

INDEPENDENT EXPERTS PEACE INITIATIVES

WHITE PAPER ON UKRAINE/RUSSIA

Prospects for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: causes, sanctions and possible scenarios

1. Introduction

This “white paper” is the product of interdisciplinary collaboration by an independent and international assembly of “experts,” scholars and political actors, sponsored by the International Council for Diplomacy and Dialogue—USA and the European Council for Democracy Development. Their disciplinary focus ranges from sociology to political science to economics and the humanities. They work in universities, institutes, non-governmental organizations, and various advisory bodies. None are propagandists of any party or in the pay of any government; indeed, their vitae are available on request. They have very different political beliefs, but they are united by a common rational and realistic approach to conflict resolution. Our purpose is not to insist on a single tactic or strategy. We instead provide a balanced and nuanced document based on verifiable data that deals with the causes, scenarios, and possible diplomatic initiatives that should be discussed in order to further the cause of peace.

2. Causes: The Russian-Ukrainian conflict began due to a number of geopolitical, military and economic factors:

- **Russian Imperialism** based on the belief that territory of the former USSR constitutes its sphere of influence, and its “historical territory.”
- **NATO’s expansion into Eastern Europe** has fueled xenophobic fears of Western encroachment into the sphere of influence inherited by the Russian Federation from the USSR. Collective security treaties after World War II clarified red lines, defined the balance of power, and (albeit imperfectly) provided stability. This system was undermined beginning in 2001, when the United States unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and ended in 2023, when Vladimir Putin withdrew from the New START Treaty that Russia and the United States had signed in Prague in 2010.

- **Clashes over values** have proven important as the West’s liberal universalism has challenged Russia’s authoritarian illiberalism. Each sees the other as an existential threat: Russia is seen by the West as seeking to restore its Empire, while the West is seen by Russia as intent on building a unipolar world based on its military, political, economic and (alien) ideological hegemony. In this vein, Russia also views Western claims of "victory" in the Cold War as a humiliating deception. Its leaders believe that this supposedly specious claim is being used by the West as a propagandistic weapon. “Soft diplomacy” can prove useful in dealing with this situation.
- **Lack of uniform and binding human rights standards.** Neither the United States nor international organizations have been able to ensure the rights of ethnic, national, and religious minorities, as well as members of the LGBT community in Russia. However, discrimination also targets Russian-speaking, as well as Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, Bulgarian, and other minorities in the former Soviet republics, primarily in the Baltics and Ukraine. The forced “Ukrainization” of the public sphere has not provoked protests from Western countries or international human rights organizations. The plight of the Russian-speaking population has been used by Russia to justify its aggression against Ukraine. Insistence on recognizing human rights standards on both sides is crucial for any new system of collective security.

3. Victims: Following the revolutionary change of power in Ukraine in late February 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and supported separatist uprisings in Donbass. On February 24, 2022, Russia announced the start of the so-called “special military operation” against Ukraine, which turned into the largest and most destructive military conflict in Europe since the end of World War II. The human costs brought on by Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine have exceeded what either side could have expected. By the end of February 2025, 900,000 Russian troops and 500,000 Ukrainians have been killed or wounded. In addition, sexual assaults on Ukrainian women were frequent and thousands of children have been most likely deported or “evacuated” to Russia, or Russian occupied territories without their families’ consent. Again, providing signs of its shifting position on the war, the United States has also withdrawn from multinational investigation into alleged war crimes. Our

experts consider it incumbent upon those rebuilding Ukraine to provide the war's civilian victims with:

- Free counseling and therapy
- Support for women's centers and clinics
- Negotiation for the return of corpses for burial
- Compensation for the families
- Appropriate health care
- Housing and jobs
- Monitoring of these programs by international organizations

4. Sanctions: As currently employed, they have not produced changes in the strategy or policy aims of the Russian Federation. Our experts believe that they have been ineffective for the following reasons:

- Current sanctions have barred Russia from Western markets, but China, India, and other countries have stepped into the breach.
- Current sanctions have not blocked Russia's oil and gas exports on which its economy rests.
- Current sanctions have not significantly weakened Russia's military potential: In 2022, 100 cruise missiles were produced and then used against Ukraine's civilian facilities and infrastructure. Russian production of Shahed -136 UAVs has also increased six-fold compared to 2022.
- Current sanctions have increased Russian xenophobia by targeting all citizens and, in fact, helped stem capital flight, which has been a major problem . In 2022 alone, \$240 billion or 13% of GDP flowed out of the country. Today, capital outflow has been significantly reduced and Russian oligarchs have been returning their money to the Russian Federation.

5. Making Sanctions More Effective: Our experts suggest that sanctions:

- Focus on sectors of Russia's war machine, especially technology, energy, and financial systems. Western countries should also tighten controls on technology exports, especially those that could be used for military purposes.
- Prioritize oil and gas exports and simultaneously work with European and Asian countries to reduce their dependence on Russian energy resources.
- Prevent countries such as China and nations of the "global South" from aiding Russia by circumventing sanctions. It is also necessary to strengthen controls on dual-use goods exported to Russia from these countries, as well as on cyber operations.
- Close financial loopholes that allow Russian oligarchs and state-owned enterprises access to international capital markets, and also prevent the return of those assets to Russia.
- Prove more flexible by targeting Russian officials, their close associates, oligarchs and corporations, but not on ordinary Russians and the middle class. Focusing on the oligarchs will inevitably create tensions between them, but also between this elite and the majority of the country's population, which will weaken the regime.
- Employ the "carrot and the stick" by linking tough sanctions linked to prospects for lifting them in the event of significant steps being taken towards peace.

6. Possible scenarios: Our experts have put forward the following:

- **Russia's military conquests are tacitly acknowledged**, and hostilities end without a formal peace agreement. This would leave Russia in control of roughly 20% of Ukraine, including Crimea and Donbas, the region destabilized, and the victim of aggression in fear of further incursions.

- **Direct confrontation with NATO** is unlikely.. The European Union is considering the creation of a continental army, but this will take time, and some members such as Hungary and Slovakia, along with right-wing extremist political parties, will undoubtedly create obstacles. Both Russia and Europe would probably prefer to avoid a scenario that might result in a regional or perhaps even global confrontation.
- **Nuclear attack** would take this confrontation to another plane. In spite of Russian threats, Russia is in an advantageous military position, especially given that the United States is withdrawing support for Ukraine, and Europe has still not formulated a common strategy. Nevertheless, politics calls for considering the worst scenario and it would be a mistake simply to dismiss this option entirely.
- **Russia widens the conflict:** Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were part of the Soviet Union [until 1991], and Putin has stated his desire to recreate the old empire. However, attacking these Baltic states would stretch Russia's already depleted resources, force it to keep its forces in the region, and provoke NATO. This scenario is, therefore, unlikely and some see threats against the Baltics as mere propaganda rhetoric.
- **Other plausible options** exist for Russia to apply pressure on Ukraine and the Baltic states. Cyber-attacks, disinformation, and geo-political threats. are less risky. While such tactics might also cause retaliation, but they would undoubtedly prove more effective in achieving Russia's goals.
- **Creating spheres of influence:** This would involve some version of a so-called "New Yalta" or "global compromise" that takes the following form:
 - i. **Determining spheres of influence while isolating Russia from the West.**
This option can be seen as the basis for a global compromise. It is intended to prevent further escalation by achieving a new balance of power. In this case, Russia would have a sphere of influence, but would remain isolated from the West and would face Western security guarantees for what was left of Ukraine. In addition, it would continue to feel the pressure of major sanctions, which would remain in effect.

Isolating Russia from the West will not necessarily eliminate its imperialist ambitions. This will depend upon where lines of demarcation are drawn, the form that collective security guarantees will take, and the degree of disunity among Ukraine's Western allies. Most probably, Ukraine would be forced to surrender at least 20% of its territory, face possible depopulation, remain dependent on Western economic support to stay afloat, and receive security guarantees that it can only view with mistrust.

ii. **Determining spheres of influence with Russia emerging from isolation.** In this option Russia ends its isolation from the West by reaching an agreement with the United States that would include lifting sanctions, suspending military action, and recognizing new spheres of influence. Ukraine would be sidelined, and neutralized (without full security guarantees), NATO would be weakened and a new anti-European alliance would take shape. Russia would retain control over conquered territories and, in exchange, it would lower the costs of Russian energy and "share" Ukrainian earth minerals with the United States.

However, this might fuel resentment from Ukrainian ultranationalists and delegitimation of the government in a manner similar to the Weimar Republic following Germany's defeat in World War I. It also may encourage Russia to expand its zone of influence to other countries of the former USSR that are not part of the NATO bloc: Moldova, Armenia and Central Asia. An important deterrent could be China, which could participate in creating spheres of influence, but so far Beijing has shown no particular desire to get involved in this process.

European acquiescence will likely aggravate the situation. Pro-Russian and authoritarian proclivities of right-wing radical parties, such as "Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the "National Rally," and illiberal nations such as Hungary and Slovakia will likely demand that Europe endorse Trump's tilt toward Russia, and even his anti-immigration views by rejecting Ukrainian refugees, in exchange for his administration's defense of their battle against the institutional arrangements and political values of Europe's democratic forces.

- ii. **Europe refuses to accept the "New Yalta"**. This scenario will lead Europe to attempt substituting itself for the United States. It will continue to finance Ukraine, alone if necessary, start its own program of military construction and rearmament, including nuclear weapons. Divisions between supporters of Russia, such as Hungary, and opponents will complicate matters. Continental rearmament will take time, enormous investment, and tensions with the United States will necessarily grow.

Europe cannot serve as a military or economic substitute for the United States. It will seek to guarantee Ukraine's security, but without the drones, ammunition, and defense systems previously provided by the United States. That the European Union will be put under enormous strain is a foregone conclusion. It may consider taking a chance, and biding its time, in the hope that the United States undergoes regime change, or a change of policy in 2026 or 2028.

- **Russia and Ukraine are showing little interest in US peace initiatives.**

Russia lays claim to at least all of Ukraine's eastern lands, while Ukraine will demand the full return of the territories, including Crimea. Recent events show that both sides are trying to impress President Trump by portraying themselves as supporters of peace, while trying to present the other side of the conflict as an opponent of a peaceful settlement. Ukraine's attacks on Russia in June 2025, which destroyed part of the Russian nuclear triad - 12 nuclear-capable aircraft - were possibly aimed at forcing Putin to give up on peace talks. Ukraine could then present itself as the lone beacon of hope, If this continues, the US will likely withdraw from the peace process and may even impose additional sanctions on Russia, such as high tariffs on countries buying its oil and petroleum products. At the same time, the US will likely reduce or stop military aid to Ukraine, shifting the burden to Europe. A mining deal will not improve the situation, although the US may decide to sell weapons to Ukraine using money provided by Europe. This could partially solve the problem. However, under these circumstances, the war will continue in accordance with scenarios 1-5.

As matters currently stand, “victory” over Russia, which Ukraine and EUROPE seek, will require “boots on the ground,” which can only increase the risks of an expanded war and perhaps even nuclear escalation. At the same time, the Russian peace plan implies the creation of a sanitary corridor from 4 Ukrainian regions, which is unacceptable for either Ukraine or NATO. Consequently, peace is possible only through well-considered and intelligent diplomatic pressure on both warring parties in order to force them to compromise.

7.. **Furthering Peace:** Our experts have highlighted key concerns that participants might consider to facilitate negotiations and, ultimately, end hostilities:

- Introduce a new system of collective security. This idea is speculative but important, nonetheless. The aim is to provide collective security for all nations involved in the conflict. Emphasis upon civil rights and liberties is necessary in implementing this strategy. Negotiations will then not only deal with arms control, but the adoption of uniform standards for minority rights. Talks of this sort could be launched under the auspices of the OSCE, the Council of Europe or another international organization.
- Publicly recognize "red lines": Russia perceives NATO expansion as a direct threat to its security. NATO should therefore make the explicit commitment not to expand eastward as it leaves Crimea and the Donbas to Russia. That compromise could serve as a starting point for negotiations.
- Provide incentives for stability: Prospects for de-escalation might improve by introducing economic incentives in concert with discussions on collective security and peace. Investment and aid will depend upon the participants' willingness to begin negotiations without preconditions.
- Include “indirect actors” in the negotiations: Successful negotiations require multilateral diplomatic efforts and input not only from the West, but China, India, and various countries from the Global South. Bringing such indirect actors to the negotiating table, however, should occur only if they agree to exclude extraneous issues and the pursuit of interests external to those of the actual participants.

- Freeze” the conflict: Full resolution of tensions will probably take years, but a temporary cessation of hostilities is possible. This would involve freezing the conflict and providing a reprieve with which to negotiate a long-term peace settlement. However, this approach only makes sense if both sides suspend their preconditions for engaging in talks.

8. Discrete Prospects:

- **The United States:** The old alliance between the United States and Europe is currently at a low point. “Neo-isolationism” has led the United States to withdraw from numerous international agencies and treaties and, with its policy of “America First!”, appears ready to “go it alone.” The Trump Administration has chosen a “transactional” approach to international relations, which is evident in its proposal to “share” Ukrainian mineral rights. Instrumentalism of this sort, coupled with Trump’s “unpredictability,” has resulted in a shift in policy from one that favors Ukraine to one that supports Russia. Should circumstances change, it might well shift back again to Ukraine—especially should Democrats become the congressional majority after the mid-term elections of 2026.

The USA might change direction by rehabilitating the old Western alliance: 1) exchange reduction of tariffs for greater economic contributions to NATO; 2) cease interfering in the working of European democracy, through public support for illiberal forces on the right, on pain of turning the isolation of America into a self-fulfilling prophecy; 3) drive wedges between Russia’s “BRICS” allies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South America); 4) negotiate a new nuclear deal with Iran, which also supports Russia.

The Trump Administration will need to determine the extent to which it will support Ukraine’s ultimate recovery and what position it will take in a burgeoning “new Cold War” between the Western Alliance and BRICS. There seems no general strategy designed to deal with this situation or how will it react, should Russia’s territorial demands call upon Ukraine to abandon its sovereignty.

- **Europe:** NATO and the EU must now confront the same problem that plagued American foreign policy to Ukraine before Trump took office: aid to Ukraine is

crucial for Europe's geo-political security, and for Ukraine to continue the war, but such financial support cannot go on forever. NATO and the EU will thus need to develop a strategy that does not rely on the United States as their military bulwark against Russia.

Europe could choose to develop an independent policy toward the Russia-Ukraine War; in addition to bringing Ukraine to the table, perhaps through using “the carrot and the stick,” NATO will need to decide on the ends that any given tactic are meant to serve or, to put it another way, what will be the status of Ukraine after cessation of hostilities. It might also accept increased financial responsibility for its defense, and favorable economic incentives for the United States, in exchange for continuing an (uncertain) alliance. Europe can also shift its gaze to the weaker nations that the United States is offending – Canada, Mexico, Panama—while striking its own deal with separate members of BRICS.

Everything hinges on the fundamental question: Can European security afford the dismemberment of Ukraine and successful Russian expansion? Is Ukraine the “red line” that Russia dare not cross? If so then to what extent is Europe ready to defend it with the requisite economic and military assistance? But that is possible only insofar as it can withstand the anti-democratic tendencies existing in its member states and overcome divisions between them. Europe could attempt to build its own army, or nuclear arsenal though the former will take time (that Europe does not have), and face conflicts between member states, while the latter might raise prospects for an international conflagration. Finally, it can gamble by “treading water,” either doing nothing or a little bit of everything, while waiting for Republicans to lose the congressional elections of 2026 and the White House in 2028.

- **Russia:** According to most of our experts, Russia will not enter into real negotiations, according to most of our experts, and instead (likely) escalate the war if driven from the Ukrainian regions it has occupied, such as Crimea. To admit defeat, or sue for peace, would probably presage the regime's collapse and, to forestall that, its leaders might resort to a general mobilization or even tactical nuclear weapons.

New circumstances might arise through regime change or President Putin's death. A quick change in foreign policy has occurred more than once in Russian history.

Russia might even return its occupied territories to Ukraine—other than Crimea. However, Putin surely knows that such drastic changes might also cause Russia to disintegrate. This would revive nationalist sentiments throughout the region, create economic instability, and inspire separatist movements throughout the former empire.

If the conflict is frozen, Russia will maintain control over conquered Ukrainian territory, and remain isolated from the West, while sanctions remain in place. Victory over Ukraine, by contrast, will make it the hegemonic power in the region, and turn Ukraine into a puppet state, which could amplify its imperialist ambitions. Russia would then become an even greater threat to the West and, in turn, this might actually produce a renaissance of Western cooperation and leave Europe in the neo-isolationist position of the United States.

Whatever the war's outcome, many of our experts agree, Russia will draw closer to its authoritarian allies such as China, India, and other members of BRICS and the SCO. It may also draw closer to the United States—though it is unclear what role Trump's constantly changing tariff policy will play. In any event, more than likely, Russia will need to rely more on its own domestic resources to maintain its independence and sovereignty. Securing a multilateral alliance by turning to the East will revive the prospect of a Western alliance resulting in a “new” cold war that would threaten the West with the loss of its dominant role.

- **Ukraine:** This imperiled nation will likely experience the continuation of hostilities with numerous temporary suspensions and breaks during periods of negotiation. The present situation projects deteriorating socio-economic conditions, depletion of military resources, and possible regional de-stabilization. Ongoing war might also produce mass protests, regime change, with a growing acceptance of with maximum concessions.

Ukraine could turn into a neutral state, or buffer zone between Russia and the West. This option assumes that it will not become part of NATO and the EU, but that it will receive security guarantees from the USA, France, Germany, and maybe China. In exchange for this, Kyiv would have to surrender Crimea, some parts of Donbas, and perhaps even more territory. Ukraine would retain its sovereignty, but not its

territorial integrity. Thus, it would remain in a state of political uncertainty and under the threat of further interference from Russia.

Should Ukraine survive the war, it will further integrate with the EU and NATO. This could strengthen its democracy as well as attract significant economic investment for post-war reconstruction. The West could then view Ukraine as a strategic bulwark against Russia. However, this scenario would generate significant resistance and future escalation – or re-escalation -- of the conflict by Russia.

Should the conflict be frozen, Ukraine will lose territory, and face long-term instability, even as it simultaneously attempts to rebuild its economy and defensive capacities. It will thus continue to depend upon external assistance to maintain its sovereignty in the face of constant threats from Russia, and lack of a decisive peace agreement.

9 .Strategic Options The geo-political future of Russia and Ukraine depends on how the conflict between them is resolved.

Reluctance to compromise on the conquered and claimed territories, coupled with the failure to achieve a clear military, is having disastrous effects on both nations. That is especially the case with Ukraine whose infrastructure has been destroyed, sovereignty undermined, and citizenry shattered by bombing. Excepting the unpredictable consequences of military defeat or domestic implosion, by contrast, Russia will likely keep its leading position on the world stage, albeit to a more or less limited extent.

A “global compromise” might be undertaken, but this would call for territorial deals, participation in military blocs, security guarantees, and advocacy for the rights of Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine and the rest of the region. Sanctions may also become subject to compromise and perhaps even their abolition. A strategy of this sort would, at least, make it possible for Russia to “sell” peace to its citizens, and proclaim “Russia’s victory in the war against the collective West.” That is not as superficial as it sounds: “saving face” is crucial for any a regime in which the national interest is identified with that of the leader. Neither Russia nor Ukraine is ready for a global compromise today, because it would contradict the aims and

promises expressed at the start of the war. Thus, the global compromise is primarily a speculative proposal, but one that deserves consideration.

Mistrust, contested ideological narratives, failure to adapt to a changing world, and underestimation of the enemy's military strength have fueled the conflict. Russia underestimated Ukraine's resilience and the West's readiness to give up its lucrative relations with Russia, including cheap energy supplies, no less than its willingness to provide multi-billion-dollar aid packages to Kiev. Meanwhile, the West underestimated Russia's reaction to NATO's advance to the East, its self-sufficiency, its resolve to reclaim its former glory, its readiness to sacrifice citizens and resources, and its willingness to sever lucrative economic ties with the West – all in the name of security and territorial ambitions.

Western sanctions have failed to devastate the Russian economy or the defense industry. They have also not provoked mass anti-government protests. If the West expects sanctions to be more effective, it needs to target sectors that are critical to Russia's military capacity, prevent Russia's partners from circumventing them, and abandon non-selective sanctions against both Russian citizens and the Russian-speaking population in the countries of the anti-Russian bloc.

10. Basics of Strategy: Debates over strategy will continue, but our experts believe that dealing with certain core issues are preconditions for any sustainable cessation of hostilities. These include:

- **Acknowledging that the Western alliance might collapse:** That is a real possibility given the “transactional” and neo-isolationist policies of the new U.S. Administration. President Donald Trump's foreign policy is based on unpredictability, lack of transparency, impatience, and transactional hopes: he wants to achieve success at breakneck speed. President Vladimir Putin's stubbornness in making a deal could fuel Trump's impatience, leading him to push even harder on both sides, with potentially incalculable consequences ranging from incremental moves toward Russia, to forcing Ukraine to give up more territory, to escalating the conflict.

- **Dealing with war fatigue:** Western support for Ukraine remains critical to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, however, no less than its ability to serve as a democratic bulwark and deterrent to further aggressive moves by Russia. Western ignorance remains regarding what is at stake and the complexities in bringing about peace. In some European countries and the US, far-right and left-wing forces with ever greater governmental influence are advocating views that normalize Russian aggression and project the end of Ukraine.
- **Creating a new system of collective security in Europe.** This will call for strengthening (while refashioning) NATO, unifying the continent's defensive capacities, fostering further interconnectivity between members, and prioritizing among military, nuclear, and cyber tools in response to the new direction of American foreign policy. Shaping the geo-political future, however, will depend not only on the outcome of the Ukrainian conflict, but the ultimate result of internal ideological-political dynamics within the Western democracies, and their decisions in dealing with the BRICS alliance.

Designing a new global compromise in which parties to the Russia-Ukraine conflict can agree on a new systemic arrangement that considers the interests of all concerned parties and the rights of minorities. In this scenario, Ukraine will probably play the role of a neutral buffer that strives to integrate with the West, and receive assurances regarding its sovereignty, while Russia takes over at least 20% of Ukraine, receives its own security assurances from NATO, and insists on the lifting of sanctions, and some help in reconstructing its conquered territories. The practicality of such a scenario depends largely on the policies of the Trump administration. That is the case because such a global compromise ultimately rests on a new system of collective security encompassing the United States, Europe and the BRICS countries.

11. Concluding Thoughts:

Flaws in the architecture of the unipolar world of the 1990s have led to the absence of instruments capable of preventing conflicts such as that taking place between Russia and Ukraine. The future may well portend the destruction of the old and the creation of a new

world order. The strength of the European security arrangement that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet bloc is being tested right now in Ukraine's resistance against Russia's invasion of its territory and imperialist attack on its sovereignty. It will need new strategies to deal with the uncertainties and vagaries of American foreign policy.

Ending the impasse calls for serious diplomatic efforts by third countries – Western countries, on which Ukraine depends economically, politically and militarily, as well as China, which has increasing influence on Russia. The efforts of NGOs can also play an important role. The most available option is freezing the conflict, which preserves the risks of resuming and even escalating the war, but creates opportunities for future peace negotiations and perhaps even global compromise that would produce a new system of collective security to replace the old post-war treaties and agreements that have lost their relevance. Military and political factors, human rights and national interests, will remain decisive in bringing that about.

As things currently stand, prospects for ending the Russian-Ukrainian conflict remain slim, since both the Ukrainian and Russian peace plans do not include compromise and mutual concessions. None of the existing options for ending the conflict will either terminate existing tensions or restore the status quo ante. The need for a new global security architecture, a new world order, is almost self-evident. However, all principal participants in the conflict resist that conclusion. They remain captive to outmoded ideological narratives, which is precisely the reason why a new network capable of providing independent experts peace initiatives is necessary.

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