
Enlarging the Problem: Ukraine and the Future of European Security

The military and diplomatic positions of Ukraine and Russia are entrenched. The US-mediated negotiation process is stalled, and there is little prospect of diplomatic dialogue on how to manage relations between Russia and the West and the future of European security. With the war dragging on into its fifth year and the costs and dangers rising, it could be time to heed President Dwight D. Eisenhower's advice that "If a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it".

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The war in Ukraine is in its fifth year. While both sides are entrenched along a more than largely static 1,000 km front line, long-range strikes and hybrid warfare are continuing. Moscow is pounding big cities in Ukraine on an almost daily basis, while Kyiv is stepping up pressure on Crimea and carrying out long-range strikes on strategic targets in Russia, including oil and military installations. Thousands of soldiers are being killed or injured every month; civilians – particularly in Ukraine – are being targeted; and infrastructure, dwellings, and cultural property are being destroyed. Escalation, either as an end in itself or as a way of forcing de-escalation, is the predominant logic on both sides.

Diplomatic efforts to end the conflict are stalled, not least because of a lack of political will and the diversion of Washington's focus to the crisis in the Middle East.

Neither Russia nor Ukraine is willing to budge in the Donbas. Both claim that the territories are constitutionally theirs – particularly since Russia unilaterally declared its annexation of areas in and around four Ukrainian oblasts (Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia) on 30 September 2022. Therefore, for both sides, any territorial concession is a red line.

There are ways of getting around this dilemma, for example by creating a demilitarised zone. However, even a less-than-perfect arrangement in the Donbas that would enable both sides to save face would leave a wide range of unresolved issues that could either prolong the conflict or trigger a return to violence some time in the future.

A driving factor is that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is linked to a conflict between Russia and the West. The longer the war in Ukraine continues, the greater the risks of war between NATO and Russia. Indeed, for the foreseeable future, Russia will continue to test the West, while NATO countries will increase defence spending and strengthen deterrence. Such dynamics can decrease rather than increase security for both sides. As [Alexander Graef](#) has pointed out, "confrontation does not stabilise itself, nor does it move naturally toward resolution. It risks becoming unmanaged".

Bearing this in mind, and considering the difficulty of untying the Gordian knot of competing territorial claims in the Donbas, it may be time to heed President Eisenhower's advice that "If a problem cannot be solved, enlarge it". Essentially, this means that when opponents are stuck on a narrow, deadlocked issue, they should broaden the scope of their focus, and add more variables to find a way forward.

Contents of a possible "enlarged" package

In addition to brokering a ceasefire and framework agreement between Russia and Ukraine – as difficult as that is – it could be prudent to consider a wider range of other issues of potential interest to the parties.

This could include:

- agreement on peace implementation procedures, including international monitoring of a ceasefire, election monitoring, and administration of a demilitarised zone;

- bilateral security guarantees between Ukraine and a number of countries, including the United States and members of the Coalition of the Willing, and security guarantees for both sides as part of an agreement on the principles of a settlement;
- a non-aggression treaty between Russia and NATO (countries), as well as agreement on confidence- and security-building measures to manage relations along the 5,000 km NATO-Russia contact zone;
- a US-Russia agreement of principles on strategic stability; and
- a roadmap for the [future of European security](#) (ideally to be discussed in the context of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which is currently chaired by Switzerland).

Such a package would have something for everyone. It could address some of the root causes of the conflict, help to manage and rebuild relations in a zero-trust environment, and provide a future-oriented perspective. It could also help to reduce the security dilemmas of all sides: Ukraine, Russia and the West.

Furthermore, negotiation of such a package would give the parties a wider range of issues on which to make trade-offs, instead of a narrow “win-lose” discussion about territory. This would lower the political costs of any compromises for leaders whose narratives have been framed in terms of “victory”. It would also reduce the chances of future frictions or collisions, to use [Michael Kimmage’s expression](#), at various levels, including between Russia and the United States, Russia and Ukraine, and Russia and the West.

More layers and actors

Negotiating such a package would require a multilayered approach. In addition to the current US-brokered peace talks between Ukraine and Russia, there would have to be an intensification of negotiations between the United States and Russia on the normalisation of relations and the future of strategic stability. This could create momentum and leverage for progress on other tracks, such as negotiating a ceasefire and framework agreement between Russia and Ukraine and dialogue on risk management and reduction between Russia and NATO. It would also necessitate an increase in the diplomatic capabilities that the United States invests in its own negotiation architecture.

Enlarging the problem would require increasing the number of actors who are trying to solve it. The chances of success would be enhanced if the United States could work together with other key stakeholders, including Europe and China. This could either be coordinated through a [contact group](#) or a structured process that enables coordination between the different levels and tracks – or both. That said, the formats should not be too complex or cumbersome. Military-to-military contacts between European NATO members and Russia would have to be renewed and diplomatic channels reopened.

Attention would also have to be paid to the sequencing, and how the various components of the package fit together.

Major drawbacks are that currently there is no contact group, it is not clear who speaks for Europe (or even if it wants to talk to Russia), the NATO-Russia Council is suspended, and the OSCE is gridlocked. As a result, the development of such a package approach may have to start in informal spaces. But ultimately it will only succeed if it is formally supported by the states concerned.

Another risk is that enlarging the problem could give some stakeholders new excuses not to engage in good faith and to hold hostage progress on one set of issues until others are resolved to their satisfaction. But this is the current reality anyway, so it is best to address the problem head on.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine cannot continue forever, but the longer it lasts, the greater the costs and risks. Cemeteries and hospitals will fill up, while treasuries, ammunition, and public support will dwindle. Yet, at the moment there is no path to peace; indeed, there is a serious risk of further escalation.

The outcome of this war will define the future of Ukraine and Russia, but also European and international peace and security. The lack of a solution in the Donbas should not lead to a protracted conflict with heightened risks of horizontal and vertical escalation. Rather, it should trigger an intensification of a structured diplomatic dialogue that enlarges the problem in a way that increases the chances of a comprehensive and sustainable peace being achieved.