



To Silence the Guns in Ukraine

Though their land is torn by horrific war, what many Ukrainians fear is an early ceasefire. As deep as the desire to silence the guns may run, it is hard to get past the understandable suspicion that a ceasefire now would launch a settlement process that would reward aggression and ignore the full sovereign rights and interests of Ukraine. In a process driven primarily by the need to end the fighting, the ceasefire skeptics fear, it would be tempting to simply convert current military front lines into *de facto* boundaries – enshrining injustice rather than restoring peace.

That fear defines the central challenge facing advocates of an early ceasefire – to credibly assure the victims of aggression that a ceasefire will allow justice to be achieved, not just a short-term break in the suffering and destruction. Durable peace requires a process focused on restoring the rule of law and setting a foundation for long-term stability, both within Ukraine and within the broader region that will continue to include Ukraine and Russia as immediate neighbours. For that to happen, the international community will have to be as vigorous and determined in the pursuit of a just peace as it has been in support of a devastating war.

Stopping the carnage

The calls for an early ceasefire are of course primarily driven by the overriding reality of tens of thousands of lives lost, and many more injured, and millions driven from their homes – with only the promise of much more of the same to come, along with declining confidence that the outcome of the war will be worthy of the sacrifice. The inhumanity of this European war leaves in its wake a level of crushing destruction that will live on in history through names like Mariupol and Bakhmut, and it will impose on Ukrainians a multigenerational struggle for physical, psychological, political, and economic recovery.

Carnage is not too strong a word, and the call to silence the guns in Ukraine is also a call to stop that carnage from spreading – to forestall escalation to the unparalleled horror of nuclear attack and the growing possibility of war spreading to neighbouring countries.

Obstacles to a ceasefire

In addition to the fears that a ceasefire at the current frontlines of battle would fatally prejudice subsequent settlement options, ceasefire calls run up against expectations on both sides of the conflict that victory is still possible, or at least that there is still greater advantage to be gained in fighting than in talking. Though the war is now essentially stalemated, both sides seem convinced that their military prospects could still improve. Ukraine looks forward to ongoing and more sophisticated weapons shipments and seems confident that its suppliers and supporters will remain steadfast. Russia, for its part, envisions a steady

supply of weapons via its own industrial base and new mobilization drives that will continue to yield willing fighters.

The deep distrust and enmity that have come to characterize each side's understanding of the other are also in danger of making the prospect of direct talks an anathema to both. Furthermore, the international community has done little to encourage, never mind pressure, the warring parties to even consider negotiations. While some states have offered peace overtures, the prevailing focus is instead on competing geopolitical interests. Ukraine's main sponsors in the West have ambitions beyond Ukraine's recovery, namely the degrading of Russia. China, meanwhile, is content to see Russia's dependence on it grow.

The path to a ceasefire

Despite all that, some negotiations have taken place. Grain shipments and prisoner exchanges have required engagement and coordination, and some diplomats see these limited but important exchanges pointing the way to further similar accommodations – for humanitarian pauses and non-combat zones around hospitals and nuclear power plants, for example. While such limited initiatives are important in their own right, their cumulative effects could be to gradually build some trust that will prove invaluable when the time comes for expanded, comprehensive negotiations.

This all points to an urgent need for a continuing forum to explore and support ceasefire proposals and broader peace possibilities. In the early months of the war the Mexican president suggested the establishment of “a commission for dialogue and peace.” The idea has so far not found much favour, but it is a compelling format for a Peace Table that could host both research and dialogue, draw on experts linked to the parties to the conflict, and even involve direct representatives of the parties at whatever level of formal or informal representation they would support. Such a Table could initially be modelled on a Track 2 dialogue hosted by civil society, with the potential for rising to direct dialogue among formal representatives of the parties.

The key would be for the forum to stay actively and continuously engaged, testing the parties' openness to involvement in dialogue, developing and exploring elements of settlement options, testing their viability, and building up an inventory of credible negotiating ideas and proposals available to the parties.

There is no reason why states like Canada (while actively supporting Ukraine) and Brazil (a BRICS partner to Russia and supporter of negotiations) could not at the same time also sponsor such an initiative. Even those who question the wisdom or viability of an immediate ceasefire should welcome a peace commission or table committed to exploring options and possibilities. There is also no reason why major supporters of Ukraine, like the United States, could not appoint peace envoys with a mandate to continually explore ceasefire and peace process possibilities.

The likelihood of either side in this war ever being in a position to dictate settlement terms to the other is remote, and that means negotiations are inevitable. Again, prudence suggests that states now devoting major material and political capital to the war effort, should devote commensurate capital to diplomatic efforts (formal or informal) to end the war.

The path to durable peace

To build peace the war must first end. Furthermore, ceasefire arrangements must be such that they do not preclude the conditions necessary for a durably stable peace. The research and exploratory talks that an ongoing peace table and peace envoys could address would be expected to include themes like the following:

1. Measures toward demilitarizing the conflict when the fighting stops (ceasefire) are likely to include military pullbacks from the front lines, limitations on new weapons supplies, and the challenges of monitoring compliance, with a potential role for armed peacekeepers as monitors and for responding to isolated or low-level violations.
2. The governance and sovereignty questions that so plagued Ukraine before the invasion will require international attention. These are ultimately decisions that must rest with the Ukrainian people, yet any process will benefit from international facilitation, monitoring, and support. Key governance issues to be expected include proposals related to the development of semi-autonomous self-governing regions under the Ukrainian constitution (along the lines of the Minsk Accords), not to mention the long-term resolution of the status of Crimea – or at least the launch of a process for resolving it.
3. Peacebuilding in a post-war Ukraine will obviously be essential for the well-being of Ukrainians, but also for long term stability. Successful peacebuilding will depend heavily on the level of international support that is made available and on the responsibility that falls to Russia for reparations and funding to rebuild the physical infrastructure and homes that the war destroyed. International investment will also be key and will in turn depend on a stable peace, and membership in the European Union could become a positive aid to Ukrainian prosperity once territorial issues are settled.
4. Defining Ukraine's unique position on the strategic fault line between Russia and NATO has regional implications that should engage inclusive institutions such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. While the neutrality that was commonly proposed for Ukraine before the invasion may not be viable in the wake of a war that has thoroughly driven Ukraine to the western side of that fault line, Ukraine cannot escape its neighbourhood and the need for stable relations with Russia. Ukraine's continued pursuit of NATO membership will also depend on a binding settlement of territorial issues. Redefining and restructuring the Ukraine-Russia relationship is essential to stability and will need to be a major focus.
5. The international strategic order will not be stabilized without a new modus-operandi among the United States/NATO and Russia, and ultimately China. The ending of the war on Ukraine, and the multifaceted negotiations that will have to ensue, will also require sustained strategic dialogue toward the reinvention of a more stable international order. Russia came to the present disastrous war with genuine security grievances and expectations. None of those in any way justified the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, but the grievances and expectations are real and future stability requires that they be addressed.

Meeting the moment

The international community's current posture is essentially to send weapons to the battlefields and then wait to see what war brings – and what it has brought is this moment of extraordinary death and

destruction and the promise of more of the same or worse. Ongoing war holds little prospect for a decisive outcome and no possibility of resolving any of the key issues that will necessarily occupy negotiators when it finally ends. What this moment requires is for the international community to become fully seized of the urgent need to silence the guns and to get focused on understanding the requirements for, and means of pursuing, an early and durable peace.

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