intervention that would necessarily lead to further expansion and escalation of the war. For now, Ukraine is demonstrating to Russia that it will not be defeated, let alone conquered, and that Russia will eventually have to negotiate for an end to hostilities. The U.S. should continue to strengthen this impression for Russia. It is also important that the United States does not formally recognize Russia’s annexation of any part of Ukraine’s internationally recognized territory. Areas under Russian military occupation should only be described as illegally occupied territories for all diplomatic purposes moving forward in order to preserve the principle that territorial conquest is illegitimate.

Establish a realistic strategy for an achievable victory. As my colleagues Emma Ashford and Kelly Grieco have argued persuasively, the best hope for an eventual victory may be for Ukraine and its allies to redefine “victory” as Ukraine’s successful defense

and survival, unbroken by Russian aggression and integrated into the rest of Europe. While this would not achieve Ukraine's ideal vision of victory, it would mean adopting a much more realistic war aim of ensuring Ukraine's survival as an independent state. It would also simplify the military challenge for Ukraine's armed forces, which could concentrate on constructing a layered defensive system, rather than simultaneously developing both defensive and offensive capabilities, formations, and operational concepts. To this end, Ukraine has evidently begun to shift its focus away from reclaiming all of its lost territory and toward establishing as strong a defensive posture as it can to frustrate Russia's efforts to conquer more territory or bring about the collapse of the Ukrainian government, thus preventing Putin from achieving his strategic goals.

This shift to a defensive strategy might also allow Ukraine to become more self-sustaining and less reliant on Western assistance by concentrating on the production and deployment of defensive systems, armaments, and military formations. When Russia's leadership is persuaded that Ukraine's defenses are sufficiently strong to prevent it from achieving its aims through military force, Moscow may become more inclined to pursue negotiations to end the fighting.

In short, if Russia cannot produce the collapse of the government in Kyiv, it will likely continue its effort to take control of the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine and attempt to effectively subjugate a smaller, weaker, more isolated Ukraine. America's goal should therefore be to prevent Russia from achieving most, if not all, of its strategic goals by ensuring that Ukraine does not become subjugated to Russia, isolated from its European friends, or weakened by the war to the point that it can no longer defend itself.

From a diplomatic standpoint, the Trump administration can do at least three things to ensure Ukraine's survival and prevent the conflict from expanding:

Signal conditional support for a ceasefire. Washington can convey to Moscow that the United States will continue to supply Ukraine with defensive arms and will not negotiate over sanctions relief or a resumption of normal interactions with Russia unless and until an armistice or ceasefire agreement is reached between Moscow and Kyiv. Putin must be persuaded that his war will not become easier and that allied support for Ukraine will persist if he continues to pursue a military outcome. The United States can also signal to Russia that it is willing to re-engage on issues of strategic stability, arms control, and transparency around military exercises and other issues related to shared security interests pending Russia's conclusion of an armistice or ceasefire agreement with Kyiv. This would present Moscow with a choice between continuing its costly war of aggression or moving toward more responsible great power relations.

Propose a process for de-escalation. The United States can propose a process for Russia and Ukraine to implement a phased de-escalation beginning with specific confidence-building measures, perhaps with a designated group of international observers or guarantors (for example, India, Brazil, China, Turkey, France, the UK, and/or Germany).

This overture would simultaneously serve two functions: it would test Russia's willingness and ability to comply with an agreed upon de-escalation process, and it would provide a forcing function for the organization and eventual establishment of an adequately resourced, mutually accepted international monitoring or peacekeeping mission (in whatever form that can be negotiated by the belligerents). While such a mission is widely understood to be necessary under any terms that might eventually be negotiated, there has been little effort to date to establish the practical political and diplomatic scaffolding for such a complex mission, which will take longer than 24 hours to work out.

Negotiate appropriate security guarantees for both sides. Finally, the United States can reach agreement with Ukraine on the kinds of security guarantees that would be both necessary and practical to give Ukraine confidence in pursuing a negotiated end to the fighting. These security guarantees can be conveyed as another condition for Russia. A major obstacle to the cessation of hostilities is that Russia could use any break from the fighting to refit and reorganize its forces to resume its aggression. Security guarantees must be designed to ensure that Russia is deterred from attacking Ukraine again in the future. In the end, however, both Ukraine and Russia will need to be dissuaded from reigniting the conflict once a ceasefire or armistice is reached, so they will both need to be reasonably satisfied that their security interests have been bolstered by any eventual negotiations. Russia's security concerns will also be a necessary part of any negotiations.

This new approach may not be embraced with any public enthusiasm in Ukraine or beyond. Russia would have a basis for declaring victory in capturing much of the Donbas region, which Ukrainians would undoubtedly resent for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, this scenario is perhaps the least awful way the war can end. Those who advocate for the United States and NATO allies to redouble their efforts to bring about an outright military victory for Ukraine must face the reality that Ukraine cannot win this war on the battlefield without much more significant outside support – most likely the direct intervention of NATO forces. Some may genuinely not understand why establishing a NATO no-fly zone would require using force against Russia, or that sending uniformed NATO troops into the warzone to carry out combat or non-combat missions would almost certainly result in further escalation. However, these harsh realities present real dangers that the Trump administration would be wise to avoid.

A far better option for the United States, NATO, and Ukraine is to press for an early end to the fighting. This would save untold thousands of lives and allow Ukraine to preserve its freedom and democracy and chart a course toward deeper integration with the rest of Europe. The alternative is to continue along the current path, fighting an existential war that Ukraine is on course to lose.