

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

DECEMBER 10, 2025

The Time to End the War in Ukraine Is Now

Trump Can Defy the Skeptics and Seal the Deal

THOMAS GRAHAM

The Time to End the War in Ukraine Is Now

Trump Can Defy the Skeptics and Seal the Deal

THOMAS GRAHAM

Deep skepticism has surrounded U.S. President Donald Trump's latest attempt to settle the Russia-Ukraine war. Ukraine, backed by Europe, has been clear that it is not prepared to accept terms that amount to surrender, while Russia has given no signal that it will back off its maximalist demands, which would end Ukraine's existence as a sovereign, independent state. That, skeptics argue, leaves no ground for serious negotiations. Russian President Vladimir Putin's evident refusal to make any substantive concessions at his talks with Trump's envoys on December 2 only reinforces their doubts.

But the skeptics are wrong. The time is ripe for a resolution of the conflict in the coming months. The real question is whether the Trump administration can muster the skill, patience, and stamina to drive a diplomatic process to a successful conclusion.

NO TIME TO LOSE

Nearly four years of brutal combat, in which neither side has achieved a strategic breakthrough, has created a paradoxical situation in which both countries lose the longer the war rages on. The best deal each side can

achieve is available now, not in six months or later. Ukraine will not gain anything by waiting to negotiate from a hypothetical future position of strength; such a position will not come soon, if ever. Ukrainian leaders have already acknowledged that they cannot liberate by force all the territory Russia has seized. What Ukraine cannot achieve on the battlefield will not be handed to it at the negotiating table. Nor will a stronger Ukraine incline Western countries to provide it with more formidable security guarantees. Western governments have already made it clear that they will not risk war with Russia to defend Ukraine. And the longer Ukraine waits, the more destruction it will have to endure.

Instead of seeking a position of strength, Ukraine urgently needs to settle the conflict, which has devastated the country economically and demographically. The cost of reconstruction over the next decade has been estimated at more than 2.6 times its pre-war GDP of \$200 billion. Kyiv will find it increasingly difficult to man the frontlines and has yet to demonstrate that it can halt Russia's grinding advance. Close to seven million Ukrainians—about one-sixth of the pre-war population—have fled the country; many will never return. In response to the national emergency, the concentration of power in the president's office and the indefinite postponement of elections nationwide are slowly eroding the foundations of the country's fragile democracy. An unfolding corruption scandal, which has engulfed senior officials, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's powerful chief of staff, graphically illustrates the corrosive impact of the concentration of power. Each day the war continues, Ukraine's future looks bleaker.

Russia appears stronger. But it has paid a staggering price—more than one million dead or wounded—for marginal tactical gains. During this year's offensive, Russia seized just one percent of Ukrainian territory at the cost of more than 200,000 dead and wounded. The cost of recruiting new volunteers is soaring, while the Kremlin still fears the social repercussions of a mass mobilization. After two years of growth of over four percent, the economy has stalled. The forecast for this year and next hovers around one percent growth. Meanwhile, Russia has invested negligible sums in

cutting-edge technologies. In short, it is mortgaging its future to sustain the conflict. As a result, each day the war continues, Russia falls further behind the great powers—China and the United States, to be sure, and also possibly India and Europe, with which it hopes to compete in the decades ahead.

Unsurprisingly, Russia and Ukraine remain far apart on the terms of a settlement, particularly on territorial questions and the nature of security guarantees for both of them. Ukraine will not cede territory in the Donbas that Russia has not conquered, as the Kremlin demands. Nor will it, simply to make Russia feel secure, easily abandon its ambition of joining NATO—the ultimate security guarantee—or cap its military capabilities at levels inadequate to deter future Russian aggression.

But these gaps are bridgeable. Indeed, the contours of a final settlement are visible, even if both sides vigorously deny it: a cease-fire along the line of contact without either country formally recognizing the other's control of territory it considers its own; armed neutrality, or sufficient military capabilities to reliably defend one's territory, for Ukraine with the possibility of EU accession but not membership in NATO; and no further NATO expansion eastward into the former Soviet space. Such an outcome would enable Putin to declare victory and Zelensky to claim he had preserved what was most precious—Ukraine's sovereignty and independence as well as its European aspirations. It would also spare both countries the further depredations of continued warfare. But agreement on these terms can only be achieved in strictly confidential negotiations, in which the two belligerents can make the necessary compromises on sensitive issues as part of a broader peace agreement.

SEEKING ASSURANCES

Achieving this outcome will, however, require a concerted diplomatic effort that engages all parties to the conflict: Russia, Ukraine, and the United States, as well as Europe. But only one country can lead that effort: the United States. It enjoys unique leverage over the other three parties. As it has already demonstrated, Washington can pressure Ukraine and Europe by threatening to cut essential assistance, including

irreplaceable battlefield intelligence. It can also pressure Russia effectively, although not solely through sanctions or arms for Ukraine, which figure most prominently in public discussions. Those tools matter—especially the arms needed to stop Russia’s advance on the battlefield and to minimize the consequences of its aerial assault—but they alone will not deliver a settlement.

The United States also needs to deploy the formidable psychological leverage it possesses over Russia. One cannot overstate the role the United States—and Trump personally—plays in validating Russia as a great power and Putin as a global leader. This matters all the more because Russia has struggled on the battlefield against what it (and most Western observers) assumed was a second- or third-tier military. Instead of the anticipated blitzkrieg and swift conquest of Ukraine, the Kremlin will soon find itself fighting the Ukrainians for longer than it took the Soviet Union to crush Nazi Germany in World War II. Washington can exercise that leverage in the first instance by assuring Moscow that it would be willing to normalize relations. Such a measure will help convince Putin that the United States will not relegate Russia to a secondary tier of interest once the war is resolved. Trump’s new National Security Strategy makes clear that the administration no longer considers Russia a major threat, to the consternation of traditional U.S. allies. Normalization is also strategically important to Putin in its own right: it would allow him to rebalance Russia’s relationship with China and expand his room to maneuver globally.

Washington has already promised normalization once the war is on a clear path toward resolution. But words alone will not satisfy Putin. He seeks concrete evidence of Washington’s intentions. That could include establishing working groups on key bilateral issues—nuclear policy, the Arctic, and commercial relations, for example—and holding initial meetings to set the agenda and lay out the first steps. That would give Putin confidence that the United States will continue to treat Russia as a serious player, commensurate with Moscow’s own self-perception. The White House should make it clear that tangible progress on any of these

bilateral issues depends on the Kremlin taking the hard decisions needed to end the war.

TRUST THE PROCESS

The Kremlin's desire for normal diplomatic relations also applies to the narrower question of the Russia-Ukraine war. Earlier this year, it initially embraced the idea of a quick resolution reached through direct talks with Trump, using Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff as a confidential conduit. In the Kremlin's scheme, the two presidents would agree on the deal, and Trump would impose it on the Ukrainians. But that approach ran aground by late spring. The Ukrainians resisted U.S. pressure, and the Europeans stepped in to support Ukraine in resisting both Moscow's aggression and Washington's bullying.

With the diplomatic situation more complex and the talks narrowing to a few crucial issues, Russian leaders want to establish a more traditional negotiating process. They understand that presidential phone calls and long talks with Witkoff cannot do that, and presidential meetings produce lasting results only if lower-level officials work out the details in advance. That would entail creating expert working groups, which the Trump administration has hesitated to do. The Russian presidential aide Yuri Ushakov hinted at this approach after Putin's December 2 meeting with Witkoff and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and occasional envoy. U.S.-Russian talks, Ushakov said, would continue between the presidents, presidential assistants, and other officials.

That is a template that Washington should embrace. The Kremlin, to be sure, was speaking only of bilateral contacts. But the Trump administration should expand this approach to include Ukrainians and Europeans. The Russians will almost certainly resist participating directly with Europeans in any working groups, and they will be reluctant to engage Ukrainians in a trilateral format with Americans also in the room. That means that at least initially, the United States will have to shuttle between parallel working groups with the Ukrainians and Europeans, on the one hand, and the Russians, on the other, until there is sufficient trust to bring all the parties together in unified working groups.

Russia wants a more traditional negotiating process.

This broadened process would require a number of working groups that at a minimum would study territorial disputes, security guarantees, and cease-fire modalities. The composition of the groups would vary by topic: a U.S.-Russian working group could suffice for nuclear issues; Russians, Ukrainians, and Americans could address territorial issues; and Europeans would have to participate in discussions of security guarantees and broader matters of European security. The working groups would initially be tasked with reaching consensus on the elements of a settlement and developing sufficient detail on implementation so that the parties can sign a framework agreement and put a cease-fire in place. Subsequently, they would flesh out the framework agreement to produce a final settlement on all the issues in their purview.

Even if working groups are established, the White House–Kremlin channel will be indispensable. It is the only channel that can set the broad principles and parameters to guide the efforts of the working groups and break the logjams that will inevitably arise.

Critics will argue that such a diplomatic effort is beyond the capabilities of the Trump administration. It allegedly lacks the discipline, consistency, capacity, and patience to pursue a sustained diplomatic effort. But even the admittedly halting progress in current negotiations would not have been possible had Trump not opened a dialogue with Putin in February with the goal of ending the war. Despite much speculation to the contrary, Trump has neither abandoned Ukraine to Russia's will nor walked away from the problem as one that is too hard to solve. And the U.S. national security apparatus has the expertise and skill needed to manage a complex diplomatic undertaking, if only the administration could find a way to reliably control its own bureaucracy, which it does not trust.

Success is not assured, of course, and it will not come as quickly as Trump desires. But with one last effort, he could once again defy his critics and end a conflict others thought intractable.