
The Strategic Power of a Prospect of Peace

A realistic prospect of a lasting peace deal is not only necessary to end the death and destruction caused by a war, but also to prevent the consolidation of powerful domestic and transnational groups benefitting from an ongoing conflict. International mediators need to do their best to keep such a prospect open for Russia and Ukraine.

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As an armed conflict on a scale not seen over the last 70 years, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war highlights the long-standing dilemmas of peace-making that require a serious review of existing conflict resolution strategies. In this war, the main short-term risk is uncontrolled escalation – either through the use of weapons of mass destruction or an expansion of the war zone. The imperative of averting such short-term risks makes international stakeholders look for possible ways of bringing about a pause in the fighting. Even if a ceasefire does not lead to a definitive solution to the issues that caused the war in the first place, just a cessation of heavy fighting would go a long way towards meeting the security interests of many players in Europe, Asia and the United States. However, the longer-term risks of allowing the war to simmer beyond a ceasefire are often overlooked. These risks include the consolidation of vested interests in perpetuating the conflict. Overcoming such interests may require a clear prospect of a stable peace as a powerful alternative to protracted conflict.

The choice for war and its discontents

In his January 1961 farewell address to the American people, US president Dwight Eisenhower famously [warned](#) against allowing the “unwarranted influence” of the “military-industrial complex” on politics and society in the United States. In the contemporary world, however, government-connected defence industrialists are usually well funded even in peacetime and are sometimes wary of having some of their products tested in action (and possibly found wanting). More dangerous are politicians exploiting pro-war sentiment to stay in office instead of offering a regular socio-economic agenda even in democratic countries, predatory

businesses flourishing on illicit trade, corporate raiders looking to take over companies whose value is depressed by the war, and a cottage industry of influence peddlers and advisors internationally and propagandists domestically who would go out of business if the conflict came to an end. In a country like Russia, the money accruing from the war – for example, injected into the defence industry or used to attract and pay volunteer armed forces recruits – feeds various ecosystems that have significant lobbying power and can resist the scrapping of their windfall profits.

A prospect of peace thus becomes instrumental in preventing the formation of deep-seated and intractable interests and networks that live off armed conflict, as well as brainwashing operations thriving on the war. Such a prospect can illuminate the way for stakeholders in the conflicting states that see a benefit in pivoting towards peace.

As the war drags on, peace may come within sight because of a change in calculus among those parties currently advocating for a continuation of war in the conflicting states or – in an authoritarian system – as a result of a domestic political realignment leading to an overwhelming democratic expression of the desire for peace. However, betting on such changes is a risky proposition for international stakeholders. If powerful players, such as coalitions of states, fear the perpetuation of the conflict and lack the wherewithal to place the countries that are involved in a war on a peace track, these stakeholders may nevertheless have enough resources to make peace look like a realistic alternative. This can be done by offering incentives (such as the removal of sanctions, promises of economic aid or asylum, etc.), applying pressure on the warring sides, creatively formulating

peace proposals and drawing roadmaps to peace, providing effective monitoring services for a peace deal, and offering other forms of mediation.

In a way, creating a realistic prospect of peace can serve as an instrument in two-level negotiations: international actors can influence the domestic situation in a counterpart country by presenting its domestic actors with a credible peace alternative. Once the prospect of peace acquires sufficient support in a country waging an aggressive war, its incumbent government may find itself under pressure to negotiate an end to the armed conflict.

The odds of peace in Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine became the first serious armed attempt at geopolitical revisionism by a nuclear-armed power. It is understandable why many stakeholders may want to end the fighting as soon as possible. And yet freezing the conflict through an immediate ceasefire would not change the constellation of interests involved in the war and would present Ukraine's Western supporters with difficult choices of whether to recognise the territory that Ukraine loses as Russian, how long to maintain sanctions on Russia, or how to offer Ukraine solid collective security guarantees.

Even if a robust solution to the conflict may not yet be in sight because of the mismatch between considerations of justice and the current correlation of forces, strategic action needs to be taken to minimise the entrenchment of constituencies living off the conflict and interested in an open-ended war. The prospect of an eventual negotiated solution can present an alternative that could allow the isolation of the most radical proponents of perpetuating the conflict.

A credible strategy for ending the war would require concerted action from multiple parties and could consist of several parts, including:

- a broad international display of a shared interest in implementing time-tested "compromise" formulas, such as "Korea" (de-facto partitioning of Ukraine with its western part integrated into NATO), "Minsk" (stop the fighting on ambiguous terms expected to be clarified later), or "Finland post-World War II" (Ukraine's non-bloc status coupled with prompt economic integration with Western partners) – as opposed to declarations of unilateral terms of settlement – for example, demands that Ukraine surrender several regions claimed by

Russia or restore its internationally recognised borders;

- the declaration by powerful mediators – the United States, the European Union (EU), China and others – of their positions and actions under different settlement scenarios, as opposed to suggesting that it is up to the warring parties to reach a settlement that they both agree to; and
- signalling support for the factions in the warring countries that are interested in a comprehensive solution to the conflict.

If credible peace plans can be floated and the path to successfully negotiating an end to the war can be mapped out, actors favouring peace will garner additional influence that can be put to good use amid mounting war fatigue in the conflicting societies.

The recent past provides ample evidence of the prospect of lasting peace being an effective deterrent against the runaway escalation of major conflicts. The Abraham Accords and the concurrent dynamic contributed to containing the armed conflict between Israel and militant Islamic groups in the wake of the 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel. Despite the war in Gaza, Saudi Arabia and Israel remain interested in normalising their relations, which keeps them from returning to the antagonistic positions they held prior to the normalisation process and escalating their relationship to one of greater conflict. Twice already in 2024 the promise of Western sanctions on Iran being eased under a revived nuclear deal with the United States and EU may have prevented Tehran from escalating its conflict with Israel. Similarly, the prospect of peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan strengthened Armenia's democratic government against populist revanchism after Armenia lost possession of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Conclusion

The Russo-Ukrainian war and the socio-economic mobilisation of both societies in support of the war make signalling the will for peace difficult. In April 2024 the Kremlin publicised a draft peace treaty claiming that it could have stopped the war at an early stage, in an obvious attempt to sow discord on the Ukrainian side between the groups that are willing to keep fighting and those looking for an exit from the current predicament. However, regret about the failure to reach a peaceful solution in April

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2022 may mount in Russia itself if the cost of the war increasingly reveals itself to Russian society.

A well-timed and strategic peace proposal can prompt adversaries to reformulate their goals under the influence of perceived peace dividends. Negotiators must strike a balance between showing weakness in their attempts to influence the opponents' calculus and acting decisively when war fatigue sufficiently impacts decision-making in the warring countries.

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