

Opinion – Immediate Ceasefire in Ukraine Is a Double-Edged Sword

Written by Jinghao Zhou

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JINGHAO ZHOU, DEC 16 2024

Donald Trump has claimed that he could end the Russia-Ukraine war within 24 hours of taking office. He now calls for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine and the beginning of negotiations. However, history shows that what cannot be achieved on the battlefield is unlikely to be obtained at the negotiating table. Immediate ceasefire of the Ukraine war could be a double-edged sword for the United States under the current circumstances. Russia occupies significant Ukrainian territories, including Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and parts of Zaporizhzhia, amounting to approximately 18% of Ukraine's territory. Ukraine has made incursions into the Russian regions of Belgorod and Bryansk, only amounting to less than 1% of Russia's total territory. How can both sides achieve their goals at the negotiating table?

Trump's special envoy Keith Kellogg suggests ending the war by halting weapon supplies to Ukraine if it refuses to engage in peace talks — and increasing weapon deliveries to Ukraine if Russia fails to do the same. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has suggested the possibility of negotiating a cease-fire deal with Russia, proposing that the status of occupied territories could be addressed diplomatically at a later stage. This reflects Ukraine's constrained position under various pressures. Russia is open to a peace talk but is unlikely to make a huge compromise with Ukraine.

Despite NATO's extensive support, sufficient military resources such as ammunition and air defense systems have not been provided to enable Ukraine to effectively counter Russian advances and produce decisive outcomes in strategic offensives due to unclear strategic objectives and effective implementation measures.

Sanctions imposed by the U.S. and its allies have not crippled the Russian economy as intended; instead, the Russian economy grew by 3.1% in the third quarter of 2024, and its national debt remains at 14.6% of GDP—approximately the same level as when the war began in 2022. In 2023, Russia spent \$160 billion on military needs, accounting for about 40% of its budget. For 2025, Russia has already allocated 13.5 trillion rubles (over \$145 billion) for national defense, representing 32.5% of the budget.

With support from North Korea, Iran, China, and other countries, Russia is likely to sustain its efforts on Ukrainian soil. In contrast, Ukraine is unlikely to achieve a decisive victory in the short term. If its allies continue with the current strategy while reducing financial aid, Ukraine risks depleting its resources and prolonging the conflict into an unpredictable stalemate, potentially leaving it at a disadvantage during negotiations.

Without doubt, an immediate ceasefire could help stop further casualties and bring some much-needed relief to the people affected by the conflict. It can also ease the immediate burden of supporting Ukraine militarily and financially, freeing resources for domestic priorities and addressing other international challenges, particularly countering China's challenges. However, an immediate ceasefire according to the current battlefield map could also benefit U.S. rivals—authoritarian regimes. First, it would solidify Russia's control over occupied territories, allowing Moscow to claim a partial victory and bolster domestic support. Such an outcome rewards territorial aggression and undermines international norms.

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Second, it could weaken the U.S. commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, signaling to adversaries that aggression can succeed if sustained long enough. European allies might interpret a ceasefire as a sign of wavering U.S. resolve, leading to fractures within NATO and weakening transatlantic unity. Allies in Asia, including Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, may question the reliability of U.S. security commitments in the region.

Third, China has been closely watching the West's response to the Ukraine crisis, focusing on the cohesion of alliances, the impact of sanctions, and the dynamics of military support. An immediate freeze of the war would demonstrate limited Western resolve and suggest that territorial aggression can yield lasting gains. This reinforces Beijing's belief that the international community would hesitate to intervene militarily in Taiwan and encourages China to change the status quo over the Taiwan Strait, believing it can manage economic sanctions and diplomatic pressures.

Fourth, an immediate ceasefire does not guarantee long-term peace. The lack of a comprehensive peace agreement leaves underlying issues unaddressed, and it merely postpones hostilities, making the prospect of sustainable peace elusive. Historically, frozen conflicts like those in Georgia's South Ossetia and Moldova's Transnistria have fostered prolonged instability, enabling aggressors to consolidate control over occupied territories and exert leverage over affected states. The lesson from Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea demonstrates that tolerating an aggressor only encourages further expansion of their ambitions.

Instead of an immediate ceasefire agreement, it is necessary to further support Ukraine in reclaiming its territory by changing the current strategy before reaching any cease-fire deal. Historical patterns show that successful territorial recaptures often require asserting military strength before engaging in peace talks. A cease-fire without the necessary restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty risks legitimizing Russia's invasion. A successful Ukrainian counteroffensive could not only enhance Ukraine's leverage in negotiations but also serve as a powerful deterrent against future territorial ambitions by other authoritarian regimes globally.

The United States will not compromise American national interests when mediating a cease-fire agreement between Ukraine and Russia. However, it will be an extremely challenging task for any American president to broker a peace deal at this time because a deal should uphold Ukraine's sovereignty and internationally recognized borders, align with U.S. support for a rules-based international order, and ensure a balance between both parties instead of rewarding Russian aggression. It should strengthen U.S.-European relations rather than undermine allied unity, adhere to longstanding U.S. foreign policy principles rather than prioritize political gains, and enhance the U.S.'s reputation as a reliable global leader. Otherwise, immediately freezing the war could potentially harm U.S. national interests in the long term and directly encourage the ambitions of aggressors worldwide.

About the author:

Dr. Jinghao Zhou is an associate professor of Asian studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York. His research focuses on contemporary China, and U.S.- China relations. He has published six books and six dozen articles. His latest book is *Great Power Competition as the New Normal of China-U.S. Relations* (Palgrave 2023).