

The Long-Term Risks of a Premature Ceasefire in Ukraine

By Frederick W. Kagan, Director of the Critical Threats Project and Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute

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The wise-seeming counsel of seeking compromise with Russia at a point of high leverage for Ukraine is a dangerous folly now. It merely puts off and makes even more dangerous the risks we fear today. It might make sense to buy time in this way if time favored us. But it does not—time favors our adversaries. Accepting risk now to reduce the risk of worse disaster in the future is the wisest and most prudent course of action for the US, NATO, and Ukraine.

The West faces a choice: it can accept the short-term risks of continuing to support Ukraine's effort to achieve a sustainable and enduring resolution to the current Russian invasion, or it can push for a premature cessation of hostilities that greatly increases the likelihood of renewed Russian aggression on terms far more favorable to Moscow.

The path forward should be clear—the West must prioritize reducing Russia's ability to renew a war that the Kremlin is more likely to win and that would carry the same escalation risks as the current war by helping Ukraine use its position of relative advantage *now* to set conditions to deter future conflict.

The US has a vital national security interest in averting future Russian attacks on Ukraine. Russian invasions of Ukraine inevitably harm and endanger Europe and NATO, put the US commitment to defend its NATO allies on the table, and entail the risk of conventional or nuclear escalation. America and its Western allies and partners should not accept, let alone push for, a temporary cessation of hostilities in Ukraine that increases the likelihood of a renewed Russian invasion in future years. This consideration must drive decisions about when to seek negotiated compromises and what conditions to encourage Ukraine to accept.

US interests in ending the current war on terms that minimize the risk of future Russian invasion can be fully separated from the moral and humanitarian considerations that motivate many people to support Ukraine. American interests flow from the NATO alliance and the obligations it imposes on the US as well as to the close and vital economic interdependence of the US with Europe. Europe and NATO will be profoundly affected by a future Russian invasion of Ukraine as they have been by this one, and the US will face the same imperative to support its allies in the future as it does today. **American policymakers today must focus on the imperative of resolving the current conflict in ways that do not set conditions for renewed war for our own interests, not just Ukraine's.**

The likely durability of a cessation of hostilities rests on three fundamental questions:

- Will Russia's objectives with respect to Ukraine, other former Soviet states, NATO, and the US change?
- Will the future correlation of forces favor Ukraine once the fighting stops?
- Will Western support for Ukraine remain firm?

The answer to all three questions if hostilities were suspended soon is “no.” Russia's objectives are not likely to change in the foreseeable future and must be taken as a given. The correlation of forces will begin to move away from favoring Kyiv toward favoring Moscow as soon as the fighting stops, and

Western support for Ukraine will almost inevitably begin to fall. Ukraine's position today is such that a drop in Western support and the shift in the correlation of forces will significantly increase the likelihood of a renewed Russian invasion.

A stable and sustainable cessation of hostilities can occur only if the West helps Ukraine use its current momentum to secure a sufficiently advantageous position from which it will be able to effectively deter a future Russian attack even as the correlation of forces changes and Western support falls. **The imperative of seeking to avert a future war in Ukraine thus requires continuing to help Ukraine fight to make necessary military gains and secure necessary reconstruction assistance rather than seeking to freeze war prematurely.**

Putin's objective in launching the invasions of 2014 and then 2022 was the destruction of an independent, pro-Western Ukrainian state. His aims have increased over that period rather than moderating. His initial complaints in 2014 revolved around Ukraine's orientation toward the West and away from Russia. Eight years later, he and his subordinates are engaged in a full-throated denial of the validity of a Ukrainian ethnicity or independent Ukrainian state. The Kremlin has clung to its demands despite battlefield defeats and its rhetoric has only become more extreme as Ukraine has turned the tide of the war against Russia.

It is [extremely unlikely](#) that Putin would accept any reasonable compromise terms because of the domestic price he would likely pay for having obtained relatively little at such a great cost. Putin and those around him are also driving his maximalist position on Ukraine deep into the Kremlin's ideology and trying to imbue the Russian population with it. There is no evidence to suggest that Putin or any Putinist successor will abandon his maximalist objectives toward Ukraine, even if he or a successor is willing to accept a temporary cessation of hostilities.

The planning assumption regarding Putin's and Russia's objectives toward Ukraine must be that they will remain unchanged—Russia will continue to seek to subjugate Ukraine to its control fully and completely by one means or another.

We must learn the right lesson from the period of the Minsk II Accords from 2014 to 2022. France and Germany, with US support, engaged Russia as a theoretically neutral and non-belligerent mediator in a conflict begun by a Russian invasion. They imposed on Ukraine a set of commitments that amounted to partial surrender of Kyiv's sovereignty while demanding no formal commitments directly from Russia. They accepted the fiction that Russian proxies in Ukraine were independent of Moscow and pressed Ukraine to uphold its commitments even as the proxies continually violated theirs—and never held Moscow explicitly to account for the actions of proxies that were acting on Russia's orders and with Russia's direct support.

The accords imposed a settlement that was extremely favorable to Russia. They specifically required Ukraine to grant the Russian-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk autonomy while at the same time allowing them to participate fully in the Ukrainian political process. Such a move would have created permanent Russian levers to manipulate the Ukrainian political system throughout the country while depriving Kyiv of the ability to control Russian and Russian proxy activities in the Russian-occupied areas. The accords did not require Russia to withdraw its forces from the areas it occupied because they did not recognize that Russia had forces in those areas—even though it clearly did. The theory of the case of those in the West who supported these accords was twofold—first, that “peace” in the form of an incredibly violent and constantly-violated ceasefire was better than open warfare, and second, that the “Minsk process” would somehow, ultimately, mollify Putin and bring him to accept a new status quo highly favorable to Russia permanently. Above all the Western backers of the Minsk II

Process thought that Putin was focused only or at least primarily on eastern Ukraine, whereas in fact he continued to seek to regain effective control of the entire country.

The assumptions underlying the Minsk II Process have been utterly and completely invalidated. Russia's proxies deliberately ensured that they never met their commitments under the accords and so made it almost impossible for Ukraine to meet its commitments. The proxies were not out of Russia's control—they were pursuing Putin's aims. Because Putin was never satisfied with Minsk II—he wanted more, and he used his proxies to try to renegotiate the accords by force. When that effort failed, he invaded.

The burden on those who would argue that any agreement between Russia and Ukraine today would not follow a similar path toward renewed Russian invasion is enormous. It is almost impossible, in fact, to see how one could persuasively make such an argument given Russian actions and rhetoric over nearly all of Putin's tenure.

We must instead accept as a planning assumption that Putin will continue to try to renegotiate by force any limited compromise agreement made now, up to and including through renewed Russian full-scale invasion if and when he or his successor decides that circumstances are propitious.

That consideration then raises the question of the likely trajectory of the correlation of forces between Russia and Ukraine. Some advocates of negotiations now point to the fact that Ukrainian leverage at the moment is high because of Kyiv's battlefield successes and Western support, on the one hand, and Russia's struggles and relative isolation, on the other. If negotiations conducted at a moment of high leverage could yield a permanent resolution of conflict, then such an approach can make sense. **But if, as in the present case, a negotiated settlement can only be expected to generate a temporary respite, then this approach makes sense only if we can expect the future correlation of forces to favor Ukraine.**

That consideration, in turn, requires a closer examination of the factors that have given Ukraine relatively high leverage at the moment. The key factors are the rallying of Ukrainians behind a full mobilization for war and high levels of Western support, on the one hand, and the catastrophically bad performance of the Russian military and Russian defense industry on the other. None of those factors is likely to change in the next six-to-twelve months if the fighting continues. All of them are likely to change rapidly and to Ukraine's disadvantage once a ceasefire takes hold.

Ukrainians remain willing to support full national mobilization because they are fighting a war for the survival of their state and people. They know that if they stop fighting, Russian troops will drive deeper into their country and inflict horrors on them, ultimately overthrowing their government and subjugating them. But full mobilization is extraordinarily painful. It will be unsustainable once the immediate threat of defeat is removed. Ukraine will have to demobilize partially and attempt to rebuild, greatly reducing its combat power. The Ukrainian government will be under pressure to do sustain a strong enough military to defend against future Russian invasion and reconstruct a vibrant and prosperous economy. Ukraine is not wealthy enough to do both of those things well, particularly if it must lose much of the territory Russia currently occupies, so it will likely suboptimize both. It will likely seek to stabilize a smaller but higher-quality military while satisfying the economic demands of its people. Ukraine's organic military capacity will thus drop significantly following a ceasefire, possibly increasing again gradually as more sustainable military practices take hold.

If Ukraine's current military power-driven leverage is temporarily high because of full mobilization, Russia's is temporarily low because of the series of stupid decisions made by Putin and his generals before and during this war. Putin did not mobilize for this war. He did not put Russia's defense industry

on a war footing. He did not prepare his people for war. He did not even prepare his military for war. Once his initial assumptions about the ease of this invasion were falsified he took many months to order the reserve mobilization he should have ordered at once. But he ordered even that mobilization without adequate preparation or warning, and it, too, became a mess.

Russian forces would have benefitted enormously from a months-long cessation of hostilities or even relaxation of the demand for offensive operations. Any such protracted operational or strategic pause would have given them time to reorganize, refit, and prepare for renewed offensive operations on much better terms. Putin gave them no such time, instead whipping his generals to constant offensives that simply ground the remaining combat power of the Russian military into dust. Putin did not allow his military to concentrate the mobilized reservists into coherent units that could be massed to achieve decisive battlefield effects, but instead demanded that they be hurled into combat piecemeal and unprepared, frittering away yet another opportunity to regain the initiative. All these dynamics continue to this day—the Russian military is consuming combat power as fast as it can be generated and is trying to draw on a defense industrial base only slowly and haltingly creaking into gear and badly hampered by international sanctions.

The net effect of Putin's bad decisions has been to reduce Russia's effective combat power to a level far below what Russia could in principle generate. Russia's military weakness is thus very likely temporary. As soon as the fighting stops the Russian military can begin to reconstitute itself. Lessons can be learned. Bad organization can be rectified. Its defense industry can start to come online and replace essential kit, especially if sanctions are lifted even partially—and it is very hard to imagine Putin accepting any ceasefire that does not include some significant sanctions relief. Conscription and training systems can be improved. Russia can start to generate the kind of military power its population, industrial base, and military organization have the potential to produce.

A protracted ceasefire will thus likely allow Russia to restore the correlation of forces between itself and Ukraine that is the natural result of the countries' relative sizes and economic capacities—in other words, Russia will likely regain its inherent military advantages over Ukraine in the years following a ceasefire.

Western support to Ukraine is the key factor in this equation. Russia can regain military superiority over Ukraine, but it cannot establish military superiority over Ukraine backed by the West. So the final question is this: Will Western support for Ukraine increase, decrease, or remain the same following a ceasefire? The answer is obvious: it will decrease.

Western support today is driven partly by Russian actions and partly by the heroic and effective resistance of Ukrainians in the face of initially overwhelming military odds and then the atrocities Russian forces continue to commit. The Russian military continues offensive operations to conquer Ukrainian territory. It uses brutal tactics against the Ukrainian military and is conducting war crimes on a scale amounting to crimes against humanity. It is deliberately targeting Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure while conducting ethnic cleansing operations using genocidal rhetoric. Russia has created a massive humanitarian and refugee crisis that obviously demands urgent responses. At the same time Ukrainian forces have fought back bravely and brilliantly, defeating the Russian drive on Kyiv, liberating Kharkiv in a stunning and rapid counteroffensive, and most recently pushing Russian troops out of western Kherson. These factors more than any others have kept Western support for Ukraine strong and created a political environment in most Western states that makes abandoning Ukraine highly unpopular.

Those dynamics will begin to change rapidly once the fighting stops. Attention will turn to reconstruction, which is inherently far less popular. Reconstruction is also inherently political and will

focus attention on Ukrainian domestic politics and the natural and historic limitations of Ukrainian governance effectiveness. Domestic tensions within Ukraine will naturally grow as various groups argue for differential distributions of reconstruction aid and more normal politics returns with all its strife and messiness. Russia's inherent skill in manipulating the information space, overwhelmed during the fighting by Russia's failures and brutality, will begin to shape perceptions more effectively once more. The current veneer of near-universal support for Ukraine will vanish, and arguments about how and even whether to continue to support Ukraine will become much more prominent throughout the West. Both military and economic aid to Ukraine will certainly decrease.

Within a few years of the cessation of hostilities, therefore, the following conditions are extremely likely to hold:

- 1) Ukrainian military power will be lower than it is now
- 2) Russian military power will be greater than it is now and rising
- 3) Western military support for Ukraine will be lower
- 4) Western economic support for Ukraine will be insufficient and dropping
- 5) General Western enthusiasm for supporting Ukraine will be lower
- 6) Internal Ukrainian cohesion will be lower
- 7) Russia's aims toward Ukraine and the US will remain unchanged

Western leaders and Ukrainians should not simply accept these forecasts as givens, of course. Western political leaders should fight hard to sustain Western support for Ukraine, continuing to make the real and urgent case for defending the West's interests by helping Ukraine rebuild and deter future Russian invasions. Ukrainians should also fight to rebuild as cohesive a state and society as they can, as well as to sustain the strongest defense posture possible in their post-conflict economic and social conditions. But a sober forecast based on normal historical trends and patterns requires assuming that such efforts will be at best partially acceptable, and future policy should be based on pessimistic sobriety rather than hopeful optimism.

One obvious conclusion follows from these observations: Any territory Ukraine does not retake now will likely be lost to it indefinitely. The de facto borders of Ukraine at a ceasefire in the near term will be the maximum territorial extent of the Ukrainian state for the foreseeable future.

We must also recognize that the risks of escalation driving the current push to press Ukraine to make concessions will be just as real whenever Russia renews the attack. Russia will always be a nuclear power. It will always be able to attack NATO with conventional or nuclear forces. Those facts will not be changed by a ceasefire now. If Putin or his successor concludes after a few years of rebuilding that he can try to conquer Ukraine again, NATO will face exactly the same risks then that some are now seeking to avoid by driving Kyiv to concessions. Those concessions will only have made the renewed invasion and return of escalation risks more likely while weakening Ukraine's ability to deter and defeat another massive attack.

The most important conclusion to draw from all these reflections, however, is this: Ukraine's power and Western support for Ukraine is at or near its peak and can remain there only as long as fighting continues and Ukraine continues to make gains. Both will likely begin to drop rapidly once fighting is halted or conditions of real stalemate descend. Russia's diminishing power and influence, on the other hand, will likely begin to rise when active combat stops. **Success for Ukraine and the West lies in ensuring that Ukraine has secured territorial gains, military capabilities, and economic and reconstruction support while it is at or near its peak that are all great enough to deter a recovering Russia from restarting the war even as Ukraine's power and Western support drop.**

Ukraine should not cash in the leverage it might have now to secure a temporary cessation of hostilities that will leave it in a far more vulnerable condition that will invite future Russian aggression, therefore. **Kyiv and its Western supporters, rather, should reinforce Ukraine's current advantages to consolidate Ukraine's position during the fighting so that Ukraine—and peace—can survive the inevitable erosion of Kyiv's current advantages after the conflict's end.**