

Ukrainian Neutrality Is Still the Key to Peace

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*President-elect Trump said on January 9th that he is [planning](#) a meeting with Russian **President Vladimir Putin** about the war in Ukraine. He said “Putin wants to meet,” because “we have to get that war over with.” So what are the chances that a new administration in Washington can break the deadlock and finally bring peace to Ukraine?*

During both of his election campaigns, Trump [said](#) he wanted to end the wars the U.S. was involved in. But in his first term, Trump himself exacerbated all the major crises he is now confronting. He [escalated](#) Obama’s military “pivot to Asia” against China, disregarded Obama’s [fears](#) that sending “lethal” aid to Ukraine would lead to war with Russia, [withdrew](#) from the JCPOA nuclear agreement with Iran, and [encouraged](#) Netanyahu’s ambitions to land-grab and massacre his way to a mythical “Greater Israel.”

However, of all these crises, the one that Trump keeps insisting he really wants to [resolve](#) is the war in Ukraine, which Russia launched and the U.S. and NATO then chose to [prolong](#), leading to hundreds of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian casualties. The Western powers have until now been determined to fight this war of attrition to the last Ukrainian, in the vain hope that they can somehow eventually defeat and [weaken](#) Russia without triggering a nuclear war.

Trump rightly blames Biden for [blocking](#) the peace agreement negotiated between Russia and Ukraine in March and April 2022, and for the three more years of war that have resulted from that deadly and irresponsible decision.

While Russia should be condemned for its invasion, Trump and his three predecessors all helped to set the stage for war in Ukraine: Clinton launched NATO’s expansion into eastern Europe, against the [advice](#) of leading American diplomats; Bush promised Ukraine it could join NATO, ignoring even [more urgent](#) diplomatic warnings; and Obama supported the [2014 coup](#) that plunged Ukraine into [civil war](#).

Trump himself began sending [weapons](#) to Ukraine to fight the self-declared “people’s republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk, even though the Minsk II Accord’s OSCE-monitored ceasefire was largely holding and had greatly [reduced](#) the violence of the civil war from its peak in 2014 and 2015.

Trump’s injection of U.S. weapons was bound to rekindle the conflict and provoke Russia, especially as one of the [first units](#) trained on new U.S. weapons was the infamous Azov Regiment, which Congress [cut off](#) from U.S. arms and training in 2018 due to its [central role](#) as a hub for transnational neo-Nazi organizing.

So what will it take to negotiate a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine? The

answer has been hidden in plain sight, obscured by the rote repetition of deceptive rhetoric from Ukrainian and Western officials, claiming that Russia has refused to negotiate or that, if not stopped in Ukraine, Russia will invade NATO countries, such as Poland or the Baltic states.

The [agreement](#) that had Ukrainian [negotiators](#) popping champagne corks when they returned from Turkey at the end of March 2022 was referred to by all sides as a “Neutrality Agreement,” and nothing has changed in the strategic picture to suggest that Ukrainian [neutrality](#) is any less central to peace today.

A neutral Ukraine means that it would not join NATO or participate in joint NATO military exercises, nor would it allow foreign military bases on its territory. This would satisfy Russia’s security interests, while Ukraine’s security would be guaranteed by other powerful nations, including NATO members.

The fact that Russia was ready to so quickly end the war on that basis is all the evidence an objective observer should need to recognize that Ukrainian neutrality was always Russia’s most critical war aim. And the celebrations of the Ukrainian negotiators on their return from Turkey confirm that the Ukrainians willingly accepted Ukrainian neutrality as the basis for a peace agreement.

“Security guarantees and neutrality, non-nuclear status of our state. We are ready to go for it,” Zelensky [declared](#) in March 2022.

Neutrality would give Ukraine a chance to transform itself from a New Cold War disaster zone, where greedy foreign oligarchs gobble up its [natural resources](#) on the cheap, into a bridge connecting east and west, whose people can reap the benefits of all kinds of commercial, social and cultural relations with all their neighbors.

Biden justified endlessly prolonging the war by stressing territorial questions and insisting that Ukraine must recover all the territory it has lost since the 2014 coup. By contrast, Russia has generally [prioritized](#) the destruction of enemy forces and NATO weapons over occupying more territory.

As Russia inexorably occupies the remainder of Donetsk oblast (province) after three years of war, it has still not moved to occupy Kramatorsk or Sloviansk, the large twin cities in the north of that oblast where 250,000 people live. They were among the [first cities](#) to rise up against the post-coup government in 2014, and were besieged and recaptured by Ukrainian government forces in the first [major battle](#) of the civil war in July 2014.

Neither has Russia pushed further westward into the neighboring oblasts of Kharkiv or Dnipropetrovsk. Nor has it launched a [much-predicted](#) offensive to occupy Odesa in the south-west, despite its strategic location on the Black Sea, its history as a Russian city with a Russian-speaking population, the infamous [massacre](#) of 42 anti-coup protesters there by a mob led by Right Sector in May 2014, and its current role as a hotbed of [draft resistance](#) in Ukraine.

If Russia’s goal was to annex as much of Ukraine as possible, or to use it as a stepping-stone to invade Poland or other European countries, as Western politicians have regularly claimed, Ukraine’s largest cities would have been prime targets.

Image is from InfoBrics



But it has done the opposite. It even withdrew from Kherson in November 2022, after occupying it for eight months. NATO leaders had previously [decided](#) that the fall of Kherson to Ukrainian government forces would be the chance they were waiting for to reopen peace negotiations from a position of strength, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs **General Mark Milley** argued they should “seize the moment” to do so. Instead, President Biden put the [kibosh](#) on yet another chance for peace.

When Congress approved another \$60 billion for weapons shipments to Ukraine in April 2024, Senator and now **Vice President-elect J.D. Vance** voted against the bill. Vance explained his vote in an [op-ed](#) in the New York Times, arguing that the war was not winnable and that Biden should start talking to Putin.

In explaining why Ukraine could not win, Vance relied heavily on [testimony](#) by NATO’s top military commander, U.S. **General Christopher Cavoli**, to the House Armed Services Committee. Vance wrote that even the most optimistic projections of the impact of the weapons bill could not make up for the massive imbalance between Russian and Ukrainian armaments and forces. Cavoli told the committee that Russia already outgunned Ukraine by 5-to-1 in artillery shells, and that a European push to produce a million shells in the past year had [yielded](#) only 600,000.

While Ukraine was desperate for more Patriot missiles to intercept 4,000 Russian missile and drone strikes per month, the U.S. could only provide 650 in the next year, even with the additional funds, due to the massive amount of weapons being shipped to Israel or already promised to Taiwan.

Both Russia and Ukraine have covered up their [casualties](#) with propaganda, underestimating their own casualties and exaggerating their enemies’, to mislead their own people, their allies and their enemies alike. General Cavoli [testified](#) under oath that over 315,000 Russian soldiers had been killed and wounded. But he went on to say that, by calling up reserves and conscripting new troops, Russia had not only made up those losses but increased its overall troop strength by 15%, and was well on the way to building a 1.5 million-strong army.

Image: Ukrainian army mobilization (Source: Sputnik / Evgeny Kotenko)



Ukraine, on the other hand, has a recruitment crisis, due to an underlying demographic [shortage](#) of young men caused by a very low birth-rate in the 1990s, when living standards and life expectancy plummeted under the impact of Western-backed economic shock treatment. This has now been severely compounded by the impacts of the war.

Ella Libanova, a demographer at Ukraine's National Academy of Science, [estimated](#) to Reuters in July 2023 that, with so many people leaving the country and building new lives in other countries as the war drags on, the total population in government-held areas might already have fallen as low as 28 million, from a total population of 45 million ten years ago. It must surely be even lower now.

Based on huge imbalances in artillery shells and other weapons, Ukrainian and U.S. claims that Ukraine has suffered much lower casualties than Russia are frankly unbelievable, and some analysts believe Ukrainian casualties have been [much higher](#) than Russia's. The declining morale of its troops, increased draft [resistance](#), [desertion](#), and [emigration](#) from Ukraine have all combined to shrink the available pool of new conscripts.

Vance concluded,

"Ukraine [needs more soldiers](#) than it can field, even with draconian conscription policies. And it needs more matériel than the United States can provide. This reality must inform any future Ukraine policy, from further congressional aid to the diplomatic course set by the president."

In his press conference on January 3rd, President-elect Trump framed the need for peace in Ukraine as a question of basic humanity.

"I don't think it's appropriate that I meet [Putin] until after the 20th, which I hate because every day people are being - many, many young people are being killed, soldiers," Trump said.

More and more Ukrainians agree. While [opinion polls](#) soon after Russia's invasion showed 72% wanting to fight until victory, that is now down to 38%. [Most Ukrainians](#) want quick negotiations and are open to making territorial concessions as part of a peace deal.

In recent interviews, President Zelensky has been [softening](#) his position, suggesting that Ukraine is willing to cede territory to Russia to end the war as long as the rest of the country is protected by a "NATO umbrella." But NATO membership for Ukraine has always been totally unacceptable to the Russians, and so the 2022 neutrality agreement instead

provided for security guarantees by which other countries, including individual NATO members, would guarantee Ukraine's security.

Trump's peace plan is [rumored](#) to entail freezing the current geographical positions and shelving Ukraine's accession to NATO for 20 years. But continuing to dangle NATO membership in front of Ukraine, as the U.S. has bullied NATO into doing since 2008, is a root cause of this conflict, not a solution. Neutrality, on the other hand, resolves the root causes of the conflict for all the countries involved, and therefore provides a stable and sustainable solution.

There are many things we both disagree with Donald Trump about. But the need for peace in Ukraine is one thing we agree on. We hope Trump understands that Ukrainian neutrality is the key to peace and the best hope for the future of Ukraine, Russia, the United States and Europe, and, in fact, for the survival of human civilization.

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Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J. S. Davies are the authors of [War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict](#), published by OR Books, with an updated edition due in May 2025. They are regular contributors to Global Research.

Featured image: President Donald J. Trump participates in a bilateral meeting with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky Wednesday, Sept. 25, 2019, at the InterContinental New York Barclay in New York City. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)

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