



Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs Applied History Project

Harvard Kennedy School 79 JFK Street Cambridge, MA 02138

www.belfercenter.org

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From Stalemate to Settlement

Lessons from History for Ukraine's Peace

Kate Davidson Raphael Piliero Peter Gaber Joshua Henderson

About the Applied History Project Program

The mission of **Harvard's Applied History Project** is to revitalize applied history by promoting the production and use of historical reasoning to clarify public and private challenges and choices. Founded by Professors Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson in 2016, the Applied History Project builds upon the foundation laid by Professors Ernest May and Richard Neustadt in the 1980s, reflected in their book *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*.

About the Authors

Kate Davidson is a researcher with the Avoiding Great Power War Project at the Belfer Center, focusing on politics and security in Russia and Europe. She tracks the Russia-Ukraine War, including Russian nuclear threats, foreign support for Ukraine, and territorial control.

Raphael Piliero is a researcher with the Avoiding Great Power War Project at the Belfer Center, where he focuses on strategy, defense policy, nuclear weapons, and Asia-Pacific security.

Peter Gaber is a researcher with the Applied History Project at the Belfer Center, conducting research at the intersection of history and public policy, with a particular focus on American grand strategy, international political economy, and political thought.

Joshua Henderson is a researcher with the Avoiding Great Power War Project at the Belfer Center, where he studies US-China relations, Chinese elite politics, Chinese domestic political economy, Taiwan affairs, and Chinese foreign policy.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Professor Graham Allison and the Applied History Project for supporting and inspiring our research. In addition, we are grateful for thorough and invaluable feedback from Kevin Klyman, Evan Sankey, Kevin Ryan, and Julia Davidson in particular, as well as many others.

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Introduction

After over two years of conflict in Ukraine, where does the war stand today? As Ukraine's then-Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Valery Zaluzhny, declared: stalemate. Since November 2022, over a year ago, the front line has moved fewer than 20 miles. Meanwhile, both sides have experienced enormous losses, with hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians and Russians estimated to have been injured or killed. Both Russia's 2022 winter offensive and Ukraine's 2023 summer counteroffensive failed to break the deadlock despite high costs in lives and equipment. After two years of calls to support Ukraine in taking back all its territory, Western analysts entered 2024 strategically adrift, as total Ukrainian victory appears increasingly unrealistic, and Russia hopes to hold a Trump card following the US elections in November.

Major battlefield swings appear unlikely. Territorial change effectively ceased since the end of Ukraine's 2022 counteroffensive over a year ago, and Ukraine will likely not have the capacity to execute another major counteroffensive, let alone liberate all territory. At the rate Ukraine has advanced over the past year, it would take until well after 2100 to liberate all of its territory. Russia's rapid offensive in the past few weeks erased Ukrainian advances during their summer 2023 counteroffensive. After months of deliberation, both the US and Ukraine recently passed major bills which will help sustain Ukraine's defenses through 2024. While war is unpredictable, the United States and Ukraine should prepare for the significant possibility that their interests will soon be best served by negotiating with Russia.

Possible endgames for Ukraine are often presented as a false dichotomy between total Ukrainian victory and a frozen conflict that would serve as a future "launching pad...for aggression" by Russia. But as US analysts, we should broaden our collective strategic imagination about how the Russia-Ukraine War might end. What lessons can be drawn from the history of war termination? Armed with historical precedent, how can American policymakers secure a favorable endgame for the US and their Ukrainian partners?

This white paper is an attempt to clarify what possible negotiated settlements look like, and how various endgames affect the national interests of the four most

influential players: Ukraine, Russia, China, and the United States. The participants, Russia and Ukraine, are the two most significant actors, while the US and China have played key supporting roles. The US has furnished Ukraine with military and financial aid, leading a coalition of Western nations. China has supported Russia less directly (and, as of this writing, has not given lethal military aid), but without China's economic and technological support Russia would struggle to continue the war. While other entities are also important, such as the European members of NATO, the aforementioned countries represent the four unitary actors with the greatest involvement in the war.

The paper surveys the history of war termination beginning with World War II, selecting eight cases that exemplify one or more of the following: a meaningful territorial stalemate, an eventual negotiated settlement, and involvement by great-power patrons in an otherwise regional war. Our objective is not merely to survey conflict termination but to apply this history as a guide for how today's conflict may end. Accordingly, each historical case is "graded" in terms of its desirability for each actor in the Russia-Ukraine War, describing whether an analogous endgame would satisfy the interests of the United States, Ukraine, Russia, and China. To illuminate which objectives are essential and which can be discounted in negotiations, we taxonomize each actor's interests as vital, extremely important, important, or merely secondary.

Our cases take place across eight decades and involve over a dozen distinct countries, from Cambodia and Vietnam to Finland and Russia. Despite the wide variance in time, location, and outcome, we derive six lessons from this history that policymakers can marshal to pursue a favorable ending to today's war. Each lesson is a broad principle, followed by two detailed recommendations that US and Ukrainian policymakers should heed. While our paper and lessons are directed at the United States and its partners, our recommendations aim for an attainable settlement that Russia and China could sign up for, instead of a mere wish list of Western demands.

This white paper attempts to apply history to illuminate possible paths forward but is neither a detailed blueprint for peace nor an intricate playbook for how negotiations should proceed. With any negotiated settlement, the devil is in the details, and questions such as the prosecution of war crimes, repatriation of prisoners of war (POWs), reparations, and specific territorial lines will

undoubtedly be debated fiercely by Moscow and Kyiv. The specific contours of any deal will be ironed out at the negotiating table. Additionally, significant negotiations are unlikely to take place in the lame-duck period prior to the US presidential election. Our recommendations are therefore not an immediate call for action but guidelines for policymakers if and when Ukraine decides to negotiate.

This paper begins by analyzing the top five national interests that Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and China each have in the war, as they are the belligerents and primary patron states. Next, we examine eight cases from the history of major wars post-World War II, and then discuss the methodology used to select and grade each historical case. We give a brief overview of each, from the roots of conflict to how the war progressed and eventually ended. Particular attention is paid to the eventual settlement and its aftermath. The cases are graded based on how well an analogous deal would address the interests of each actor in the Russia-Ukraine War today. The cases are ordered from least to most optimal, in terms of how their outcome would align with US national interests. We conclude by offering six lessons drawn from the cases, in an attempt to guide US policymakers as Ukraine considers and eventually begins negotiations to bring the largest European land war since World War II to a close.

Lessons

- 1. Be wary of unanticipated peace spoilers
- 2. In a proxy conflict, resolve beats resources
- 3. Complete territorial integrity is not a precondition for prosperity
- 4. Carpe diem: Seize the first opening for peace that secures vital interests
- 5. Patrons should not only empower belligerents to wage war, but to pursue peace
- 6. Agreements must lock in the post-war status quo, making future aggression unacceptably costly

National Interests

During a war, politicians from nations even peripherally involved attempt to justify their role by invoking "national interest." This is logical: citizens rightly expect their leaders to explain why they're expending blood and treasure on a conflict. These statements are often laden with hyperbole, with statesmen affixing "vital" or "indispensable" to even the most mundane of interests. But if everything is essential, then nothing is. A more finely calibrated rubric of interests is essential in distinguishing between actors' needs, wishes, and wants in the Russia-Ukraine War.

In 2000, the Commission on America's National Interests set out to create such a framework. To weigh and assess the intensity of interests, they developed a taxonomy ranging from "vital," "extremely important," "important," and "secondary" interests.⁷ Vital interests are those that affect the survival of a nation and its fundamental values. This category is intentionally limited, with "vital" meaning what the dictionary says it is: absolutely essential.⁸ These interests, if infringed upon, existentially threaten a country or the way of life of its citizens. Examples of vital interests are nuclear Armageddon, extreme climate change, a third world war, or complete global economic collapse. Extremely important interests are those one rung below vital: ones that don't directly threaten the survival of a nation but nonetheless fundamentally affect its citizenry. A nation might consider nearby conflicts, nuclear use elsewhere in the world, or aggression by a neighbor to be threats of this magnitude. Important interests, unlike vital and extremely important ones, offer more room to maneuver without drastic measures such as war. These tend to be more geographically removed or offer less of a direct effect on a nation's citizens, such as minor economic disruption or war in a faraway region. Secondary interests, while not unimportant, are those that can be managed or deprioritized, particularly when responding to them will manifest new threats to other, more important interests. Consider, for instance, democracy promotion or efforts to manage civil unrest overseas.

As a general proposition, states will choose to fight wars for vital or extremely important interests, while staying on the sidelines for those that are less important, particularly if entering a secondary conflict would imperil more important interests. Whether it was President Dwight Eisenhower's decision in 1956 to stand aside while the Soviet Union steamrolled Hungary or President Joe Biden's choice to not "fight

World War III in Ukraine" in 2022, American leaders have chosen to pull back, even if it means accepting unsavory outcomes.⁹

What constitutes an interest (and the intensity of that interest) is subject to fierce disagreement. Assessments of the interests of Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and China are hardly uniform, even within the government—let alone the analytic community. While governments frequently release strategy papers claiming to define interests, such pronouncements invariably are designed for popular consumption. A state claiming an interest as "vital" may be a bluff or signal to its domestic audience. Instead, we quantify interests for the four relevant actors based not on what they claim their interests are, but our assessments of how proximate the interest is to the country's ability to survive and thrive.

Across all four actors, one interest is almost universally vital: avoiding a third world war. Given the direct belligerent role of one nuclear power, Russia, and the varying involvement of several others (the United States, China, France, and the United Kingdom), in the Russia-Ukraine War, a widened conflict could pit nuclear powers against each other in a large-scale, protracted conventional war for the first time ever. This would raise the specter of an all-out war, an unthinkable prospect in the nuclear age where the push of a button can almost instantly incinerate hundreds of millions. However, as a state already fighting a major war for its survival, Ukraine places less emphasis on this interest than the others, for whom the status quo is not existentially threatening.

While not vital, avoiding nuclear use of any kind (including tactically on the battlefield) is of extreme importance to most players in the conflict. No nuclear weapon has been detonated in war since 1945, a taboo repeatedly reaffirmed over 75 years that, if broken, could normalize using nuclear weapons as just another weapon of war. For Russia, however, avoiding nuclear use is a lower priority, particularly as the state that has made belligerent nuclear threats and could use a tactical nuclear weapon in the event of a battlefield collapse.

For Ukraine nothing could be more important than its own survival, which is directly imperiled by the war. In justifying his invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin identified "denazification" as his goal, a euphemism for deposing Ukrainian leadership and consigning Ukraine to exist as a colony. ¹² Its sovereignty and continued existence is therefore a vital interest. Ukraine, as

the only country existentially threatened by the stakes of the war, has the most intense interests of any participant. While not determinative for Ukraine's survival, complete territorial integrity is also important. Ukrainians aspire to take back territory seized by Russia post-2022 in southern and eastern Ukraine, as well as areas originally lost following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and commencement of Donbas hostilities. Of similar importance is long-term Western alignment that facilitates self-defense and economic rebuilding. These interests are important but not vital: Ukraine's existence as a free and sovereign country will not be determined by Western alignment or its exact territorial lines. Ukraine will undoubtedly attempt to reclaim territory seized by Russia since 2022, as well as territory occupied between 2014 and 2022 in Crimea and parts of the Donbas. While these aims are important Ukrainian interests, they are not essential, and the leadership has reportedly been open to compromising on them in previous talks.¹³

Compared to Ukraine, Russia, as the attacker, lacks interests of similar intensity. Notwithstanding Russian propaganda about "Nazis" on its border, Russia was in no danger of attack from Ukraine, which posed no threat to Russia's territorial integrity, let alone its survival. Yet the outcome in Ukraine is nonetheless of extreme importance to Russia, which finds far deeper interests than its Western counterparts. Putin, after all, maintains his rule through a reputation for security, protecting Russians against a supposed Western attempt to "dismember" their nation. 14 The 2014 annexation of Crimea, held up as the historic return of Russian land, supported this narrative and boosted Putin's polling numbers among Russians. The US intelligence community has claimed that Putin may use a nuclear weapon if he feels his control of Crimea is threatened. 15 Similarly, CIA Director William Burns has described Ukrainian membership in NATO as the "reddest of red lines" for Russians across the political spectrum, perceived as extending a menacing military alliance right on Russia's border. Preventing the loss of Crimea and Ukrainian membership in NATO are therefore for Putin, and by extension Russia, extremely important interests worth fighting a costly war over. Russia's important interests are retaining eastern and southern Ukrainian territory acquired since 2014, as well as shielding the Russian public from the physical risk and economic costs of war. Rolling back borders to pre-war lines would make many Russians question whether they suffered wartime costs in vain. A new round of wartime mobilization or economic distress would make the costs of the war soar further for ordinary Russians. While these interests do not pose a certain or

even probable threat to Putin's regime, any risk-averse leader would prefer not to roll the dice.

The interests at stake for the United States pale in comparison to both Ukraine and Russia. This is unsurprising. Russia and Ukraine share a 1,500-mile border, while the US is 6,000 miles away by flight. The United States is not only geographically distant, but also the world's most powerful country. The oft-told joke that Americans learn geography only through wars highlights a harsh truth: what happens in a distant country that most Americans can't identify on a map will not pose an existential threat to its citizens. In confronting Russia, few would be willing to risk nuclear war and trade Kansas for Kyiv or Ohio for Odessa. However, none of this is to say that Americans lack any interests in the conflict. The US has long taken an interest in local balances of power, having gone to war in Europe twice to stymie a German bid for regional hegemony. The world order that the United States built out of the wreckage of two world wars has depended critically on a norm against territorial conquest. Russia's war, the largest land invasion in Europe in 75 years, amounts to a significant assault on this norm. Making clear that aggression will not pay is essential to preserving some semblance of a behavioral sanction behind this norm. Another US interest, a sovereign, democratic, and prosperous Ukraine, has been cited on multiple occasions by President Biden, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mark Milley, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. 16 Finally, the US has an interest in a strong NATO, with a strong frontline alliance to help forestall conflict that, if history is any guide, could drag the United States back into the region. Ukraine is no doubt important for the United States—important enough to assist, but not a conflict with vital stakes. This, more than anything, explains the Biden administration's strategy thus far: significant military and economic assistance, but an unwillingness to send Americans or risk fighting "World War III in Ukraine" against Russia.

China is far less involved in the conflict than the others. It plays little role in European security, is still primarily a regional actor, and is not a formal treaty ally of any country involved. Nonetheless, it has a stake in the outcome. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has brought China and Russia closer than any time in history, describing their partnership as having "no limits." As Russia is China's only great-power partner, the weakening of Russia, or the ouster of Xi's "best friend" Putin are outcomes China seeks to avoid. Similarly, given Xi's fears of "comprehensive containment, encirclement, and suppression" hampering Chinese

development, he also wants to avoid a situation where war brings tighter US and European ties at the expense of China. And during a period of greater economic uncertainty and slowing growth, Chinese leadership will also keenly be aware of the risks of global economic disruption from the war, particularly as it relates to the energy markets that China relies on. China's strategy, unsurprisingly, has been to help from a distance and with plausible deniability: offering Russia diplomatic cover, sending non-lethal aid, and buying Russian energy at cut-rate prices, but also positioning itself as a neutral party whose objective is peace.

Top Interests						
US Ukraine		Russia	China			
Avoid WWIII	Preserve sovereign government	Avoid WWIII	Avoid WWIII			
Avoid nuclear use	Avoid nuclear use	Retain Crimea	Avoid nuclear use			
Jphold norm against erritorial conquest Western alignment and longterm security aid		Prevent Ukrainian NATO membership	Preserve China-aligned Russia			
Sovereign, democratic, prosperous Ukraine	Reclaim territory occupied since 2022	Retain territory in southern and eastern Ukraine	Avoid consolidation of US-led bloc			
Strengthen NATO	Reclaim territory occupied 2014-2022		Stabilize global economy			

Vital Extremely important Important

Methods

Case selection

We selected eight cases that provide a broad view of the outcomes of major interstate wars beginning with World War II. This timescale was chosen due to the major changes in the international system and warfare that have occurred in the past 75 years: the advent of nuclear weapons and the creation of the modern rules-based international order have had particularly salient effects on both the broader security landscape and the nature of war. Each case had

either a meaningful territorial stalemate, a negotiated settlement, or significant involvement by great-power patrons in an otherwise regional war. Many cases featured a peacemaking role for China, important given China's high potential relevance in brokering any negotiations in the current war. We chose to omit smaller conflicts, with under 1,000 combat deaths per year, as well as civil conflicts without significant major-power troop deployment. Such conflicts are less likely to feature conventional warfare and instead often center on insurgency, which offers different dynamics than two armies attempting to take and hold territory.

Why specifically include cases featuring China? China has the potential to play a unique and influential role in any resolution of the conflict, meriting separate consideration in our analysis. While China is clearly aligned with Russia despite publicly professing neutrality, Ukraine continues engaging with China as part of its own peace effort, and Volodymyr Zelensky himself has called out China as an essential part of any solution.¹⁹ Putin puts significant weight on Xi's statements about the war and is also dependent on both economic and military-component trade with China. After Putin issued veiled nuclear threats in Fall 2022, China likely helped push him away from considering nuclear use.²⁰ Though China's participation in any peace negotiations is not certain, its potential influence makes it valuable to consider policy options that might appeal to China, as well as assess how China's interests would be impacted by each peace model.

The eight wars we selected involved an initial invasion in which territory was seized. In most cases, the aggressor was a significantly larger, more powerful state. These conflicts were ended by dealmaking, which either ended hostilities or reduced the fighting below the level of a major war (1,000 combat deaths per year). The cases cover a wide range of possible outcomes, including cases which would be a clear victory for Ukraine or Russia if achieved, as well as some lose-lose scenarios. They are ordered, in the paper and grading charts, from the worst to best outcome for US interests. While we attempted to select eight representative cases, we recognize this is not comprehensive but rather a sampling of possible outcomes from some of the most significant wars over the past 75 years.

Grading

Each case begins with a brief overview on the conflict: its origins, the progression of fighting, and the eventual peace deal. The cases then feature scoring on how

Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and China would grade an equivalent outcome in terms of their key national interests. This assessment examines both short- and long-term outcomes for the parties to the conflict.

The grades are predicated on how well national interests were fulfilled, with greater weight being put on the medium- and long-term outcomes. Vital interests are given the most weight in determining grades. Any outcome that completely fails a state's vital interest, such as loss of sovereignty is given an "F." Incompletely addressing a vital interest, such as continued risk of wider war or nuclear escalation, downgrades the outcome. In contrast, an "A" grade represents an outcome where all interests are addressed, with at most one interest being only partly addressed.

Cases

	Grade for analogous outcome in Ukraine War				
	US	Ukraine	Russia	China	
First Nagorno-Karabakh War	D	D	В	В	
Vietnam War	С	F	A	A	
First Indochina War	С	В	С	В	
2014 Invasion of Donbas	С	С	A	В	
Korean War	C*	В	С	В	
Finnish Continuation War	В	С	В	Α	
Cambodia-Vietnam War	A	В	С	В	
World War II Western Front	A *	A	F	D	

^{*}Both outcomes required US boots on the ground as precondition, lowering prospects of obtaining a similar deal in Ukraine.

1. First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994)

Background

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was a long-simmering ethnic dispute over a region claimed by both Azerbaijan and Armenia. With both Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis living in the territory at various points, control has been contested for over a century.²² In 1923, Nagorno-Karabakh was created as an autonomous oblast within Azerbaijan.²³ The territory, majority Armenian but governed by Azerbaijan, was surrounded by areas that were majority Azerbaijani. This arrangement persisted for nearly seventy years, maintained by strong central Soviet control.²⁴

The situation began to unravel in the late 1980s with the beginning of the breakup of the Soviet Union. Armenians within Nagorno-Karabakh began to question publicly why a territory with a majority Armenian population belonged to the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1988, regional authorities voted to request accession to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic but saw their demand rejected by Soviet authorities, who controlled both republics at the time. ²⁵ Rebuking the pro-Armenian constituency, the Soviet Union subsequently limited the rights of the autonomous oblast and conferred greater authority on the Azerbaijan SSR, abolishing the oblast altogether in 1991. This culminated in a referendum for granting full independence and statehood to Nagorno-Karabakh in 1991. The result was war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which both became independent in late 1991, over the status of the territory. ²⁶

The status of the region remained ambiguous from 1988 to 1994, with active hostilities from 1991 to 1994 until Armenian-backed forces acquired control over the region and surrounding areas, occupying 20% of Azerbaijan.²⁷ Post-Soviet Russia provided significant support for Armenia, in particular through discounted arms sales.²⁸ The war killed 30,000 and displaced one million civilians.²⁹ Russia brokered a ceasefire with the relevant parties: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh (the unrecognized Republic of Artsakh), which culminated in the 1994 Bishkek Protocol. The ceasefire left territorial questions unresolved and kept borders at the conflict's line of control, creating a functionally

independent Nagorno-Karabakh and a frozen conflict.³⁰ Despite occasional fighting, most notably in 2016, casualties essentially ended from the 1990s through the 2010s.

In 2020, however, an Azerbaijani offensive led to the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. The month-long war culminated in a new ceasefire but also gains for Azerbaijan.³¹ The new Russian-mediated ceasefire also provided for thousands of Russian peacekeepers. Yet in 2022, with Russia's attention and manpower elsewhere, Azerbaijan again moved to change the status quo, blockading the sole highway connecting the region to Armenia.³² One year later, Azerbaijan finally moved to seize control over the entire region. This caused 100,000 Armenians to flee and ended the Republic of Artsakh.³³

Relevance

In both the Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, the more powerful state was thwarted in its attempt to secure outcomes through force alone. The challenges Azerbaijan faced—a hostile population, organized opposition, unfavorable terrain, and an influx of aid from outside—are closely related to those Russia that encounters in Ukraine today. In both cases, the result has been the inability of either side to accomplish objectives with force alone, making players more willing to freeze conflict.

The primary difference is that while Azerbaijan undoubtedly had advantages over Armenia, the two countries were peer-like in ways that Ukraine and Russia are not. Consider that Azerbaijan, in 2023, was four times larger economically than Armenia, whereas Russia's economy dwarfs Ukraine by nearly ten-fold. The war was also on a much smaller scale: the geography and population of Azerbaijan and Armenia combined were less than one-twentieth of those of Russia and Ukraine. The relationship between Russia and Armenia, despite Russia's ostensible support, was also not nearly as intimate as that of the United States and Ukraine. While the defending state, Armenia, had less third-party support, the aggressor state, Azerbaijan had greater help. Turkey, particularly in the subsequent 2020 war, played a key military and political support role for Azerbaijan, supplying lethal military aid, intelligence, training, and even providing "volunteers" to aid in the effort. In contrast, Russia's assistance to Armenia pales in comparison to what the US did for Ukraine, while Turkey aided Azerbaijan far more thoroughly than

China ever did for Russia. Finally, the terms of the original 1994 ceasefire, where the weaker state, Armenia, acquired territory, are effectively the inverse of today's conflict, as Ukraine hasn't regained any meaningful part of its territory seized by Russia, let alone seized any Russian territory.

The conflict nonetheless demonstrates the risks of a frozen conflict, where one party can later restart active conflict after more favorable conditions develop. Even a "great-power guarantor"—Russia for Nagorno-Karabakh, the United States for Ukraine—is no true assurance, given that geopolitical winds can shift over a tenor twenty-year horizon and refocus the patron state's priorities elsewhere.

Actors

The four key actors were Azerbaijan (playing a role analogous to Russia in today's conflict), Armenia (today's Ukraine), Russia (today's US), and Turkey (today's China). Azerbaijan, stronger than Armenia, attempted to use force in a way analogous to Russia in the Ukraine War. Similarly, Armenia resembled Ukraine today as the smaller actor. Russia in this conflict backed the weaker party (Armenia) in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and sought to prevent the use of force to change territorial lines—a role similar to how the United States has aided Ukraine.

Grading

Ukraine: D

A "Nagorno-Karabakh ending" with Armenia ostensibly avoiding territorial loss would have been more appealing for Ukraine had this paper been written in the 2010s. A frozen conflict and unresolved territorial questions had left the Republic of Artsakh in a state of limbo, much like occupied Ukraine 2014-2022, and occasional skirmishes erupted, but no major challenges to the Bishkek Protocol emerged. However, following the 2020 and 2023 conflicts, Azerbaijan finally achieved the absorption of Nagorno-Karabakh. The equivalent outcome for Ukraine would be permanent loss of territory to Russia. Armenia's ultimate defeat was also enabled as its foreign ally, Russia, stood by as Azerbaijan attacked. A similar abandonment of Ukraine by the United States could be catastrophic for Ukraine.

Russia: B

Azerbaijan accepted the terms of an unfavorable ceasefire in 1994, and it took decades to achieve its goals. Russia would prefer to avoid accepting de facto defeat in the short run and waiting for an extended period to fulfill its objectives. Azerbaijan did eventually fulfill its main military objective, absorbing Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Russia similarly knows that time may be on its side, especially with the right deal. It dwarfs Ukraine economically and militarily, and is also largely self-sufficient, while Ukraine relies on the goodwill of Western countries in keeping it armed and its economy running. Under an agreement freezing current territorial lines, Russia could wait until Western support declines, interest wanes, or a US government unfriendly to Kyiv materializes—and then act.

United States: D

Much as the United States is Ukraine's patron, Russia was Armenia's—and it ultimately backed the losing side. Russia initially looked like a peacemaker and power broker, leading and guaranteeing the negotiations that kept the conflict frozen. But the eventual collapse of the arrangement underscored that Russian geopolitical influence was waning. The aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where Russia failed to aid a key cooperative partner and ally, left others in the post-Soviet sphere no doubt wondering whether Russia could be a reliable guarantor of their security. Similarly, a US-negotiated ceasefire that culminated in the collapse of its Ukrainian ally would show the limits of American diplomacy and, ultimately, the failure of a core US objective: sustaining Ukraine as an independent, democratic state.

China: B

Freezing the war would help address China's two top interests by reducing escalation risks and stabilizing both the Putin regime and the global economy. Finally, ending the hot war removes the galvanizing force driving the US and its allies closer together. While a frozen conflict could be restarted down the road, it would buy time for China and promise a return to normalcy for the foreseeable future.

2. Vietnam War (1955-1975)

Background

By the time Richard Nixon became US President in 1969, the Vietnam War was at an impasse. Five years of intense bombing, over a decade of US involvement, and half a million American troops had failed to weaken the Viet Minh in North Vietnam or stamp out the Viet Cong insurgency in the South.³⁷ Just one year prior, the 1968 Tet Offensive had demonstrated the ability of the North Vietnamese to carry out massive and bloody campaigns, showing Americans that the war effort was going nowhere and prompting President Lyndon Johnson to withdraw from the presidential race. American forces were operating in unfamiliar terrain, waging a counter-insurgency campaign they were ill-prepared for. Meanwhile, due to the fear of escalation with China or the Soviet Union, restrictive rules of engagement prevented strikes that might threaten North Vietnamese economic or industrial power.

Upon taking office in 1969, President Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger realized that military means alone couldn't achieve US objectives of preventing communist rule. Instead, they sought a diplomatic offramp. Publicly, this effort was reflected in "Vietnamization" of the war, handing over efforts to the South Vietnamese who would sustain the peace; privately, this offered a way to disentangle from the conflict while saving face and avoiding an immediate collapse of the South Vietnamese position as soon as the United States pulled out.³⁸

That same year, the Paris peace talks were reinvigorated, aimed at finding a way for US forces to withdraw without consigning the South to a takeover by the North. Simultaneously, US ground forces were reduced by hundreds of thousands annually for the next three years, until only 5% of the 1969 total remained. However, Nixon and Kissinger didn't equate withdrawals with decreasing pressure on the opposition—they loosened Johnson's rules of engagement significantly. The 1969 attacks inside Cambodia and Laos to interdict Viet Cong supply lines were followed by the mining of Haiphong Harbor and the massive strategic "Christmas Bombing" campaign in 1972, all calibrated to threaten North Vietnam's economic vitality and bring its leadership to the negotiating table. Nixon even resorted to a

strategy of purported irrationality, hoping that appearing to be a "madman" willing to use nuclear weapons could compel Ho to wind the war down.

By early 1973, a deal had been struck, with the Paris Peace Accords mandating an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of all US forces within sixty days while stipulating that reunification would be pursued through peaceful means without coercion by either side or foreign interference. Nixon withdrew US troops, and the war appeared to be over. Fighting effectively ended, with both Kissinger and his North Vietnamese counterpart, Lê Đức Thọ, sharing the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize.

The text of the Paris Peace Accords was superficially favorable to the United States and South Vietnam: Washington got its clean exit, while Saigon remained independent. The wheels began to come off just months later. The threat of reintroducing ground forces should the North Vietnamese breach the agreement was a central component of its enforceability. But Nixon soon faced a firestorm of domestic restrictions: multiple acts of Congress that limited funding for war efforts in Cambodia and South Vietnam, restrictions on the ability of a US president to commit troops during a war for the first time ever, and prohibitions on operations in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos without congressional approval. By 1975, the President's hands were tied, and the United States' predictable inability to enforce the agreement resulted in a vastly different picture. North Vietnam was on the move and quickly captured Saigon, and by 1976 achieved its original objective of unifying Vietnam under Communist rule.

Relevance

Nixon in 1969 understood the same inconvenient truth that dawned on Ukrainians and Americans in 2023: stalemate. As in Ukraine, stalemate was not just about the inability to gain more territory. Rather, it featured the gradual realization that North Vietnam was more resilient than anticipated and that objectives could not be achieved through force alone. In Vietnam, the US plan to bomb North Vietnam into submission or kill its way out of an insurgency ran aground when enemy fighters proved unexpectedly committed. Contrast that with South Vietnam's lack of independent capacity and resolve. The centrality of American assistance was underscored by Saigon's complete collapse when US support ended. Similarly, few seriously contemplate the possibility of Ukraine

fighting on without extensive Western military and economic aid. One final similarity is the degree to which the US faced restraints, both due to worries about escalation and domestic barriers. In Vietnam, Johnson sought to avoid a repeat of the Korean War's direct engagement between major powers, keeping newly nuclear-armed, global powers like China and the Soviet Union away from direct combat roles. Similarly, Biden proclaimed that he would not "fight World War III in Ukraine," acknowledging that direct conflict between the two nuclear-armed states could wipe both off the map. ⁴³ Domestic constraints existed in both wars. Anti-Vietnam protests drove Johnson from seeking reelection and swept Nixon into power on the promise of ending the war, while eroding US popular support for the Ukraine conflict stalled military aid in Congress for months on end and, in extremity, could return to office a former president who pledged to "end the war in 24 hours."

The primary difference between the Vietnam war and the present one is the direct role played by the United States. Americans were sent to fight and die in Vietnam, with 60,000 fatalities by the time troops departed.⁴⁵ In Ukraine, the US has given ammunition, advice, and funding, but sent no US troops. The obvious advantage is that the Ukraine model is more sustainable: aid has been .3% of US GDP, and 5% of the defense budget, and the severe political fallout of the US military experience in Vietnam has been avoided.⁴⁶ But US arms-length support is not an unqualified positive. A core enforcement provision of Vietnam's Paris Peace Accords was the pledge that the resumption of North Vietnamese attacks would be countered by a return of US combatants. In contrast, in Ukraine, the US could not credibly threaten to send troops to enforce a peace deal because doing so has been consistently rejected by Biden.

Actors

Mapping the past conflict directly onto today's war, the defending state then was South Vietnam (today's Ukraine), while the aggressor state was North Vietnam (today's Russia). The roles of China and the United States are the same, today with China as the arms-length supporter of the aggressor and the United States as the more deeply involved patron of the defending state.

Grading

Ukraine: F

An outcome like South Vietnam would mean Ukraine losing its most vital interest—sovereignty. An agreement that traded a ceasefire for the end of Western aid might give Ukraine a few years of peace but would almost certainly be followed by a Russian restart once Moscow felt newly empowered. Ukraine, fighting alone, would likely fall and the outcome everyone foresaw in early 2022—Russian victory—would have been deferred but not averted.

Russia: A

The Paris Peace Accords produced no greater winner than North Vietnam, consolidating its control over all Vietnam and permanently ending Western intervention. After 1975, no prospect existed for any foreign power to come in and re-divide Vietnam, nor catalyze a new civil war. Similarly, were Putin to do to Kyiv what Ho Chi Minh and his successor did to Saigon, he'd find himself with a Russian puppet state on his border, permanently keeping Ukraine out of the EU, NATO, and the West's orbit. While the West would undoubtedly protest and keep sanctions in place, as occurred with United States-Vietnam relations post 1975, Putin would reasonably expect the world to eventually move on so that he could pursue a long-term rapprochement with the democratic world.

United States: C

In Vietnam, the United States achieved its ultimate objective: getting out. An equivalent endgame in Ukraine would also nullify the associated risk of a great-power war or nuclear use, America's most significant interests in the conflict. But this would come at a steep cost to its secondary interests. In Vietnam, US credibility took a major hit, with the world seeing it chased out of Saigon and "Vietnam Syndrome" at home shaking confidence in American grand strategy.⁴⁷ Russian victory in Ukraine would similarly eliminate Europe's largest democracy by territory and telegraph to the world that territorial conquest carried out by a nuclear power can stand unpunished. The failure of Western arsenals of democracy to sustain Ukraine, despite sending hundreds of billions of dollars

in aid, would also raise serious doubt about US commitment to NATO among Europe's leaders and populace.

China: A

In both conflicts, China's role was more limited than that of the other players, as it primarily aimed to avert a catastrophic outcome while hoping for a good outcome for an aligned state. In that context, the eventual success of North Vietnam was an unequivocal victory, primarily in averting the risk of a unified, US-aligned state, but also offering secondary benefits: another Communist player in Asia and the weakening of the United States. The main outcomes that China fears in Ukraine are the collapse of Putin's China-aligned government, and the use of nuclear weapons. A negotiated settlement would remove the biggest risk to Putin—war-induced unrest—and instantly address any concerns about nuclear escalation. A settlement that positioned Russia to ultimately emerge victorious would also have the salutary benefit of rendering Putin even more secure at home, leaving the China-Russia partnership on steadier footing. An end to the war would also remove a wedge between it and Europe, which Beijing had been courting to blunt the impact of US-led economic and technological containment.



3. First Indochina War (1946-1954)

Background

After Japanese forces withdrew from the region in the aftermath of World War II, France unsuccessfully tried to reclaim the Southeast Asian colonies it controlled prior to Japanese occupation—most notably in modern-day Vietnam. Vietnamese nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh resisted French efforts to restore colonial rule, leading to the outbreak of the First Indochina War in 1946 between occupying French forces and Ho-led Viet Minh nationalist forces.

While active belligerence was restricted to France and the Viet Minh, the scope of the conflict broadened significantly over its eight-year course. As China supported the Viet Minh after its formation under Communist rule in 1949 with training and weapons, and the United States supported France with logistical, financial, and military assistance. And China had become convinced of the dangers posed by hostile foreign forces occupying territory on its borders and was committed to preventing a repeat of the situation that compelled it to enter the Korean War in 1950. China's communist leadership also saw the benefits of a like-minded regime on its periphery. The United States, meanwhile, became increasingly concerned about the "domino effect" of a communist victory in Vietnam on the broader region—particularly after securing a hard-earned but unsatisfying ceasefire in Korea in July 1953.

Despite US support, France's campaign in Northern Vietnam was largely unsuccessful, culminating in a humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu, a major French encampment near Vietnam's Laotian border. The Viet Minh's successful siege in May 1954 provided the impetus for extended talks at the Geneva Conference that summer. The French were ready to engage in peace talks after their defeat, and China convinced the Viet Minh to come to the negotiating table. Under the leadership of Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai, China convinced Ho, who wanted to continue his military campaign to retake the entirety of Vietnam, that temporary peace was preferable to extended conflict that would risk direct US involvement. China's primary objective was to deny any US opportunity to intervene. St

The 1954 Geneva Accords, signed by France and the Viet Minh, mandated a supervised ceasefire overseen by an International Control Commission and a temporary partition of Vietnam along the 17th parallel, in which the Viet Minh controlled North Vietnam and South Vietnam remained independent.⁵⁵ All foreign forces were ordered to leave Vietnam, and both sides agreed North and South Vietnam would hold free, nationwide elections in July 1956 to select a unified government.

The Geneva Accords failed to permanently resolve the conflict. The United States did not sign the agreement. Instead, it was determined to prevent South Vietnam from falling under communist rule and became increasingly involved in the financing and governance of South Vietnam. It ultimately backed a rigged referendum in South Vietnam that installed the US-friendly Ngo Dinh Diem as the president of the Republic of Vietnam, instead of the nationwide election agreed to in Geneva. Subsequent tensions between North and South Vietnam escalated into the decades-long Vietnam War, as discussed above, which concluded in 1975 with the defeat of Western-allied South Vietnam.

Relevance

The First Indochina War has clear structural parallels to the current conflict in Ukraine. As in Ukraine, the First Indochina War was limited to two direct combatants. Each combatant was supported indirectly by the US or China, as in Ukraine, and the Geneva Accords represented a compromise in which two parties with maximalist goals of independence and occupation nevertheless compromised at the urging of their more powerful backers—a likely eventuality in the current conflict.

The most notable difference is that unlike the current conflict, China backed the weaker party, Vietnam as represented by the Viet Minh, while the US backed France, the stronger occupying force. Although Vietnam was occupied by France, this was the result of pre-war colonialism and not the result of an invasion like Russia's. The geography of the First Indochina War is also unlike the current conflict, as France was waging its campaign from the other side of the world,

making the war both more logistically challenging and less of a direct threat to its vital interests. In contrast, in the current conflict, the two combatants, Russia and Ukraine, share a border. The First Indochina War also was of arguably greater importance to Mao's China than the Russia-Ukraine War is for today's China, given that the war took place directly across from China's own borders. In addition, actors were exhausted from the recently ended World War II, which may have made them more willing to negotiate.

Actors

For the purposes of this analysis, the actors in the First Indochina War correlate to the current conflict in Ukraine as follows: The Viet Minh (today's Ukraine); France (today's Russia); United States (today's United States); China (today's China).

Grading

Ukraine: B

An analogous outcome to the 1954 Geneva Accords would protect Ukraine's two most vital interests in the short term—preserving a sovereign government and avoiding dramatic military escalation. However, the Geneva Accords did not result in long-term security guarantees from the Viet Minh's allies, nor control of all of Vietnam. Moreover, the Geneva Accords established only a brief interlude of peace before conflict broke out between North and South Vietnam in 1955 with the outbreak of the Vietnam War. Finally, the Geneva Accords resulted in the division of Vietnam into separate states. A similar settlement for Ukraine would mean autonomy for parts of eastern Ukraine, such as the Donbas, which in many cases are Russia-aligned. This would leave open the possibility of internal instability. However, North Vietnam did prevail in the end, an outcome Ukraine would be fortunate to attain.

Russia: C

The same ending France achieved would, for Russia, satisfy its most vital interest—avoiding World War III—but would result in Russia withdrawing from all territory it had occupied, including Crimea. However, an analogous outcome in the current conflict would prevent Ukrainian NATO membership and perhaps result in

autonomy for some of the territories in Eastern Ukraine that sought independence. Ukraine would be prevented from Western alignment and the aforementioned territories would have a Russia-friendly government. This division of Ukrainian territory would likely hamper Ukraine's democratic system and enable Russian political influence, similar to the Minsk II agreement (discussed below) which called for autonomous regions with heavy Russian influence. Even if Russia itself no longer controlled any of Ukraine, the country would be left weaker.

United States: C

The Geneva endgame would avoid dramatic military escalation and largely uphold the norm against territorial conquest by preventing Russia from acquiring land forcibly. However, it would not strengthen US alliances nor leave the side it backed in the conflict "sovereign, democratic, and prosperous" in the long-term. While Russian troops would no longer occupy the country, Ukraine would be divided and lack internal cohesion.

China: B

A parallel outcome would avoid dramatic military escalation and preserve a China-aligned regime on the side it backed in the conflict. However, the risk would be the resumption of the conflict down the road, like the aftermath of Indochina. If this were to happen, it would not satisfy China's secondary objectives of stabilizing the region and would offer only a temporary respite.



4. 2014 Invasion of Donbas (2014-2015)

Background

Ukraine's growing ties with Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union created ongoing tension with Russia. In 2004, Ukraine's Orange Revolution forced a runoff to overturn the fraudulent election of Putin's favored candidate, Victor Yanukovych.⁵⁷ In 2008, NATO promised Ukraine and Georgia that they would eventually become members, and shortly thereafter, Russia invaded Georgia to prevent this outcome.

The pro-Russia Yanukovych was eventually elected president in 2010, and after a series of Russian economic and trade threats, Yanukovych announced his decision not to sign the parliament-approved EU association agreement in November 2013.⁵⁸ Large scale protests broke out, with a group occupying Kyiv's Independence Square. After the deaths of 108 protestors and 13 police officers and a failed unity government, Yanukovych fled to Russia in early 2014.⁵⁹ After a subsequent election, pro-Russian protests against the new government broke out across Ukraine. They were concentrated in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, areas with high concentrations of ethnic Russians.⁶⁰

On February 27, pro-Russian gunmen seized Crimea's government buildings and forced a referendum to change Crimea's leadership.⁶¹ Unmarked soldiers ("little green men") began occupying key locations. On March 18, Crimea was annexed by Russia.⁶² Russian soldiers stormed Ukrainian military bases in Crimea and seized naval vessels, gaining control of Crimea within a week.

Pro-Russian protests continued in eastern Ukraine, and Russia massed forces along its border with Ukraine.⁶³ In April, pro-Russian separatists declared two oblasts in the Donbas, Donetsk and Luhansk, to be independent republics—the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics. Militants led by former Russian military members began occupying government buildings and small cities. In response, Ukraine launched the Anti-Terrorist Operation on April 15. However, militant control spread rapidly, and by April 30 Ukraine declared it had lost control of both regions.⁶⁴ Russian military "volunteers" became increasingly important in the

conflict, and Russia began supplying separatists with heavy weaponry in June.⁶⁵ After a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive, Russia sent in several thousand conventional troops to protect the regions.⁶⁶

In early September, Ukraine, the separatists, and Russia signed a first ceasefire, Minsk I. Minsk I decreased the intensity of the conflict until the deal collapsed in early 2015, when Russia attacked Debaltseve in Donetsk.⁶⁷ Then, in February, France and Germany led a second round of negotiations between Ukraine, the separatists, and Russia. The parties agreed to establish a ceasefire, pull out heavy weaponry, and allow monitoring by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This next round was known as Minsk II, which also called for local elections, restoration of Ukrainian government control, and the removal of military formations.⁶⁸ Minsk II was signed by representatives from Ukraine, the separatists, Russia, and the OSCE on February 12.

Minsk II almost collapsed immediately due to the ongoing separatist offensive in Debaltseve.⁶⁹ However, after Ukraine retreated from Debaltseve on February 18, fighting intensity decreased significantly. The ceasefire and withdrawal of heavy weapons were largely implemented with OSCE oversight. In the first year of war, approximately 6,000 people died. However, following Minsk II, conflict-related deaths dropped to about 250 per year, below the number of murders in Chicago.⁷⁰ The front line stabilized, essentially frozen at February 2015 lines.

Unfortunately, Minsk II failed to achieve long-term peace and stability, and Ukraine's economy did not return to pre-war levels until 2021. Russia and Ukraine disagreed over how to implement political reforms, and Russia remained in control of territory in Crimea and the Donbas, which represented 7% of Ukraine.⁷¹ Low-level ceasefire violations occurred regularly for the next eight years.⁷² Ukraine did take advantage of the low-intensity conflict to strengthen its military, receiving help from NATO.⁷³ However, in 2022, after additional degradation in Ukrainian-Russian relations, Russia launched its much larger invasion of Ukraine, with the current conflict reflecting the failure to establish a lasting peace.

Relevance

The invasion of Donbas has high relevance to the current conflict because it involves the same geography, countries, and coalitions. In both cases, Russia seized control of Ukrainian territory under the pretext of representing the local population.

However, there are several key differences. Russia's 2014 invasion of Donbas involved conflict on a much smaller scale and over a briefer period. Russia relied on political influence, proxies, state-aligned militants, and unmarked troops, as opposed to open invasion by the Russian army. Engagement was geographically limited to Crimea and Donbas. Russia also had more limited military goals and likely aimed to control Ukrainian politics by creating autonomous, Russia-aligned proxies in Donetsk and Luhansk. In contrast, in 2022 Russia aimed to overthrow the Ukrainian national government using military force. China was also essentially a non-actor in the 2014 conflict.

Actors

Actors in Donbas correlate to the same position in the current conflict. Both cases involved invasion of Ukraine with Russia as the larger power and aggressor. The United States backed Ukraine in both cases, and China has become more closely aligned with Russia.

Grading

Ukraine: C

A Donbas-style freeze would be an acceptable outcome in terms of Ukraine's vital interests. Ukraine would continue to have a sovereign government, and the risk of nuclear escalation would abate. However, it would not fulfill Ukraine's goal of regaining territory or formally aligning with the West. In addition, a deal like Minsk II could slightly erode Ukrainian sovereignty. Although Ukraine did not receive NATO membership, NATO-Ukraine cooperation deepened, with Ukraine receiving training and funding for new equipment. While in theory Minsk II had a provision for eventual return of occupied territory to Ukrainian government

control, in reality it froze the issue, leaving political grievances unresolved and giving both sides time to rearm.

Russia: A

A low-intensity stalemate similar to what followed the Minsk agreement would significantly reduce any chance of war escalating into a multinational world war. Notwithstanding the text of the settlement agreements, Russia and its proxies would de facto retain all occupied territory, with little pressure to ever return it. While Ukraine would become more aligned with NATO, the existence of disputed territory within Ukraine would create a significant hurdle for Ukraine ever joining the alliance and gaining Article 5 protections. Finally, in a low intensity conflict, the draft and economic burden on Russian society would be minimized, and after several years, countries might begin easing sanctions.

United States: C

A settlement similar to the Minsk II agreement and stalemate would greatly reduce the risk of World War III or nuclear weapons use. However, the deal (and Russia's refusal to withdraw occupying troops) would do nothing to uphold the norm against territorial conquest. Under the Minsk agreements, Ukraine remained sovereign, but its democracy continued to struggle, with free but corrupt elections, and the Ukrainian economy had barely recovered to 2013 levels after eight years, before collapsing following the next Russian invasion in 2022. While NATO helped build up Ukraine's army during the post Minsk II stalemate, empty threats by the West and continued waffling on Ukrainian membership did not strengthen the alliance's image.

China: B

A Minsk-style outcome would fulfill China's top two interests, avoiding a global war and nuclear escalation. In addition, a deal followed by stalemate would help preserve a Putin-led Russia. A pause would also reduce risks to global economic stability. However, the invasion of Donbas and stalemate led to some consolidation of the US-led security bloc, as the US and Europe grew more aligned against Russia, and significantly increased cooperation and training with Ukraine's military.

5. The Korean War (1950-1953)

Background

When the Japanese withdrew from Korea in 1945, the Soviet Union and United States established separate governments in the north and south, divided at the 38th parallel. The Soviets withdrew from the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) in December 1948 while the United States completed its exit from the Republic of Korea (ROK) in May 1949^{.74} In January 1950, US Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave a speech outlining "the situation in regard to the military security of the Pacific area." He declared that the United States would enforce a "defensive perimeter" that runs "along the Aleutians to Japan and then goes to the Ryukyus," notably leaving out the Korean Peninsula. The Soviet Union and United States and United States with the 38th parallel. The Soviets with the 38th parallel. Th

The Korean War had five distinct phases of intense combat followed by a long stalemate. The first phase (July to September 1950) was a rapid advance by DPRK forces, capitalizing on the absence of US troops, which pushed ROK control back to Pusan. The second phase (September to November 1950) was characterized by a massive counteroffensive with an amphibious landing at Incheon by UN forces commanded by the US. In October, offensive forces crossed the 38th parallel and took control of Pyongyang. The third phase (November 1950 to January 1951) was marked by China's entrance into the war and another rapid DPRK advance southward. In January 1951, Seoul and Incheon fell to China just three months after being captured in the UN offensive. The fourth phase (February to April 1951) was like the prior counteroffensive: UN forces pushed their way past the 38th parallel and into DPRK territory. In the last phase of intense combat (April to July 1951), China pushed UN forces back to the 38th parallel, where stalemate set in.

Joseph Stalin proposed negotiations shortly after the frontlines crystallized. Talks began in July 1951, but an agreement would not be reached until two years later, in July 1953. The remaining two years featured low-intensity combat as diplomats repeatedly met and broke off negotiations. Among the many obstacles was whether prisoners of war should be forcibly repatriated even if they preferred to stay in the nation in which they were being held prisoner.⁷⁶

No grand bargain moved the needle on negotiations. Instead, ending the Korean War depended on a change in leadership of both superpowers. In January 1953 Dwight D. Eisenhower became US President and promised the American people that he would conclude the Korean War using all resources at his disposal. The implied threat was possible nuclear use.⁷⁷ Two months later, Stalin died. Within days of his funeral, armistice talks had resumed. The leaders who filled the vacuum left by Stalin were unsure of how the newly elected President Eisenhower would react to the news. 78 The negotiations that began in April 1953 were more productive than earlier rounds. The DPRK relinquished its demand to forcibly repatriate their troops, and the ROK accepted the 38th parallel as a demarcation line. Each maintained its claim to the territory of the other, but they accepted that "a frozen conflict is better than either an outright defeat or an exhausting war of attrition." Peace has been maintained ever since, even as the two Korean nations have grown further apart. Despite similar levels of per capita GDP in the 1960s, the ROK surpassed the DPRK in the 1970s and its productivity is now 30 times higher.80

Relevance

The Korean War has been frequently cited as an analogue to the Russia-Ukraine War as it is one of the few major interstate wars that ceased major combat operations with neither a decisive military outcome nor a grand political bargain. The conflicts are similar in the significant level of external support for each side. Ukraine today, supported by the United States and NATO, mirrors the situation with the ROK, which was also backed by the United States. Similarly, China's support for Russia today resembles Soviet and Chinese support for the DPRK.

However, there are major differences in the level of involvement of each supporting faction. Ukraine is a democracy, albeit a flawed one, in contrast to the ROK's then-authoritarian system. Whereas the United States and China intervened directly in the conflict, there is no indication that the Russia-Ukraine war will draw in the United States, Europe, or China. This also shapes the feasibility of this endgame: because the US is unwilling to fight for Ukraine, indefinitely stationing troops in the country is unlikely. Another major difference is the role that nuclear weapons play in the conflict. In the Korean War, the US was a nuclear power and patron state with troops on the ground. In contrast, the DPRK did not receive major support from a nuclear power. Today, Russia possesses a nuclear monopoly

among belligerents. In addition, the primary actors, the DPRK and ROK, were more closely matched in size and resources than Russia and Ukraine are today.

Actors

If analogized to today's conflict, the ROK is the defending state (today's Ukraine), the DPRK as the original aggressor (today's Russia). The United States (today's United States), and China (today's China) each played similar supporting roles in both conflicts.

Grading

Ukraine: B

The outcome of the Korean War offers mixed results for securing Ukraine's national interests. It would ensure the continuation of Ukrainian sovereignty, but it would mean permanently ceding the territory that Russia currently occupies. However, like the ROK, Ukraine would likely maintain its claim to its lost territory in the hope of a future peaceful reunification. The ROK also signed a Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States, which included an Article V guarantee similar to what NATO would provide Ukraine. The security agreement would create long-term stability and enable Ukraine to grow into a prosperous nation like South Korea.

Russia: C

The Korean War offers superficially positive results for securing Russian national interests. In this scenario, Russia would likely retain all the territory it has already seized, including Crimea and Donbas. Freezing the conflict would also mitigate domestic pressures on Putin from a faltering economy and unpopular conscription. However, a Korea-style armistice would mean giving Ukraine a NATO-style defense pact, violating an extremely important Russian interest. In addition, the ROK saw enormous US military buildup, including the installation of nuclear missiles in 1958, only withdrawn in 1991.

United States: C

An analogous armistice in Ukraine would reduce the threat of escalation. In addition, with US presence promoting stability, it would set the stage for a prosperous and democratic Ukraine. Offering a NATO-like security guarantee would help strengthen US alliances. However, freezing the front lines and de facto ceding territory would not help uphold the norm against territorial conquest.

China: B

The Korean War case fulfills most of China's national interests. It preserves an enlarged, Putin-led Russia while likely stabilizing the global economy. In addition, an armistice decreases the risk of major escalation. However, it would significantly strengthen existing US alliances, and create a new commitment between Ukraine and the United States.



Finnish Continuation War (1941-1944)

Background

In August 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany divided Eastern Europe between the two, with the Soviet Union slated to receive Finland. After failed demands that Finland cede parts of its territory, the Soviet Union invaded, beginning the Winter War. Finland received little international assistance but managed to inflict heavy losses on the Soviet Army and prevent its advances until February 1940.⁸¹ Facing a renewed Soviet offensive, both sides signed the Moscow Peace Treaty. The treaty granted the Soviet Union 9% of Finland's territory and required a major resettlement of Finns living in Karelia, one of the disputed areas.⁸²

The Continuation War broke out between Finland and the Soviet Union in mid-1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Finland worked with Germany to plan part of the invasion, claiming to have attacked the Soviet Union only to regain its lost territory.⁸³ Finland rapidly retook the territory lost in the Winter War and advanced slightly further before establishing a defensive line. Between 1942 and 1944, front lines were relatively static, with Finland occupying land retaken from the Soviet Union.⁸⁴

Finland opened negotiations in 1943 after Germany's defeat at Stalingrad but withdrew after several months due to high Soviet demands.⁸⁵ The Soviet Union began an offensive in June 1944, breaking through the first two Finnish lines of defense before being stopped by anti-tank weaponry sent by Germany. Continued defense exhausted Finland's resources, and approximately 300,000 combatants were killed over three years.⁸⁶

In September 1944 with allied victory near, Finland, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom signed the Moscow Armistice under which Finland ceded slightly more territory to the Soviet Union than under the 1940 Moscow Peace Treaty. In addition, Finland had to pay \$300 million to the Soviet Union in reparations, legalize the communist party, try officials who were responsible for the war, and drive remaining German troops from Finnish territory.⁸⁷

In 1948, Finland and the Soviet Union signed the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, which declared a policy of Finnish neutrality and obligated Finland to resist any German attacks and accept Soviet military assistance if necessary. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union retained significant political influence in Finland. Most notable was the 1958 Night Frost Crisis, where the Soviet Union successfully pressured the Finnish government into resigning, delaying economic agreements and withdrawing its ambassador. Finland's democracy was constrained by Soviet influence and threats, with the authoritarian-leaning Urho Kekkonen remaining in power for over 30 years. Finland's deferential political system towards Soviet interests and persistent neutrality in the face of the threat of another invasion is known as Finlandization and remains controversial.

Over the long run, Finland has flourished, despite never regaining the territory ceded to the Soviet Union in the armistice. Notwithstanding a turn towards authoritarianism in the 1970s, Finland is currently one of the world's top-ranked democracies, and after a slow post-war recovery, its GDP per capita is now ten times higher than in 1950.⁹¹ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland joined the European Union in 1995 and in 2023 joined NATO.⁹²

Relevance

Both Finland and present-day Ukraine are weaker actors invaded across a border shared with the larger power. In addition, both states have a relatively large territory that helped them defend and inflict costs on their invader. Both conflicts originally began with aggressive territorial demands by the larger power. The Soviet Union ultimately seized about 10% of Finland, and Russia currently controls approximately 17% of Ukraine.⁹³

However, Finland's position reflected several key differences. One was that the Soviet Union was distracted and weakened by the larger struggle against Nazi Germany. With resources stretched thin, the USSR was more willing to accept a compromise with Finland. Today, Russia's military resources are almost exclusively concentrated on Ukraine, with 97% of its land forces devoted to the fight. In Ukraine, Putin often makes cultural and imperialist arguments for a claim to territory. While Finland was briefly part of the Russian Empire, it is a non-Slavic country and the Soviet Union justified the invasion on security grounds. And

Finland, unlike Ukraine, pushed the conventional war on to Russian territory while Russia fought on multiple fronts, helping lay siege to Leningrad. Finally, although it received some foreign aid and collaboration from Germany, Finland largely lacked strong allies.

Actors

If mapping the actors onto today's conflict, Finland (today's Ukraine) was the smaller country whose territory was seized in the conflict. The Soviet Union (today's Russia) was the more powerful actor and occupied foreign territory at the time of peace negotiations. The US (today's US), while not as clearly an ally of Finland as it is of Ukraine today, had a similar interest in helping Finland maintain its independence. Meanwhile, China (today's China) was an ally of the Soviet Union, the dominant power.

Grading

Ukraine: C

An outcome like Finland's outcome after the Continuation War would harm key Ukrainian interests, particularly in the short run, but also offer long-term opportunity. The Continuation War peace greatly reduced the risk of escalation by ending active hostilities. However, Finland ceded 10% of its territory to the Soviet Union, which Finland has still not regained even 80 years later. Under a similar deal, Ukraine would preserve its sovereignty, but with significant short-term constraints. Ukrainian foreign and domestic policy would be beholden to Russian interests, possibly to the extent of overturning democratic choices. The threat of invasion and loss of sovereignty would likely loom for several decades, but Finland ultimately preserved and cemented its sovereignty. Although Finland remained neutral during the Cold War, in the long run it aligned strongly with the West, joining the EU in 1995 and NATO in 2023, offering hope for Ukraine's long-term democracy and foreign policy self-determination under a similar outcome.

Russia: B

A similar outcome would secure all of Russia's interests in the short term, with some long-term losses. The outcome would end the conflict and reduce the risk of escalation, while permanently and legally transferring occupied territory to Russia. In the short and medium term, Ukraine would be unable to join NATO. In addition, Ukraine would be forced to adopt a performatively neutral foreign policy and tailor Ukrainian policy to Russian security concerns. However, Finland was ultimately able to break out of neutrality to align with the West, and a similar settlement might allow Ukraine a similar outcome longer term. Although reparations like those that required Finland to subsidize the USSR's economic recovery are highly unlikely in Ukraine today, any armistice would reduce Russia's political and economic strain just as the peace in Finland ended the burden of war on the Soviet Union.

United States: B

A similar armistice would fulfill the United States' top two goals: reducing the risk of expanded war or nuclear use. However, legally transferring territory gained in war would weaken the norm against territorial conquest. Additionally, under a deal similar to Finland's, Ukrainian sovereignty and prosperity would be weakened in the short and medium term, as would the prospects for a strong alliance. Nonetheless, Ukraine would have the opportunity to slowly rebuild its economy and sovereignty in peacetime. Finally, while Western allies and NATO would not intervene to help Ukraine if it were threatened further, they would likely have consolidated to defend each other against the Russian threat.

China: A

As discussed above, ending the war helps resolve China's chief concern—escalation. In addition, with the war over and a satisfactory result for Russia, risk to Putin's regime would dissipate. The main drawback of an outcome like the Continuation War is that it would lead to a consolidation of the US-led bloc against the Russian threat, albeit with Ukraine excluded. Finally, ending the war and clearly delineating territorial control would help stabilize the global economy.

7. Cambodia-Vietnam War (1977-1991)

Background

During the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh's Viet Cong and Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in Cambodia aligned to defeat US forces in the region. The communist regimes shared an interest in removing Western occupiers from Southeast Asia, making them natural allies. However, almost immediately following the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975 and withdrawal of US forces from the region, the partnership disintegrated. Fearful that the more powerful Vietnam had expansionist aims that entailed the consolidation of smaller Southeast Asian states into a confederation subservient to Vietnam's government, the Khmer Rouge adopted a more hostile attitude towards their neighbors, engaging in periodic skirmishes with Vietnamese forces along the Vietnam-Cambodia border from 1975 to 1977. 98

After the Khmer Rouge launched a more substantial attack on Vietnamese forces in April 1977, Vietnam retaliated with force. When Chinese attempts to mediate peace talks between the two sides failed, in December 1978 Vietnam ordered an invasion of Cambodia to remove the Khmer Rouge from power.⁹⁹ The invasion itself was surprisingly successful, with 150,000 Vietnamese troops overwhelming the Khmer Rouge and toppling the regime in just two weeks. China, which had a strong relationship with the Khmer Rouge and had been supplying its forces with aid and armaments for years, retaliated against Vietnam by invading Vietnam in an ill-advised campaign that failed within a month. 100 What ensued was a decade-long Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia between 1979 and 1989. While Vietnam established a puppet regime in Phnom Penh, Cambodian resistance forces formed a coalition government-in-exile. This coalition, which included both communist and non-communist forces, was recognized by the United Nations as the legitimate government of Cambodia. 101 However, it had little power to influence the situation on the ground while Vietnamese troops continued to occupy Cambodia. By 1989, a US-led boycott of Vietnam-occupied Cambodia led to the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops. 102 Peace talks were soon hosted by China between Cambodia's government-in-exile, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union. While the parties did not agree to formal peace terms, they were close enough

to a resolution that Vietnam agreed to withdraw its troops anyway—a move that facilitated the ultimate resolution to the conflict, reached in 1991 through the Paris Peace Agreements.

The framework, signed by both the Vietnam-backed regime in Cambodia and Cambodia's government-in-exile, received widespread international support. China, Vietnam, France, the Soviet Union, the United States were all signatories. The agreement had two key elements. First, the parties agreed to establish a United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) overseen by 22,000 civilian and military personnel from 43 countries over 1.5 years. UNTAC was responsible for supervising a ceasefire between the combatant parties, disarming and demobilizing all Cambodian armed forces, supervising a nationwide election in 1993, and overseeing civil administration and policing in Cambodia until 1994. The Paris Peace Agreements also stipulated that Cambodia would commit to permanent neutrality in its 1993 constitution—a key issue for both Vietnam and China, each concerned about Cambodian alignment with the other. 103

The Paris Peace Agreements were largely successful. While Cambodia has endured numerous bouts of domestic political turmoil in the decades since UNTAC withdrew from the country in 1993, the Vietnam-Cambodia relationship has remained conflict-free.

Relevance

The Cambodia-Vietnam War has both significant structural similarities and differences with the current conflict in Ukraine. Both conflicts feature a dominant regional power invading a smaller neighbor over concerns that the latter was actively hostile and increasingly aligned with a rival power. However, while the Russia-Ukraine War was initiated solely by the dominant regional power (Russia), in the Cambodia-Vietnam War, it was the smaller power (Cambodia) that attacked the dominant regional power, prompting the latter to launch a full-scale invasion. Moreover, while in the current conflict, China is nominally aligned with the dominant regional power (Russia), neither China nor the US supported Vietnam in its invasion of Cambodia. In fact, both China and the US supported Cambodia in various forms during the conflict, an alignment with no analogue to the current war. In addition, the preexisting government in Cambodia was replaced by a government-in-exile, likely contributing to the need for a transition

period. Finally, unlike the current conflict, which has resulted in extended military engagement between the two sides over several years, the Cambodia-Vietnam War transitioned from hot war to a prolonged occupation within a few weeks. While Cambodian resistance forces persisted throughout Vietnam's occupation, no major military engagements between the two sides occurred after Vietnam's successful initial invasion.

Actors

The four key actors in the Cambodia-Vietnam conflict are Cambodia, Vietnam, the United States, and China. If analogized to today's conflict, the less powerful, occupied state was Cambodia (today's Ukraine). Vietnam (today's Russia) invaded and occupied its neighbor. The United States and China have largely equivalent roles in each conflict, but as noted, largely supported the same side (Cambodia).

Grading

Ukraine: B

An analogous outcome to the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements would protect Ukraine's two most vital interests: preserving a sovereign government and avoiding military escalation, although it would have to accept the bitter medicine of a 1.5-year transition period under the supervision of the United Nations. While permanent neutrality would prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, it would not preclude Ukrainian alignment with other non-military Western blocs, including the European Union. Moreover, an analogous agreement would see Ukraine regain control of all occupied territory. While the Paris Peace Agreements did not result in any long-term security guarantees for Cambodia, the agreement was backed by a large number of powerful states and successful in the long-run and Vietnam did not again pursue conflict with Cambodia.

Russia: C

A resolution similar to the Paris Peace Agreements would satisfy Russia's most vital interest—avoiding dramatic military escalation—but would result in Russia withdrawing from all territory it had occupied, including Crimea. However, an analogous outcome in the current conflict would prevent Ukrainian NATO

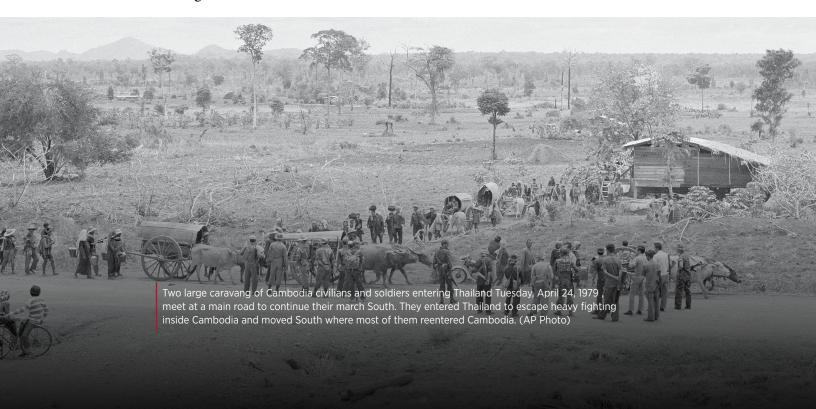
membership and would ensure Ukraine's permanent neutrality, which was a key stated objective of Russia. This resolution would also ease the strain on Russia's economy, since withdrawal from Ukrainian territory would eliminate the need for heightened mobilization associated with occupation and reduce Russia's economic isolation as sanctions are lifted.

United States: A

The Cambodia-Vietnam endgame would satisfy all of America's most important interests: avoiding dramatic military escalation, upholding norms against territorial conquest, and establishing a "sovereign, democratic, and prosperous" Ukraine. It is possible that an analogous resolution would strengthen US alliances through the sustained, multilateral involvement of numerous allies to end the conflict and supervise Ukraine's reintegration, rebuilding, and reforms in line with the deal.

China: B

A similar result would satisfy China's most vital interest: avoiding dramatic military escalation. It would also be unlikely to threaten either Putin's hold on power or undermine Russia's alignment with China. Secondary Chinese interests—avoiding the expansion of the US-led bloc to Ukraine and stabilizing the global economy—would be largely satisfied in an analogous outcome to the Paris Peace Agreements.



8. World War II: Western Front (1939-1945)

Background

The roots of World War II are found in the peace agreement that concluded World War I. The Treaty of Versailles imposed harsh penalties on Germany, including large financial reparations and the forfeiture of territory on its eastern and western flanks. These penalties exacerbated Germany's disastrous economic situation, which in turn catapulted the Nazi Party to national prominence. Some territory of the German Empire was ceded to Poland, which had been reconstituted in the wake of World War I to maintain a balance of power in Eastern Europe and provide a buffer between the Soviet Union and Germany. Its existence was written into the Treaty of Versailles, and the United Kingdom and France ensured its defense. Adolf Hitler argued that the Treaty of Versailles unfairly divided the German people and thus made the case for shifting the borders of his state to unite them.

The Munich Agreement of September 1938 saw the United Kingdom and France let Germany annex the Sudetenland, a border region of Czechoslovakia, provided that Germany did not expand further. Despite their assurances, the Nazis invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, and continued advancing. France declared war on Germany in September 1939 after Hitler ordered the invasion of Poland, although major combat didn't start until May 1940, when Germany launched its invasion of France. Capitalizing on advances in military technology, the German military used blitzkrieg tactics to punch through the Low Countries and Ardennes Forest, a large portion of the French border unprotected save for the natural terrain. France surrendered the next month. Hitler installed a collaborationist government in France and turned his attention eastward. Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi invasion of Russia, tied down immense resources and remains the largest land offensive in history. 106 But a turning point came after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor caused the United States to join the war in December 1941, after which the United States sent masses of fresh troops to Europe.

In January 1943, after initial successes in the Pacific and North Africa, US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill met in Casablanca. The pair agreed on two important points: they would accept nothing less than "unconditional surrender" from the Axis nations, and they would probe potential weak points in the Axis defense of Europe, starting with the Allied invasion of Italy.¹⁰⁷

By January 1944, the Allies were advancing on Germany from the east and south. Operation Overlord, an amphibious invasion of Northern France, commenced in June 1944 and added another vector of advance against Germany. Two months later, France was liberated, and by 1945, the outcome of the war was a foregone conclusion. Hitler descended into his bunker in January and committed suicide in April. The Soviet Union captured Berlin in May. Pursuant to the 1943 declaration at Casablanca and with the failure of the Versailles Treaty in mind, there were no negotiations. Germany declared its unconditional surrender on May 8. The Allied nations dissolved the German government and each assumed control of a portion of the country.

Relevance

The structural similarities between France in World War II and Ukraine today are apparent. Both were invaded by their stronger neighbor who laid claim to contested territory that had changed hands several times in the prior decades. However, even the most maximalist proposals for intervening in Ukraine do not go so far as to call for Russia's "unconditional surrender." To effectuate such a policy would almost certainly require US boots on the ground, as it did in France in 1944. And unlike Hitler when Allied forces were closing in on Berlin, Putin has the option to go nuclear.

Assigning the role of Nazi Germany to Russia today is also problematic, not merely because of the differences in political and social philosophy. Russia is not directly fighting other great powers and does not confront a military peer akin to the allied powers. The all-encompassing nature of total, global war required Germany to constantly manage tradeoffs in manpower and resources across multiple theaters of war. In contrast, the relatively localized nature of the Russia-Ukraine War has allowed Russia to focus its military capabilities.

Actors

If analogized to today's conflict, the occupied state is France (today's Ukraine), Nazi Germany as the invader (today's Russia), the United States (today's United States), and Nazi Germany's Axis allies (today's China).

Grading

Ukraine: A

France's experience in World War II represents Ukraine's ideal outcome. Instead of begging Western governments for resources to survive, NATO forces would join the fight alongside Ukraine. With these capabilities, Ukraine would likely reclaim territory occupied before 2022 and become integrated in the postwar allied security architecture as a full and equal partner. Russia would be defeated, Putin out of power, and the country unwilling or unable to attack again in the future.

Russia: F

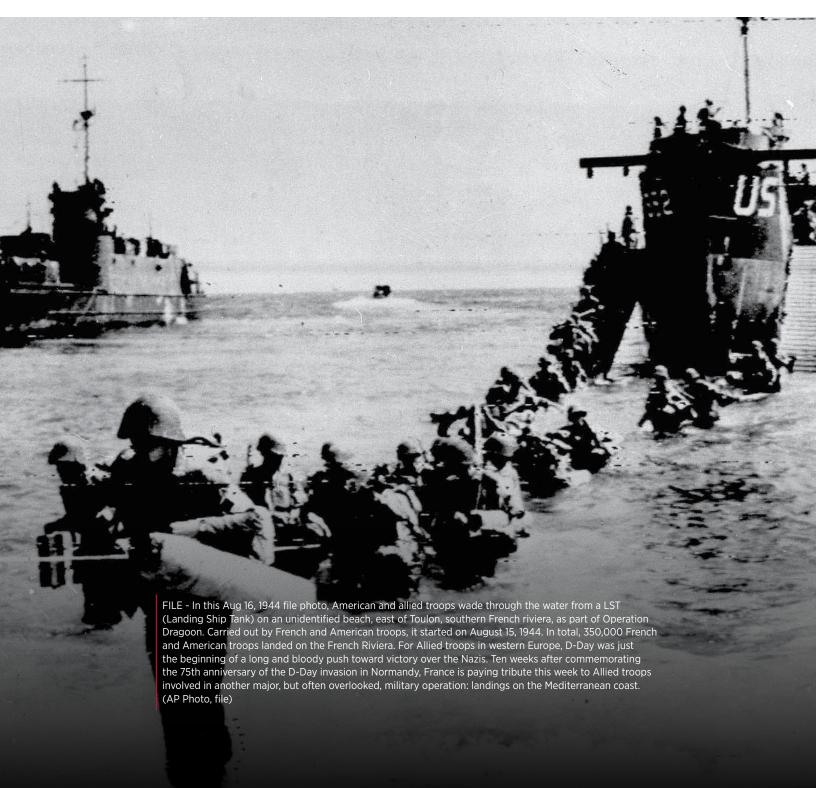
Nazi Germany's experience in World War II represents Russia's worst-case scenario: humiliating defeat, long-term occupation, the total dissolution of the Russian regime, and its perceived integration as a vassal of the West. This case not only fails to secure any of Russia's national interests but also likely falls outside of the realm of possibility: if NATO forces entered the Russia-Ukraine War with the goal of Putin's "unconditional surrender," nuclear war would be almost unavoidable.

United States: A

A World War II-type peace deal in Ukraine would be an ideal outcome for the United States. An analogous outcome would eliminate the risk of escalation, replacing the relevant hostile government with one occupied by the United States and its allies (though occupying Russia would present its own challenges). In addition, US alliances and the norm against territorial conquest would be greatly strengthened. Finally, Ukraine would be well set up for a future of prosperity and democracy.

China: D

Russia's total defeat and occupation by NATO is an almost catastrophic outcome for China. A similar post-war settlement would remove the risk of escalation and stabilize the global economy. However, China's key ally would be completely destroyed and replaced with a US-occupied state. Replicating Germany's experience in World War II would also mean further expansion of the Americanled bloc into Russia and along China's northern border.



Conclusion

Our eight case studies of possible endgames in the Russia-Ukraine War range from its outright defeat to negotiated settlements, with similarly varied consequences for the other principal actors. These cases offer six major takeaways for American policymakers and their Ukrainian partners on how to negotiate peace—and how to keep it. Some lessons are warnings, drawn from previous cases that, if not heeded, can cause peace to fail or never be negotiated to start with. Others are recommendations, "clues to peace" from historical precedents where policymakers succeeded in squaring competing interests in the settlement process, securing a favorable ending that lasted. After outlining these takeaways, we examine them through the lens of our case studies before drawing recommendations for current circumstances from each.

1 Be wary of unanticipated peace spoilers

Remember any deal will be shaped by external factors outside the control of any actor.

Negotiations are unlikely to start until after the 2024 US election.

2 In a proxy conflict, resolve beats resources

Western aid should aim to position Ukraine for negotiations, not out-last Russia or force Russian capitulation.

Don't bank on Russian battlefield collapse or regime change.

3 Complete territorial integrity is not a precondition for prosperity

Ukraine should shift from offensives to defending the territory it currently holds, especially its access to the Black Sea. Ukraine should begin rebuilding major economic centers.

Ukraine should not make reclaiming currently occupied territory a precondition in negotiations.

4 Carpe diem: Seize the first opening for peace that secures vital interests

Ukraine should accept a peace offer if it gives Ukraine the chance of being sovereign, free, and able to prosper.

Ukraine should capitalize on major battlefield changes to negotiate, not continually hold out for a better position.

5 Patrons should not only empower belligerents to wage war, but to pursue peace

Both the US and China should privately condition future support on participation in negotiations and decline to support major new offensives.

The US should not support escalatory measures by Ukraine, such as strikes inside Russia, or a major assault on Crimea

6 Agreements must lock in the post-war status quo, making future aggression unacceptably costly

Western states should provide Ukraine long-term military aid, at a lower "peacetime" level, with security guarantees for continued aid and automatic stabilizers if attacked.

Ukraine should receive reconstruction assistance, as well as eventual EU accession. Russian sanctions on finance and technology should be reduced but with a snapback mechanism. Ukraine should be recognized as a militarily neutral state, with NATO membership deferred.

#1: Be wary of unanticipated peace spoilers

- Remember any deal will be shaped by external factors outside the control of any actor.
- Negotiations are unlikely to start until after the 2024 US election.

Events outside the control of either side can quash peace, even if the parties were otherwise ready to negotiate. A sudden, unexpected shift on the battlefield can cause one party to walk away, concluding that it can position itself even more favorably for negotiations with additional battlefield gains. Even without battlefield changes, the progression of time can spoil negotiations. One side may, for instance,

see an upcoming election as an opportunity to hold out for a better deal. And even if both primary actors are ready for peace, their great-power patrons may disagree, encouraging the fighting to continue for their own reasons.

The Korean War vividly demonstrates the impact of unpredictable swings on willingness to negotiate. While the battlefield had settled into a stalemate by late 1951, peace took two additional years to negotiate despite no battlefield progress. Due to previous shifts in momentum, all parties held out hope that good fortunes would return. Realistic assessments of the state of play on the battlefield, then, became a lagging indicator, with both sides clinging to hope that another offensive could break the deadlock. By 1952, it was also election season, and Truman's lame duck presidency was a drag on peace negotiations. The 1952 race also featured two starkly different candidates, Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson, and the North likely wanted to wait to see who it would be working with before pushing for peace. Finally, even when North Korea and China were ready to wind down the war, Stalin ran interference, repeatedly rebuffing attempts to negotiate settlements until his death.

Today's war appears to have many similar features: two sides that can each plausibly point to past momentum (Ukraine in its Fall 2022 offensives; Russia in 2024 thus far), an upcoming US election that could sharply shift American policy towards the war, and reluctance on the part of great-power patrons to push for peace. But the Korean War also serves as a reminder that luck can sometimes swing in the opposite direction. Stalin's unexpected death in early 1953 prompted peace talks to resume within weeks, as the new Soviet leadership was far more willing to wind down the war. While something unexpected could prove decisive in the Russia-Ukraine War, such as the death of a leader or regime change, the looming external event in this case is the 2024 US presidential election. Both sides, regardless of the current battlefield conditions, will be looking ahead to November's election.

Unexpected changes, immutable structural constraints, and simple bad luck are a reality of conflict. Otto von Bismarck was right to claim that "the statesman's task is to hear God's footsteps marching through history, and to try and catch on to His coattails as He marches past," and actors play the hand they're dealt. Yet this does not mean actors forfeit their agency or lose all room to maneuver. The art of statecraft is securing the best outcome within those constraints. ¹⁰⁹ Ukraine will

hold out hope for a Biden victory and continued aid but hedge its bets and try to secure a deal before his possible departure. Russia, on the other hand, faces the prospect of a Republican presidency that promises to "end the war in one day" and give free license to Putin. Moscow will therefore seek a "Trump put" and delay negotiations and freeze or advance positions until November. 110

Recommendations: All players in the present war will be well served to remember that whether a deal is reached—and what it looks like—will be invariably shaped not just by negotiations, but "X-factors" outside of their control. Of the myriad possibilities, the most foreseeable disruptor is the 2024 US election, with Russia holding out on negotiations for the chance of Trump winning and rushing to make a deal. In the face of Russian intransigence, this will likely delay negotiations this year, perhaps deferring them entirely until after the US election.

#2: In a proxy conflict, resolve beats resources

- Western aid should aim to position Ukraine for negotiations, not out-last Russia or force Russian capitulation.
- Don't bank on Russian battlefield collapse or regime change.

When predicting how a conflict will end, there is an understandable temptation to measure the amount of military and economic power on each side to forecast the result. Yet history is riddled with cases where the party that was weaker on paper punched above its weight. Recall Napoleon's exhortation that "in war, the moral is to the physical as three to one" and Clausewitz's reminder that in fighting, a "trial of moral and physical forces," the presence of "psychological forces exert a decisive influence on the elements involved in war." The balance of resources is less decisive than the balance of resolve, and a powerful enemy can often be waited out or outlasted.

This dynamic is often manifest in a proxy conflict, when a strong backer can lead to the illusion of overmatch. Yet even the combination of a powerful patron and dedicated recipient state can fail if the patron's interest flags. Too often, the supporting state falls prey to illusions of a quick success on the basis of superior strength, believing that it is one tranche of assistance or battlefield success away

from complete victory. This dynamic, known as the fallacy of the last move, assumes a flat-footed opponent that won't adjust. It views aid as something that will swing a static balance of power without contemplating a reaction by the other side. Yet the other side, if devoted, will find a way to compensate for a comparative disadvantage in resources and materiel. In any conflict pitting two countries with great-power backers against one another, one side's additional assistance will often be matched by the other's escalating support, effectively canceling out any advantage. If a party is deeply invested in the outcome, it will not remain static in the face of a new advantage for its adversary but instead seek every means to counter it.

The Vietnam War demonstrates the perils of misplaced confidence in the ability of additional resources to swing battlefield outcomes. Major US escalations, such as the draft or the authorization of massive bombing campaigns, were met with optimism that the additional measures would be decisive. The United States banked on weakened North Vietnamese resolve in the face of an overwhelmingly powerful adversary. The North did not capitulate but doubled down as the Soviet Union and China boosted their support to counter growing US involvement. Ho Chi Minh and his partners bet, correctly, that even if the US had the capabilities to go all-out and defeat North Vietnam, the United States was deterred from striking certain targets by the risk of escalation with Russia and China, unwilling to throw troops into a multi-decade quagmire in the face of popular opposition at home. In Vietnam, the US was willing to escalate, but only to a point. The Communists knew they had far greater resolve and could outlast the Americans. The South Vietnamese could only survive with American backing which eventually faded. Contrast Vietnam with World War II, where absolute victory was achieved, but only with absolute commitment, with the US willing to place its entire economy on a war footing and lose 450,000 troops to defeat the Axis powers. This was proof of what Barbara Tuchman called the "law of vital interest," or that a weaker state, with more resolve, could defeat a stronger one—and that "on the basis of the law of vital interest, it was predictable that the United States would ultimately back down in Vietnam and the North prevail."112

Ukraine's stakes in the conflict are undeniably the highest, as the country is fighting for its existence. But Ukraine could not successfully sustain the war without support from its backers in the West, who are less invested in the war than Russia, which views the conflict in existential terms. There is no doubt as to

which side is backed by greater latent military and industrial capacity: NATO and the collective West, with a GDP twenty times larger than Russia. But the West has been far less willing to convert potential might into actual power. Russia has put its economy on a wartime footing, committing 40% of its budget towards the war and throwing a generation into a brutal fight that produced half a million casualties by 2024. 113 In contrast, some in the West have started to go wobbly, with the United States struggling to muster the will to continue sending less than 0.5% of GDP to Ukraine. 114 While Ukraine's backers are correct to insist on continued aid to prevent Ukrainian collapse, they should harbor no illusions that more support will be the final word. Throughout the war, analysts have predicted a Russian economic meltdown due to sanctions, threats to Putin's power, or a complete battlefield collapse. 115 But Russia undoubtedly has additional levers to pull in the face of new resources that threaten to shift the war in an unfavorable direction. While the West has avoided crossing Russian red lines, Russia has also avoided taking measures that would risk rapid escalation of the conflict, such as targeting Ukraine aid while it transits NATO territory or even limited nuclear use. Backed into a corner, Russia could fight with less restraint. It could also push North Korea, Iran, and China for greater material support to compensate for additional Western resources. If Russia's history is any guide, conflicts premised on attrition, out-lasting, and out-suffering play to its strength, even when it squares off against a larger and stronger opponent.

Recommendations: While Ukraine is fighting for its survival, the resolve of the collective West is an open question. Ukraine cannot wage a successful campaign against Russia without external support. The resources of the West exceed that of Russia, but the West lacks comparable resolve. Russia, as the only unitary actor with both considerable strength and resolve, will not go quietly. Ukraine and its backers should not bet on a miraculous Russian collapse. Nor should they treat aid as decisive in and of itself, but as a means to position Ukraine favorably for peace negotiations and, ultimately, secure a prosperous, democratic, and secure Ukraine for the long term. Western aid should therefore be continued primarily as a device for convincing Russia that it cannot achieve its objectives through force alone and, sooner or later, will need to negotiate to end the war.

#3: Complete territorial integrity is not a precondition for prosperity

- Ukraine should shift from offensives to defending the territory it currently holds, especially its access to the Black Sea. Ukraine should begin rebuilding major economic centers.
- Ukraine should not make reclaiming currently occupied territory a precondition in negotiations.

It is understandable that countries maintain absolutist territorial aims, particularly in a defensive war. No leader wants to countenance surrendering land or consigning its people to live in occupied territories. Great powers who have invested significant resources and credibility in the war are often similarly reluctant to be seen as having "compromised" or even "lost." But not all interests are created equally. Some are existential while others are highly desirable but not essential to the survival of a nation. In many cases, full territorial integrity falls into the latter category.

Consider the Korean War. South Korea controls only about half of the land it claims and is just a 2.5-mile demilitarized zone away from a nuclear-armed, hostile neighbor with whom it technically remains at war. South Korea nonetheless has blossomed into a modern, prosperous democracy in the 70 years since the armistice. Finland, which was forcibly divested of 10% of its territory following the Continuation War, also never regained all its territory. Following the Moscow Peace Treaty, the Finns laid down their arms and rebuilt with what they had. Finnish GDP per capita has grown by 10 times since the war ended, and Finland is among the wealthiest, most democratic states in the world.

Ukraine, like Finland before it under the leadership of Carl Mannerheim, may face its own Mannerheim moment, where it gives up on gaining back occupied territory. But this need not mean Ukrainians resigning themselves to a divided and broken country. The fate of Ukraine in the 21st century will depend on many factors, including its ability to finance reconstruction, the return of its refugees, and its territorial control over major industrial centers. Whether Ukraine regains its full territory or where the exact line of control in the Donbas is drawn will not determine Ukraine's future. Ukraine, with international support, can rebuild a prosperous economy, provided it preserves major industrial centers

and maintains access to the Black Sea. Indeed, even while fighting is ongoing, Ukraine has resumed Black Sea shipping at near pre-war levels, a remarkable accomplishment. While Ukraine successfully went on the offensive in fall 2022, making further gains will be a challenge due to stronger Russian defensive lines in the remaining areas, the defense-dominant nature of the war thus far, and the stark reality that the high points of Western support may be behind them. Despite its territorial losses, Ukraine still holds the bulk of its key urban areas and economic resources while retaining essential Black Sea access; attempting to retake every inch will exhaust not just Ukrainian resources, but Western aid and goodwill. The strong presumption should be that the time for regaining territory has ended. Today's moment instead calls for holding and rebuilding.

Recommendations: Ukraine, controlling major industrial centers and access to the Black Sea, possesses the fundamental ingredients for future success and prosperity. Ukraine should therefore focus on cementing control of the areas it currently holds and direct its energy towards rebuilding. This does not require renouncing claims on territory seized by Russia, nor does it mean Ukraine must abandon an eventual objective of getting back its land. But Ukrainian leaders must recognize that "eventually" may not be today. Ukraine should not make reacquisition of remaining territory (including Crimea) an unconditional demand, nor foreclose negotiations that involve surrendering some territory in exchange for a lasting peace.

#4: Carpe diem: Seize the first opening for peace that secures vital interests

- Ukraine should accept a peace offer if it gives Ukraine the chance of being sovereign, free, and able to prosper.
- Ukraine should capitalize on major battlefield changes to negotiate, not continually hold out for a better position.

Belligerents should seize the first opening to reach a peace settlement that secures vital interests, even if imperfect, because that opportunity may not last forever. The tragic paradox of conflict is that wartime leaders suffer simultaneously from excess pessimism and optimism: overly pessimistic about the unrelenting dangers posed by their adversary and therefore aiming to achieve clear victory; exceedingly

optimistic about their own battlefield prospects and the ease of achieving these maximalist objectives. Governments can come to believe their own sanguine public messaging, underestimating the difficulties and unpredictability of war. Sometimes, they allow their views of battlefield prospects to be shaped by the desire to return to their best moments of success in the war, with their assessments lagging reality. When an opportunity for peace arrives, these biases quickly manifest: an imperfect offer is viewed as far too accommodating to a hostile adversary, while a better offer always appears to be just around the corner with greater success.

However, actors cannot see all their opportunities laid out on the table and pick the best one. Underestimating today's negotiating opportunity and overestimating tomorrow's chances, they tragically pass up good opportunities. In Korea, one of the major obstacles to negotiations was the frequent swing in momentum. Despite a relatively stable line of control, all parties remembered a time when they seemed close to achieving all objectives. Negotiations also featured numerous unforeseeable barriers, from an intransigent Stalin to a protracted dispute over the status and repatriation of POWs. 120 When an opportunity did arise, following the death of Stalin, all sides wisely leapt on it, with a deal just months later.

Similarly, Ukraine refused negotiations after its major battlefield successes in spring and fall 2022, premised on the hopes that further gains would put it in an even better negotiating position. Figures within the US government, like Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, began to float trial balloons for negotiations. In fall 2022, Ukraine likely could have secured a pause or even permanent freeze along the line of control, but chose to press forward. In retrospect, this was a mistake: a year after those windows of opportunities closed, Ukraine's position has deteriorated significantly. Now, with a US election coming up and momentum having swung back to Russia, the prospects for a deal have narrowed. While critics will counter that pursuing negotiations under current circumstances requires sacrificing Ukrainian interests, that is the essence of compromise. Ukraine, facing neither total defeat nor absolute threats to its existence, will need to give in to some demands—as will Russia.

Recommendations: Ukraine missed an opportunity for a better deal than would likely be attained today, including not just a permanent freeze but also possibly liberating newly occupied territory. If a similar opportunity arises, Ukraine should

seize it, negotiating even an imperfect peace, lest its prospects worsen further. Both sides must be willing to compromise on some demands. Ukraine should shift its objectives to focus primarily on securing its vital interests: maintaining its sovereignty and ability to prosper. Ukraine will need to be open to giving up other interests, such as complete territorial integrity, accountability for war crimes, or reparations. In contrast, maintaining its sovereignty will invariably remain Ukraine's bottom line, with the ability to self-govern and avoid becoming a Russian puppet state. Russia, for its part, will likely need to drop demands that Ukraine officially recognize occupied territories, demilitarize, and change leadership.

#5: Patrons should not only empower belligerents to wage war, but to pursue peace

- Both the US and China should privately condition future support on participation in negotiations and decline to support major new offensives
- The US should not support escalatory measures by Ukraine, such as strikes inside Russia, or a major assault on Crimea.

Great-power partners possess considerable influence and should use this influence to push for negotiations whenever an opportunity for a deal arises. Although direct belligerents have the greatest stakes, patron states have their own interests in the dispute and clear preferences as to whether the war staggers on or is brought to a close. Patrons should therefore not just empower belligerents to wage war, but also push them to pursue peace.

In some cases, a great-power patron who is eager for fighting to continue can throw sand in the gears of the peace-making process. Stalin desperately sought to keep the United States tied down in the Korean War and resisted Korean or Chinese peace efforts until his death. Conversely, in the first Indochina War, a key driver for the peace process was pressure from China on Ho Chi Minh to end the war, despite Ho wanting to continue fighting. Another relevant case is that of the Cambodia-Vietnam War. Having disastrously failed in its earlier military intervention, China pushed the belligerents to initiate peace talks in an attempt to mediate and end the war, alongside the Soviet Union. The United States similarly boycotted Vietnam to pressure it to withdraw from occupied

territories in Cambodia. 126 The result was all parties acceding to the Paris Peace Agreements of 1991, ending the decades-long war. The agreement also underscored the influence and interests of larger powers, with Cambodia agreeing to non-alignment and neutrality, a key demand of China.

In today's conflict, support from the United States and China has been constrained by their distinct and sometimes conflicting interests. In the first year of the war, when the risk of nuclear use was more acute, the United States held back on delivering certain weapons to Ukraine and pressured Kyiv to forego strikes inside Russia with Western weaponry, despite this undoubtedly undermining Ukraine's campaign. Similarly, China made clear to Putin that his nuclear threats were unwelcome, publicly (and perhaps privately) pushing him away from escalatory options. China also has repeatedly declined to offer lethal military aid to Russia. 127

If it furthers their interests, for example reducing meaningful escalation risk, both the United States and China should push their allies to be willing to negotiate seriously and find a compromise. Two years into the conflict, neither country has interest in a forever war that promises only distraction, economic disruption, and repeated rolls of the nuclear dice. The US population has grown weary of giving billions of dollars in aid to Ukraine. 128 Meanwhile, China confronts an unexpectedly weak economy hampered in no small part by US trade and technological restrictions. 129 It seeks to grow closer with Europe to drive a wedge into the Western alliance—an effort undermined by the perception of China as enabling the Russian war effort. While US and Ukrainian (as well as Chinese and Russian) interests have aligned for much of the war, the interests of the patron states have started to diverge from those of the belligerents, with both Russia and Ukraine wanting to keep fighting to improve their positions and their backers wanting a respite. A breaking point may be reached where the United States and China directly push the parties to negotiate in the event of a change in US leadership, a major military escalation, or economic disruptions. If they choose to use it, diplomatic support, economic aid, and, in the United States' case, military support provide leverage for patron states to induce a wind-down of the war. Neither should impose peace over the head of its belligerent partner, not least because this would appear an act of desperation that would undermine any negotiating leverage. But candid, private conversations between partners about the interests and viability of continued fighting are not abandonment. There is ample room for patrons to maneuver between the two extremes of a unilaterally imposed

peace and unconditional support. This is the space in which the United States and China should operate.

Recommendations: The United States and China should begin pushing Ukraine and Russia to negotiate peace. Both patrons should also consider using leverage to steer the direction of the conflict, whether by conditioning certain forms of assistance on diplomatic openings, declining to offer aid that would unnecessarily escalate the conflict or, in the extreme case, reducing support if interests diverge too far. Both patrons should decline to support offensive operations that would prolong the war, such as a major Russian campaign to push west or a Ukraine offensive to liberate Crimea. While the US should be open to the possibility of an unforeseen military opening—and allow Ukraine to capitalize—such an opportunity remains unlikely. Instead, both the United States and Ukraine should operate as though there will not be another breakthrough, and efforts should be geared towards holding defensive lines, not launching new offensives.

#6: Agreements must lock in the post-war status quo, making future aggression unacceptably costly

- Western states should provide Ukraine long-term military aid, at a lower "peacetime" level, with security guarantees for continued aid and automatic stabilizers if attacked.
- Ukraine should receive reconstruction assistance, as well as eventual EU accession. Russian sanctions on finance and technology should be reduced but with a snapback mechanism. Ukraine should be recognized as a militarily neutral state, with NATO membership deferred.

To establish stability, any endgame must make it unacceptably painful for either state to restart the war. A party accepting a compromise deal is seldom being honest if it claims to be laying down its arms in perpetuity. Instead, most hold out hope for favorable trends and a future opportunity to restart hostilities and improve their positions. Disincentives to restart a conflict can be material, creating a balance of power that makes it challenging to use force to change territorial lines. They can also be psychological, leaving parties with no desire to restart the war, even if theoretically possible.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the stronger power, Azerbaijan, was able to simply bide its time until it was more powerful than Armenia. As soon as Armenia's great power patron, Russia, was distracted, Azerbaijan seized the opportunity and attacked. In the Vietnam War, the peace agreement's enforcement was premised on the threat of US intervention, which US domestic politics made untenable, something North Vietnam's leaders understood. 130 And in the 2014 Donbas invasion, the Minsk agreements were neither backed by great power patrons nor built with any mechanism to deter Russia from retooling and restarting the war later. Other cases offer more optimistic prospects. In the Korean War, strong military presence and great power aid created new material conditions that were difficult for belligerents to alter. To this day, the North has poor prospects of overrunning the 30,000 forward-deployed US troops fighting alongside South Korea's large, modern military. 131 And the Finns have felt no urgent need to start a new war with Russia and imperil the remarkable society they built after the war. They also retained the capacity to mobilize a relatively strong military if they needed to defend against another Soviet invasion. Perhaps most ideally, Vietnam and Cambodia struck a deal that created new material and political realities, establishing international peacekeeping and civilian forces to oversee the peace process on an ongoing basis, and enshrining neutrality in the Cambodian Constitution as a means of removing the single biggest irritant for Vietnam and China.

For a stable peace, agreements must create an incentive structure that dissuades both Russia and Ukraine from restarting the war at a later point. While a "Korea Model" of a mutual defense treaty involving US service members is untenable, continued aid at a lower peacetime level is attainable, given a clear purpose and long-term funding. Providing Ukraine a steady flow of armaments as a condition of any negotiated settlement, confirmed by Congress and funded by Western benefactors, would limit windows of weakness that Russia might view as favorable opportunities to restart the war. Meanwhile, the West can disincentivize Ukraine from resuming the war by helping rebuild a prosperous nation that Ukraine, like Finland, would be reluctant to imperil. Conditionality, such as cutting off aid to Ukraine in a conflict it initiates, or reducing Russian financial and technological sanctions but creating a snap-back mechanism should hostilities resume, could disincentivize either side from restarting hostilities. The US and its allies should avoid one possible outcome: halfway promises akin to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum that offered a vague "security assurance" yet lacked enforcement

mechanisms and was in actuality guaranteed by a country that later invaded Ukraine (Russia). 132 Such agreements will not deter Russia from attacking again. While continued aid to Ukraine and the promise of Western sanctions can play a role in deterring future Russian aggression, the war began in 2022 despite those sticks being applied after Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea. Deterring Russia will require not just shaping the cost/benefit perceptions of war, but also those of peace, by helping affect whether Russia perceives a non-war status quo to be tenable. While no one factor triggered Russia's 2022 invasion, the worry of increasing Ukrainian alignment with the West was undeniably a significant precursor. A commitment to Ukrainian military neutrality finds precedent in the Vietnam-Cambodia case, as well as Finland. This does not mean Ukraine could never gain NATO membership, but it does mean no NATO membership for the foreseeable future. While Ukraine faces special challenges in its relationship with Russia based on their history, Finland's model shows that armed self-sufficiency can exist even without a NATO guarantee, and that non-alignment need not be permanent.

Recommendations: Resuming war must be untenable or undesirable. This requires continued Western military assistance to Ukraine for an indefinite duration as a means of ensuring Ukraine's resiliency against a future Russian attack, although at a far lower peacetime level than current assistance. Military aid at the level provided to Foreign Military Financing (FMF) partners could become an annual fixture of US defense appropriations bills. This lower amount would be more domestically palatable in the US, particularly if Europeans adopt similar provision. If used carefully, this aid could be deployed to fund asymmetric platforms that make an invasion of Ukraine costly, akin to the support given in the lead-up to the 2022 invasion. The promise of such aid could be part of the security guarantee offered to Ukraine by the US and European partners. Such guarantees would not pledge Western involvement, but continued aid—and include commitments that aggression will be met with a surge in aid from the peacetime level to a higher, wartime footing. While the threat of sanctions was not enough to stop the 2022 invasion, lifting sanctions with a snapback mechanism for their return in the event of an invasion would be yet another reason for Russia to choose not to attack. To dissuade Ukraine from restarting the war, Western states should offer reconstruction assistance to Ukraine and accelerate Ukrainian accession to the European Union, rebuilding Ukraine to ensure a prosperous, thriving society with no incentive to return to war. As noted, Ukraine should forego ambitions of

joining NATO, instead existing as a neutral buffer state between the Western and Russian powers.

While war is ongoing, peace can seem far off and improbable, even impossible. Yet Russia and Ukraine have already come close to negotiating peace. Samuel Charap and Sergey Radchenko obtained draft agreements and interviewed participants of a round of negotiations from March 2022, when the two sides came close to a deal. 133 While both began with hardline positions, stances softened. Ukraine was reportedly willing to accept military neutrality and commit to not joining NATO, while permitting negotiations about what territory it kept. Russia, meanwhile, was prepared to accept a Ukraine that remained free and Western-aligned (even joining the EU), and also Western security guarantees that went beyond the Budapest Memorandum in providing for weapons and assistance to Ukraine, were it attacked. The dialogue powerfully demonstrated that even seemingly intractable disagreements can be ironed out at the negotiating table. Russia will likely be unyielding on Ukraine joining NATO, while Ukraine will insist on retaining sovereignty and some form of Western alignment. Outside of that, in 2022 both sides were willing to make sweeping and painful concessions. Even though the talks broke down, the dialogue powerfully demonstrated that nations can and do compromise on seemingly irreconcilable positions when it becomes apparent that only diplomacy can finish what the military started.

While actors play the hand they're dealt, they still retain agency over their fate. Ukraine has the potential to become as prosperous and democratic as the most successful post-conflict nations from the past seven decades. It should aim to be in as strong a position as possible when it comes to the negotiating table. Once Ukraine recognizes that it has obtained all it reasonably can from military action, leaders should examine past negotiations for warnings and insights. Ukraine and the US will not get everything they want in negotiations. But in the end, armed with the knowledge of how past wars ended, awareness of the value of compromise and careful diplomacy, and a healthy dose of luck, the United States and Ukraine can succeed.

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