



By: *Richard Haass*

The Case for a Ceasefire in Ukraine



“Ripeness is all” opined Edgar in Shakespeare’s King Lear. Everyone would do well to keep this in mind amid diplomatic efforts to end the war between Russia and Ukraine.

Rarely in history is one side able to end a war merely by imposing its will on the other. In nearly all cases, what makes a given conflict ripe for progress, even resolution, is the presence of leaders who opt for an accord over continued fighting, who are strong enough at home to maintain support for that stance, who endorse a formula involving some benefits for all, and who accept a mutually acceptable diplomatic process to achieve these aims.

Today, the obvious question about the Russia-Ukraine war is whether these elements can be identified. While US President Donald Trump has made **peace** a priority, it is difficult to be optimistic.

Russia occupied Crimea and parts of Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region in 2014, and three and a half years of renewed fighting that commenced in February 2022 have produced little change to the map. The only peace that can be imagined will have to be negotiated, not imposed.

An enduring peace beyond reach

Diplomatic prospects are especially unripe when it comes to Russia. President Vladimir Putin is probably strong enough to sell an end to the war at home, although he would have to explain why so many lives were sacrificed for less than total victory.

But he is not yet inclined to do so, because he believes he is better off without an agreement and that time is on his side.

His goal is not more territory per se, but rather the end of Ukraine as an independent democratic country with close ties to the West, and he has not **shown** any willingness to settle for anything less.

Nor is it clear that a process that Russia will accept currently exists; revealingly, the Kremlin is throwing up roadblocks to a meeting between Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

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There are limits on the Ukrainian side as well. Ukraine views a ceasefire as **preferable** to continued war, but only so long as it is not asked to transfer any land permanently to Russia.

Zelensky could sell such a compromise, although many at home would be bitter that Russia would continue to occupy Ukrainian territory.

An enduring peace between Russia and Ukraine would surely be preferable, but it simply remains beyond reach. A long-term settlement must be doable as well as desirable, and for now such ambitious diplomacy is not.

What is more, there are a good many risks associated with pursuing a lasting peace before the time is ripe.

The need to revisit the possibility of a ceasefire

Compelling Ukraine to give up territory would **reward** Putin for his aggression, possibly tempting others with territorial ambitions to use force to achieve those aims.

Then there is the reality that negotiating such a peace would take months or years, thereby extending the fighting. As a rule, the scope of diplomatic ambition cannot be greater than the degree of ripeness.

These considerations highlight the need to revisit the possibility of brokering a ceasefire – the US approach before the Trump-Putin

summit in Alaska.

Neither Russia nor Ukraine would be entirely happy. Ukraine would give up the ability to attempt to liberate by force what Russia occupies; Russia would give up the ability to occupy more of Ukraine and oust its government.

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But a ceasefire offers something for both sides, beyond the benefits that would accrue from stopping the fighting. Neither side would be required to give up its long-term aims or be prevented from strengthening its military.

Bringing about such a ceasefire would require two things: increased pressure on Russia and a long-term commitment to Ukraine.

Much of this could be **accomplished** by Trump pledging (and getting Congress to back) the open-ended provision of military and intelligence assistance that Ukraine requires to mount a sustained defense and carry out attacks against targets in Russia.

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A pause rather than a step toward peace

Some argue that security assurances must be extended to Ukraine. This possibility ought to be approached with caution. Ukraine has already been invaded twice despite assurances it received in 1994.

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Europe and the United States also need to think hard about whether they want to abandon their policy of indirectly supporting Ukraine in exchange for putting planes in the sky and boots on the ground, which could bring them into war with Russia. Again, security assistance looks more attractive than security assurances.

Pushing for a ceasefire would be far from easy. There is a real risk the war would continue. Over time, both sides would have to reassess the pros and cons of continued fighting and whether there was more they were prepared to compromise on to end it.

And even if a ceasefire were to come about, there is the danger it wouldn't last, that it would simply turn out to be a pause rather than a step toward peace. The way to guard against renewed fighting would be to make it unattractive by bolstering deterrence and to buttress this approach by specifying the costs that would be imposed on the side that violates the ceasefire.

There is also the danger that the ceasefire would last and that temporary lines become near-permanent. This has been the experience on both the Korean Peninsula and in Cyprus. Still, it would be far better than continued war.

And one day, after new leadership emerges,

there may well be an opportunity to negotiate a peace agreement. Until then, a lasting ceasefire looks like the best option for everyone.

Richard Haass, President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, senior counselor at Centerview Partners, and Distinguished University Scholar at New York University, previously served as Director of Policy Planning for the US State Department (2001-03), and was President George W. Bush's special envoy to Northern Ireland and Coordinator for the Future of Afghanistan.