

BRIEF

PROSPECTS FOR AN AMERICAN PEACE

 RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE SERIES 2
 NO. 9

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As Russia's war in Ukraine grinds on, international attention has turned toward the prospect of a negotiated settlement, with a US-backed framework among the most prominent initiatives.¹ Reports suggest this might include a ceasefire, security guarantees for Ukraine, tacit recognition of Russia's existing territorial control, and a long-term halt to Ukraine's NATO aspirations. On the surface, these terms may appear pragmatic, offering a potential off-ramp from a costly and protracted conflict. However, below this is a complex dilemma, shaped by structural asymmetry, political mistrust, and fundamentally divergent national priorities.

While the deal proposed by the US may formally end the war, its terms disproportionately favour Russia, leaving Ukraine with little reason to believe that it would deliver a just or sustainable peace. Washington's proposed peace initiative appears less like a genuine attempt to resolve the structural roots of the Russia–Ukraine conflict and more like an effort to step back from European security, and to peel Russia away from Beijing, or at least keep it neutral in the US–China rivalry.² Ukraine's future is treated more as a bargaining chip in a larger geopolitical game than as a core strategic concern.

From a rational choice perspective, this configuration locks all three actors into predictable strategies: the US seeks a quick resolution aligned with domestic and global priorities; Russia continues aggression or symbolic negotiation as low-cost strategies to consolidate gains; and Ukraine, dependent on external support and shaped by past betrayals, resists a deal that would deepen its vulnerability.

Effective negotiations are unlikely unless the strategic environment is transformed—specifically, by shifting the power balance in Ukraine's favour and raising the costs of defection for Russia. Only under such recalibrated conditions can a peace deal become a rational and mutually acceptable choice.

However, Donald Trump's unconventional approach to international politics has so far reinforced the underlying structure of the conflict. His leadership style, centred on speed, spectacle, and transactional diplomacy, prioritises optics over substance and has failed to recalibrate the strategic incentives of the warring parties.³ His pursuit of symbolic and personal victories, and resource-based deals may serve short-term political goals, but does not lay the groundwork for a credible or lasting peace.⁴ Instead of opening a path to genuine conflict resolution, Trump's approach risks entrenching the very asymmetries and mistrust that have made the war so intractable.

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STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The logic that shapes Ukraine–Russia negotiations can be partly understood as a distorted and asymmetric version of the classic prisoner's dilemma.⁵ In its basic form, the dilemma describes a situation where two actors face the choice to cooperate with one another, or to avoid cooperation and seek benefits on their own ('defection'). If both cooperate, they

receive a moderate benefit; if one defects while the other cooperates, the defector gains significantly while the cooperator suffers. In the Russia-Ukraine case, cooperation means accepting the Trump-proposed deal, while defection means rejecting it. Without credible guarantees, both sides expect betrayal, making cooperation irrational. For example, if Ukraine agrees to the deal but Russia later violates its terms and attacks, Ukraine would be left politically exposed and strategically weakened, with little chance to recover its losses.

Russia's war in Ukraine is an asymmetric conflict between actors of vastly different power. It is both logical and rational to expect that Russia will seek to exploit its material advantage rather than agree to any settlement that delivers only partial strategic objectives. Instead, it will aim to preserve strategic credibility and avoid projecting weakness. Ukraine thus faces a far more constrained and high-stakes dilemma, in which the decision to resist—and the cost of doing so—depends heavily on an external factor: continued military support from the US.

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The legacy of past interactions between Russia and Ukraine, along with the weak enforcement of third-party commitments, also continues to undermine the prospects for a credible agreement.⁶ For Ukraine, previous cooperative efforts—most notably the Minsk I and II

agreements—yielded no mutual benefits but instead led to territorial losses and heightened strategic vulnerability. The failure of the Budapest Memorandum, under which Ukraine relinquished its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security guarantees, further entrenched a deep-seated distrust in both Russia's intentions and the West's reliability. But for Russia, repeated violations of international commitments—such as disregarding the Minsk agreements or invading Ukraine anew—have brought limited and manageable consequences. Sanctions have often been delayed, inconsistent, or gradually relaxed, reinforcing the belief that defection is not only tolerable but advantageous. In this environment, past experience has conditioned both sides to view cooperation not as an opportunity, but as a risk.

In this light, the Trump-proposed deal reflects a biased cooperative outcome, in which Ukraine is expected to accept major concessions without adequate enforcement, while Russia retains leverage and avoids accountability. These dynamics are captured in the table below, which

shows that current imbalances in power and commitment lead both sides towards defection. Unless structural asymmetry is altered—through credible guarantees, power-balancing mechanisms, or long-term institutional safeguards—any externally imposed deal risks producing not a sustainable peace though mutually acceptable or evenly distributed outcomes, but a set of coerced concessions extracted primarily from Ukraine, and misaligned with its strategic interests.

	Russia accepts the deal	Russia rejects the deal
Ukraine accepts the deal	Conditional peace. Ukraine concedes NATO & territory. US withdraws. → Favours Russia's goals (territory + recognition), Trump's goal of quick exit. Negative for Ukraine.	Strategic betrayal. Ukraine disarms. Russia resumes pressure. → Worst case for Ukraine. US credibility hit. Russia exploits gains.
Ukraine rejects the deal	Diplomatic tension. Ukraine blamed for blocking peace. → Undermines Ukraine's position. US wavers. Russia gains narrative edge.	War continues. → Aligns with Ukraine's resistance goals, but unsustainable. US fatigued. Russia tolerates long war.

The table illustrates how US involvement shapes strategic expectations. While US mediation can deter open escalation, it does not guarantee mutual trust or a balanced peace under the proposed terms of the deal. Ukraine's options remain constrained, especially if the US prioritises exit over enforcement. Russia retains incentives to defect under the cover of diplomacy.

AMERICAN INCONSISTENCY

The uncertainty surrounding US intentions is among the most destabilising factors in the ongoing war. For Ukraine, ambiguity about long-term US commitment complicates both military planning and diplomatic positioning and mixed signals undermine Kyiv's ability to pursue a coherent strategy.

On the one hand, sustained US support and recent initiatives such as the bilateral deal on rare earth minerals indicate that mutually beneficial cooperation remains possible. On the other hand, America's parallel promotion of peace frameworks and informal negotiations conveys the message that resistance may become politically inconvenient if it delays efforts to secure a rapid, image-driven outcome that showcases American leverage.

This inconsistency traps Ukraine in a strategic dilemma with no clear favourable path. Accepting the proposed terms would mean abandoning core national interests in sovereignty and alignment with the West; rejecting them risks prolonging a costly war under conditions of shrinking external support—especially if future US assistance becomes conditional or more limited. For Russia, this perceived US ambivalence creates room for opportunism: Moscow may escalate or de-escalate its actions based on shifting assessments of American resolve. In an environment of ambiguous signalling, deterrence is weakened, and the conflict becomes more volatile and harder to contain.

Rather than reflecting deliberate strategic ambiguity, Washington's current behaviour increasingly resembles a desperate push for a quick resolution at almost any cost—a dynamic that, given the existing power asymmetry, disproportionately serves Russian interests over Ukraine's.

EUROPEAN WEAKNESS

In this environment, mutual defection remains the rational choice for both Russia and Ukraine. Neither side has sufficient incentives or credible guarantees to make cooperation preferable to continued resistance or manipulation. Only a clear, sustained, and enforcement-oriented US policy—focused on long-term conflict resolution

rather than short-term stabilisation—can shift the payoff structure and make cooperation a rational strategy for both parties.

Washington's behaviour resembles a desperate push for a quick resolution at almost any cost

Although recent rhetoric suggests some shifts in the US position—Washington has expressed frustration with Russia's lack of meaningful engagement in peace efforts, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio has warned that the US may reconsider its involvement in negotiations if no progress is made—American mediation remains largely biased toward the objective defined by Trump, namely, a quick resolution. This risks favouring Russia by encouraging further delay and obstruction. A premature US withdrawal from mediation or a reduction in military support to Ukraine would effectively leave Kyiv facing the Kremlin alone, altering even further the balance of power in Moscow's favour.⁷

Europe would find it difficult to step in to fill the gap. Europe continues to face a crisis of international (geopolitical) agency—lacking not only a unified command structure but also the political cohesion required for coordinated action, with no leadership to drive a meaningful response. The EU's internal divisions—such as Hungary and Slovakia's obstructionism—reveal a fractured landscape of political will regarding continued support for Ukraine. In addition, Europe's limited ammunition stockpiles and defence industrial capacity constrain its ability to sustain high-intensity military aid over time.⁸ The result is not strategic leadership but strategic abdication. Russia may calculate that Western fatigue, wavering resolve, and potential US retrenchment will provide greater freedom of action. This vacuum, in turn, shapes Ukraine's strategic calculus—forcing it to choose between asymmetric resistance and vulnerable negotiation.

CONCLUSIONS

The US approach, particularly under Trump, reflects a convergence of domestic political expediency and transactional diplomacy rather than long-term strategic thinking. The resulting peace proposal risks reinforcing power

asymmetries and rewarding coercive behaviour. Ukraine's constrained position—dependent on external military and financial support—renders it particularly vulnerable to a coerced settlement that does not provide credible security guarantees. Russia, meanwhile, has strategic incentives to prolong or manipulate negotiations while consolidating its battlefield gains.

In the scenario of a protracted struggle, Ukraine may be capable of sustaining resistance on its own—but the strategic, economic, and human cost would be very high. Its resilience will therefore depend not only on internal determination, but on the consistency of the West's commitment. Under these conditions, Ukraine's rational choice is to reject any agreement that compromises its strategic interests—territorial integrity, sovereignty, and future NATO membership. This stance, though risky, is rational: conceding to coercion would be tantamount to capitulation. Continued resistance—even if it offers no guarantee of

achieving strategic objectives in an asymmetrical conflict—preserves the possibility that the west may yet reaffirm its support, or at least impose more meaningful costs on Russia, which in itself would represent a valuable shift in the strategic environment. Without credible guarantees and an enforceable framework, even a negotiated settlement risks entrenching instability—thus, transforming a superficial peace into a deferred collapse.

While a modified prisoner's dilemma model is useful in clarifying patterns of mistrust and asymmetry, it inevitably simplifies a complex geopolitical landscape. Any results should be viewed as probabilistic interpretations, not deterministic forecasts. Other frameworks—such as those emphasising identity, institutional dynamics, or cognitive biases—might offer different, complementary insights.

ENDNOTES

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⁶ Jack S Levy, "Foreign Policy Decision-Making: The Psychological Dimension," in Leonie Huddy, David O Sears, Jack S. Levy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, 2nd edn, (Oxford University Press, 2013), 301–334.

⁷ Bart H Meijer, Gabriel Stargardter and Andrea Shalal, "[US will abandon Ukraine peace push if no progress soon, Trump and Rubio say](#)," *Reuters*, 19 April 2025.

⁸ International Institute for Strategic Studies, "[Building defence capacity in Europe: An assessment](#)," IISS Strategic Dossier, November 2024.

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