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# After the Guns Fall Silent, What Then?



By Douglas Webber , INSEAD

## **Would an end of Russia's invasion of Ukraine result in lasting peace for the region?**

Only a few weeks ago, after the Ukrainian armed forces had driven their Russian counterparts into retreat in north-eastern Ukraine and had re-taken the city of Kherson in the country's south, many observers speculated that a decisive turning point in the war had been reached and that Ukraine might achieve a swift military victory over Russia.

Although these hopes have since dissipated and a brutal war of attrition seems likely to continue through the coming winter and beyond, the tenor of most outside observers' analyses of the invasion remains fundamentally optimistic. With the help of Western (primarily American) military and financial aid, they suggest, Ukraine has turned the tide and won the upper hand and will sooner or later vanquish Russia on the battlefield.

However, relatively few analysts have asked what would happen after the last Russian tanks and soldiers have withdrawn from Ukrainian territory. How will Russian-Ukrainian relations evolve in the longer term?

## **The challenges of a negotiated settlement**

A unilateral Ukrainian military victory is unlikely to be accompanied or followed by a negotiated settlement. In view of the devastation wrought by Russian armed forces on Ukraine and the crimes they committed against Ukrainians, Kyiv is unlikely to be willing to negotiate with or make any concessions to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Given the sacrifices made by the Ukrainian people to enable the victory, Ukraine's Western allies will also be reluctant to force Kyiv to accept significantly less than what it has always demanded: the withdrawal of all Russian military forces from Ukraine, likely including Crimea.

For its part, Russia will not want to acquiesce in any negotiated settlement that ratifies its military defeat and thus formalises its humiliation. Once his armed forces are back in Russia, Putin is likely to begin rebuilding them for a fresh military "intervention" in Ukraine at what he deems is an opportune time. He will lick his wounds, bide his time, and when he thinks the moment is right, he will strike again.

Why? A cursory survey of the region's history suggests that when the central power in Moscow is weak, neighbouring nations can secure greater autonomy or independence. This was the case, for example, when the new Communist regime was fighting for survival in the Russian Civil War at the end of the First World War and after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

On the other hand, when Moscow is strong, it strives to bring the states on its periphery into its orbit and under its control. As all his pronouncements denying the existence of a Ukrainian nation and the legitimacy of a Ukrainian state show, Putin is deeply steeped in the traditions of Russian nationalism and imperialism. During the over two decades he has been in power, Putin has tried to re-establish Russian control over most of the post-Soviet republics. There is little reason to think he will not try to do the same thing again, if given the chance.

It is therefore unlikely that there will be a negotiated end to this war. Such an outcome, however, is not entirely inconceivable. The human, material, economic, financial and other costs of the war are huge. Both countries may grow increasingly war-weary and be prepared to compromise to end the war. Putin might conclude that such an outcome would be preferable to a comprehensive battlefield defeat, which could result in his downfall in Russia. Equally, the Ukrainian government might come under greater

pressure from its American and European aid suppliers to settle for an outcome short of a complete Russian military withdrawal from the country.

### **Could NATO be the answer?**

But a negotiated end to the war would still face one especially high obstacle. Although Russia, alongside the United States and the United Kingdom, signed a treaty in 1994 to respect and safeguard Ukrainian independence, Ukraine has twice been invaded by Russia in the last decade. No Ukrainian government would or could afford to take Putin's – or, for that matter, any other Russian leader's – word at face value.

This means one thing above all: Any negotiated settlement would require a cast-iron guarantee from the US and NATO's other member states to defend Ukraine in the case of any future military aggression – or threat thereof – by Russia.

Probably the only way that this certainty could be given to Ukraine is by admitting it as a member of NATO. Under NATO's Article 5, its member states would be obligated to come to Kyiv's aid should Russia again invade the country, and in a much more comprehensive fashion than in the ongoing conflict.

It is by no means certain, however, that even after the current war, all NATO member states would want to link their security irrevocably to that of Ukraine. Nor is it certain that should the US re-elect Donald Trump as its president or a candidate that shares his foreign policy views in 2024, American support for Ukraine would be as steadfast or reliable as it has so far been under President Joe Biden. It is also worth remembering that the prospect of Ukraine's accession to NATO was the *casus belli*, or justification, that Putin used to legitimise his invasion of the country, even if in reality other motives weighed more heavily on his thinking.

This kind of outcome would therefore constitute a fragile truce between Russia and Ukraine, whereby Ukraine would be protected by military deterrence and Russia dissuaded from threatening or trying to subjugate its neighbour by the prospect that this could not be achieved by military force or at only too high a cost. Short of outright war, however, Russia would likely continue to do what it could – and this is potentially a lot – to undermine, weaken and destabilise Ukraine.

## **An uneasy, temporary peace**

There may be only one scenario in which a durable and more genuine peace can be achieved: Putin and his authoritarian regime collapses or is overthrown. In its aftermath, a new democratic Russian state develops – one that renounces the use or threat of military force against its neighbours and accepts Ukraine’s right to exist as a sovereign nation.

For the time being, there are unfortunately few signs of Russia developing into a peaceful liberal-democratic state, or simply one that respects international law. Despite growing evidence of the failure of Putin’s “special military operation” in Ukraine, there are no overt signs that his grip on power in Russia is seriously threatened. Even if Putin does fall from power, it cannot safely be assumed that the next Russian president will necessarily be any less belligerent.

Where does all this then leave a post-war Ukraine? Its independence, security and whatever prosperity it can create with international aid will continue for an indeterminate period to be menaced by a big neighbouring state from whose overbearing presence it cannot escape. It will probably be unable to rely fully on the US and other European countries to defend itself against fresh Russian aggression.

This analysis suggests that Ukraine does have a strong interest in a negotiated, diplomatic solution to the current war – one that Russia has accepted. It is questionable, however, whether Russia can be trusted to comply with the terms of any solution that is acceptable to Ukraine.

That is the tragedy of this war. The guns may one day fall silent, but there is regrettably a high likelihood that it will only be temporary. This does not look like a conflict that will be peacefully resolved, nor does it resemble a frozen conflict – one that is not resolved but does not degenerate into a new war. Rather, it is shaping up to be a volcanic conflict that will smoulder and simmer and occasionally erupt violently, with potentially devastating fallout.

To co-exist peacefully in the long run and for the European continent to be stable and peaceful, Ukraine and Russia must find a *modus vivendi*, a way to live together peacefully. Alas, it is more likely that they will fail than succeed.

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