

Opinion – Examining the Conditions for Durable Peace in Ukraine

Written by Abhishank Mishra

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ABHISHANK MISHRA, MAY 24 2025

Despite a series of US brokered meetings and simultaneous diplomatic engagements with Russia and Ukraine in Saudi Arabia, a limited thirty-day energy ceasefire was achieved. Both sides have since continued to strike energy installations in each other's territory. As both Russia and Ukraine seek a favourable outcome of the war through pursuing their maximalist demands in negotiation, an analysis of the underlying motivations and constraints influencing the feasibility of a sustainable peace framework can indicate whether a lasting solution to the conflict can be achieved through negotiation. While in broader public discourse, NATO expansion has been recognized as a key grievance for provoking Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a longstanding unease with Western European economic influence and the spread of a democratic political reform agenda in zones of Russian strategic interest have also played a role.

Through waging this war emanating from these vulnerabilities, Russia is broadly trying to achieve three goals: First, disrupt Ukrainian ties with NATO and reinstate a security buffer between itself and the West. Russia is attempting to create a frozen yet managed conflict to maintain military presence and assume the role of a self-proclaimed peace-keeper to further its interests and potentially install proxy leadership. In recent weeks, Putin's push for placing Ukraine under UN led government and a bid to hold fresh elections is part of this elaborate subterfuge.

Second, the Kremlin is trying to derail Ukraine's growing closeness and assimilation with Western Europe. Triggered by Ukraine and Georgia entering into the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement with the European Union, which would have harmonized legislative frameworks and reinforced political integration with the West through this conflict, Russia has sought to punish Ukraine's relationship with the EU. An unanticipated yet purposeful consequence of the Russian Federation's debilitating war on Ukraine is the erosion of productive capacity, which weakens the long-term prospects of contributing and qualifying for both EU and NATO memberships.

Third, and finally, by leveraging this conflict, Russia is trying to erode pro-Western sympathy and obstruct political reform in its sphere of influence. To achieve its third aim, Russia has sought to undermine Western political influence by engaging in misinformation campaigns, cyber operations, malign finance, civil society subversion, and economic coercion to silence critics and install proxy regimes to erode Western influence and block options to build alliances with the West. Thus, Russia's invasion of Ukraine signals the unfolding of a long-term strategic vision rather than a mere tactical response to NATO expansion.

For Ukraine, a crucial inclination in achieving a temporary ceasefire is regaining secure access to its main exporting channel in the Black Sea and securing its critical infrastructure, which will serve as the cornerstone of Ukraine's reconstruction efforts. More durable war aims are centred around preserving its status as a sovereign liberal state and securing security and independence while preventing further human casualties, physical assets, and economic damage from being incurred due to this conflict. Notably, after the failure of the Minsk agreement, Kyiv has heavily leaned towards seeking credible security assurances as a precondition to achieving lasting peace. The preferred route through which Ukraine has sought to achieve security guarantees is through securing membership of NATO and its attendant Article 5 protection. However, this has been a non-starter due to the unwillingness of the United

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States and current NATO members to take on additional security liabilities. A crucial impediment to extending the NATO security guarantee to Ukraine has been the inadvertent possibility of undermining the credibility of the existing formalistic guarantees to its members in Eastern Europe.

A second route through which Ukraine has sought security guarantees is through multilateral or bilateral collective defence obligations providing extended deterrence and flexible assurance under the security umbrella of the United States or an all-European “coalition of the resolute”. This has proved unfeasible due to America’s long-standing lack of interest in making Ukraine a security imperative or additionally guaranteeing extended deterrence, which would entail a greater risk of direct confrontation with Russia.

As compared to the United States, a European Security guarantee by extending the membership of the European Union to Ukraine, which does not implicate NATO’s Article 5 commitments for the European states, has also been explored. In contrast to NATO’s watertight collective defence commitment, the EU’s Lisbon treaty on mutual defence, due to its more ambiguous character, guarantees commitment while providing greater room for manoeuvrability. In practice, however, extending this guarantee would create issues in separating European guarantees to Ukraine from de facto NATO protection. Moreover, if European forces were attacked and a carveout from the NATO alliance positioned itself as a European guarantor coalition, it would splinter and weaken the NATO alliance by creating conditionalities in the principle of collective defence and subvert the underlying strategic logic of pursuing a unified approach to defence.

Except for its demands for security guarantees and a robust post-war security framework from mediators of the conflict, Ukraine has shown a willingness to make concessions and yield to pragmatic solutions. Kyiv has exhibited an inclination to maintain neutrality under heightened appeal of joining the West to dissuade further Russian aggression. Despite talks of a complete ceasefire, Russia has not offered any comprehensive concessions to indicate that it wants lasting peace and not a temporary truce. This round of talks between Trump and Putin indicates that Russia is not interested in an unconditional ceasefire and is more concerned about gaining an advantageous settlement for itself.

Putin’s lack of concession concerning his demands puts the resolution out of the zone of possible agreement, as the prevention of NATO’s expansion or membership cannot be met without sacrificing Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Second, his demands are positional, leading to the implication that with the hard position that it has taken, the possibility of conversation about legitimate issues and how they might be resolved is locked out. This also leads to attendant issues in creating value through diplomacy failing, and with it, the prospects of resolving concerns and making a long-term agreement. In delaying and manipulating the negotiations, there is an attempt by Putin to achieve broader concessions, while guaranteeing Russian forces time to achieve battlefield gains. Russia wants a ceasefire on its own terms, which indicates that there is little potential for Putin to alter his core demands and agree on security guarantees for Ukraine.

Given Russia’s notorious track record of repeated ceasefire and terms of agreement violations, even de facto concession of territory as part of a ceasefire does not guarantee any assurance against potential violations in the future. Based on its deceptive negotiation tactics, maximalist demands, and persistent breaches of previous ceasefires, Russia has not proven to be a trustworthy nation to negotiate or uphold a genuine commitment to peace. This highlights that any negotiation with Russia is likely to be risky unless backed by firm and enforceable security assurances.

Within these circumstances, then the most practicable route to achieving security guarantees for Ukraine remains through ‘armed neutrality’, which, while leaving it with no formal external security guarantee, will still guarantee significant military assistance to help build a credible self-sufficient deterrent with European initiative in provisioning military aid. This would involve renouncing NATO aspirations, which would assuage Russian concerns while building independent military capabilities, striking a delicate balance of reassurance with credible deterrence. This option provides Ukraine with a fair chance of achieving long-term peace. However, this would not be a costless strategy for the European Union and NATO, as they would be responsible for building and fortifying Ukraine’s defences. In this case, Ukraine must militarily fortify its front line and diplomatically reclaim leverage in the negotiation to avoid being

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forced to make unacceptable concessions that would make it impossible to implement the arrangement.

Trump's wilful ignorance and urgency for peace may achieve little in terms of a lasting solution but risks leaving a legacy of unresolved tensions and lingering hostility, which might reignite conflict in the future. There is a great likelihood that the brokered deal will not achieve formal peace but a mere ceasefire of active hostilities. Ceasefires are mere tourniquets to enable immediate cessation of hostility and diplomacy's short-term solution to intractable issues. An analysis of the competing war aims and negotiation tactics indicates that a lasting peace might not be achievable just through compromise and negotiation but requires credible security assurances that guarantee enforcement, deterrence, and accountability, especially with a state that has consistently used negotiations as an instrument for manipulation.

About the author:

Dr Abhishank Mishra is a PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University and a Network for the Advanced Study of Technology Geopolitics Fellow (2024-25) at Takshashila Institution, India. He has published opinion pieces and commentaries for platforms such as Stimson Centre, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) Publications, and Lowy Institute. He also writes for newspapers and media outlets in India, such as The Hindu, The Indian Express, The Telegraph, and NDTV.