



## A Possible Path to Peace in Ukraine

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The risk of nuclear war in Ukraine is one of the most pressing challenges ahead for the incoming administration.

The [reckless gambit of the outgoing Biden administration](#) to box in President-elect Trump, who won on a platform promising to fulfill the wishes of millions to negotiate for peace, has resulted in the [blurring of the definition of a co-belligerent](#) in this conflict. This recklessness has moved the US from a position of strict-to-qualified neutrality per international law, to a position far too close to that of active participant in a war that risks turning nuclear.

Russia [recently stated](#) that it had fired an experimental medium-range hypersonic ballistic missile called Oreshnik at an alleged military target in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro. In an unannounced televised address, Russian President Vladimir Putin seemed to suggest that Russia has the right to “strike” any western country that is a “co-belligerent” in the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

The video evidence of the missile system is still hazy, with [social media footage](#) showing half a dozen MIRVs striking a small area without subsequent secondary blasts. But it does appear to demonstrate that despite the wishful thinking of some analysts in Washington, DC, and western Europe, Russian ICBM technology is functional, modern, and accurate.

The Russians apparently dropping a dozen nuclear capable MIRVs with empty payloads on a city of around a million is the [clearest signal](#) yet of both their resolve to escalate, as well as [their capability](#) to turn any city in the West into radioactive ashes.

To help pull the world back from that brink, this brief report considers a few potential starting negotiation positions in pursuit of an end to the war in Ukraine and a few finite deliverables, responding to the stated redlines of both Moscow and Washington. As always, this framework for negotiation is predicated on the desire for a stable equilibrium between Washington, DC, and Moscow. The question of will, capability, and risk-tolerance of European countries, meanwhile, are for them to determine on their own, depending on the wishes of their electorates.

Admitted Russian redlines ahead of the war were primarily a demilitarized Ukraine. Russia’s most clearly [stated redline](#) was Ukraine joining NATO, and this demand remains. Purely from Moscow’s vantage, there is no incentive for Russia to stop a war where it has the “escalation dominance,” in its near abroad, has more interest in the theater compared to NATO, and where

the chances of a peaceful Ukraine joining an antagonistic military alliance remain acute. [Russian redlines are based on geography and remain historically consistent](#). The peripheral Russian fear is that of a potential “color revolution” in Ukraine and having a hostile government instigating change in Moscow.

Counter-intuitively, however, there is also no incentive for Russia to continue the conflict in a manner that makes it even more dependent on China, as well as to continue expansionism outside Ukraine, thereby potentially inviting NATO into the fray. Nothing in recent Russian behavior demonstrates that it is expansionist to the point of irrationalism. In fact, the Russians are constantly [notifying the US](#) of their every major escalation via hotline, including the recent MIRVs attack in Ukraine, showcasing a high level of “signalling” and a desire to maintain an open backchannel.

One can therefore cautiously argue, in light of this incentive structure, that Russia will consider a negotiation that starts with meeting the demands of no NATO accession for Ukraine, a demilitarized and divided Ukraine as a buffer state between NATO and Russia (similar to Austria and Switzerland), and no Western support for what are perceived as “color revolutions” in Russia’s near abroad.

The Western redlines are varied. For Western Europe, the redline is further Russian expansionism or destabilization in Europe, especially a hybrid attack within core European NATO member states. For the US, an additional redline is further formalization of Russo-Chinese alignment. The US needs an end to its involvement to arrest the depletion of stockpiles which might be needed elsewhere. As Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan [wrote in Foreign Affairs](#) last year, “For over a year, the West has allowed Ukraine to define success and set the war aims of the West. This policy, regardless of whether it made sense at the outset of the war, has now run its course. It is unwise, because Ukraine’s goals are coming into conflict with other Western interests.”

Thus, a cautious starting point for Western negotiation perhaps would be Russia’s return to a pre-2022 but post-2014 starting point: a return to the *status quo ante*, for military mobilization, and a recall of mobilized troops and hardware to Ukraine’s easternmost line of actual control.

No negotiation can start without a ceasefire. In the first track of diplomacy, direct talks between Ukraine and Russia with the US and the EU as mediators should start urgently, and in order to do that, an official date for a ceasefire should be discussed. Despite Ukraine’s rhetorical rejection of any peace process without total Russian withdrawal, without American military support, [Ukraine is unlikely](#) to be obstinate about a peace negotiation. It is, moreover, unlikely that the EU will be able to continue the conflict without the US.

A majority of [Ukrainians desire a peace, including one which leads to territorial concessions](#). A majority of Americans, [per recent polls](#), desire a [cessation of hostility](#) as well as a stop to all further funding to Ukraine. To that end, Ukraine and Russia, with the US and the EU negotiators, should decide on an immediate ceasefire date with US and EU mediators and observers, and daily joint flag meetings between officers of at least a brigadier level or higher, to stop further sudden escalation. The model of flag meetings that lead to de-escalation is already tried, tested, and evident in the Indo-Chinese border currently. It would be similar to the continuous and open hotlines between Brussels, Washington, and Moscow, just on a more territorial level.

The primary talks would be between the Ukrainian and Russian counterparts, with the EU and the US on the sidelines having bilateral talks with Russia, and observers from neutral countries, such as India, Norway, or Austria, present to monitor the actual ceasefire. Depending on the success at that point, a few additional steps could be taken immediately. A broader talk about legitimizing parts of Russian territorial and financial interest between the Germany, France, the UK, the US, Italy, and Russia could perhaps be started, with a total pull back of both Russian and Ukrainian heavy equipment on the same day and same time, effectively creating a demilitarized zone, to the pre-2022 “line of actual contact.”

Temporarily freezing the line of actual contact should not be seen as an ideal or just end, but rather as a starting point to future order. A series of overtures could be rhetorically tested to see what might be palatable to either side, such as a potential restart of the NATO-Russia joint council, similar to the late 1990s. The EU should be forthright in asking Russia how it could offer some economic incentive to both Ukraine and Russia without any severe strings of social reforms involved. In fact, a good signal from the US side to Russia would be to demonstrate at least a willingness to defund some USAid-funded NGOs in parts of Eastern Europe. Intelligence sharing and joint patrols, similar to the post-9/11 relationship between the US and Russia, as well as further joint space research, should be on the table.

In return, concrete deliverables should be asked from Moscow. One, Russian troops should eventually move back to a pre-2022 boundary in return for Ukrainian legal and military neutrality. Two, Russia must show a willingness to aid Western interests in the Middle East, to aid on a renewed Iranian nuclear negotiations as President Trump highlighted, and to aid in talks in the now frozen North Korean peace process—once more, a personal interest of the incoming US president.

In conclusion, any peace proposal that fails to understand that Russia enjoys the escalation dominance in Ukraine due to asymmetric interest—ie, that Russians care more about Ukraine than Americans do, and are prone to escalate more than Americans are, because it matters more to them—or fails to take into account the core Russian redline of a neutral Ukraine, guaranteed by the US and EU allies, is bound to be dead on arrival.