

Frequently Asked Questions About the Russia–Ukraine Negotiations

ANATOL LIEVEN AND MARK
EPISKOPOS

The Current State of Play

Has Russia made concessions in the negotiation process?

Yes. Russia has made significant concessions.

Russia has agreed to lift all objections to Ukraine's accession to the European Union, marking a major shift from its position before and after the 2014 Euromaidan revolution.

- It has accepted the principle that Ukraine is entitled to a robust postwar domestic military deterrent. This includes very few qualitative restrictions on the types of weapons Ukraine can possess and a far larger peacetime standing army than Russia demanded during the 2022 Istanbul peace talks. Specifically, in 2022, Russia demanded that the Ukrainian military be limited to 85,000 troops, while current proposals would allow Ukraine to maintain a peacetime military of at least 600,000 and up to 800,000 troops, which would be by far the largest army in Europe.
- During the August 2022 Alaska summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed with President Trump that Ukraine is entitled to substantial, binding security guarantees from Western states, the scope and content of which are currently being negotiated.
- Moscow has pared down its September 2022 territorial demands by expressing a willingness to indefinitely freeze the front in Zaporizhzhia and

Kherson, abandoning its original goal of conquering these regions.

Combined, these Russian concessions would permit the establishment of a secure, sovereign, Western-aligned Ukrainian state on approximately 80 percent of its pre-2014 territory.

Has Ukraine made concessions in the negotiation process?

Yes. Ukrainian President Zelensky has repeatedly recognized that Ukraine will not recapture eastern and southeastern territories lost to Russia since the invasion began and has agreed to negotiate a viable, durable peace deal on that basis.

Ukraine has accepted the White House proposal to demilitarize contested parts of the eastern Donetsk region — including areas under its control — despite its prior insistence that abandoning its “fortress belt” of fortifications in Donetsk is an unacceptable risk.

Kyiv has, at least in a *de facto* sense, accepted that it will not join NATO and is instead working with the Trump administration on an alternative set of security guarantees to help ensure Ukraine's postwar sovereignty, stability, and prosperity. Zelensky has opened the door to codifying territorial and political concessions by holding a nationwide referendum that the Ukrainian Rada can then recognize as legally binding.

What are the key outstanding areas of disagreement?

Several sticking points remain on territory, the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, and security guarantees.

Territory: Both sides attach great symbolic value to Donetsk, which, together with neighboring Luhansk, forms the eastern Donbass region where the conflict between Ukraine and Russian-backed separatists began in 2014. The last remaining territorial issue dividing the two sides is the Russian demand that Ukraine relinquish the 20 percent of Donetsk that Russia claims and Ukraine still controls. Because of the immense destruction and loss of life that stems from 10 years of fighting over this region, it is politically and psychologically challenging for the respective sides to negotiate on the compromise arrangements being offered by the White House.

Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant: Russian forces control the plant, which generated about one-quarter of Ukraine's electricity before the war. Ukraine seeks to push Russia out of the nuclear power plant as part of a peace deal, with Zelensky pushing for a joint management scheme between Ukraine and the U.S. This is a red line for Moscow, which will likely reject any arrangement that excludes it from the plant's postwar management.

Security guarantees: Though Zelensky understands and largely accepts the security guarantees being offered by the White House and a coalition of willing Western states, part of Ukraine's negotiation strategy is to signal agreement while holding out for better terms on the margins. Zelensky seeks to make the binding assurances taken on by guarantor states as robust as possible. European proposals to station a European military force in Ukraine as a postwar security guarantee are a red line for Russia and, if seriously pursued, could derail negotiations.

Should it be possible to resolve these issues and reach an agreement?

Yes. The White House has made substantial progress in narrowing the negotiating gap between Russia and Ukraine over territory. For example, the White House has proposed demilitarizing contested

areas of Eastern Ukraine and turning them into "special economic zones," thereby reframing concerns about sovereignty and territorial integrity in a way that makes the deal easier for both sides to swallow. There is technical work left to do, particularly in working with Moscow to review the proposal's finer points, but both sides have demonstrated a willingness to negotiate within this compromise framework. A key question is who would provide security in these zones.

Regarding the Zaporizhzhia plant, the White House originally proposed a tripartite scheme whereby Ukraine, the U.S., and Russia would jointly manage it. This arrangement, though it falls short of what either Kyiv or Moscow considers as their respective optimal outcome, satisfies several key criteria. It helps address Ukraine's postwar energy needs, advances U.S. economic interests, and is pragmatic enough to be accepted by Russia, which maintains military control over the plant. There is some light retooling that can be done — for example, management roles and profit distribution can be calibrated in a way that offers more benefits for Ukraine while still being accepted by Moscow — but the three-way management scheme is a far superior diplomatic solution to what Ukraine can achieve on the battlefield, considering its numerous unsuccessful prior attempts to retake the plant.

On security guarantees, Ukraine is understandably driving a hard bargain to secure the best deal possible. But, considering the difficult trajectory of this war, there is only so much room to offer Kyiv better terms before the whole package becomes unacceptable to Moscow. The White House is rightly sensitive to Russian red lines, such as a Western military force within Ukraine, and is maneuvering around them. In addition, it would be unrealistic to offer security guarantees that commit the U.S. to taking steps the Biden administration was unwilling to take in previous years of the conflict, such as direct military intervention by U.S. troops.

In parts of the settlement where difficult compromises are necessary, the need can be partially offset by offering better terms elsewhere. For example, the White House can tinker with the numbers to make the proposed international reconstruction fund more lucrative for Ukraine if

Zelensky accepts the White House proposal on the Zaporozhzhia plant. It can lift or suspend certain U.S. sanctions on Russia, and put pressure on the EU to do the same. These kinds of creative linkages were what initially got the peace process off the ground after the Anchorage summit, and they continue to serve as the necessary glue for making a deal stick.

Looking Ahead to the Future

What will a likely final agreement look like?

To be acceptable to the Ukrainians, a peace settlement will have to include Ukraine's right to receive weapons and training from NATO, and some form of binding guarantee that in the event of future Russian aggression, Ukraine will receive greatly increased support from the West. Ukraine's right to join the European Union must also be explicitly included.

To be acceptable to the Russians, a peace settlement will need to include some kind of formal and permanent bar on Ukraine joining NATO, and on Western combat troops being deployed to Ukraine. There will also need to be some sort of guarantees for the linguistic and cultural rights of Russian-speaking citizens of Ukraine (with a reciprocal guarantee by Moscow of the rights of Ukrainians in Russia). Most Western economic and political sanctions against Russia would be suspended, with a "snap-back" proviso that they will automatically resume if Russia restarts the war.

On the question of control of the part of the Donbas still held by Ukraine, the most likely outcome will be a ceasefire along the existing front line, along with the disarmament of this territory, which will remain under Ukrainian sovereignty and administration. This assumes that Russia remains incapable of capturing this territory. Both sides will have to guarantee they will not attempt to change the ceasefire line and acquire more territory by force.

Ideally (and as an incentive to Russia to drop its territorial demand), the peace settlement will include measures to reduce military confrontation in Europe and lay the foundations of a new European security architecture.

Does such an agreement benefit U.S. interests?

Yes. No significant U.S. interests would be sacrificed, especially when one considers that the Ukrainian front line with Russia today runs almost 1,000 miles east of the front lines during the Cold War, when Soviet armies were stationed in the middle of what is now a reunited Germany.

This agreement would remove the danger that the war in Ukraine could lead to a direct clash between NATO and Russia, with the possibility of escalation to full-scale war and mutual nuclear annihilation. An end to the war will greatly facilitate the transfer of the chief responsibility for European security to Europeans themselves, allowing the U.S. to concentrate its resources on urgent tasks elsewhere.

Would such an agreement embolden or empower Putin to engage in further aggression?

No. The Russian army has suffered enormously in this war, with total casualties probably exceeding one million men. Virtually the entire force with which Russia began the war has been destroyed. Russia apparently began the war with the intent of subjugating Ukraine to Russia; instead, the result of a peace treaty would be an independent and Western-aligned Ukraine with a very substantial independent military force and external security guarantees. After years of talking up the Russian threat to Europe, Finnish President Alexander Stubb has now said that Europe can defend itself without America, because Ukraine has restricted Russia's advances since 2022 to barely 1 percent more territory and imposed huge casualties on Russia.

Given the tremendous advantages that contemporary military technology provides for defense, it is entirely within NATO's capacity to help the Ukrainians build defenses strong enough to deter the Russians.

Russian threats and "hybrid" actions against the West since 2022 have been an outgrowth of the war in Ukraine. Indeed, the intention of these threats has been to deter NATO from intervening directly in Ukraine.

Finally, what is the alternative? All serious military analysts, including the Ukrainians themselves, now agree that Ukraine cannot reconquer its lost territories on the battlefield. The alternative to a peace settlement is therefore indefinite war, with the risk that an exhausted and heavily outnumbered Ukrainian army may eventually collapse, leading to much greater Russian gains.

Could Ukraine maintain its security and sovereignty under such an agreement?

Yes. This agreement would leave four-fifths of Ukraine (including all its core ethnic territories) as an independent state, with the recognized right to join the European Union. Russia would play no role in the administration of Ukraine. And for the reasons set out above, the West would be in a position to help Ukraine build defenses that are formidable enough to deter future Russian aggression.

Would such an agreement commit the U.S. to do more than the considerable amount it has already done for Ukraine?

No. Under this agreement and in the case of reinvansion, the U.S. would only be committed to do things very similar to what it has already done in this war: supply Europe and/or Ukraine with weapons and intelligence, and impose punishing economic sanctions on Russia. The U.S. would not be committed to going to war in Ukraine itself, nor to a direct combat role in any military operation that European states might undertake.

What would happen if Ukraine and Russia prove unable or unwilling to reach a compromise peace?

If Russia were to conclude that no compromise peace with Ukraine is attainable, it would accelerate air strikes on a wide range of Ukrainian targets and increase the number of soldiers it has deployed to the front lines. It would decide in the course of a stepped-up offensive where the *de facto* border between Russia and a rump Ukraine will be drawn — ranging anywhere from full control over the territories it has officially annexed to complete conquest of Ukraine's coastline — and then unilaterally declare an end to its military action.

Russia could not conquer all of Ukraine and would not try, as this would require an occupation army many times the size of the entire Russian military and would almost certainly encounter sustained Ukrainian guerrilla attacks. But it would ensure that unoccupied Ukrainian territory could not be reconstructed by wielding an ever-present threat to bomb reconstruction projects. This would ensure that few of the millions of Ukrainians who fled the country never return, effectively close the door on Ukraine's NATO and EU membership, and make it likely that Ukraine would become a dysfunctional and unstable rump state, radiating instability into broader Europe.

About the Authors

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.

MARK EPISKOPOS is a research fellow in the Quincy Institute's Eurasia program. He is also an adjunct professor at Marymount University. Episkopos holds a PhD in history from American University and a masters degree in international affairs from Boston University. His research focuses on great power competition and the international system, the transatlantic relationship, Russian foreign policy, military thought and capabilities, and domestic politics and issues in Eastern European security. Episkopos was previously the National Security Reporter for *The National Interest*, where he wrote widely on military and foreign affairs topics.

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2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
7th floor
Washington, DC 20006

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

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