

Endgame in Ukraine: Exploring Diplomatic Solutions to a Global Crisis

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Introduction

The Ukraine-Russia conflict, now in its eleventh year since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, has evolved into a protracted and devastating war with no clear end in sight. After Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the conflict rapidly escalated into the largest land war in Europe since World War II, resulting in massive casualties, widespread destruction, and repeated cycles of military offensives and stalemates. As of September 2025, the frontlines remain highly active, with Russian forces recently launching the largest drone and missile strikes against Kyiv to date and making incremental territorial gains in eastern Ukraine and along the northern border. Despite these offensives, neither side has achieved a decisive breakthrough, and the fighting continues to exact a heavy toll on both militaries and civilian populations.

The conflict's global implications are profound. Humanitarian crises persist, with millions displaced

and critical infrastructure repeatedly targeted. The economic fallout has reverberated worldwide, disrupting food and energy supplies, driving inflation, and straining national budgets across Europe and beyond. Security concerns have intensified as the war has heightened fears of escalation between NATO and Russia, raised nuclear risks, and prompted a re-evaluation of defence postures throughout the West.

In this context, the necessity for a diplomatic solution has become increasingly urgent. The limits of military victory are evident: both Ukraine and Russia face mounting losses and war fatigue, while the risk of further escalation remains ever-present. Analysts widely regard a negotiated settlement as the only viable path to long-term stability since it can address not only the immediate end to hostilities but also the underlying security, political, and humanitarian challenges.



(Turkish Foreign Ministry / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

The Current Battlefield and Geopolitical Landscape

As of September 2025, the Ukraine-Russia conflict remains a grinding war of attrition, defined by fluctuating frontlines and mounting geopolitical ramifications across Europe and beyond. Fighting persists along the 1,000-kilometre frontline, where Russian forces have achieved notable territorial gains in the Donetsk region throughout 2024. The captures of Avdiivka and Vuhledar, as well as the ongoing fighting near Pokrovsk, Novopavlivka, and Maryinka, mark significant milestones in Moscow's campaign (Carey & Gak, 2025). Despite attempting to grab Russian territory in the Kursk region at the end of 2024, Ukrainian troops have struggled to retain hold over these advances. By late April, Russian authorities formally announced the "full liberation" of the Kursk region from Ukrainian control. However, Ukrainian sources suggest that isolated pockets of resistance continue to operate near the border (Teslova, 2025).

The human cost of this war has been devastating for both sides. Reports indicate enormous casualties, with each military enduring profound losses since the full-scale invasion began. Independent analyses suggest hundreds of thousands have been killed or wounded, though precise numbers remain difficult to verify amid the fog of war. The expanding deployment of advanced technologies like drones, unmanned aerial vehicles, and precision-guided missile strikes further compounds the attritional character of the war. These tools have revolutionised both offensive and defensive operations on the battlefield and contributed to the prevailing stalemate. The extensive use of drone swarms, electronic warfare, and cyberattacks has not only shaped tactical engagements but has also created additional humanitarian crises, with countless civilians displaced and infrastructure shattered across the combat zones (Gurung, 2025, pp. 5-7).

Domestically, Ukraine endures a climate of resilience under extreme hardship. President Zelenskyy's administration continues to enjoy broad popular legitimacy, yet the country faces steep economic challenges and a protracted humanitarian emergency. Martial law remains in effect, precluding the possibility of elections and intensifying feelings of uncertainty among citizens (European Parliament, 2025). Millions remain internally displaced, and ongoing Russian missile strikes frequently target critical infrastructure, exacerbating energy shortages and threatening civilian livelihoods.

In Russia, the war has coincided with a tightening of domestic policies. The government has responded by intensifying restrictions on dissent, expanding military recruitment, and allocating significant state resources to the conflict. While these measures have reinforced centralised control, they also raise questions about Russia's capacity to sustain the war (Mirovalev, 2025). Additionally, these actions have drawn criticism from civil society groups and contributed to strained relations with many Western nations.

On the international stage, the geopolitical environment is increasingly fraught. The inauguration of the new Trump administration in the United States has prompted a recalibration of American policy. Washington has suspended military aid and intelligence sharing with Kyiv and is now signalling a preference for renewed ceasefire negotiations—a shift that has unsettled both Ukrainian leaders and European allies. While the European Union has reaffirmed its steadfast support for Ukraine, internal divisions and economic pressures threaten the bloc's unity and its ability to sustain long-term assistance (European Parliament, 2025). China, for its part, continues to advocate for a negotiated settlement, positioning itself as a potential peace broker while opposing Western sanctions and maintaining strong economic ties with Moscow, as noted by the U.S.-China Economic AND Security Review Commission (2025). Türkiye remains an active diplomatic player, leveraging its strategic position to host talks and preserve relations with both belligerents (Ozdemir, 2024).

The conflict's repercussions are felt globally, disrupting energy and food supply chains, elevating nuclear risks, and pushing NATO and its partners to reassess security postures. As the war drags on with no decisive military breakthrough on the horizon, the dangers of escalation—including the use of nuclear weapons and wider regional destabilisation—grow ever more acute. This ongoing interplay of military deadlock, domestic strain, and shifting international alignments underscores both the urgency and the formidable complexity of forging a diplomatic resolution.



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Defining the Endgame: Competing Visions and Core Demands

The search for an endgame in Ukraine remains dominated by sharply divergent objectives, entrenched mistrust, and a web of interests involving multiple external actors. As of September 2025, the principal players—Ukraine, Russia, and their international backers—have yet to fully reconcile their core demands. However, the protracted stalemate on the battlefield, combined with the mounting human, economic, and political costs on all sides, has started to give rise to discussions about potential compromises.

For Ukraine, the overarching goal remains the full restoration of its pre-2014 borders, including Crimea and all occupied territories in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson—a demand etched into the national consciousness. While this position reflects the unwavering will of the Ukrainian people, the reality on the battlefield presents formidable challenges. Kyiv's stance is rooted in principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, but military constraints and shifting frontlines complicate its realisation. Beyond territorial recovery, Ukraine seeks binding security guarantees to deter future aggression, though geopolitical negotiations progress unevenly. EU integration remains a strategic priority, yet accession faces institutional hurdles despite broad public support. Justice and reparations are non-negotiable for a society scarred by war crimes, though legal mechanisms move slower than the hunger for accountability. These pillars—territorial restoration, security, European integration, and justice—define Ukraine's position, even as the gap between aspiration and operational realities persists (German & Tyushka, 2024).

On the Russian side, the Kremlin's objectives are just as resolute, though fundamentally at odds with Ukraine's aspirations. Moscow insists on maintaining its hold over Crimea and the additional territories it annexed in 2022, seeking international recognition of these conquests as

Russian sovereign land. Russian leadership further demands a neutral or non-aligned status for Ukraine, effectively precluding any future NATO membership or significant Western military presence. The Kremlin also links any potential settlement to the lifting of Western sanctions, security guarantees against further NATO expansion, and legal protections for Russian-speaking populations within Ukraine's borders. President Putin has framed these demands as existential for Russian security and regional clout, leaving little room for flexibility.

A sense of urgency has surfaced in Western circles, driven by fears of escalation, including nuclear risks and long-term economic turbulence. While the West remains committed to deterring further Russian expansion and upholding international law, there is growing recognition of the need for a sustainable, enforceable peace, one that carefully balances justice, security, and the practicalities of compromise.

Despite the deep divides, some tentative pathways toward negotiation have emerged through diplomatic contacts and Track II dialogues. These include phased agreements on territorial status, incremental or conditional security guarantees and a stepwise lifting of sanctions in exchange for verified Russian withdrawals. Internationalised processes for justice and reconstruction are also being cautiously discussed, provided they uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and credibility.

Defining the endgame in Ukraine will inevitably require closing wide gaps in vision, addressing legitimate security concerns for all sides, and crafting an agreement that is both just and enduring. Whether creative diplomacy and political determination can overcome years of bloodshed and suspicion remains the central question as this crisis grinds onward.

Diplomatic Pathways and Peace Proposals

As the Ukraine-Russia conflict endures into its third year of full-scale warfare, diplomatic efforts have intensified, yet a durable, consensus-driven peace remains elusive. The ongoing hostilities have galvanised multiple actors-Ukraine, Russia, the United States, European powers, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia-to advance a variety of peace frameworks, each reflecting distinct priorities and red lines (Maad, 2025). Despite the proliferation of proposals, the challenge lies in balancing the core demands of both Kyiv and Moscow, safeguarding Ukrainian sovereignty, and forging an agreement that upholds security, justice, and humanitarian needs.

A central feature of the most recent peace initiatives is the call for a comprehensive ceasefire spanning land, air, and sea. Ukrainian and European plans, unveiled in London in April 2025, propose that the United States and its European allies oversee the technical discussions, monitoring, and enforcement of any ceasefire, with the U.S. assuming a leading supervisory role (Reuters, 2025b). These proposals also demand the unconditional return of deported Ukrainian children and the exchange of prisoners of war and civilian detainees, reflecting the deep humanitarian concerns that have come to the fore during the conflict. Russia, while signalling an openness to direct talks, insists any diplomatic roadmap must accommodate its principal objectives: recognition of Crimea's annexation, restrictions on Ukrainian sovereignty, and the gradual removal of Western sanctions.

The Istanbul peace talks, hosted in May 2025, marked a significant moment in recent diplomatic efforts. While the negotiations did not yield a breakthrough on a permanent ceasefire or a direct summit between Presidents Putin and Zelenskyy, they did result in an agreement to carry out the largest prisoner exchange since the war began, with 1,000 detainees from each side set for release. This humanitarian achievement underscores the value of sustained dialogue, even when immediate political solutions remain out of reach. The talks also led to a commitment to exchange written proposals for a potential ceasefire and to reconvene for further negotiations.

Security guarantees for Ukraine remain among the most contentious issues in current negotiations. Kyiv and its European supporters strongly advocate for robust, NATO-like assurances, including the unrestricted presence and operations of allied forces on Ukrainian territory. How-

ever, the new U.S. administration has expressed hesitation, proposing instead that European powers become the primary guarantors of Ukraine's security while Kyiv pursues EU membership and retains its right to self-defence. This divergence underscores the complex balancing act faced by Western leaders, who were caught between reassuring Ukraine and maintaining broader alliance unity.

Territorial questions-particularly the fate of Crimea and Donbas-are to be addressed only after a ceasefire has been solidified. Ukrainian proposals call for negotiations starting from the current line of contact, with the explicit goal of reclaiming strategic sites and infrastructure, such as the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and the Kakhovka Dam and restoring access to the Dnieper River (Reuters, 2025b). In contrast, Russia aims to consolidate its control over occupied territories, demanding international recognition of its sovereignty over Crimea and parts of Donbas as part of any final agreement.

Economic recovery and reparations also play a critical role in peace discussions. Ukraine and its partners call for a comprehensive reconstruction initiative to be partially funded by Russian sovereign assets frozen abroad. Sanction relief for Russia is envisioned as a phased process linked to performance against the terms of the peace agreement, with a "snapback" mechanism to reinstate sanctions in the event of violation (Reuters, 2025b). Addressing justice and accountability is equally vital: proposals have included hybrid tribunals, reparations funds, and international oversight of post-war justice, all aimed at ensuring that civilian suffering and alleged war crimes do not go unaddressed.

While a ceasefire along existing frontlines is one scenario under active discussion, it risks codifying Russian territorial gains and fostering a prolonged, unstable "grey zone" akin to the post-2014 Donbas. More expansive proposals involve phased or conditional peace settlements, perhaps trading some measure of international recognition for Russian withdrawal from certain regions, backed by legally binding security guarantees for Ukraine. The most ambitious conceivable framework for resolution would involve a comprehensive settlement underwritten by principal international stakeholders, potentially including the United Nations, the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, and possibly China. Such an agreement would need to systematically address multiple interdependent dimen-

sions: territorial considerations, sustainable security architectures, postwar economic rehabilitation, and transitional justice mechanisms. Such a complex settlement would demand robust international oversight and phased implementation.

Through all these proposals, the firmness of Ukraine's stance is unmistakable. Ukrainian leaders insist that any agreement must secure a "real and just" peace, firmly opposing arrangements that would normalise Russian territorial advances or erode their country's sovereignty. Meanwhile, Russia leverages its battlefield position and exploits international divisions to press for more advantageous terms. The United States, seeking a swift resolution, must balance its support for Kyiv with the need to maintain unity

among European allies and avoid undermining Ukraine's negotiating leverage (Weir, 2025). Each party continues to advance its core interests, contributing to the complexity of the ongoing diplomatic process.

In summary, the outlines of a potential diplomatic settlement are becoming clearer: a comprehensive ceasefire, phased negotiations over contested territories, carefully calibrated security guarantees, and major commitments to post-war reconstruction and justice. Yet, entrenched disagreements and mutual distrust persist, making the prospect of a genuine, lasting peace uncertain. The coming months will be a critical test of the willingness and flexibility of all parties as they traverse the complex landscape of diplomacy in search of an end to the war.

Obstacles to Peace and Diplomatic Challenges

Despite renewed diplomatic efforts in 2025, the prospects for peace in Ukraine remain distant, hindered by deeply entrenched political, strategic, and societal barriers. Years of violence and broken promises have generated profound mistrust on both sides, making compromise seem perilously remote. Russia demands recognition of its control over Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine, guarantees that Ukraine will not join NATO, and the lifting of Western sanctions-preconditions Ukraine and its Western allies, for now, refuse to accept. Meanwhile, Ukraine's unwavering demands for complete Russian withdrawal, full restoration of territorial integrity, prosecution of war crimes, and strong security guarantees are requirements that Moscow regards as unacceptable (Schwartz & Entous, 2025).

Domestic politics reinforce the intransigence of both protagonists. In Ukraine, public outrage stemming from Russian atrocities, such as the Bucha events and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, has hardened resistance to any territorial compromise or concessions on sovereignty (Davlikanova & Ogryzko, 2025). President Zelenskyy faces scrutiny from civil society, opposition parties, and veterans' groups, who view any perceived concessions with considerable unease. In Russia, President Putin operates within a complex political landscape where hardline factions exert significant influence. These groups are deeply committed to maintaining territorial gains, viewing any potential retreat as a threat not just to national interests but also to regime stability. As a result, Putin must carefully balance geopolitical pragmatism with domestic pressures,

making concessions politically risky. This mutual intransigence leaves little room for meaningful negotiation or middle ground.

Another complication lies in external actors who, wittingly or unwittingly, impede the peace process. The United States, under the Trump administration, has pressed for a rapid settlement but faces resistance from European governments and Ukrainian officials concerned that American proposals might legitimise Russian aggression or undermine Ukraine's sovereignty (Reuters, 2025a). The European Union and NATO prioritise the defence of Ukraine's territorial rights, while other global powers, such as China, emphasise stability and the avoidance of escalation. This divergence of international interests makes it difficult to forge a coherent approach, impeding mediation and the design of enforceable agreements.

Even if compromise were possible, the practical challenges of enforcing and monitoring any peace deal are formidable. The legacy of failed ceasefires-such as the troubled Minsk process and 2025's short-lived "Easter truce"-has demonstrated the difficulty of ensuring compliance in an environment rife with mutual suspicion. The heavily militarised, constantly shifting frontlines are littered with mines and fortifications, undermining prospects for stable demilitarised zones. Robust, impartial monitoring mechanisms would be required, yet both sides remain sceptical of outside oversight and are likely to dispute the neutrality of international monitors.

Strategic risks loom over every stage of negotiation. Ukrainians and their allies fear that a settlement too favourable to Russia could not only embolden Moscow to act aggressively in the future but set a dangerous precedent for other conflicts, undermining the basic international norm against territorial conquest. On the other hand, the absence of agreement perpetuates the threat of further escalation—including, in the worst-case scenario, the use of nuclear weapons by Russia, whose leaders periodically issue thinly veiled threats (Davlikanova & Ogryzko, 2025).

A further source of frustration is the occasional exclusion of Ukraine's representatives from key negotiations, which breeds perceptions of injustice and fuels scepticism about

the legitimacy of outside-imposed solutions. Experts argue that all key stakeholders, including Ukrainian civil society, must engage to make any peace deal sustainable (Bauer, 2024), and universal values such as justice, dignity, and accountability must be upheld.

In sum, the road to peace in Ukraine is obstructed by a daunting array of obstacles: mutual mistrust, irreconcilable objectives, powerful domestic and international pressures, and immense practical challenges in implementing any future deal. Creative diplomacy and persistent, inclusive engagement, guided by the lessons of past failures, must work toward a durable, just, and legitimate settlement.

Strategic Recommendations for a Credible Diplomatic Endgame

Achieving a sustainable diplomatic resolution to the Ukraine conflict requires a comprehensive and pragmatic strategy that balances justice, security, and the necessity of difficult compromise. The lessons of past peace processes and the complexities of the current conflict point toward an approach grounded as much in realism as in principle, seeking not only a cessation of violence but the transformative underpinnings of a durable peace.

The immediate priority must be a mutually agreed ceasefire, brokered by trusted and experienced international mediators such as the United Nations or Türkiye. This ceasefire should be enforced by a robust, impartial international monitoring mission to verify compliance, monitor violations, and provide early warning against renewed hostilities. Secure, internationally supervised humanitarian corridors must be established to facilitate the evacuation of civilians, the delivery of aid, and the safe return of displaced persons. These urgent steps are vital for halting bloodshed, rebuilding a minimum of mutual trust, and demonstrating the tangible benefits of peace to exhausted communities (Beebe & Lieven, 2024, pp. 44-46).

Upon securing a ceasefire, negotiations should proceed within a transparent and structured framework marked by phased milestones and reciprocal measures. The process must be inclusive, ensuring meaningful participation by civil society, local governments, and communities directly affected by the conflict, thereby enhancing legitimacy and public support. Negotiations may be informed by established proposals, such as the Istanbul talks, which outline

core elements to reach a sustainable peace agreement. Implementation should advance in stages, with coordinated troop withdrawals, gradual adjustment of sanctions, and restoration of economic relations linked to verified progress.

International oversight is essential to manage financial aid, technical assistance, and anti-corruption initiatives that underpin post-conflict stabilisation and recovery. A multilateral oversight body—potentially composed of the EU, U.S., UN, and additional key actors, including neutral parties such as Türkiye, China, or representatives from the Global South—could help bridge divides, strengthen legitimacy, and ensure coherent support for the peace process. The United Nations, in collaboration with regional organisations and specialised agencies, should play a central role in supporting negotiations, humanitarian efforts, and reconstruction initiatives.

Sustainable stability in the region will be contingent upon establishing verifiable security assurances for Ukraine. Potential institutional frameworks may encompass NATO integration, alternative multilateral security architectures, or legally binding bilateral agreements that equitably address the strategic concerns of all relevant state actors. A critical distinction must be maintained between provisional cessation-of-hostility measures and enduring security arrangements to prevent conflict protraction and mitigate risks of subsequent escalation.

Transitional justice mechanisms must retain institutional autonomy from political negotiation processes. A com-

prehensive peace settlement should integrate structured accountability frameworks, including internationalised judicial proceedings for atrocity crimes, compensatory justice instruments, and context-specific truth verification initiatives. Such mechanisms require a dual focus on individual criminal responsibility and inter-state obligations, particularly regarding cases of forced population transfers and grave breaches of international humanitarian law.

Post-conflict societal reconstruction necessitates participatory engagement methodologies incorporating affected civilian populations, tertiary educational establishments, and traditionally marginalised demographic groups. This multi-stakeholder approach facilitates restorative dialogue, enhances social capital, and develops institutional capacity for sustainable peacebuilding.

A transparent and well-managed economic reconstruction effort will be essential, drawing on lessons from past post-war recoveries. Priorities should include rebuilding critical infrastructure, assisting affected communities, and

strengthening governance in line with international standards. The responsible use of available resources—including any frozen assets, where legally permissible—could help support long-term stability and development.

Finally, Humanitarian and environmental challenges, such as displacement, food security, and ecological recovery, should be central to any lasting resolution. A sustainable approach must prioritise the safe return of affected communities and the restoration of damaged ecosystems.

In summary, a credible diplomatic endgame for Ukraine requires immediate humanitarian action, structured and inclusive negotiations, awareness of the actual situation on the battleground, phased reciprocal implementation, strong security guarantees, comprehensive reconstruction, meaningful justice, and sustained international engagement. Only through such a fully integrated and internationally supported strategy can the foundation for a just and lasting peace be established.

Conclusion

The imperative for a diplomatic resolution to the Ukraine crisis has never been greater. After years of devastating warfare, mounting casualties, and escalating global risks, sustainable peace cannot be achieved through military means alone. The stakes extend far beyond Ukraine's borders: the outcome of this conflict will shape the future of European security, the credibility of international norms against aggression, and the resilience of the global order.

Ukraine's struggle has become a defining test case for 21st-century conflict resolution. The lessons drawn from this crisis—about the necessity of robust security guarantees, the challenges of balancing justice with compromise, and the importance of inclusive, internationally supported diplomacy—will inform responses to future crises worldwide. Achieving a credible diplomatic endgame will require vision, patience, and unprecedented cooperation among global actors. Only by learning from the past and committing to a comprehensive, principled approach can the international community help Ukraine secure a just and lasting peace, setting a new standard for resolving conflicts in an increasingly turbulent world.

Although the direct talks between the parties in Istanbul after three years mark a hopeful step towards ending the war, they also underscore the need for sustained and stra-

tegic diplomatic engagement. To move beyond symbolic gestures towards meaningful resolution, greater responsibility now lies with international actors capable of facilitating structured negotiations and addressing the underlying causes of the conflict.



(TUR Presidency/ Murat Cetinmuhurdar - Anadolu Agency)

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