

Three Years of Russo - Ukraine War: The Turning Point is Apparent

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Introduction

As the Russo-Ukrainian war approaches its third anniversary, the conflict is at a turning point. A visible sign being the cover of the latest issue of the Economist that carries an image unmistakably representative of the President Trump with his back turned. No one could have imagined this three years ago.

The war was initially perceived to result in Russia overwhelming Ukraine in a matter of weeks but that never happened. Thereafter, analysts felt that Russia would collapse in the face of a united West and President Putin was portrayed as an autocratic leader with no support of his population. But he too remains in power and sanctions have not crippled Russia. Today the West is divided and the statement being drafted by the G7 to mark three years of the conflict is no longer calling Russia the aggressor.

But the fact is that after three years of an attritional conflict , Ukraine's military is exhausted¹, facing worsening manpower shortages with the prospect of diminishing western aid. While Russia, despite steady gains², hasn't scored a decisive breakthrough and is suffering losses amid tightening economic constraints.³

President Donald Trump who had promised to end the war has already held a long telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the first negotiations have been held in Riyadh. Meanwhile the widening rift between President Trump and President Zelensky is evident.⁴ Trump denounced Zelensky as "a dictator without elections" and Zelensky said Trump was trapped in a Russian disinformation bubble, in response to the US President suggesting Ukraine started the war.

A new security architecture is taking shape in Europe and the Europeans are being forced to look at their image in the mirror by the US. Last week's Munich

Security Conference marked that moment when the US told Europe emphatically that it could not rely on transatlantic support

Both sides are locked in combat with little visible movement. Russia continues to take small parcels of territory along the Eastern front, but progress is slow. The two countries have achieved a degree of parity when it comes to their long-range strike capabilities. However, in the immediate future, with the frontlines remaining relatively stagnant. There are unlikely to be no major breakthroughs.

The Focus is Now Peace Negotiations

Ceasefire is relatively easy but resolving issues where incompatible collisions of reality exist is challenging. While questions about territory will most likely be settled based on the captured territories, with the US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth terming Ukraine's goals of recovering all its territory and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership "Unrealistic".⁵ But Ukraine's long-term security will be the sticking point. While President Zelenskyy harped on NATO membership being the only way to ensure a lasting peace, many current alliance members, including the US, were unwilling to take on the additional security burden.⁶

As per analyst David Ignatius the Biden administration's strategy was for extending the war to weaken Russia, "It was a sensible, cold-blooded strategy for the US at low cost to America, while Ukraine was paying the butcher's bill".⁷

The Trump administration has now changed the rules of engagement. The reality is that not only has Ukraine failed to regain any significant territory in the last two years, but the very same issues that the parties grappled with in the 2022 negotiations are likely to be at the centre of any talks.

Security Guarantees

There are those who feel that an imposed peace deal that leaves Ukraine with no support might embolden Russia to launch a third invasion into Ukraine. This would once again put Moscow and NATO at risk of direct conflict, while Russian geographic gains would further erode Ukraine's sovereign territory and allow Russia to pose new threats to Ukraine's neighbors.

Security guarantees can address this problem by offering one or both sides an assurance that renewed aggression will be met with consequences, including external military support and retaliation. Ensuring peace could come in the form of a peace keeping mission. A mere paper guarantee of a commitment to send troops in case of future attacks is also not be credible on its own. So far neither European states nor the US have sent troops to Ukraine.

Policymakers, therefore, need to consider alternatives to direct security guarantees: how to boost Ukraine's own deterrent capabilities while addressing the conflict's underlying causes. Of course, Ukraine's preferred security guarantee is a rapid accession to NATO.

But a bilateral US security guarantee for Ukraine would be unacceptable to Moscow and unworkable for the trans-Atlantic alliance, whether it took the form of a more binding mutual defence agreement like the US-Japanese treaty relationship or something more flexible like the 1975 US memorandum of agreement with Israel.⁸

The fact is that notwithstanding President Trump's recent stance, the US has long been clear that Ukraine's alignment is not a national security imperative.

European guarantees to Ukraine might seem more credible on the surface. After all, Europe has a common interest in balancing Russia with an independent Ukraine as a buffer.⁹ If Ukraine were to become a member of the European Union, for example, it would fall under the Lisbon Treaty's mutual defence provision. Although the provision is modeled on NATO's Article 5, it has not been sanctified in the same way and remains more ambiguous in nature. Still, a European security commitment would bring its own limitations and complications for NATO.¹⁰

Armed Neutrality and Its Benefits

The final option, 'Armed Neutrality', has no foreign security guarantees, but it will not leave Ukraine defenceless. As a neutral state, Ukraine would still need significant military support from the US and Europe to build an arsenal capable of deterring Russia and defending its territory.¹¹

Critics have deemed armed neutrality 'Doomed to Fail', but it seems to be Ukraine's best option. In this scenario, Kyiv would be responsible for its own security. It would have to invest in rebuilding its defence-industrial base and strengthening and

modernizing its combat capabilities over the long term, with help from the US and Europe.

But along with the burdens of independence, it would also receive the benefits of self-sufficiency.¹² History offers frequent reminders that the only truly 'Ironclad' defence is the one a country provides itself.

Conclusion

All wars end at sometime but how they end is also important as the ending determines the peace that is to follow. The end of both World War II and the Cold War chartered the course that Europe followed but now what is important is the unveiling of the new security architecture in Europe which will have global implications.

At the end of the Cold War, there was an assumption that liberal democracy and globalization had triumphed. Many believed that the era of large conventional wars had come to an end. This prompted leaders to downsize their countries' military forces, munition stocks, and production capacity. The situation in Ukraine has shown that such optimism was misguided

Unfortunately, the complexities of this conflict preclude quick solutions. But regardless of the outcome of the negotiations, the war in Ukraine has already changed the character of conflict around the world. Countries now need to adapt to the new realities on the battlefield. However, the credibility of the global policymakers now depends on how soon and in what manner this war ends.

Endnotes

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