

How Security Guarantees Remain the Most Important Unresolved Question in the Peace Deal for Ukraine

Introduction

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and a delegation of seven European leaders rushed to the White House on 18 Aug for talks with Donald Trump after the United States (US) President had rolled out the red carpet for Russian leader Vladimir Putin at Anchorage on 15 Aug and appeared to swing towards Russia's positions on the war. President Trump abandoned demands for President Putin to agree to a ceasefire ahead of negotiations and said Ukraine would have to concede territories to Russia as part of the settlement.¹

The meeting in Alaska led to Russian demands for territorial annexations in the Donbas region and Ukraine ceding sovereignty over Crimea.² The Washington meeting discussed these demands as well as security guarantees, and possible further efforts to end the conflict.

The talks in Washington yielded a commitment from Trump, at least for now, to join security guarantees for any peace deal and reserve discussion on territorial swaps with Russia for later.³

Ukraine and its European allies see robust security guarantees as a crucial element in unlocking a peace deal with Russia, potentially allowing Kyiv to compromise in areas it would have rejected previously.⁴

Security Guarantees

The problem is that everyone has a different understanding of what a security guarantee would mean for Ukraine. The Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni proposed to provide Ukraine with military support if it is attacked by Russia in the future. It is similar to a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-like collective defence commitment that stops short of membership of the bloc for Ukraine.

It is equally implausible that the Russians would, as the US President's special envoy Steve Witkoff claimed, agree to guarantees based around an Article 5-type solution, given the extent to which that would lock in the very Western influence they have sought to eject.⁵

This leaves open the possibility that what has been discussed are 'Guarantees' that look 'Assurances' involving Russia given under the Budapest Memorandum, or were proposed as part of the failed negotiations in Istanbul in 2022, which gave Russia a role as a guarantor—a wholly unacceptable situation now.

Article 5 of the NATO has a very clear understanding that has been created through over 70 members and implies that if the territory of a NATO ally is attacked, all the other members will come to its defence.

A European troop presence would add a lot of weight to the security assurance, because it would mean that Russia would then be going to war not just with Ukraine, but with Europe. But this would also raise the stakes.

Though there have been suggestions regarding deployment of the US forces to 'Protect' Ukraine, President Trump is clear that Europe is the 'First line of defence' for Ukraine, a stance consistent with his desire to shift more of the responsibility on to European countries for their own security.⁶ European leaders talked about a 'Coalition of the Willing', a European group led by the United Kingdom (UK) and France, potentially including a multinational force on the ground. However, the form and function of a European force now seems to have been scaled back from some of the early ambitions.

Trump has ruled out sending US ground troops but floated a form of air support as a possibility. "You have my assurance, and I'm President", he told Fox News that there would be 'Boots on the ground' in Ukraine.⁷ He added that the US could still play a role "By air, because there's nobody that has the kind of stuff we have".

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has floated the idea of an international peacekeeping force in Ukraine, ranging from a few hundred observers to a contingent of tens of thousands. But here again, a United Nations (UN) force where a permanent member of the UN Security Council is directly involved will find their hands tied behind their back.

Maintaining peace after a ceasefire will require a monitoring mission that can patrol both sides of the line of occupation. This will depend heavily on surveillance and needs to be led by a country or organisation that both Ukraine and Russia trust.

Now, instead of a significant force with combat power and a strong deterrent capability, something focused on helping Ukraine rebuild and restructure its forces seems to be on the cards. But it is not just land borders, a secure and open Black Sea is also vital for Ukraine's economy and regional stability.

As per Sergey Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister, Russia supports guarantees based "On the principle of collective security, on the principles of indivisible security".⁸ "Anything else, anything unilateral is, of course, an absolutely hopeless undertaking".⁹

The question of post-war security guarantees has become the central challenge.

Ready for Peace

More than anything, the leaders of the four sides, in this case Russia, Ukraine, the US, and Europe, need to see either a ceasefire or a peace deal as preferable to the status quo. These leaders must be able to act on that. They must be strong enough and willing to act. There must be some kind of formula that is potentially viable and a process that is acceptable.

While a ceasefire is the more realistic goal, it essentially involves a cessation of hostilities, separation of forces, or disengagement, followed by a de-escalation.

Negotiating a formal peace deal take considerably a longer time because it involves several issues that both sides would like to bring to the negotiating table.

The biggest difference then, between a ceasefire and a peace, is that in a ceasefire, one does not sign away their rights to anything, but simply agree to stop the fighting. In a permanent peace deal, one has to sign away rights, which could range from territory to populations, or an alignment, as in this case, it is Ukraine agreeing not to be part of the NATO. There are also a host of issues such as security assurances, reparations of prisoners of war, and alleged human rights violations. It has a degree of finality for which the stakes are enormous. The phrase 'Peace Agreement' or 'Peace Treaty', therefore, implies a degree of formality, permanence.

Ceasefires can be formal or informal. It can be called an armistice, a cessation of hostilities.¹⁰ It is almost the same. Korea and Cyprus are a case in point where the fundamental issues that divide them have not been settled, but firing across the border has ceased.

Russia and Ukraine

Ukrainians have become sophisticated observers of the international game over the past three and a half years and are now aware of the stance of different partners. The US under Trump is putting enormous pressure on Ukraine since the disastrous meeting at White House in Feb and President Zelensky is now focusing on not being the obstacle while simultaneously pushing his own agenda forward. Domestically, he has the space to pursue what he argues is necessary in the international domain. However, as per reports, there is greater public opinion towards peace and conflict termination.

From the Ukrainian perspective, setting a clear dividing line between 'Acceptable' behaviour and that which warrants Western military action also necessitates defining the geographic area to be defended.¹¹ This means even more emphasis will be on where the 'Line of Contact' is at the time when fighting ends.

Russia, on the other hand, feels its security interests must be considered in any settlement. Russia has repeatedly declared that Ukraine must abandon ambitions to join NATO and adopt a neutral status.¹² It has also rejected the presence of troops from NATO states in Ukraine.

Sergey Lavrov, in an interview to NBC on 22 Aug, stated that Putin would meet Zelensky "When the agenda is ready for a summit", but noted that "This agenda is not ready at all".

Lavrov accused Zelensky of failing to accept Russia's demanded preconditions for negotiation, such as 'Discussions of territorial issues', even though Zelensky stated on 18 Aug that he remains willing to meet with Putin unconditionally and directly discuss territorial questions.¹³

Conclusion

The fact remains that ultimately negotiating tables reflect battlefield realities and dynamics, so countries do not opt for compromise at a negotiating table if they think they have the ability or support for prolonging fighting. which will give them what they want at an acceptable cost.

For Ukraine, there is also a fear that Russia will use peace deal and the lifting of sanctions to rebuild and retrain its army and re-emerge as a more formidable force to attack it again. Unlike the territorial control question, security guarantees require the US involvement. Ukraine is also wary of assurances that sound strong but prove meaningless. The West's weak responses to Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022 demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and the 2014-15 Minsk agreements, respectively.

But dealing with Trump 2.0 is not easy due to his constant variables, hence, for Ukraine and Europe the question now is whether the relative goodwill shown by the US towards them in Washington will endure or if Putin can exploit Trump's belief in the strength of a US-Russia bilateral relationship and distance the US away from Europe and Ukraine.

¹ "Proposed Ukraine Land Concessions Are Putin's Trap, EU Top Diplomat Tells BBC", *BBC*, 22 Aug 2025, accessed 28 Aug 2025 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8zdez507o>

² Kurt Volker, "What Is next for Negotiations between Ukraine and Russia?" *CEPA*, 19 Aug 2025, accessed 28 Aug 2025 <https://cepa.org/article/what-is-next-for-russia-ukraine-negotiations/>

³ Natalia Drozdiak and Alex Wickham, "Security Guarantees for Ukraine Face Early Challenges in US-Led Talks", *Bloomberg*, 21 Aug 2025, accessed 28 Aug 2025 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-08-21/doubts-grow-on-ukraine-security-package-as-russia-demands-a-role>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Matthew Savill, "Guaranteeing Insecurity: The Flaws in Ukraine's Security Talks", *Rusi.org*, 2025, accessed 28 Aug 2025 <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/guaranteeing-insecurity-flaws-ukraines-security-talks>

⁶ Nahal Toosi, "The 'Big Tactical Error' in the Russia-Ukraine Negotiations", *POLITICO*, 21 Aug 2025, accessed 28 Aug 2025 <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/08/21/trump-ukraine-russia-negotiations-interview-00517411>

⁷ Callum Sutherland and Nik Popli, "Trump Vows No U.S. Boots on the Ground in Ukraine", *TIME*, 19 Aug 2025, accessed 28 Aug 2025 <https://time.com/7310588/trump-troops-ukraine-security-deal/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Drozdiak and Wickham. "Security Guarantees for Ukraine"

¹⁰ Toosi, "The 'Big Tactical Error'"

¹¹ Matthew, "Guaranteeing Insecurity"

¹² Drozdiak and Wickham. "Security Guarantees for Ukraine"

¹³ "Russian offensive campaign assessment", *Institute for the Study of War*, 2025, accessed 28 Aug 2025 <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-22-2025>

Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

Uploaded on 02-09-2025

Disclaimer: The article was written before the US' attack on Iran. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organization that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India