

# Independent Experts Peace Initiative

## WHITE PAPER ON UKRAINE/RUSSIA

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

### Introduction

This “white paper” is the product of interdisciplinary collaboration by an independent and international assembly of “experts,” scholars and political actors, sponsored by the International Council for Diplomacy and Dialogue—USA and the European Council for Democracy Development. Their disciplinary focus ranges from sociology to political science to economics and the humanities. They work in universities, institutes, non-governmental organizations, and various advisory bodies. None are propagandists of any party or in the pay of any government; their vitae are available upon request. They have very different political beliefs, but they are united by a common rational and realistic approach to conflict resolution. Our purpose is not to insist on a single tactic or strategy. But it is crucial for the sake of a strategy that defends democracy, and the integrity of Ukraine to provide a document that clarifies the interests and beliefs of the Russian invader. To this extent we provide a balanced and nuanced assessment of the crisis based on verifiable data not cheerleading. It highlights the interests, scenarios, and possible diplomatic initiatives that might further the cause of peace and prevent the obliteration of the Ukrainian people. Our focus is not on governments alone but the impact of their decisions on everyday citizens.

1. **Causes:** The Russian-Ukrainian conflict began due to a number of geopolitical, military and economic factors:
  - **Russian Imperialism** based on the belief that territory of the former USSR constitutes its sphere of influence and its “historical territory.”
  - **NATO expansion into Eastern Europe:** As much to provide an excuse for invasion, as to hide xenophobic ambitions, this belief has fueled fears of Western encroachment into the sphere of influence inherited by the Russian Federation from the USSR. Collective security treaties after World War II clarified red lines, defined the balance of power, and (albeit imperfectly) provided stability. This system was undermined beginning in 2001, when the United States unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and ended in 2023, when Vladimir Putin abandoned the New START Treaty that Russia and the United States had signed in Prague in 2010.
  - **Clashes over values** have proven important as the West’s liberal universalism has challenged Russia’s authoritarian illiberalism. Each sees the other as an existential threat: Russia is correctly seen by the West as seeking to restore its Empire, while the West is seen by Russia as intent on building a unipolar world based on a historically (alien) ideological hegemony. In this vein, Russia also views Western claims of “victory” in the Cold War as a humiliating deception

and as a propagandistic weapon. “Soft diplomacy” can prove useful in dealing with this situation.

- **Lack of uniform and binding human rights standards.** Neither the United States nor international organizations have been able to ensure the rights of ethnic, national, and religious minorities, as well as members of the LGBT community in Russia. However, discrimination also targets Russian-speaking, as well as Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, Bulgarian, and other minorities in the former Soviet republics, primarily in the Baltics and Ukraine. This has not provoked protests from Western countries or international human rights organizations. No less than when the Nazis claimed to defend the rights of Germans in the Sudetenland in 1938, the seeming plight of the Russian-speaking population been used by Russia to justify its aggression against Ukraine. Without viewing conditions in Russia and Ukraine as equivalent, insistence on recognizing human rights standards on both sides is crucial for any new system of collective security.

**2. Victims:** On February 24, 2022, Russia announced the start of its so-called “special military operation” against Ukraine, which turned into the largest and most destructive military conflict in Europe since the end of World War II. Three years later over 1 million people have been killed or wounded, sexual assaults on Ukrainian women have been frequent, thousands of children have been “evacuated” to Russia, and Ukraine’s infrastructure and eco-system have been destroyed. Those rebuilding Ukraine must provide the war’s victims with free counseling and therapy, women’s centers and clinics, free burials, appropriate health care, housing and jobs, and compensation for the families.

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

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

**Making Sanctions More Effective:** Our experts suggest that sanctions:

- Focus on sectors of Russia’s war machine, especially technology, energy, and financial systems. Western countries should also tighten controls on technology exports, especially those that could be used for military purposes.

- Prioritize oil and gas exports and simultaneously work with European and Asian countries to reduce their dependence on Russian energy resources.
- Prevent countries such as China and nations of the “global South” to aid Russia by circumventing sanctions. It is also necessary to strengthen controls on dual-use goods exported to Russia from these countries, as well as on cyber operations.
- Close financial loopholes that allow Russian oligarchs and state-owned enterprises access to international capital markets, and also prevent the return of those assets to Russia.
- Prove more flexible by targeting Russian officials, their close associates, oligarchs and corporations, but not on ordinary Russians and the middle class.
- Employ the “carrot and the stick” by linking tough sanctions linked to prospects for lifting them in the event of significant steps being taken towards peace.

**4. Possible scenarios:** Our experts have put forward the following for discussion. Each of them has his or her preferences. This white paper is a collation of their views, and its structure reflects our recognition that not academic outsiders, but political decision-makers will decide which option in what scenario is the most appropriate

- 1) *Russia’s military conquests of are tacitly acknowledged*, and hostilities end without a formal peace agreement. This would leave Russia in control of roughly 20% of Ukraine, including Crimea and Donbas, the region destabilized, and the victim of aggression in fear of further incursions.
- 2) *Direct confrontation with NATO*: It is unlikely that this scenario will take shape. The European Union is considering the creation of a continental army, but this will take time, and some members such as Hungary and Slovakia, along with right-wing extremist political parties, will undoubtedly create obstacles. Both Russia and Europe would probably prefer to avoid a scenario that might result in a regional or perhaps even global confrontation.
- 3) *Nuclear attack* would take this confrontation to another plane. In spite of Russian threats, Russia is in an advantageous military position, especially given that the United States has compromised its support for Ukraine, and Europe has still not formulated a common strategy. Nevertheless, politics calls for considering the worst scenario and it would be a mistake simply to dismiss this option entirely.
- 4) *Russia widens the conflict*: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were part of the Soviet Union [until 1991], and Putin has stated his desire to recreate the old empire. Attacking these Baltic states would stretch Russia’s already depleted resources, force it to keep its forces in the region, and provoke NATO. This scenario is, therefore, unlikely and some of our experts see Russia’s threats against the Baltics as mere propaganda rhetoric.
- 5) *Other plausible options* exist for Russia to apply pressure on Ukraine and the Baltic states. Cyber-attacks, disinformation, and geo-political threats are less risky. Whatever the threat of retaliation, they would undoubtedly prove more effective in achieving Russia’s goals.

6) *Creating spheres of influence*: This would involve some version of a so-called "New Yalta" or "global compromise" that take one of the following forms:

- i. *Determining spheres of influence while isolating Russia from the West*. This option can prevent further escalation by creating a new balance of power. In this case, Russia would have a sphere of influence, but remain isolated and faced with Western security guarantees for what was left of Ukraine. In addition, Russia would continue to feel the pressure of major sanctions, which would remain in effect.
- ii. *Determining spheres of influence with Russia emerging from isolation*. Russia ends its isolation from the West by reaching an agreement with the United States and the European Union that would include lifting sanctions, suspending military action, and recognizing new spheres of influence. Ukraine would be sidelined, and neutralized (without full security guarantees), NATO would be weakened, and a new anti-European alliance would take shape. Russia would keep its conquered territories and, in exchange, lower the costs of Russian energy and "share" Ukrainian earth minerals with the United States.

This scenario would fuel resentment from Ukrainian ultranationalists and de-legitimate the government in a manner reminiscent of the Weimar Republic following Germany's defeat in World War I. It could also tempt Russian ambitions regarding countries of the former USSR that are not part of the NATO bloc such as Moldova, Armenia and Central Asia. European passivity will likely aggravate the situation. So, would endorsing Trump's tilt toward Russia, his anti-immigration views, and indifference to the plight of Ukrainian refugees.

- iii. *The United States turns its back on Ukraine, and Europe refuses to accept the "New Yalta"*. Europe will then attempt to substitute itself for the United States by financing Ukraine, alone if necessary, and engage in rapid military rearmament. Divisions between supporters of Russia, such as Hungary, and opponents will complicate matters. Continental rearmament will also take time, enormous investment, and tensions with the United States will grow.
7. *Russia and Ukraine, show little interest in US peace initiatives*. Russia lays claim to at least all of Ukraine's eastern lands, while Ukraine demands the full return of the conquered territories, including Crimea. Both sides are currently portraying themselves as supporters of peace, while presenting the other side as opposing a peaceful settlement. Russia keeps bombing and its stalling can only improve its geo-military position leaving Ukraine in an increasingly untenable situation. Given the fluctuations and oft-stated "transactional" character of its foreign policy, the US could attempt to dominate or abandon the peace process. It might impose additional sanctions on Russia and high tariffs on countries buying its oil and petroleum products,. But it might also, perhaps even simultaneously, reduce military aid to Ukraine-- thus shifting the burden to Europe. A mining deal will not improve the situation, although the US may sell weapons to Ukraine using money provided by Europe. This could partially solve the problem. Under such circumstances, the war will continue in accordance with scenarios 1-5.

8. *“Victory” over Russia* will most likely require Europe to aid Ukraine by putting “boots on the ground.” How citizens respond to this is an open question. Already speculation about the need for troops to “monitor” the future peace has caused consternation among the citizenry. That is because foreign military intervention increases the risk of an expanded war and perhaps even nuclear escalation. By contrast, Russia’s peace plan, implies creation of a sanitary corridor running through four regions of Ukraine; this must surely prove unacceptable to either Ukraine or NATO. Peace is possible only through compromises brought about through well-considered and intelligent diplomatic pressure on both warring parties.

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

- i. **Introduce a new system of collective security.** This idea is speculative but important, nonetheless. This approach seeks to provide collective security for all nations involved in the conflict. Emphasis upon civil rights and liberties is necessary in implementing it. Negotiations will not only deal with arms control, but the adoption of uniform standards for minority rights. Talks of this sort can be launched under the auspices of the OSCE, the Council of Europe or another international organization.
- ii. **Publicly recognize “red lines”:** Russia perceives NATO expansion as a direct threat to its security. NATO should therefore make the explicit commitment not to expand eastward as it leaves Crimea and parts of the Donbas to Russia. That compromise could serve as a starting point for negotiations.
- iii. **Provide incentives for stability:** Prospects for de-escalation might improve by introducing economic incentives in concert with discussions on collective security and peace. Investment and aid will depend upon the participants’ willingness to begin negotiations without preconditions.
- iv. **Include “indirect actors” in the negotiations:** Along with the inclusion of Ukraine, successful negotiations require multilateral diplomatic efforts and input not only from the West, but China, India, and various countries from the Global South. Bringing indirect actors to the negotiating table, however, makes sense only if they agree to exclude extraneous issues and the pursuit of interests external to those of the actual participants.
- v. **“Freeze” the conflict:** Full resolution of tensions will probably take years but a temporary cessation of hostilities is possible. This would involve freezing the conflict and providing a reprieve with which to negotiate a long-term peace settlement. Of course, this approach only makes sense if both sides suspend their more extreme preconditions for engaging in talks.

**6. Discrete Prospects:**

- i. **The United States:** The old alliance between the United States and Europe is currently at a low point. “Neo-isolationism” has led the United States to withdraw from numerous international agencies and treaties and --with its policy of “America First!” -- appears ready to “go it alone.” The Trump Administration has chosen a “transactional” approach to international relations, which is evident in its proposal to “share” Ukrainian mineral rights. Instrumentalism of this sort, coupled with Trump’s “unpredictability,” has resulted in policy shifts that favor Ukraine to others that support Russia. Complicating matters further is the looming possibility that Democrats will become the congressional majority after the mid-term elections of 2026.

**Options:** The Trump Administration must determine the extent to which it will support Ukraine’s ultimate recovery and what position it will take in a burgeoning “new Cold War” between the Western Alliance and BRICS. There seems no general strategy designed to deal with this situation.

**Europe:** NATO and the EU must now confront the same problem that plagued American foreign policy to Ukraine before Trump took office: aid to Ukraine is crucial for Europe’s geo-political security, and for Ukraine to continue the war, but such financial support cannot go on forever. NATO and the EU will thus need to develop a strategy that does not rely on the United States as their military bulwark against Russia. Seeking to form a “coalition of the willing” is a step in the right direction.

**Options:** Everything hinges on the fundamental question: Can European security afford the dismemberment of Ukraine and successful Russian expansion? Is Ukraine the “red line” that Russia dare not cross? If so then to what extent is Europe ready to defend it with the requisite economic and military assistance? Any such defense by Europe is impossible without resisting anti-democratic tendencies existing in its member states and overcome divisions between them. Europe could attempt to build its own army or nuclear arsenal though the former will take time (that Europe does not have), and the latter heightens the likelihood of an international conflagration. Of course, Europe can also gamble by “treading water;” it can either do nothing or a little bit of everything as it waits for Republicans to lose the congressional elections of 2026 and the White House in 2028.

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

**Options:** If the conflict is frozen, Russia will maintain control over conquered Ukrainian territory, and remain isolated from the West, while sanctions remain in place. Victory over Ukraine, by contrast, will make it the hegemonic power in the region. Ukraine would then turn into a puppet state. This would nurture Russia’s imperialist ambitions and make it an even more lethal threat to the West. In turn, however, such a development might actually produce a renaissance of Western cooperation and leave Europe in the neo-isolationist position of the United States.

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

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

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

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

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

## 7. Strategic Options:

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

A “global compromise” is possible, but this would call for territorial deals, participation in military blocs, security guarantees, and advocacy for the rights of Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine and the rest of the region. Sanctions may also become subject to compromise and

perhaps even their abolition. Both leaders require an “exit” strategy and the ability to “sell” peace to their citizens.” That is not as superficial as it sounds: “saving face” is crucial for any a regime in which the national interest is identified with that of the leader. Neither Russia nor Ukraine is ready for a global compromise today, because it would contradict the aims and promises expressed at the start of the war. Thus, the global compromise is primarily a speculative proposal, but one that deserves consideration.

The current conflict is the result of many factors. Russia underestimated Ukraine’s resilience and the West’s readiness to give up its lucrative relations with Russia, including cheap energy supplies, no less than its willingness to provide multi-billion-dollar aid packages to Kiev. Meanwhile, the West underestimated Russia’s distrust of NATO, its self-sufficiency, its imperialist resolve to reclaim its former glory, its readiness to sacrifice citizens and resources, and its willingness to sever lucrative economic ties with the West – all in the name of security and territorial ambitions.

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

## 8. Basics of Strategy:

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

- **Acknowledging that the *old* Western alliance might collapse:** That is a real possibility given the “transactional” and neo-isolationist policies of the new U.S. Administration. President Vladimir Putin’s stubbornness in making a deal could fuel Trump’s impatience, leading him to push even harder on both sides, with potentially incalculable consequences ranging from incremental moves toward Russia, to forcing Ukraine to give up more territory, to escalating the conflict.
- **Dealing with war fatigue:** Western support for Ukraine remains critical to its sovereignty and territorial integrity, no less than its ability to serve as a democratic bulwark and deterrent to further aggressive moves by Russia. Western ignorance remains regarding what is at stake and the complexities in bringing about peace. In some European countries and the US, far-right and left-wing forces with ever greater governmental influence are advocating views that normalize Russian aggression and project the end of Ukraine.
- **Creating a new system of collective security in Europe.** This will call for strengthening (while refashioning) NATO, unifying the continent’s defensive capacities, fostering further interconnectivity between members, and prioritizing among military, nuclear, and cyber tools in response to the new direction of American foreign policy. Shaping the geo-political future will



depend not only on the outcome of the Ukrainian conflict, but the result of internal ideological-political conflicts taking place in the Western democracies, and their decisions in dealing with the BRICS alliance.

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

## 9: Concluding Thoughts:

Flaws in the architecture of the unipolar world of the 1990s have led to the absence of instruments capable of preventing conflicts such as that taking place between Russia and Ukraine. The future may well portend the destruction of the old and the creation of a new world order. The strength of the European security arrangement that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet bloc is being tested right now in Ukraine's resistance against Russia's invasion of its territory and imperialist attack on its sovereignty. Europe will need new strategies to deal with the uncertainties and vagaries of American foreign policy.

As things currently stand, prospects for ending the Russian-Ukrainian conflict remain slim. Neither the Ukrainian nor the Russian peace plan includes compromises and concessions; it is crucial to determine what is on the negotiating table and what isn't. None of the existing options will either terminate existing tensions or restore the status quo ante. The need for a new global security architecture, a new world order, is almost self-evident. However, all principal participants in the conflict resist that conclusion. They remain captive to outmoded ideological narratives, which is why a new network capable of providing independent experts peace initiatives is necessary.

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