Getting Europe on Board for a Peace Settlement in Ukraine

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OVERVIEW

The Trump administration's fast-moving approach to pursuing a negotiated settlement between Russia and Ukraine has shaken Europe's policy elites to their core. Many had been expecting a repeat of the first Trump administration, in which — despite much bluster — the transatlantic alliance was strengthened and Western pressure on Russia increased. Instead, we have witnessed senior American and Russian officials meeting in a Middle Eastern country to discuss the future of European security without direct European input.

Yet despite the administration's efforts, ceasefire talks have been replete with obstacles. This is partly owing to Russia's lack of an incentive to compromise while it thinks it has the chance to make greater gains on the battlefield. But it is also because European leaders remain unwilling to entertain even partial sanctions relief so long as Moscow continues to prosecute its war of aggression. Sensing that the reality to which they had grown accustomed has been shattered, Europe's elites now risk acting out in ways that will further jeopardize stability on the Continent, making it more difficult for Washington to adjust its grand strategy to the realities of a post-unipolar world.

If the Trump administration wishes to forge a new equilibrium between Russia and the West that can underwrite its approach to addressing the China challenge, it must pursue robust diplomacy that constructively engages with Europeans' security perceptions *and* status-related fears. Specifically, European elites must be given incentives to view their own interests as synonymous with the administration's priorities and to see peace in Ukraine as more of an opportunity than a risk.

The task of getting Europe on board for a compromise settlement in Ukraine is especially imperative now that direct talks between Moscow and Kyiv have resumed. So long as any major stakeholder in the process remains intent on throwing a spanner in the works, there is a significant risk that the negotiating process will fail — an outcome that would cast doubt on both the plausibility and legitimacy of a diplomatic solution to a war that has caused immense devastation.

THE SOURCES OF EUROPEAN ANGST

Unease over security-related questions can often be a stand in for deeper concerns about status. For example, Moscow's oft-repeated view that NATO expansion posed a threat to its security was genuinely perceived and not purely contrived. But the deeper issue at play was the

perception that NATO and the European Union were becoming the central institutions of the post–Cold War European order — and these were clubs that Russia had no hope of ever joining. Without membership in these bodies, Russia's interests were transformed into secondary considerations, leaving Moscow with no option but to challenge the order if it wished to preserve its *status* as a recognized great power.

Today, European countries have security concerns about Russia. They see Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as an attack not just on that country but on Europe as a community and everything that it stands for. And while Moscow's aims may not be as expansive as they are often portrayed, perceptions can be hard to shake when little trust exists on either side. After all, Russia, too, was patently unconvinced that NATO was a purely defensive alliance whose enlargement posed no threat to its security, given the military actions that Western states undertook in Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya.

Europe's security concerns are worsened precisely because they are also status-related fears. Since the post–Cold War European economic and political orders are centered around the E.U. system, this has allowed Brussels to be the only term-setter of consequence on the Continent, leaving other states only with the choice of how closely to align themselves with E.U. norms and regulations. Given the West's adamance that no third party can interfere in the right of states to choose their security orientation, forging a compromise peace with Russia would threaten this arrangement, as this would require a commitment not to admit Ukraine to NATO.

It is therefore not uncommon for Europeans to express the (frankly unsettling) view that a "bad peace" in Ukraine would represent an even worse outcome than continued war. European elites are concerned that a "bad peace" risks allowing Russia to do away with Ukraine's position as a buffer state on the side of the West, while also giving Russia an opportunity to enrich itself and rebuild its war machine through sanctions relief — developments that would allow Moscow to pose an even more direct threat to Europe's security. These perceptions are severely compounded by Europe's status-related "loss aversion" — a psychological notion positing that the fear of losing something is even greater than the potential pleasure of gaining something.

As such, there is little reason to assume that an American decision to extricate itself from the war in Ukraine and leave the Europeans to shoulder the burden would lead to the emergence of a stable equilibrium on the Continent. As the history of both the 19th-century Concert of Europe and the Cold War shows, a balance of power is most durable only when there is broader agreement concerning the rules of the game — something that Moscow and other European capitals today manifestly do not share.

ADDRESSING EUROPE'S SECURITY AND STATUS-RELATED CONCERNS

It is possible to envision the contours of an agreement that the United States, Russia, and Ukraine can each sell at home — with varying degrees of difficulty — as a "win" of some kind. President Trump will have brought another "endless war" to an end, Moscow will have ensured

that there will be no Ukraine in NATO nor (in all likelihood) any NATO troops in Ukraine, and Kyiv will have its path toward E.U. membership endorsed by all relevant stakeholders including Russia.

The same is more difficult to say for the European Union itself, which gives European countries a strong incentive to scuttle the process. Yet the unavoidable reality is that European participation is essential for providing the components of any successful package deal, including sanctions relief for Russia and eventual E.U. membership for Ukraine.

The Trump administration must therefore make a concerted effort to get Europe on board for a peace settlement. This will require a multipronged approach to encourage the Europeans to view such a settlement as an opportunity to strengthen, rather than undermine, both their security and their strategic position.

1. A coordinated transition: While welcoming Europe's plans to spend more on defense, Washington should make clear that it still prefers for this to occur as much as possible in a fashion that is coordinated with the United States. As Europe rearms, Russia will increasingly rely on a modernized nuclear force to contend with NATO's conventional capabilities. Meanwhile, the perception that America can no longer be trusted has encouraged discussion in European capitals about the need for a more robust European nuclear deterrent.

Rocking the boat may have been necessary to shake Europe out of its sense of complacency. However, the Trump administration must now shift its focus to preventing a situation in which relations between Russia and the rest of Europe worsen and America is drawn back into managing security dynamics on a perpetually unstable European continent. American interlocutors should reassure their European counterparts that Washington will not hang them out to dry.

However, such a commitment should not presage a return to business as usual in transatlantic relations. Once progress has been made in settlement talks and a degree of trust with all parties has been restored, Washington should be prepared to confront the Europeans with the reality that burden shifting and increased military production in Europe will need to be linked with arms control. This includes questions such as what sorts of systems will need to be stockpiled for Kyiv and what limitations will be agreed regarding their deployment in the context of a negotiated settlement with Moscow.

2. Reframe the debate over security guarantees: Washington should communicate that under no circumstances will it back any pledge to deploy a "coalition of the willing" after a ceasefire is reached, as such a promise will only make it harder for Moscow to agree to an end to hostilities. Rather, the Trump administration should advocate that a strong Ukraine — militarily but also economically and demographically — offers a better path to enhancing Europe's security. After all, if Europeans fear that Russia may attack a NATO member state,

then surely they must acknowledge that a Western force on Ukrainian soil would be far from invulnerable.

Eschewing a "coalition of the willing" would allow European countries to focus to a greater extent on defending themselves, relieving at least some of the pressure they currently face to pursue massive rearmament. When combined with a reinforced and revitalized Ukrainian military, economy, and society, this would give Europe a strategic advantage by forcing Russia to divide its attention between Ukraine and NATO's easternmost members. Crucially, however, creating the space for Ukraine to build up the varied facets of its national power requires an end to the current round of hostilities, which is impossible without engaging with Russia's demands for a political settlement.

3. Speed up Ukraine's E.U. accession: President Trump's comments that the European Union was created essentially to "screw" the United States from an economic standpoint underscores how he feels about the bloc. A face-saving way forward would be for him to assert that, notwithstanding his views on trade, the European Union has become an indispensable component of the Continent's post–Cold War political and security orders and that he therefore sees it as an essential part of the settlement process to the war in Ukraine. In particular, Trump should advocate vocally that he sees Ukraine's future as lying within the European Union and encourage the Europeans to take concrete steps to help make that a reality.

For example, the president could make clear his opposition to using Russia's frozen assets to support Ukraine's ongoing military effort. Once seized and allocated, these assets will no longer be available to be used as a bargaining chip. Washington should persuade European capitals that it would be better to strike a deal that results in these assets being set aside for use in Ukraine's postwar reconstruction. This would ensure that the funds' potential for strengthening Ukraine over the long term is not needlessly squandered, while simultaneously helping to speed up Kyiv's E.U. accession. The Americans should also push the Europeans to endorse a formula in which some of the revenue generated by sanctions relief for Russia will also be set aside for reconstruction.

The United States should also publicly encourage the European Union to drop its current procedural rules that allow member states to exercise a veto over the opening and closing of each chapter in the accession negotiations. The Trump administration should use its influence with Hungary to discourage it from mounting a political campaign against this rule change.

4. Give Europe an opportunity to be a term setter: The Trump administration should also encourage China to play an active role in Ukraine's reconstruction. Not only will this help to alleviate the financial burden that the United States and European Union will have to carry, it will also give Brussels a chance to negotiate Beijing's contribution in a fashion that aligns with E.U. standards, thereby reaffirming the centrality of the European Union's normative orbit on the Continent. Giving China a stake in the settlement also provides Russia with an incentive not to attack Ukraine again, which in turn can alleviate Europe's defense burden — a dynamic that can

be further buttressed by deploying peacekeepers from Global South countries with which Moscow has deepened its relations over the past three years.

Moreover, the Trump administration could specifically discourage Europeans from reallocating E.U. cohesion funds for defense spending. Washington could assert that it would not want to see measures taken that could further increase resentment of the European Union among some of its member states, thereby further highlighting America's view that a united Europe must be a central component of the Continent's future security order.

CONCLUSION

The Trump administration has attempted to pursue a settlement in Ukraine that addresses some of Russia's long-standing grievances. But the resulting rise in apprehensiveness among Europeans reinforces one of the core lessons of post–Cold War European history: namely, that any order that does not take the stated concerns of all stakeholders into account will result in security for none.

As an actor that has — consciously or not — sought to exert normative hegemony over a non-unipolar European continent, the European Union has, to no small extent, been part of the problem. But because it is inescapably woven into the fabric of any negotiated settlement between Russia and Ukraine, it inevitably must be part of the solution.

At present, European elites are not prepared to view Moscow as a trustworthy partner with whom they can rebuild a Continental security architecture. Nonetheless, a concerted campaign from the Trump administration to persuade Europeans that peace will make them stronger and safer remains essential for achieving the more limited — but still formidable — goal of stopping the killing between Russia and Ukraine.

About the Author

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Paikin holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Kent. His research, which focuses on Russian foreign policy, European security, Canadian foreign policy, and international order, has been published by leading think tanks including the European Council on Foreign Relations, the Royal United Services Institute, LSE IDEAS, the Foundation for Strategic Research, the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, and the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute. His most recent book, *Rebooting Global International Society: Change, Contestation and Resilience* (edited with Trine Flockhart), was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2022.

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