A Contact Group for Ukraine?

Walter Kemp

July 2024

GCSP

Geneva Centre for
Security Policy

Geneva Centre for Security Policy

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation that aims to advance global cooperation, security and peace. The foundation is supported by the Swiss government and governed by 55 member states. The GCSP provides a unique 360° approach to learn about and solve global challenges. The foundation's mission is to educate leaders, facilitate dialogue, advise through in-house research, inspire new ideas and connect experts to develop sustainable solutions to build a more peaceful future.

The GCSP Policy Briefs Series

The GCSP Policy Briefs series addresses current security issues, deduces policy implications and proposes policy recommendations. It aims to directly inform policy- and decision-making of states, international organisations and the private sector.

Under the leadership of Ambassador Thomas Greminger, Executive Director of the GCSP, the series is edited by Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan, Director of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Department, and Doctor Tobias Vestner, Director of the Research and Policy Advice Department & Head of Security and Law, and managed by Ms Christine Garnier Simon, Administration and Coordination Manager, GCSP Geopolitics and Global Futures.

About the author

Walter Kemp is Director of Communications at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and Senior Strategy Advisor at GCSP. He recently led a two-year multi-stakeholder process that resulted in the publication of a report entitled *Intersections: building blocks of a global strategy against transnational organized crime*. He is also author of *Security through Cooperation: To the same end* (Routledge, 2022). Walter has held senior positions in the Organization for Security and Cooperation Europe (OSCE), was spokesman and speechwriter at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and Vice President of the International Peace Institute. He writes extensively on issues of European security and teaches at the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna.

Introduction

The high-level Ukraine peace summit hosted by Switzerland on 15 and 16 June underlined the need for finding a path to peace. But thus far, proposals made by several countries, including Ukraine, have not stopped the fighting. Since Russia's aggression against Ukraine has implications for international peace and security, perhaps it is time to consider the formation of an international contact group to formulate a more coherent approach to de-escalating the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and nudge the parties towards peace.

Since the late 1990s it has been common to form international contact groups in times of crisis. Such groups can bolster coordination among different international actors, forge common positions and exert leverage on the parties to reduce tensions.[1] Indeed, in the past 20 or so years (since the beginning of the 21st century) there have been more than 20 such groups. Some of the more high-profile examples include contact groups on the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, the Great Lakes region of Africa, and for dealing with piracy off the coast of Somalia. These ad hoc coalitions with non-binding rules are designed to enhance cohesion, cooperation and coordination to improve conflict or crisis management. Considering the seriousness of the war in Ukraine and the fact that many countries have a stake in reducing tensions, it would seem necessary and urgent to form an international contact group on Ukraine.

---

[1] I. Henneberg, "International Contact Groups: Ad Hoc Coordination in International Conflict Management", *South African Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.27(4), 2020, p.446.

Geneva and Normandy formats

In 2014, as chair in office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Switzerland proposed the creation of a contact group to deal with the crisis in and around Ukraine.

At a meeting in Geneva on 17 April 2014, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the United States and the European Union (EU) held a meeting on the situation in Ukraine. The participants agreed on "initial concrete steps to de-escalate tensions and restore security for all citizens". These steps included all sides refraining from any violence, intimidation or provocative actions; disarming all illegal armed groups and returning illegally seized buildings to legitimate owners; granting amnesty to protesters; and launching a broad national dialogue. It was also agreed that the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM), which was established in March 2014[2], would play a leading role in assisting Ukrainian authorities and local communities in the immediate implementation of these de-escalation measures.

The Geneva format was used sparingly over the next few months, although developments on the ground underscored the need for closer cooperation among great powers in order to stop the situation from spiralling out of control.

On 6 June 2014, on the margins of the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy, France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine agreed to create an informal group that became known as the Normandy Group. Because both the Geneva and Normandy formats were informal, it appears that there was no formal agreement for France and Germany to replace the EU. Furthermore, it is not clear why the United States decided to discontinue its engagement in this contact group format.

The Normandy Group created a Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) comprising the OSCE, Ukraine and Russia to facilitate dialogue between the parties. It also brokered an agreement in Minsk, Belarus, on 5 September 2014 with representatives of the TCG and, without recognising their status, by the then-leaders of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. When this first Minsk agreement (or protocol) failed to stop the fighting, an additional memorandum was brokered and signed on 19 September. Among the points agreed were to ban flights by combat aircraft over the security zone; withdraw all foreign mercenaries from the conflict zone; ban offensive operations; pull heavy weaponry 15 km back on each side of the line of contact, creating a 30-kilometre buffer zone; and task the SMM with monitoring the implementation of the Minsk Protocol.

After heavy fighting in early 2015, the Normandy Group again met in Minsk at the presidential level. On 12 February 2015 the parties agreed to a new Package

---

[2] OSCE, Decision No. 1117: Deployment of an OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, PC.DEC/1117, 21 March 2014, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/6/116747.pdf.

of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements, commonly called Minsk II. However, like the previous Minsk agreement, this second attempt did not lead to a durable ceasefire. Instead of monitoring a ceasefire, the SMM counted hundreds – and even thousands – of violations every day.

From 2017 to 2019 the Normandy Group was not particularly active. A summit meeting involving the four presidents in Paris in December 2019 failed to make a breakthrough[3]. However, it continued to exist up until days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022. Indeed, meetings in the Normandy format were held in Paris on 26 January 2022 and in Berlin on 10 February.

However, the Normandy format was no longer the main or only forum trying to de-escalate tensions. Indeed, between 10 and 13 January 2022 alone there were bilateral meetings between US and Russian diplomats (in Geneva), a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, and a meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council, including a vague proposal to use the organisation as a venue for revitalised European security talks. But these various discussions were disjointed – and perhaps doomed to failure if Russia had already made up its mind to invade Ukraine.

Ad hoc initiatives and Zelensky's ten-point plan

After the shock of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and surprise at Ukraine's brave defence, diplomatic efforts were initiated in later February 2022. Meetings in Belarus and then Türkiye, and video conferences led to the drafting of "Key Provisions of the Treaty on Ukraine's Security Guarantees", also known as the Istanbul Communiqué. Apparently, the sides were quite close to agreement on the document at the end of March 2022[4], and on a draft treaty dated 15 April.[5] However, by late April the talks broke down, especially after the discovery of Russian atrocities in Bucha and Irpin, and it is not clear to what extent potential guarantor powers had given their support to the proposed mechanisms.[6]

After the failure of bilateral diplomacy, other parties took initiatives to foster peace. In May 2022 Italy proposed a four-point peace plan, while in February 2023 China published its position on the political settlement of the Ukraine

---

[3] OSW (Centre for Eastern Studies), "No Breakthrough at the Normandy Four Summit in Paris", 10 December 2019, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2019-12-10/no-breakthrough-normandy-four-summit-paris.

[4] S. Charap and S. Radchenko, "The Talks that Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine", *Foreign Affairs*, 16 April 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/talks-could-have-ended-war-ukraine; interview with one of the Ukrainian negotiators, 2024.

[5] *New York Times*, "Ukraine-Russia Peace Is as Elusive as Ever. But in 2022 They Were Talking", 15 June 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/06/15/world/europe/ukraine-russia-ceasefire-deal.html.

[6] Charap and Radchenko, 2024, p.17; interview with one of the Ukrainian negotiators, 2024.

crisis.[7] Some described this as China's 12-point peace plan, but Beijing was quick to diminish such a grand designation. In 2023 President Lula of Brazil suggested a peace plan[8], as well as the creation of a "peace club" or "peace group" to encourage dialogue and a peaceful settlement to the conflict.[9] In June 2023 a team of seven African presidents visited both Ukraine and Russia in an attempt to end the war[10], and there were even rumours of the Pope carrying out secret diplomacy to mediate between the parties[11]. Most recently, on 23 May 2024, Brazil and China put forward a joint proposal pushing for the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis and calling for the de-escalation of the situation. They encouraged members of the international community to support and endorse a number of common understandings outlined in the proposal and jointly play a constructive role in de-escalating the situation and promoting peace talks.[12] Critics note that the proposal makes no mention of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.

The main focus has been on President Zelensky's ten-point plan first presented at a G20 summit in November 2022. Unlike the Istanbul Communiqué, this is a list of Ukraine's demands rather than an attempt to negotiate a common position. A series of events have been held to rally support for the plan, including meetings in Copenhagen, Jeddah, Malta, Davos, and most recently the peace summit at the Bürgenstock resort in Switzerland. While dozens of countries have attended these events, their outcome has been limited.[13] Russia has rejected both the meetings and Zelensky's ten-point plan without outlining its own war aims or vision for peace, except for the maximalist conditions spelled out by President Putin on 14 June 2024.[14] That said, the main objective of the meeting in Bürgenstock was to inspire a future peace process. That opportunity should be seized.

[7] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis", 24 February 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html.

[8] M. Hirst and J.G. Tokatlian, "How Brazil Wants to End the War in Ukraine", *IPS Journal*, 6 July 2023, https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/how-brazil-wants-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine-6826/.

[9] Reuters, "Brazil's Lula Calls for 'Peace Group' to Broker Ukraine-Russia Deal", 16 April 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/brazils-lula-calls-peace-group-broker-ukraine-russia-deal-2023-04-16/.

[10] G. Khadiagala, "An African Peace Initiative in the Russia-Ukraine War?", PRIF Blog, 21 July 2023, https://blog.prif.org/2023/07/21/an-african-peace-initiative-in-the-russia-ukraine-war/.

[11] N. Mikhelidze, "Unpacking the Vatican's Diplomatic Failure in Reaching a Ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine War", Istituto Affari Internazionali, 18 May 2023, https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/unpacking-vaticans-diplomatic-failure-reaching-ceasefire-russia-ukraine-war.

[12] gov.br, "Brazil and China Present Joint Proposal for Peace Negotiations with the Participation of Russia and Ukraine", 23 May 2024, https://www.gov.br/planalto/en/latest-news/2024/05/brazil-and-china-present-joint-proposal-for-peace-negotiations-with-the-participation-of-russia-and-ukraine.

[13] ICG (International Crisis Group), "An Embattled Kyiv Looks for Aid in the Diplomatic Arena", 12 June 2024, https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/embattled-kyiv-looks-aid-diplomatic-arena.

[14] *Le Monde*, "Putin Says Ukraine Must Withdraw Troops and End NATO Bid for Peace Talks to Begin", 14 June 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/06/14/putin-says-ukraine-must-withdraw-troops-and-end-nato-bid-for-peace-talks-to-begin_6674805_4.html.

Possible role and composition of a contact group

Instead of a variety of independent initiatives or a series of peace conferences that do not include all parties, perhaps a contact group could help to move Russia and Ukraine closer to peace. This would be consistent with a UN General Assembly resolution adopted on 23 February 2023 and supported by 141 countries that called on UN member states and international organisations to "redouble support for diplomatic efforts to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine, consistent with the [UN] Charter".[15] President Zelensky seems increasingly open to internationalizing mediation of the conflict. On 8 July he said that he could imagine the EU, the US and China as mediators in peace talks between Ukraine and Russia.[16]

As noted earlier when describing past contact groups, an international contact group on Ukraine could bring greater coherence to disjointed international efforts. It could also create a greater sense of urgency, focus and common purpose among key stakeholders. Furthermore, it could exert leverage to reduce tensions and lower risks – reversing the current tendency towards escalation. Such a group could also have a positive side effect of bringing together great powers for a common cause at a time of geopolitical fragmentation and polarisation.

Among its tasks, the contact group could:

- take common initiatives and exert political pressure to reduce tensions;

- create conditions for dialogue;

- help the parties take steps towards an enduring cessation of hostilities and

- make proposals to reduce risks, address the plight of civilians, exercise restraint regarding attacks on critical infrastructure, and ensure nuclear safety and security.

The group could also provide links and a degree of coherence to other relevant initiatives such as on strategic stability, a joint military commission or de-escalation group, as well as talks on managing NATO-Russia relations and the future of European security.

It would make sense to include in the group countries that were guarantors of Ukraine's security pursuant to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum (which gave security assurances to Ukraine in return for it giving up nuclear weapons on its territory), namely the United States, the United Kingdom and the Russian

---

[15] UNGA (United Nations General Assembly), Principles of the Charter of the United Nations Underlying a Comprehensive, Just and Lasting Peace in Ukraine, A/RES/ES-11/6, 2 March 2023, https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/063/07/pdf/n2306307.pdf?token=Z0wcsb4ziVcG0ihTlG&fe=true.

[16] Ukraine sees EU, China, US as mediators in peace talks with Russia — Zelensky, https://tass.com/world/1814147.

Federation, as well as China and France. Conveniently, these are the five permanent members (P5) of the UN Security Council.

One could argue that since Russia is a party to the conflict, it should not be part of the contact group. While it was part of the Normandy format, it did so – by its own argument – as a mediator, not as a conflict party; it maintained that representatives of some areas of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions were acting without Russian support. That pretence is no longer credible. Therefore, there could be a P4+2 (Russia and Ukraine).

It would also make sense to involve Türkiye, based on its active diplomacy, not least in hosting peace talks in the spring of 2022 and for its role in the Black Sea Grain Deal. Germany could also make a case for its involvement as a great power in Europe and a former member of the Normandy format. Switzerland could also be considered because of its traditional role as a facilitator and mediator and its strong engagement with the Bürgenstock conference, although it might be better placed to host meetings of the Group rather than be part of it.

The global south should also not be overlooked. Brazil, for example, has been active in seeking a peaceful solution to the conflict. But where do you draw the line? One solution would be to involve the BRICS group, in other words add India and South Africa together with Brazil to Russia and China, with the latter two countries already included as P5 members.

This would mean a contact group of 9+2, including members of already established groups, namely the P5 and BRICS. It is also worth noting that five of the 11 are NATO members.

Another option for the composition of the contact group would be for both Ukraine and Russia to each choose three or four states to be members. However, the challenge in such a situation would be to decide who is in and who is out. Furthermore, from the outset, it creates a potentially antagonistic relationship of two opposing teams or camps, as opposed to involving states such as Brazil and Türkiye that would want good relations with both parties.

One could argue that such a contact group comprising 11 states is potentially unwieldy: the more members, the greater the transaction costs in keeping all states on board. Furthermore, the fact that many of the group's members are not like-minded means that intergroup dynamics may devolve into complex negotiations of their own.[17] However, it is worth noting that the median membership size for all 27 international contact groups that have been established since the 1970s is 12[18], so a 9+2 membership size is not so unusual. Furthermore, the group is not expected to mediate the crisis. First of all, it is highly likely that the parties do not want external mediation. Secondly, this would not be the group to do it. Rather, this contact group would support any

---

[17] T. Whitfield, "Working with Groups of Friends", *The Peacemaker's Toolkit*, Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace, 2010, p.24.

[18] Henneberg, 2020, p.451.

bilateral or multilateral initiatives. The group would also not get into the details of a ceasefire. That role should be left to the parties, for example through a joint military commission, with or without support from third parties.

Sometimes the group could meet as the 9 states, in other cases they could meet with the other 2 – Ukraine and Russia – either individually or together. This would enable contacts while keeping a degree of separation between Russia, Ukraine and the international partners. After all, contact groups seldom contain members who are parties to a conflict. Such an arrangement could also help overcome reservations from countries that would not want to be part of the same group as Russia, yet satisfy the concerns of states that do not want Russia to be completely excluded.

While the contact group would be informal, it could be useful to have a link to existing inter-governmental bodies. Including all five permanent members of the Security Council in the format would lead seamlessly to having the UN Secretariat play a supporting role to the group. At least one multinational Track 2 initiative has called for the establishment of an international contact group for the Russia-Ukraine conflict, for which it has developed proposals, and recommended that the UN Secretary-General appoint a Special Adviser (on the Cyprus model rather than a Special Representative) to support the work of the group. It would also make sense to allow the OSCE to liaise with the contact group, since it is a regional arrangement of the UN under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter and has a track record of seeking to manage the crisis in Ukraine, particularly through the deployment of the SMM to Ukraine between 2014 and 2021, as well as chairing the Trilateral Contact Group and its four working groups.

The group could either form organically as the result of a joint meeting or start with a core group (such as the P5 plus Ukraine) that would invite other members. The contact group could eventually be endorsed by a resolution of the Security Council and the G20, but would not need to wait for a mandate from the latter to begin its work.

The existence of such a group would not preclude the possibility of mediation in other formats, for example between Russia, the United States and Ukraine, or talks on strategic stability.

Conclusion

To conclude, the war in Ukraine is into its third year, with no end in sight. But it should not be forgotten that Russia's destabilisation of Ukraine has gone on for more than a decade. Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not only a serious threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, but also to international peace and security. Over the past two years several proposals have been made to de-escalate tensions and move towards peace, but these have mostly been unilateral, disjointed and lacking the support of at least one of the conflict parties.

At the moment, the parties are not seeking a negotiated settlement to the conflict, and there is an insufficient sense of urgency or leverage among other great powers to move the sides to the negotiating table. There is little point in forming a contact group if the idea is not supported by those who are supposed to work with it. However, exploring the idea of creating a contact group could pave the way for that eventuality when the opportunity arises. As has been pointed out, in a best-case scenario, the "ripening" of a conflict for negotiation may occur in parallel with the emergence of an obvious group of "friends".[19]

Total victory by one side or the other is unlikely. Russia, as a nuclear power, cannot be comprehensively defeated without the risk of nuclear war, while Ukraine, backed by NATO, cannot afford to lose, for the sake of its existence, the credibility of the European security order and the principles on which that order is based. Therefore, one day this war must end with a negotiated settlement. As the "Joint Communiqué on a Peace Framework" issued after the Bürgenstock Summit says "reaching peace requires the involvement of and dialogue between all parties".[20] Since the continuation of the war and the dangers of further escalation affect the security interests of many great powers, the sooner those powers start pulling in the same direction the better. There is an international coordination platform for the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine and a coordination mechanism for arms deliveries for Ukraine. Why not create a contact group for peace?

---

[19] T. Whitfield, "Working with groups of friends", *The Peacemaker's Toolkit*, United States Institute of Peace Washington, D.C., 2010, p. 39.

[20] Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, "Summit on Peace in Ukraine: Joint Communiqué on a Peace Framework", 16 June 2024, https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/aktuell/dossiers/konferenz-zum-frieden-ukraine/Summit-on-Peace-in-ukraine-joint-communique-on-a-peace-framework.html.

Building Peace Together

GCSP
Geneva Centre for
Security Policy