

A U.S. PEACE PLAN FOR UKRAINE

QUINCY BRIEF NO. 76
MAY 2025

GEORGE BEEBE & ANATOL LIEVEN



QUINCY INSTITUTE
FOR RESPONSIBLE
STATECRAFT

OTEL

Executive Summary

In advancing a peace settlement to resolve the Russia–Ukraine War, Washington must prioritize a concrete and detailed settlement to end this catastrophic conflict along terms that harmonize the vital, long-term interests of Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the United States. A ceasefire is unlikely, unless the outlines of such a settlement are reached beforehand.

A peace settlement must address Ukrainian fears of future Russian aggression while simultaneously laying out a broader political framework that assuages Russia’s fears of strategic encirclement and international isolation.

A successful settlement is possible along these lines:

- In exchange for the West and Ukraine’s acknowledgement that Ukraine will not be part of the NATO alliance, Russia accepts Ukraine’s eventual E.U. accession, contingent on the constitutional enshrinement of rights for the Russian minority in Ukraine and Ukraine’s postwar upholding of the democratic process.
- Russia accepts a Western–armed, trained, and maintained Ukrainian military force capable of deterring and defending against any new invasion (accompanied possibly by a ban on Ukraine’s possession of long-range missiles). In return, the United States should enter into talks with Russia on a new version of the New Strategic Arms Treaty, New START, as well as committing to a new version of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, INF.
- The United Nations mandates a comprehensive reconstruction fund for Ukraine using frozen Russian assets held by the European Union, including reconstruction in the Russian–occupied areas of Ukraine.

- Ukraine and Russia accept a ceasefire along the current territorial battlelines, establishing a *de facto* border in the four provinces of eastern Ukraine that will not be further changed by force or subversion.
- Once a broader political settlement has been established, Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the U.S. accept a U.N. peacekeeping and monitoring force drawn from neutral Global South countries, to adjudicate a ceasefire line.

The process of reaching a settlement will not be easy or quick and may require the exercise of U.S. leverage over Russia, Ukraine, and Europe. But such an accord could create security and stability for Ukraine and Europe more broadly, while also enabling U.S.–Russian detente and an eventual American military drawdown from Europe.

Absent such a settlement, the war will continue to the detriment of Ukraine, placing its standing as a sovereign state — and its future integration within the European Union — in jeopardy.

Outline of a settlement

Although the parties to the conflict in Ukraine are still far from reaching a detailed peace accord, the basic outlines of what a settlement must entail are apparent.

- **Geopolitical compromise:** The West and Kyiv agree that Ukraine will not be a part of NATO or host Western forces; in turn, Moscow agrees not to try to block Ukrainian accession to the European Union. Such a compromise would address Russia's most significant security concern — that Ukraine might become a base that Western militaries could use against it. But this also would allow Kyiv a viable path toward its vital goal of becoming part of the West politically and economically.
- **Reciprocal security assurances:** No agreement will be possible absent Russia's acceptance that Ukraine must have a significant military capable of deterring and defending against any new invasion, something that will be viable only with ongoing Western arms, training, and maintenance aid (though certain categories

of weapons, like long-range missiles, could be excluded). But such acceptance is unlikely outside the context of a broader European arms control framework that addresses Moscow's concerns about threats posed by NATO conventional and nuclear capabilities against Russia.

- **E.U.–driven political reform in Ukraine:** The political optics of accepting Russia's demands to protect the linguistic and cultural rights of Ukraine's Russian minority, defang what it regards as nationalist extremists, and hold new elections would be highly problematic for Kyiv (though Moscow could offer reciprocal protections for Ukrainian citizens of Russia). Ukraine would, however, have to address these issues as part of the E.U. membership process. Framing such reforms not as concessions to Russia, but as consequences of accession to the European Union, might be the only practical path toward resolving these sensitive issues.
- **Sanctions relief and reconstruction:** To varying degrees, both Ukraine and Russia need economic relief — Ukraine from the extreme financial and demographic duress of war; Russia from Western sanctions that, while not crippling to its economy, have nonetheless produced a discomfiting dependence on trade with China and the Global South. Because Ukraine lacks sufficient air defenses to prevent Russian missile and bomb strikes against nascent reconstruction projects, Kyiv is very unlikely to attract large-scale reconstruction aid without Moscow's agreement to a settlement. And much of the West will object to any sanctions relief for Russia absent a peace accord.
- **Pragmatism on territory:** A compromise settlement on the fraught issue of delineating the border between Russia and Ukraine must be based on the recognition that neither side will cede territory it occupies at the time of settlement nor win new land at the negotiating table. But both sides should be able to agree that the *de facto* border will not be changed by force or subversion.

The issue of the legal status of the territories concerned will have to be left for future negotiation.

- **Stable separation of forces:** Assuming the basic provisions of a peace settlement are agreed, technical arrangements to establish, monitor, and adjudicate a ceasefire must be established. Any peacekeeping and monitoring force will, however, have to be drawn from neutral countries under the aegis of the United Nations.

The procedural path to a settlement

Because continuing the war is its primary leverage over the terms of a settlement, Russia will not agree to a ceasefire without a clear understanding of the key provisions of a peace accord. Ukraine, however, will not agree to those broad provisions absent strong assurances that Russia cannot exploit a ceasefire to regroup and reinvade, nor will Russia agree without assurances that “peacekeepers” from NATO countries will not be introduced later. For these reasons, a negotiating process that begins by trying to establish a ceasefire before securing the broad parameters of a political settlement is likely to fail.

Although direct Russia–Ukraine talks can play a role in arranging a settlement, very few of the necessary compromises can be struck through bilateral negotiations alone. Absent U.S. and European support, Ukraine lacks the leverage to compel Russian compromises over its defense capabilities, and Kyiv cannot negotiate over such matters as the U.S. and European force posture within NATO, which are of critical concern to Moscow. The bulk of the incentive and coercive power that can produce Russian and Ukrainian concessions rests with Washington.

To achieve an agreement, the U.S. administration needs to play a central role in formulating a detailed plan for peace, which all parties would have to agree to. Because Russia has the upper hand on the battlefield and views U.S. intentions and capabilities as its chief security concern, the most important channel of negotiation will be between

Moscow and Washington. The Russians will almost certainly persist in their refusal to agree to a permanent ceasefire without a reasonably concrete and detailed agreement, as ending the fighting would end their ability to bring pressure on the Ukrainians and the West to accede to a compromise that meets basic Russian conditions.¹

Nor is an early ceasefire without a settlement objectively desirable, as it would leave open so many of the issues that have led to conflict since 2014, therefore increasing the chances of a renewal of the war.² An unstable and fragile ceasefire — such as existed in the Donbas from 2015 to 2022 — would not provide Ukraine with the stability and security it needs to attract foreign investment and implement the reforms necessary to move toward E.U. membership.

U.S.–Russian agreement on the broad outlines of a political settlement could be followed by intense U.S. engagement with Ukraine to build support for a settlement and highlight the negative consequences that would almost inevitably flow from failure to settle the war. Bringing Ukraine around to accepting the key elements of a political settlement will require the United States to employ both honey and vinegar. An intense campaign of public diplomacy and direct engagement with Ukrainian political and business leaders will be necessary to persuade Ukrainians that prolonging the war would result in a more onerous settlement and that compromise now would secure Ukraine’s independence and anchor it in the West, even though NATO membership is unattainable.

Ultimately, announced U.S. threats to cut off military and intelligence aid should Ukraine fail to compromise may be necessary. This may seem a harsh approach, but it may well be that it is only by being able to claim that President Volodymyr Zelensky has been forced to compromise by overwhelming U.S. pressure that he will be able to get

¹ AFP, “Temporary Ukraine Ceasefire ‘Unacceptable,’ Russian MFA Spokeswoman Says,” *The Moscow Times*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/03/06/a88277>.

² Anatol Lieven, “Why a Temporary Ceasefire in Ukraine is Pointless,” *Responsible Statecraft*, April 9 2025, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/ukraine-ceasefire-2671696219>; Kieran Kelly, “Trump Threatens to Walk Away from Ukraine Peace Talks,” *Telegraph*, April 18, 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/04/18/russia-ukraine-zelensky-putin-war-latest-news5291>.

hard-line elements in Ukraine — and in his own administration — to agree to a settlement, even if the alternative is far worse: defeat.

European support will be critical to persuading Ukraine to accept a settlement. But the countries of the European Union (and Britain) are so deeply divided over policy toward the war in Ukraine that it seems likely only firm U.S. leadership can bring them to collective acceptance of a settlement. Leading figures in Brussels and elsewhere have also nailed themselves so firmly to rejection of compromise that it will be extremely difficult for them to change course, unless Washington shows them that they have no choice. In this regard, the United States will need to put considerable pressure on the Europeans to highlight the importance of supporting a viable path toward Ukrainian membership in the European Union, an issue on which intense U.S. lobbying with Poland, Hungary, and other skeptics will be necessary.

U.S.–Russian relations as an incentive for compromise

The greatest incentive for Russia to abandon or modify its maximalist demands on Ukraine and agree to a U.S. peace plan is the opportunity that it would give to establish a wholly new relationship with the United States, under which Washington would respect what Moscow sees as vital Russian interests and consult on issues of common concern. This is something that the administrations of Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, and Vladimir Putin all sought in vain since the end of the Cold War. Between 2008 and 2011, it was also a core aim of President Dmitry Medvedev.³

Beginning with these U.S.–Russian issues has the immense advantage that they can be negotiated bilaterally between Washington and Moscow and do not have to include consultation with (and likely obstruction from) Kyiv and other European capitals. Of course, however, any U.S. agreement to Russian wishes in this area must be made conditional on Russia's willingness to compromise in its approach to Ukraine. Thus, Moscow has been demanding Ukrainian "disarmament" as part of a peace settlement,

³ Agnieszka Nowak, "A New European Security Architecture?" Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, *Opini3n* no. 41 (July 2009), <https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/new-european-security-architecture>.

and previous Russian statements have suggested that this should involve reducing the Ukrainian armed forces to a level where they could not defend the country.

This is completely unacceptable, and it is essential that in any settlement the United States and NATO should be able to continue to arm Ukraine for its defense. This would also reduce the pressure on the Europeans to engage in a crash rearmament program and on the Americans to retain large military forces in Europe. U.S. negotiators should give the Russian government a clear choice: Either Russia agrees to the Western arming of Ukraine for defense (possibly with the exclusion of certain categories of weapons, such as long-range missiles) or the United States will increase its own military deployments in Europe and help to arm NATO's European members to the teeth. This would lock Russia into a long-term military competition with the West similar to the one that helped ruin the Soviet economy. The Russian economy has sustained the war in Ukraine remarkably well, but the strains (especially the threat of inflation) are nonetheless great, and it is unlikely that they can be sustained permanently.

In return for the Russian government agreeing to long-term NATO aid in strengthening the Ukrainian armed forces, the Trump administration should urgently enter into talks on updating the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or New START. The present treaty expires in 2026 and, unless something is created to replace it, there will be no legal limit on a nuclear arms race between the United States and Russia. Pending the signature of a new treaty, the United States and Russia should agree to state a willingness to abide by the terms of New START. Both countries should also formally commit themselves to negotiating a new version of the previous Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, or INF.⁴ Under such an agreement, the United States could guarantee not to go through with its plan to deploy (nonnuclear but nuclear-capable) medium-range missiles in Germany, in return for Russia withdrawing its missiles from Kaliningrad and Belarus.⁵

⁴ "The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance," Arms Control Association, Aug. 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-inf-treaty-glance>.

⁵ Anatol Lieven, "Germans Uneasy about Stationing New U.S. Missiles," *Responsible Statecraft*, Sept. 25, 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/germany-united-states-missiles>.

In December 2021, in its ultimatum before invading Ukraine, Russia demanded that NATO withdraw forces and weaponry deployed to new member states in eastern Europe since the end of the Cold War.⁶ It will most likely be impossible to get many European countries to agree to this, but it is entirely within the rights and competence of a U.S. administration to decide that American forces will not be deployed there or, if they are there, that they can be withdrawn in return for reciprocal limits on Russian forces (notably in countries and territories on the borders of the NATO states concerned: Kaliningrad, Belarus, and Transdniestria).

Such U.S. force limits or withdrawals would be very much in line with the Trump administration's desire to reduce U.S. commitments in Europe and increase the role of European NATO members in their own defense. A U.S.–Russian agreement along these lines would not fully satisfy Russia, because European NATO members would still be free to deploy their own troops; but Russia's fears of NATO on its borders have always focused above all on U.S. forces.

Agreement on these issues could be accompanied or followed by the restoration of previous U.S.–Russian cooperation in other areas: on counterterrorism in response to what remains a dire threat to both the West and Russia; on the maintenance of stability in the Middle East and Russian help with a new Iranian nuclear deal, if the Trump administration genuinely wants one; and on limiting military deployments and confrontation in the Arctic. The United States should also promote a full restoration of Russia's role in the Arctic Council and the restoration of what was called "Arctic Exceptionalism."

A much more complex issue is Russia's demand for a new European security architecture, or consultation mechanism, which would end the NATO and E.U. attempt to monopolize security on the European continent, officially recognizing the role and *droit de regard* of Russia. This was something that was supposed to be established

⁶ Gabriele Tétrault–Farber and Tom Balmforth, "Russia Demands that NATO Roll Back from East Europe and Stay Out of Ukraine," Reuters, Dec. 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-unveils-security-guarantees-says-western-response-not-encouraging-2021-12-17>.

either under the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, or through the NATO–Russia Council.⁷ But from Moscow’s point of view, both institutions have been hopelessly compromised by the tendency of all the Western members to decide things on their own and then present Russia not with material for discussion but with a *fait accompli*.

However, any purely European consultative mechanism is inevitably going to mean that Russia is outnumbered by Western states and institutions. If, therefore, an eventual Ukrainian peace settlement is signed under the auspices of the United Nations and involves U.N. peacekeeping forces to patrol the ceasefire line and any demilitarized zone (and it is clear that *only* neutral U.N. forces in this role will be acceptable to Russia), then it might be worth considering the possibility of creating a committee of the U.N. Security Council on Ukrainian and European security, with the additional statutory membership of any nonpermanent Security Council members that contribute significant numbers of troops to a peacekeeping force or funds for Ukraine’s reconstruction.

Territorial issues

Realistically speaking, and as President Zelensky has himself stated, the Ukrainian military is not in a position to recapture the territories already lost to Russia.⁸ Nor is there any chance in the foreseeable future that it will be able to regain them through negotiations. If the war continues, the Russian military is very likely to make additional gains, but to what extent and how quickly is not at all clear.

On the one hand, the advantage that contemporary weaponry gives to the defense has meant that, over the past year, the Russian army has advanced only very slowly and at

⁷ “Statement: NATO–Russia Council,” NATO, May 28, 2002, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_19580.htm.

⁸ Kit Heren, “‘Ukraine Cannot Take Back Territory Occupied by Russia,’ Zelenskyy Admits, as He Calls for Talks with Putin,” *LBC*, Dec. 18, 2024, <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/ukraine-cannot-take-back-russia-territor-zelenskyy>.

the cost of heavy casualties.⁹ On the other hand, there has been extensive reporting in the Western media of heavy Ukrainian casualties, of exhaustion and demoralization among Ukraine's frontline troops, and of resistance to conscription in the Ukrainian population.¹⁰ There is therefore a real risk that the Ukrainian front will collapse at some point. Russia would then be able to make far greater gains and dictate the terms of peace, subjugating Ukraine and causing considerable embarrassment to the United States.

If the war continues indefinitely and complete Ukrainian defeat is to be avoided, then present levels of U.S. military aid and intelligence sharing will also have to continue indefinitely. This would impose a heavy burden on limited reserves of U.S. weaponry and be very unwelcome to the present U.S. administration and many U.S. citizens. In terms of preventing Ukrainian defeat, U.S. intelligence is even more important than weaponry. Satellite intelligence identifies the location of Russian troops. Terrain mapping allows Ukrainian missiles to hit their targets. Starlink is essential for communication between Ukrainian units.¹¹

On the question of territory, at the time of writing, the official Russian position remains that, in return for a permanent ceasefire, Ukraine must withdraw from all the land it still holds in the provinces Russia claims to have annexed, including the cities of Kherson and Zaporizhia (though there have been hints that Russia is ready to give up this demand as part of a peace settlement).¹² This would be completely impossible for any Ukrainian government to accept, and the Trump administration has quite rightly

⁹ Olga Ivshina, "How Russia Suffered Record Losses in Ukraine in 2024," BBC, May 4, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yg4z6v600o>.

¹⁰ Samya Kullab and Volodymyr Yurchuk, "Desertion Threatens to Starve Ukrainian Forces at a Crucial Time in Its War with Russia," AP, Nov. 29, 2024, <https://apnews.com/def676562552d42bc5d593363c9e5ea0>; Briar Stewart, "Facing Exhaustion and North Korean Troops, Ukraine's Soldiers Say the War Needs to End," CBC, Jan. 24, 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ukraine-soldier-front-lines-sumy-1.7439786>; Jean Mackenzie, "Conscription Squads Send Ukrainian Men into Hiding," BBC, June 17, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz994d6vqe5o>.

¹¹ Farangis Najibullah and Sergei Dobrynin, "How Important Is U.S. Intelligence for Ukraine's War Effort?" RFE/RL, March 18, 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/33340241.html>.

¹² Anna Chernova, Katharina Krebs, and Christian Edwards, "Putin Demands More Land to End Ukraine War, Terms Kyiv Rejects as a 'Complete Sham'," CNN, June 14, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/06/14/europe/putin-conditions-peace-talks-ukraine-intl>.

advocated in its draft peace terms that the ceasefire line will therefore have to run where the final battle line runs.¹³

Nor, barring complete Ukrainian defeat, can any Ukrainian government agree legally to recognize Russian sovereignty over occupied territories.¹⁴ It is possible however — as suggested in the draft peace proposals issued by the Trump administration — that the United States could do so, at least in the case of Crimea, which is a special case, having been transferred from the Russian Soviet Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic by a 1954 Soviet decree.¹⁵ Russia and Ukraine will therefore need to agree that the legal status of occupied territories will be deferred for future negotiation and that neither will try to change the ceasefire line through force, subversion, or economic pressure. The likelihood in this case is that, as in the case of the *de facto* partition of Cyprus, talks will go on for decades or generations without resolution — but also, hopefully, without a return to war.

Neutrality, Ukrainian self-defense, and the search for security guarantees

In practice, a bar on Ukrainian NATO membership has already been conceded by the West, because every leading NATO government (including the Biden administration) has made clear that they will not fight to defend Ukraine.¹⁶ This, by definition, rules out a NATO Article 5 guarantee for Ukraine. As President Zelensky himself stated publicly in March 2022, all the NATO governments he had talked to prior to the war had refused to promise that within five years Ukraine would be admitted to the organization. He

¹³ “Ukraine Peace Deal Proposals Set Out by U.S. at Talks in Paris,” Reuters, April 25, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-peace-deal-proposals-set-out-by-us-talks-paris-2025-04-25>.

¹⁴ “Zelenskyy: Legal Recognition of Ukrainian Land Theft by Russia Is Impossible,” *New Voice of Ukraine*, Jan. 22, 2025, <https://english.nv.ua/nation/ukraine-rejects-any-recognition-of-russian-occupied-territories-50483565.html>.

¹⁵ Mark Kramer, “Why Did Russia Give Away Crimea Sixty Years Ago?” Wilson Center, *CWIHP e-Dossier* no. 47, March 19, 2014, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/why-did-russia-give-away-crimea-sixty-years-ago>.

¹⁶ Paul LeBlanc, “Why the U.S. Isn’t Sending Troops to Ukraine,” CNN, Feb. 28, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/27/politics/us-troops-ukraine-russia-what-matters>.

therefore said that Ukrainian neutrality (which until 2014 was part of the Ukrainian constitution) could be accepted by Kyiv, if ratified in a referendum and accompanied by other guarantees to Ukraine.¹⁷

By the same token, a European “reassurance force” for Ukraine is impossible.¹⁸ Russia categorically opposes any military force from NATO members in Ukraine, and there is a strong likelihood that if they were deployed — even in areas far from the front line — they would be attacked.¹⁹ Assessments by European military analysts and retired officers have stated that Britain and France can only provide a small fraction of the troops necessary to create a force capable of fighting Russia in Ukraine if necessary.²⁰

Most European states (including Poland) have therefore already refused to contribute troops to such a force.²¹ The British government — one of the proposal’s leading advocates and one of the few European states with serious armed forces — has said that this can only be formed if there is a U.S. “backstop.”²² This suggests a U.S. commitment to go to war with Russia over Ukraine, which is completely contrary to Trump administration policy, U.S. vital interests, and the wishes of a majority of U.S. citizens.

The deployment of such a force would also create a real risk that, at some point in the future, a Ukrainian government — or Ukrainian extremist forces — might deliberately restart a war with Russia in an effort to draw the United States in; for any realistic peace

¹⁷ “Ukraine Ready to Discuss Accepting Neutral Status in Russia Peace Deal, Zelenskiy Says,” Reuters, March 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-prepared-discuss-neutrality-status-zelenskiy-tells-russian-journalists-2022-03-27>.

¹⁸ Anatol Lieven, “European ‘Peacekeepers’ for Ukraine? A Horrible Idea,” *Responsible Statecraft*, Dec. 16, 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/ukraine-peacekeepers>.

¹⁹ “Russia Rejects Idea of NATO Peacekeepers in Ukraine, Warning of ‘Uncontrollable Escalation,’” Reuters, Jan. 23, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-rejects-idea-nato-peacekeepers-ukraine-warning-uncontrollable-escalation-2025-01-23>.

²⁰ Johanna Chisholm, “U.K. Military ‘Too Run Down’ to Lead Ukraine Peace Mission, Says Ex-Army Chief,” BBC, Feb. 15, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czep44jn9jyo>.

²¹ “Poland Will Not Send Troops to Ukraine, Says PM Tusk,” Reuters, Feb. 17, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-will-not-send-troops-ukraine-says-pm-tusk-2025-02-17>.

²² “Sitrep: What Would a Boots-on-the-Ground Security Force for Ukraine Look Like?” *BFBS Forces News*, Feb. 22, 2025, <https://www.forcesnews.com/ukraine/sitrep-what-would-boots-ground-security-force-ukraine-look>.

settlement will be bitterly unpopular with many Ukrainians, and so threats to a long-term peace settlement do not come only from the Russian side. The Trump administration has therefore been correct to be very cautious about offering help for such a European force.

When considering alternative security “guarantees” to Ukraine, it is crucial to honestly recognize that, in international affairs and over the long term, no such absolute guarantees can exist. As long as Russia exists as a state, a potential threat to Ukraine will also exist (and, as long as Ukraine exists as a state, it will probably wish to recover its lost territories); but destroying Russia as a state is not remotely within Western capacity and would, in any case, involve a hideous risk of mutual nuclear annihilation and the end of civilization.

Nor is any geopolitical alignment set in stone. In 1814, Great Britain was an ally of the German states (and Russia) against France. One hundred years later, it was an ally of France (and Russia) against Germany. One hundred and fifty years later, it was an ally of France (and Germany) against Russia. The British government’s language of a “100-year pact” between Britain and Ukraine is therefore meaningless.²³

In consequence, the task of the U.S. administration and its European allies should be not to fantasize about absolute or permanent guarantees to Ukraine. Instead, they should craft a peace settlement that both Moscow and Kyiv can live with (however unhappily), with the right mixture of incentives and deterrents to make a resumption of the war by either side as unlikely as possible.

In any peace settlement, Ukraine must therefore keep the right to maintain sufficiently strong armed forces that, in the event of new Russian aggression, would be able to put up a serious defense, inflict heavy casualties, and buy time for the massive supply of Western weaponry (as indeed they did in the months following the Russian invasion in

²³ Sarah Rainsford, “U.K. Pledges Support for Ukraine with ‘Landmark’ 100-Year Pact,” BBC, Jan. 16, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgem31jekvo>.

Feb. 2022). Western governments should stockpile weaponry to supply to Ukraine in the event of new Russian aggression and should let Moscow know of this.

Any limitations on the numbers of Ukrainian troops should only be considered as part of a separate process introducing general and reciprocal limits of armed forces in Europe as a whole, based on (though inevitably different from, given the radically changed circumstances) the previous Adapted Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, CFE.²⁴

Russia's demand for the "demilitarization" of Ukraine should therefore be quite unacceptable as it stands. However, the U.S. administration could consider a ban on the delivery of or help in producing certain categories of weapons to Ukraine, notably long-range missiles capable of striking deep into Russian territory. Thus, Article 13 of the Austrian State Treaty of 1955, by which the Soviet Union and NATO agreed to withdraw their occupying troops from Austria and establish Austrian neutrality, prohibited Austria from possessing missiles and artillery with a range of over 30 kilometers.²⁵

Fortunately, recent developments in military technology (especially drones) strongly favor defense and mean that it will be possible for Ukraine, with Western assistance, to build up defensive forces capable of deterring future Russian aggression by denying Russia a quick victory and ensuring heavy Russian casualties.²⁶

The supply of such weapons to Ukraine must remain open in any settlement, and it should be formally guaranteed that the supply of all forms of Western weaponry will automatically resume in the event of future Russian aggression. Ukraine should, however, also be warned that, if it breaks the terms of a peace settlement, weapons and intelligence support will not be provided, ensuring defeat. This should apply, for

²⁴ "Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe," Nov. 19, 1990, via the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe at <https://www.osce.org/library/14087>.

²⁵ "State Treaty for the Re-establishment of an Independent and Democratic Austria," May 15, 1955, via the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History at <http://www.cvce.eu/obj/en-5c586461-7528-4a74-92c3-d3eba73c2d7d.html>.

²⁶ Kristen D. Thompson, "How the Drone War in Ukraine Is Transforming Conflict," Council on Foreign Relations, Jan. 16, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-drone-war-ukraine-transforming-conflict>.

example, if a future Ukrainian government allows or encourages terrorism against Russian targets by groups based in Ukraine.

As for peacekeepers, the only ones acceptable to both Russia and Ukraine would have to be organized under the United Nations and drawn from countries that have remained neutral in the Ukraine War.²⁷ Ideally, these should be important states of the Global South.

Such troops could not and would not be intended to defeat a new Russian (or Ukrainian) offensive. However, before and especially during the war, Moscow has devoted immense diplomatic effort to wooing the members of what it calls the “Global Majority.”²⁸ Moreover, while these states have refused to join in Western sanctions against Russia, they certainly did not want the war and would not want to see it resume.

It is therefore reasonable to assume that Russia would hesitate to launch an attack in which peacekeepers would be at risk of being killed, which would deeply alienate their governments. Given the importance that Russia attaches to the United Nations and its permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, a Ukrainian peace treaty signed under U.N. auspices and mandating U.N. peacekeepers would also carry more moral and political weight in Moscow than one signed simply between Russia, Ukraine, and Western states.

Sanctions and economic agreements

Economic incentives and deterrents regarding both Russia and Ukraine will be of key importance in achieving a settlement. A good start has been made with the U.S.–Ukraine agreement on minerals development, which, if implemented, will ensure

²⁷ Henry Foy, “Could U.N. Peacekeepers Be Key to a Ukraine Ceasefire Force?” *Financial Times*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/245bca78-7d8d-4c42-b3c4-9ef5c92e95f7>.

²⁸ “How Russia Courted the Global South at BRICS Summit,” *The Moscow Times*, Oct. 24, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/10/24/a86798>; Angela Stent, “Russia, the West and the ‘World Majority,’” *Russia Matters*, Jan. 25, 2024, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/russia-west-and-world-majority>.

long-term U.S. interest in Ukraine and that, in the event of new Russian aggression, a future U.S. administration will not be able simply to ignore Ukraine.²⁹

Economic issues cannot, however, be negotiated purely between Washington and Moscow, because the European Union plays a key role both in sanctions against Russia and through its control of \$300 billion in sequestered Russian assets. Nonetheless, the U.S. administration can make very strong recommendations to the Europeans on how to proceed and threaten withdrawal of U.S. military aid to Ukraine and reduction of its commitment to Europe if they reject these recommendations.

A strong incentive to Russia to make and stick to a peace settlement would be the lifting of Western sanctions. Though these have done far less damage to the Russian economy than Western governments hoped – and have in some ways even strengthened it (through the need to build up substitutes for Western imports) – the reduction in Western energy imports from Russia has made Russia much more dependent on energy exports to China, thereby allowing Beijing to set prices to Moscow's disadvantage.³⁰

However, as part of a settlement Western sanctions should be not ended but suspended, with – as in the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran – a “snapback” clause that guarantees that they would automatically resume if Russia launched a new attack on Ukraine. President Putin authorized the full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 because he thought Russia could easily win a complete victory. After the experience of the past three years, he cannot possibly expect such an outcome in the future.

The Russian assets held by the European Union (in fact, mainly by Belgium) should go to the reconstruction of Ukraine. Russian agreement to this could be gained by two means: a face-saving agreement whereby Russian assets would go into a joint fund for Ukrainian reconstruction under the United Nations, which the European Union would also contribute to; and a proviso that the fund would also pay for reconstruction in the

²⁹ Anatol Lieven, “U.S., Ukraine Minerals Deal: A Tactical Win, Not a Turning Point,” *Responsible Statecraft*, May 1, 2025, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/ukraine-war-2671878344>.

³⁰ Philip Luck, “How Sanctions Have Reshaped Russia's Future,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Feb. 24, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-sanctions-have-reshaped-russias-future>.

Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, which have also suffered very badly since 2022, and in the case of the Donbas since 2014.

The E.U. contribution to this U.N. fund would also form part of the process of helping Ukraine move toward eventual membership in the European Union – a possibility that Russia has agreed to and that should form an explicit part of any peace settlement. Whether Ukraine will be capable of joining the European Union in anything like the union's present form is of course questionable; but the economic and political reforms that Ukraine will be required to undertake as part of the E.U. accession process would be beneficial in and of themselves and, if implemented, would contribute greatly to the country's move toward the West – much more so than a NATO accession process that is, in any case, impossible.

Minority rights and internal governance

The path toward E.U. membership also provides a way for Ukraine to guarantee the linguistic and cultural rights of the country's Russian minority without seeming to bow to Moscow's demands for "denazification," since these rights are guaranteed under principles of the E.U. Charter of Fundamental Rights, which Kyiv will have to accede to in order to qualify for membership.³¹

The official status of the Russian language and Ukrainian Russians as a national minority should be established in the Ukrainian constitution. However, as reportedly discussed in the Istanbul peace negotiations early in the war, this should also form part of a mutual agreement whereby Russia guarantees Ukrainian-language rights to Ukrainians in Russia.

Ukraine will, of course, have to hold democratic elections as part of the E.U. accession process; and, while these would likely not bring a pro-Russian government to power, it is possible that they would lead to the replacement of President Zelensky, perhaps by a

³¹ "Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union," *Official Journal of the European Communities*, Dec. 18, 2000, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf.

figure more inclined to compromise with Russia. Many E.U. states also have laws banning neo-Nazi parties and symbols, which could be adopted by Ukraine as part of its strategy of joining the European Union. The union should insist on similar laws in Ukraine as part of the E.U. accession process.

As part of any settlement, Russia must guarantee noninterference in the internal affairs of Ukraine (including a specific ban on support for insurrection, as occurred in the Donbas in 2014) and respect for Ukrainian elections and Ukrainian democratic legitimacy. In return, Ukraine should guarantee not to foment rebellion or support terrorism against Russia in the Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine or in Russia itself. This is a crucially important part of any peace settlement that has been almost completely neglected in the West.

Since 2014, Ukraine has engaged in the assassination of pro-Russian officials and leaders in occupied areas of Ukraine and, since the Russian invasion of 2022, has greatly intensified this strategy and extended it to Russia itself.³² Should such attacks continue after a peace settlement, whether by the Ukrainian state itself or by Ukrainian nationalist groups, this would create a huge danger that Russia would resume the war and might even have widespread global sympathy in doing so, given the fear of terrorism that exists in most countries around the world.

The example of the threat of war between India and Pakistan caused by terrorist attacks on India should be very clear before our eyes; and indeed, were Pakistan not armed with nuclear weapons, it seems highly likely that India would have invaded Pakistan in response to these attacks. On the other hand, if Ukraine has a realistic path toward E.U. membership, this would inhibit Kyiv from engaging in or turning a blind eye to such attacks, for the resulting instability and danger of new war with Moscow would undoubtedly create a huge barrier to progress toward membership.

³² David L. Stern, "Ukrainian Hit Squads Are Killing Russian Occupiers and Collaborators," *Washington Post*, Sept. 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/08/ukraine-assassinations-occupied-territory-russia/>; "A Top Russian General Is Killed in a Moscow Bombing Claimed by Ukraine," AP, Dec. 17, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-explosion-head-of-nuclear-defense-forces-killed-9656bce946a9f552454df9debe5fbd18>.

Conclusion

A peace settlement along these lines would meet the vital interests of Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the United States. Ukraine would receive all realistic and practicable guarantees against future Russian aggression, the chance to move toward E.U. membership (which would itself be a major deterrent to Russia), and large funds for reconstruction. Russia would be guaranteed against Ukraine becoming a Western military springboard against it, and it would be able to reestablish normal economic relations with the West, thereby allowing it to recover from damage to its economy and to escape dependence on China.

Europe would no longer be faced with the terrifying danger of having to continue to back Ukraine in a war without help or guarantees from the United States. Washington would escape the risk of being drawn into a potentially catastrophic clash with Moscow against its will. It would be free to gradually reduce some of its military deployments to Europe and to concentrate its resources and attention on other issues of greater concern to the American people.

In its negotiations with Moscow, the Trump administration will need to aim at agreement on reasonably firm and concrete points, because the Russians feel that, under previous U.S. administrations, American professions of goodwill led nowhere and promises not backed by formal agreements were empty. If Russia rejects these points, then the war will obviously continue and so should U.S. aid to Ukraine.

The aim of this aid should not be — as under the Biden administration — Ukrainian “victory” but rather to change the cost-benefit analysis in Moscow, by inflicting such losses on Russia that accepting a reasonable compromise will seem preferable to continuing to suffer them in pursuit of maximalist gains that may be unachievable. The very slow progress and heavy casualties of the Russian army over the past year, and the increasing threat of inflation in the domestic economy, suggest that this strategy has a

good chance of working — but *only* if continued aid to Kyiv is combined with a continued offer to Moscow of a reasonable compromise.

If an agreement on these points with Russia can be reached, then it should be presented to Ukraine and European countries as a settled matter that they can either accept (with limited modifications) or reject — with the clear warning that, if they reject it, U.S. aid and intelligence-sharing will be withdrawn and U.S. military commitments in Europe reduced.

The Europeans would be forced to recognize the need to strengthen their own security and not adopt empty ideas (like a “reassurance force” for Ukraine) that depend completely on U.S. backing. As for President Zelensky, it seems likely that the only way that he will be able to get the Ukrainian political establishment to agree to a compromise peace is if he can present this as a *fait accompli* forced on him by Washington, which he has no choice but to accept.

And failing such a settlement, the war will continue, and to Ukraine’s disadvantage. Even if U.S. aid continues and complete collapse can be avoided, Ukraine will continue to be devastated, its male population decimated, and the day when it can begin to reconstruct and move toward the European Union indefinitely delayed. In pushing for an early settlement, the Trump administration is therefore acting as a true friend of Ukraine.

About the authors

George Beebe is director of the Grand Strategy program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. He spent more than two decades in government as an intelligence analyst, diplomat, and policy advisor, including as director of the CIA's Russia analysis, director of the CIA's Open Source Center, and as a staff advisor on Russia matters to Vice President Cheney. His book, *The Russia Trap: How Our Shadow War with Russia Could Spiral into Nuclear Catastrophe* (St. Martin's Press, 2019), warned how the United States and Russia could stumble into a dangerous military confrontation. Prior to joining QI, George was vice president and director of studies at the Center for the National Interest, and before that he served as president of a technology company that measured the impact of events, issues, and advertising campaigns on audience views. He speaks Russian and German.

Anatol Lieven is the director of the Eurasia program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. He was formerly a professor at Georgetown University in Qatar and in the War Studies department of King's College London. He also served as a member of the advisory committee of the South Asia department of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and of the academic board of the Valdai Discussion Club in Russia. He holds a BA and PhD in history and political science from Cambridge University in England.

About the Quincy Institute

The Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft believes that efforts to maintain unilateral U.S. dominance around the world through coercive force are neither possible nor desirable.

A transpartisan, action-oriented research institution, QI promotes ideas that move U.S. foreign policy away from endless war and towards vigorous diplomacy in pursuit of international peace. We connect and mobilize a network of policy experts and academics who are dedicated to a vision of American foreign policy based on military restraint rather than domination. We help increase and amplify their output, and give them a voice in Washington and in the media.

Since its establishment in 2019, QI has been committed to improving standards for think tank transparency and producing unbiased research. QI's conflict-of-interest policy can be viewed at www.quincyinst.org/coi/ and its list of donors at www.quincyinst.org/about.

© 2025 by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. All rights reserved.

2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
7th floor
Washington, DC 20006

+1 202-800-4662
info@quincyinst.org
www.quincyinst.org