

Par e-mail : <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/04/what-would-ukraine-russia-peace-deal-look-like>

# It's time to ask: what would a Ukraine-Russia peace deal look like?

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If the Russians are ever to withdraw, then a diplomatic agreement on the terms of withdrawal will be necessary. So what should the demands be?

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There is still the possibility of a diplomatic settlement that would bring an early end to this dreadful war and Russian military withdrawal while safeguarding the vital interests of [Ukraine](#). Indeed, if the Russians are ever to withdraw, a diplomatic agreement on the terms of withdrawal will be necessary.

The first round of Ukrainian-Russian talks has now taken place in Belarus, and a member of the Ukrainian delegation has stated that “The parties identified a number of priority topics in which certain solutions were outlined”.

The West should back a peace agreement and Russian withdrawal by offering Russia the lifting of all new sanctions imposed on it. The offer to Ukraine should be a massive reconstruction package that will also help Ukraine to move towards the West economically and politically rather than militarily – just as Finland and Austria were able to do during the Cold War despite their neutral status.

The demands by the Russian side are that Ukraine should sign a treaty of neutrality; engage in “demilitarisation” and “denazification”; and recognise Russian sovereignty over Crimea, which was seized back by Russia after the Ukrainian Revolution. These demands are a mixed bag of the acceptable, the unacceptable, and the undefined. The option of neutrality for Ukraine has often been called “Finlandisation”, and perhaps the determined and unified Ukrainian response to Russian aggression over the past week has given a new meaning to that term in the case of Ukraine. For like the Finns in the “winter war” of 1939-40, the Ukrainians have also been abandoned militarily by the West, which has declared publicly and repeatedly that it has no intention of fighting to defend them.

On the other hand, it seems that the extraordinary courage and resolution with which the Finns fought convinced Stalin that to rule Finland would be too much of a challenge. Finland became the only part of the former Russian Empire not to be incorporated in the USSR, and during the cold war, though neutral by treaty, was able to develop as a successful social market democracy. Similarly, we must hope that the courage and determination of the Ukrainians has convinced Putin that it will be impossible to run Ukraine as a Russian client state, and neutrality is the best deal he is going to get.

President Volodymyr Zelensky has publicly hinted that a treaty of neutrality may be on offer; and he is right to do so. For two things have been made absolutely clear by this war: that Russia will fight to prevent Ukraine becoming a military ally of the West, and the West will not fight to defend

Ukraine. In view of this, to keep open the possibility of an offer of [Nato](#) membership that Nato has no intention of ever honouring, and asking Ukrainians to die for this fiction, is worse than hypocritical.

As to “demilitarisation” and “denazification”, the meaning and terms of these will have to be negotiated. Demilitarisation is obviously unacceptable if it means that Ukraine must unilaterally dissolve its armed forces; but the latest statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has suggested that Russia would accept a ban on missiles based in Ukraine. This could be modelled on a similar guarantee to the US that ended the Cuba Missile Crisis.

As for “Denazification”, this presumably means that Ukraine should ban extreme right wing nationalist parties and militias at Russia’s behest. This is a completely unacceptable interference in Ukraine’s internal affairs; but perhaps Ukraine could make a counter-offer that would meet Moscow’s concerns about the rights and future of the Russian minority in Ukraine by guaranteeing these under the Ukrainian constitution – which, by the way, is something that the West should support anyway, in accordance with its own principles.

There remains the demand for recognition of the Russian annexation of Crimea. Here, respect for international law (slightly ambiguous in the case of Crimea, which was only transferred from Russia to Ukraine by Soviet decree in 1954) must be tempered by considerations of reality, the prevention of future conflict, and the interests of ordinary people in the region – which is essentially what we have been asking Russia to do in the case of Kosovo.

Ukraine has already lost Crimea, and cannot recover it, as Serbia cannot recover Kosovo, without a bloody and unending war that in this case Ukraine would almost certainly lose. Our principle in all such disputes must be that the fate of the territories concerned must be decided by local democratic referenda under international supervision. This should also apply to the Donbas separatist republics.

These proposals will be denounced as “rewarding Russian aggression”; but if Putin’s original aim really was to subjugate the whole of Ukraine, then by such an agreement Moscow would fall far short of its maximal goals. Moreover, such an agreement would give Russia nothing that it had not in practice already achieved before launching the invasion.

The West is morally right to oppose the monstrous and illegal Russian war and to have imposed exceptionally severe sanctions on Russia in response, but would be morally wrong to oppose a reasonable agreement to end the invasion and spare the people of Ukraine terrible suffering. America’s own record over the past generation gives no basis for such self-righteous hyper-legalism.

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