

## ARGUMENT

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# It's Time for Ukraine to Make the Best Peace It Can

U.S. policymakers can help shape a deal that preserves national security.

By **Matthew Duss**, the executive vice president at the Center for International Policy, and **Robert Farley**, an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky.



Children take shelter in a metro station during an airstrike alarm in Kyiv on Nov. 21. TETIANA DZHAFAROVA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

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NOVEMBER 21, 2024, 12:29 PM

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The reelection of Donald Trump is an outcome that many Ukraine supporters feared. Given Trump's statements on the campaign trail, his hostile relationship with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and his friendly relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, concern is amply justified. However,

despite his ideological affinity for Putin, Trump has an interest in a genuinely durable settlement that does not simply result in Russian troops overrunning Ukraine. Trump does not want Kyiv to become his Kabul.

While Trump is unlikely to support Ukraine at the same level as his predecessor, President Joe Biden, and unlikely to broker European and Asian assistance for Ukraine as aggressively as Biden did, this does not mean that Ukraine is necessarily lost. Even if Vice President Kamala Harris had won the U.S. election, this would have been an appropriate time to explore the possibility of peace more aggressively. But the details of that peace will matter a great deal. An outcome that leaves Kyiv disarmed, exposed, and without allies is an outcome that almost certainly leads to more war at Russia's convenience.

Since the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Biden administration has consistently articulated three main policy goals: first, to ensure the survival of Ukraine as a sovereign, independent, and democratic state; second, to prevent a wider escalation of the war, particularly a direct conflict between Russia and NATO; and third, to make sure the war ends as a strategic failure for Russia.

Over two and a half years later, those goals remain viable, if under threat. While Russia occupies parts of eastern Ukraine, the country remains sovereign, independent, and democratic. Thus far, the United States and NATO allies, while playing a major supporting role in the war against Russia, have not been drawn into the conflict directly. Finally, while Russia seems able to sustain its war effort for some time, its disastrous military performance in the early days of the war and inability to make major gains have been a global embarrassment.

While, at least as of now, there is no evidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin has changed his aim of subduing Ukraine and sharply curtailing its independence, U.S. policymakers need to consider more publicly and carefully the question of: "How does this end?" They will need to articulate something more than a plan to maintain end states; they will need to think about how to bring the war to an end. That means difficult, but necessary, decisions for Kyiv.

It is clear that Ukraine does not have a path to a straightforward victory. Ukraine's incursion into Russia this past August seized hundreds of square miles of Russian territory—the first time any foreign army has done so since World War II. While this might have provided a morale boost to Ukrainians tired of only playing defense and a propaganda hit to Putin, it is unclear how it will translate into overall victory. It has shown that concerns United States and European allies have expressed about Russian red lines may be

overblown, but it is not certain that the Trump administration will have an interest in relaxing those red lines in any case.

More broadly, the military situation appears quite desperate and increasingly serious for Ukraine. Russia's ability to reconstitute its military power through mobilization, the rehabilitation of old military equipment (with China's assistance), the borrowing of soldiers, and munitions from North Korea has enabled it to restore a degree of momentum to the battlefield.

Ukrainian forces are falling back on several fronts, even as they exact a high toll on the Russians. Ukrainian efforts at further mobilization have created political conflict and failed to address the imbalance between Russians and Ukrainians available at the front. Moreover, Russia's precision drone and missile campaigns against Ukrainian electrical systems and other infrastructure have drawn an increasing toll from Ukraine's civilian population.

And yet, grounds for negotiation remain. While there are some on both sides of the political spectrum in the United States who oppose the country's support to Ukraine for various reasons, the public has remained largely supportive. Ukraine has unfortunately become a partisan political issue in Congress, yet recent polling shows strong pluralities in favor of the United States both supporting Ukraine "as long as it takes" and encouraging Ukraine to engage in conflict-ending diplomacy. It's important to recognize that these two positions are not in tension.

What is certain is that Russia has sustained enormous long-term damage to its economy, military, diplomatic standing, and demographics. As doubtful as support from a Trump administration might be, France, Poland, and the United Kingdom appear ironclad in their determination to keep backing Kyiv. Thus, Russia's best-case scenario is years of brutal, grinding, and destructive warfare against an increasingly bitter and desperate foe.

Under these conditions, it makes sense to at least give Russia the option of an alternative future. Such an offer might penetrate the Kremlin's labyrinthine politics and drive a wedge between the various factions that Putin needs to manage in order to remain in power.

On our visit to Ukraine in September 2023, we witnessed a vibrant democratic society rallying to prevent Russian domination of their country. Drawn out of Russia's shadow since the 2014 war, Ukraine has undergone a cultural awakening, with art, music, literature, and history emphasizing a distinct national character. This awakening is hardly unconnected to the war. The normal avenues of Russian domination, including organized crime and state-sponsored religious activity, have been cut off by the war. Corruption still exists in Ukraine, but the impact of Russian dirty money has been substantially curtailed.

These outcomes are worth preserving, and any negotiated peace should seek to preserve them. The most important outcome of a cease-fire for Ukraine's future must be an affirmation of Ukraine's ability to protect itself, either by investing in its own defense or through relying upon its friends and neighbors. The threat posed by Russia to Ukraine is larger and more complex than simply a reprise of this invasion after a pause of months or years to recover strength.

The problem is that if Ukraine is denied the ability to defend itself—either through restrictions on its ability to build and acquire arms, limitations on its right to conclude diplomatic agreements with foreign countries, or constraints on the deployment of its armed forces—Russia will have a free hand to interfere in Ukraine's economy, society, and political system, as it often did between 1992 and 2014.

Ukraine's ability to escape Russia's shadow is more important than the territorial concessions that Ukraine may need to make. A Ukraine under Russia's thumb looks like Belarus; a Ukraine that escapes Russian domination could look like Poland.

This means that Ukraine will need to make extremely difficult decisions about what, precisely, it values. There is little serious debate that Ukraine will need to exchange territory for peace. The important question is what else Ukraine will need to concede.

Finally, the goal of a strategic failure for Russia should be dropped from public statements. Insistence that Russia accept and acknowledge its failure undermines diplomatic efforts to end the war, which will need to offer Russia at least some public theory of victory, as repulsive as that idea may be to any who have witnessed—let alone endured—the savagery of the war Putin started. The damage that Russia has inflicted upon itself is plain and undeniable in any case.

If Trump makes good on his promise to end the war, supporters of Ukraine must be clear about the principles at stake and be careful not to let maximalist aims foreclose a durable negotiated settlement. We say this with the knowledge of what conceding Ukrainian territory to permanent Russian control could mean, and has already meant, for Ukrainians in those territories.

Ending the war does not mean ending international pressure to punish Russia's treatment of those populations, which includes the horrific policy of kidnapping Ukrainian children and placing them with Russian families. Bringing an end to this war's costly and destructive military component could create greater space for attention to those crimes. Up to this point, we believe that fulsome support for Ukraine's defense has been both morally and strategically wise. Alternative paths must now be considered.

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