A global diplomatic vacuum

So far, we haven't seen any real co-ordinated efforts to end the war in Ukraine. It is high time to address this failure

The recent 'peace missions' undertaken by Viktor Orbán, who currently holds the rotating EU presidency, caused much consternation within the European Union. In particular, the question of who speaks for the EU and whether and to what extent Hungary should be sanctioned for these trips was heavily discussed. What was often overlooked, however, is the fact that Orbán is only able to play the role of a peace-bringer because of the international vacuum in this area. Russia has been waging its war of aggression against Ukraine for more than two years now, and yet, there is still no coordinated structure to broker peace.

The failed bilateral Russian-Ukrainian negotiations in Istanbul were followed by a series of ad hoc initiatives, with Italy, China and Brazil all presenting peace plans, and even the Pope apparently joining in the attempts to bring about peace. Then there was the multilateral summit in Bürgenstock, Switzerland, which wisely set out not to achieve peace but to establish a process that might result in peace. And yet, none of these efforts were connected with one another.

Amidst all the isolated initiatives and peace plans and the overarching peace conferences, one thing has been sorely lacking: a flexible and enduring structure that regularly brings together the key stakeholders. That is why we need an international contact group to address Russia's war in Ukraine. It would take its cue from the UN General Assembly resolution passed one year after the outbreak of the war, which called on all states and international organisations to support diplomatic efforts to achieve a just and lasting peace.

Potential formats

A contact group is no panacea, and it won't achieve peace within just a few months. It would, however, be able to coordinate the relevant international actors, identify common positions across peace plans and speak to the warring parties with a collective voice. Such groups generally work according to non-binding rules and exist solely to promote

coordination, cooperation and cohesion in a given conflict situation. At the same time, international contact groups serve to highlight the urgency of particular conflict situations. They can, especially in times of growing geopolitical tensions, be an important tool for getting the relevant powers around the same table, and this in itself can have a de-escalatory effect.

There certainly is plenty for such a contact group to tackle: it would need to facilitate dialogue between the warring parties and, equally importantly, present joint initiatives. It could put pressure on the two parties to start negotiations. And it could initiate small steps that might help to improve the situation of the civilian population, helping to put restraint in attacks on civilian infrastructure and the safeguarding of nuclear facilities on the international agenda.

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For such an approach to succeed in the current Russia-Ukraine war, in which Russia in particular is clearly disregarding many of the aforementioned issues, the group's composition would be key. That's why it's important to distinguish between contact group members and warring parties. The mistake of the Normandy Format, in which Russia itself was allowed to participate as it was nominally not a warring party, mustn't be repeated. The two warring parties should not be part of the contact group, as it is not intended as a negotiating platform. Instead, there should be a supplementary format that would allow them to be brought on board when appropriate, either individually or together. This would mean that they don't have a permanent seat at the table, but also that they are not excluded. Such a formula would be an elegant way of getting around the thorny issue of whether all parties should participate, which was a source of disagreement at Bürgenstock.

The contact group would need to be composed in such a way that it would have sufficient political influence. The permanent members of the UN Security Council (minus Russia) should form the core. As a key European power, Germany should be included, as should Turkey, which helped broker the successful grain deal and continues to maintain good relations to both warring parties. Alongside the Security Council members, the BRICS states should also be involved in order to bolster

the group's global credentials. You would then not only have China on board but also India, Brazil and South Africa. In addition, it might be useful to bring in Switzerland, a neutral country and one with significant expertise in conflict mediation. In this somewhat unwieldy constellation of nine-plus-two states, the Swiss could perhaps play the role of facilitator.

To aid the successful functioning of this format, it would make sense for the participants to appoint special envoys that would primarily focus on the conflict and act as contact persons both internally and externally. This would require close ties with multilateral organisations. The UN could thus appoint a special advisor (not a special representative) who would support the work of the contact group with the aid of the United Nations Secretariat. A similar role could be performed by the OSCE, which has long-standing experience in Ukraine and would thereby go some way towards fulfilling its brief as Europe's central security organisation.

Someone needs to step up to the plate

All these 'woulds' and 'coulds' and hypothetical constellations underline just how difficult it would be to ensure such a group can function and exert influence on the hitherto fragmented and uncoordinated initiatives to promote peace. To even get that far, however, efforts to establish a contact group would have to first overcome a major political obstacle, namely the need for someone to get the ball rolling and invest political capital. The ground would need to be laid soon; after all, there is only a small window of opportunity before the US elections. Either way, the process of agreeing the actual composition of such a group would have to wait at least until the election result is known.

The UN secretary-general could then take the initiative, or impetus could come from a small group of states with a shared desire to see a just peace achieved as soon as possible. A joint initiative by Germany, South Africa and Turkey, for instance, would be a promising start. The two warring parties would likely feel themselves sufficiently represented by such a group, as would NATO and the BRICS states. A third possibility would be a diplomatic initiative on the part of the Finnish government, which assumes the OSCE chair in 2025 and could make a contact group a key mission during its term as chair. It would, 50 years on from the agreement of the Helsinki Accords, represent a forward-looking approach aimed at focusing attention on and bringing about lasting peace in Europe.

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Whether any contact group could offer added value would hinge on the two warring parties' willingness to work with it. But given the current military stalemate and the war weariness on both sides, it's entirely possible that a group with this composition could offer a face-saving way of addressing unresolved issues. The repeatedly cited 'maturing of the conflict' – necessary for both sides to see negotiations as a viable option – could perhaps be accelerated with the formation of a contact group. At the same time, a suitable format would be available as soon as the need for stronger international coordination arises.

The continued fighting and the danger of an escalating conflict between Russia and the West affect numerous international actors, especially the UN Security Council and the BRICS states. The sooner they find a joint format for discussing how to end the war, or at least avoid further escalation, the better. Otherwise they are simply giving the floor to political illusionists such as Orbán, who is misusing peace-making as a vehicle for his own publicity.



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