FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Would a Peace Deal in Ukraine Last?

Two Centuries of History Offer Lessons for How to Forge a Durable Agreement

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A peace settlement to end a major war can be an opportunity to reorder the world. After the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte in France, European leaders negotiated new territorial boundaries at the Congress of Vienna, in 1814–15, in an attempt to establish a stable balance of power on the continent. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, after the end of World War I, participants drew up plans for the League of Nations, an international body tasked with securing world peace. And in early 1945, as World War II was winding down, representatives of 50 countries gathered to draft a charter for a new organization to replace the ineffective league. The United Nations began its operations later that year.

Negotiations to end Russia's war in Ukraine may not yield a new global security body, but they may well shape the future of international cooperation—and the world is due for reordering. U.S. President Donald Trump has taken a wrecking ball to the institutions and partnerships at the heart of the U.S.-led international system, his tariff threats have brought turmoil to the global economy, and his berating of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office in late February dissolved any lingering expectation that the United States would remain a trusted partner to its traditional allies and friends. Beyond the United States, European countries want greater control of their own security, and many other countries are pushing for effective forms of multilateralism that are not dominated by the West. Addressing all these pressures with a sweeping agreement in Ukraine is likely impossible; Kyiv's and Moscow's positions are too starkly opposed, and the rest of the world is too fractured. A deal could easily collapse, too. History books are full of unsuccessful attempts at peace, including those in 1938 and 1939 that failed to stop the outbreak of World War II.

Short of a grand scheme, however, a practical peace process that brings in both great powers and frontline states is possible in Ukraine. The settlements of the past offer guidance. Even a partial solution can be effective if it halts the fighting; cease-fires have proved durable in other frozen conflicts, including those negotiated in Korea in the 1950s and Cyprus in the 1970s. A territorial arrangement need not be permanent; Finland ceded territory to the Soviet Union in the 1940s but managed to reclaim small parts of it decades later. A deal in Ukraine must not undermine the credibility of either the Russian or the Ukrainian governments, as post–World War I settlements did to the German government, planting the seeds for World War II. And it

must offer security guarantees to Ukraine backed by real force, unlike the weak promises offered to eastern European states in the interwar years.

The result will not be a perfect deal. But if these conditions are all met, an agreement in Ukraine today can maintain peace until the circumstances are more favorable for a durable solution—and it can even provide a template for effective multilateral cooperation in this turbulent new world.

OPPOSING VIEWS

There is reason to want to turn the agreement that ends Russia's war in Ukraine into a grand bargain. The conflict is connected to hostilities elsewhere, with Iran and North Korea supplying Russia with weapons and North Korea supplying troops. A sweeping settlement could provide a framework for resolving conflicts in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, as well, by establishing a brand-new security mechanism to address the destabilizing effects of weaponized finance, trade wars, and fractured diplomacy. The model would be the negotiations to end World War I and World War II. These settlements were comprehensive, invoking bold visions of world peace and involving territorial settlements, population movements, security clauses, and financial reparations. Both aimed to eliminate the fundamental causes of the conflicts they ended: in 1919 by encouraging democratization to reduce militarism and in 1945 by demanding the unconditional surrender of the defeated Germany and Japan to end those specific countries' aggression.

In both instances, the negotiating parties largely agreed on the cause of the war and how it might be eliminated—and they could impose their view on the defeated. This is not true in the case of Ukraine, however, which makes a grand bargain impossible today. The parties do not see eye to eye on what

caused the war, and no amount of mediation or external pressure can reconcile their positions.

For Ukraine, the cause of the war is clear. Putin decided to seize and annex Crimea in 2014, stoke low-intensity fighting in the Donbas region thereafter, and eventually launch a full-scale invasion in February 2022. Removing the source of the conflict would mean removing the current Russian government—an unlikely prospect. From Russia's perspective, the cause of war is very different. Putin has claimed that the government of Ukraine is illegitimate, has violated constitutional norms, and is run by Nazis. He has suggested that security guarantees from the West, in particular the vague promise of eventual NATO membership that Ukraine was offered in 2008, were propping up the Ukrainian state, and he has questioned the basic notion of Ukraine's existence as an independent state.

Reaching an understanding about the underlying cause of a war is a prerequisite for negotiations on a comprehensive settlement. Without it, trying to get the belligerents in the war to agree on permanent territorial boundaries, how to secure those frontiers, and how to finance reconstruction is a futile exercise. At the Congress of Vienna in 1814–15, European governments blamed the Napoleonic Wars on the French Revolution and its doctrines, disregarding the reality that ideas about the rights of man and constitutional government held a powerful appeal. As a result, the congress crafted a settlement that was reactionary and conservative in the worst sense of the term, leading some countries (France and the United Kingdom) to defect and others to engage in revolution. Erasing history is a recipe for failure.

LAY DOWN YOUR ARMS

If a general solution is off the table, the next best option would be a partial one. Indeed, since 1945, partial solutions have been the most successful means of keeping peace, including by preventing the renewed outbreak of war in conflicts that have reached stalemates. When these provisional settlements have been reached, the parties have not known how long they would last. But in many cases, they worked, and proved remarkably durable —particularly when the great powers of the day played a decisive role in pushing combatants to de-escalate.

One such cease-fire deal is the Korean armistice of 1953, which ended three years of fighting. The truce was negotiated chiefly among representatives of the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea. South Korea, unwilling to accept the loss of the North, never signed the agreement, and North Korea did so only grudgingly, at the insistence of China and the Soviet Union. Not all terms of the deal have been upheld: the guarantors pledged not to send additional weapons to either Korean state, but one of them, the United States, violated that commitment in 1958 by deploying nuclear weapons to South Korea. Since 1994, North Korea has repeatedly stated that it does not consider itself bound by the armistice. But key elements of the arrangement have remained intact. For seven decades, a 2.5 mile–wide demilitarized zone near the 38th parallel has divided North Korea and South Korea, and the two countries have not resumed active hostilities. The armistice offers a powerful example of how, even without a formal treaty or an elaborate system of security guarantees, a settlement can achieve its main goal if the great powers involved share an interest in making peace.

The status of Berlin was also settled peaceably during the Cold War. Although there was no direct military conflict at the time, Germany was divided in two, with West Germany aligned with the Western powers and

East Germany aligned with the Soviet Union. Berlin was similarly divided, and the Western alliance–administered West Berlin sat in the center of East Germany. The arrangement seemed designed to set up a superpower clash. But during a period of broader détente, the United States and the Soviet Union—along with France and the United Kingdom—negotiated the 1971 Four Power Agreement on Berlin. East Germany and West Germany signed the 1972 Berlin Treaty shortly after. Restrictions on the movement of Germans across the wall that divided Berlin were relaxed, and although the Soviet Union did not officially recognize West Berlin as territory belonging to West Germany, the agreement implicitly acknowledged that status. As with the Korean settlement, the parties did not formally recognize all of each other's claims, but the peace mechanism worked.

The case of Cyprus offers yet another example of a successfully frozen conflict. After a military coup by Greek Cypriot officers in July 1974, the Turkish army invaded to support the island's Turkish Cypriots. After several rounds of negotiations—including a set of talks that collapsed, prompting another Turkish offensive that caused substantial casualties among UN peacekeepers—a cease-fire was agreed in August. The truce left the island divided, with one-third of it under Turkish Cypriot control. Economic and military pressure from the United States and other Western powers ensured that Turkey would not resume fighting. Cyprus, still de facto divided (Turkey is the only country that recognizes Northern Cyprus), even joined the European Union, in 2004.

Some temporary stalemates are fully resolved over time—consider Germany, which reunified in 1990, four decades after its division. Some resolutions arrive more quickly. In 1945, Yugoslavia seized the multinational and multilingual city of Trieste and its surroundings. The UN intervened, ultimately dividing the area into a northern zone (which included the city

itself) to be run by the United Kingdom and the United States and a southern zone to be administered by Yugoslavia. By 1954, Yugoslavia had allowed most of the northern zone to be incorporated into Italy, motivated largely by the prospect of economic cooperation with Italy. Even the Soviet Union, which had bitterly opposed U.S. and British efforts to encourage Yugoslavia to renounce its claims, eventually welcomed the end of the conflict.

LAND GRAB

An agreement that requires one party to cede territory can be unsustainable. In the Munich Agreement of 1938, for example, Czechoslovakia was obliged to hand over to Nazi Germany borderlands in the north, west, and south that were home not just to German speakers but also to the state's main military defenses. Six months later, Germany easily invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia.

But there are also cases in which temporarily ceding territory has stabilized a conflict. Just a few years after Munich, Finland reached a settlement with the Soviet Union that required it to accept substantial territorial losses. Throughout the Cold War, Finland was obligated to align with Soviet foreign policy, but the country emerged fundamentally intact.

The Soviet-Finnish Treaty of March 1940 ended what is known as the Winter War, which had begun a few months earlier when the Soviet Union, then an ally of Nazi Germany, invaded Finland. Left by other European powers to fight off the invasion all by itself, Helsinki soon entered bilateral negotiations with Moscow. In the final deal, Finland ceded large stretches of land along the Soviet border, agreed to lease a Baltic peninsula to the Soviet Union for 30 years, and permitted the creation of a neutral zone. Both parties signed a nonaggression pact. The treaty was clearly favorable to the

Soviet Union, especially given the impressive performance of the Finnish army; as Finnish Foreign Minister Vaino Tanner said in a radio address in March 1940, "The terms are unexpectedly heavy, when compared with what the enemy has been able to achieve during the war." Yet this is what made the peace durable: Moscow could convince itself that it had won more than might have been expected, and because Finnish leaders were careful not to connect their war to a broader ideological fight, Russia did not worry that Finland's example could attract disaffected Soviet citizens.

This was not the end of the concessions the Soviet Union extracted from Finland. In 1947, after the end of World War II, Moscow negotiated an agreement with nine other countries—the United States, notably, was not among them—allowing it to construct and operate a naval base near Helsinki, collect reparations from Finland, and order Finland to dissolve "all organizations of a fascist type" and those that produced anti-Soviet propaganda. A bilateral treaty in 1948 further cemented Finland's territorial losses to the Soviet Union and pledged Finland to resist the influence of "Germany and its allies"—a coded reference to the United States. Finland's room for diplomatic maneuver was strictly limited for the duration of the Cold War. But the arrangement also allowed the country to conduct domestic policy freely. The credibility that Finland's political institutions had built up over decades helped them retain public support despite the country's loss of territory and autonomy.

NO PEACE WITHOUT PROSPERITY

A successful postwar settlement must not discredit the regimes that make it. This principle holds for both the great peace accords of history, such as those that followed World War II, and the smaller settlements, such as Italy and Yugoslavia's resolution of their conflicting claims to Trieste. One of the major flaws of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference was that the victors in

World War I required the Weimar Republic, the new democratic German state, to take responsibility for the aggression of its predecessor, Kaiser Wilhelm II's German empire. The new German leaders signed a treaty containing a "war guilt" clause, which provided the legal basis for Germany to bear responsibility for substantial reparations. German democracy and the new European order were weighed down from the beginning by an impossibly heavy burden—contributing to the renewed outbreak of war two decades later.

For peace to last, the parties must be able to maintain economic and financial links to the rest of the world, so that governments can meet their people's legitimate postwar aspirations. A disillusioned society may turn to aggression again. In sharp contrast with the 1919 accords, post–World War II settlements recognized the indivisibility of peace and prosperity. Neither German state was required to sign any peace treaties, and the superpowers ensured that neither would be responsible for prewar German debts. Only in 1990, when Germany reunified, did Berlin sign a treaty that formalized the end of hostilities—45 years after the fighting had ceased.

It is all too easy to imagine a settlement in Ukraine that is followed by attempts to destabilize the governments in Kyiv or Moscow, effectively destroying the peace. Either side could use methods short of war to undermine the other. Ukrainians are rightly concerned, for example, that a peace agreement conditioned on new elections would provide an opportunity for Russia to launch propaganda campaigns or covert actions intended to assist candidates that would be more pliant. The Russian leadership, meanwhile, fears that the survival of Ukraine as a democratic state could inspire internal opposition after the war ends.

A failure to quickly reconstruct war-torn Ukraine could also damage Kyiv's credibility and produce widespread popular disillusionment, making the country more vulnerable to interference. History provides an example of an effective postwar recovery effort: the Marshall Plan, the U.S. scheme to revive European economies devastated by World War II. The program is the gold standard for economic reconstruction because it launched an era of rapid growth and political stability in the countries that participated. The Marshall planners did not just throw money around; Washington considered how to engage both governments and the private sector to achieve precise goals and encourage Europe itself to take initiative in its own reconstruction.

In the case of Ukraine, a first step toward postwar recovery would be to loosen bottlenecks that slow the restoration of economic activity. With steelworks out of operation, for example, those plants are not generating valuable byproducts, such as the neon gas used in semiconductor production. Minefields on land and at sea also impede access to the Black Sea, making it more difficult for Ukraine to export grain. High-tech sectors hold a lot of promise—many Ukrainians have sophisticated software skills, and the country has made rapid technological advancements to serve its war effort—but normal economic activity must resume for them to thrive. For foreign parties in particular, it will be important not to think of postwar Ukraine principally as a source of minerals and metals. These resources may attract investment, but extractive industries are also vulnerable to corruption—which leads to public suspicion—and are unlikely to generate many of the high-quality skilled jobs that Ukraine needs in order to attract back millions of wartime refugees. A viable recovery plan for Ukraine must build a generalized prosperity, not a quick windfall for a few.

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

A cease-fire agreement in Ukraine needs to be guaranteed by external parties, and those parties must provide real stability, a certainty that there will not be more fighting, instead of just promises on paper. The history of settlements is replete with flimsy security guarantees that set the stage for new conflicts, most strikingly in the period immediately before World War II.

In the Munich Agreement of 1938, which followed a month of crisis diplomacy, the British, French, and Italian leaders negotiated the fate of Czechoslovakia with the German dictator Adolf Hitler. They agreed to strip the country of its border regions without consulting the Czechoslovak government and people about the concession. The European powers mistakenly determined that making a deal with Hitler, rather than fighting him, could protect them from the horrors of war. In a radio address to the public that month, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain remarked, "How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing." Within a year, Britons were donning gas masks and building defenses. In France, a common antiwar slogan in 1938 and 1939 was *Mourir pour Dantzig?* ("Why die for Gdansk?") Clever diplomacy could not keep the war away, however, and many French were soon dying for France.

The British and French tried to pivot when Germany occupied all of Czechoslovakia, in March 1939. Poland and the United Kingdom immediately began to negotiate a security pact, signing a bilateral agreement in August that pledged assistance if the other were attacked. French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier declared support for the British commitment, adding that a failure to defend Poland "through lack of foresight or cowardice" would amount to betraying France's ideals and disregarding its

interest, leaving the country "without honor, without friends, without support, at a moment when these efforts to dominate Europe will be suddenly turned against [it]." For all the good intentions and emotional language, however, the Anglo-Polish agreement was not backed up with military support. The United Kingdom was unable to provide much assistance when German forces invaded Poland in September, and Poland soon succumbed to the Nazi onslaught.

Verbal guarantees cannot uphold cease-fire agreements. If a guarantee includes a sufficient military presence to deter breaches, however, it can sustain even a temporary settlement that avoids recognizing a permanent territorial division or concession. The genius of the peace arrangements in post–World War II Germany, on the Korean Peninsula, in Trieste, and in Cyprus is that the parties, relatively secure in the knowledge that the settlements would prevent further fighting, saw less need to haggle over where territorial boundaries should ultimately lie.

To prevent a return to war in eastern Ukraine, a cease-fire line would need to be protected with a similarly effective show of military force. Capable countries must deploy enough soldiers and equipment to enable a massive response should either Russia or Ukraine breach the cease-fire. Without a sizable and enforceable security guarantee, a truce would serve only as an invitation for Putin to plan Russia's next invasion of Ukraine—and perhaps other countries, too.

The United States' and China's roles in supporting or even negotiating a cease-fire or a settlement will be vital, given the influence that the United States has in Ukraine and that China has in Russia. They could also supply peacekeeping soldiers, although this is not strictly necessary if other countries do so instead. On the Ukrainian side of a cease-fire line, European

forces could serve this function. France and the United Kingdom have floated this possibility, and their depth of military experience and nuclear status makes them both natural candidates for the job. On the Russian side, either China or Central Asian states could fill a similar peacekeeping role.

Great powers cannot solve every problem, and a more unstable and dangerous world awaits if their leaders start to think otherwise. In 1807, Napoleon met the Russian Tsar Alexander on a raft on the Niemen River in Prussia, where the two men ended a war that engaged most of Europe by carving up the continent between the two of them. It was inevitable that they would quarrel and that fighting would resume; the Napoleonic Wars continued for nearly a decade. Inclusive diplomacy is a far preferable approach to resolving today's conflict. Many European and Asian leaders have spoken of the need for a new multilateralism, and now they have an opportunity to put their words into practice. If they can provide effective guarantees to sustain a cease-fire in Ukraine, they can demonstrate that a truly multilateral international order can function, even without the United States acting as the global police force.
