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Ukraine's black swan moment

Kyiv has given in to emotion rather than critically reassessing its strategy. What can save Ukraine from a never-ending war of attrition?

It was clear to realists as early as 2014 that peace talks with Russia would not be straightforward, whilst optimists began to realise this around the second year of the full-scale invasion. It is unclear what the idealists think on this matter, particularly within the Ukrainian government, which has traditionally lacked the ability to assess the world around itself pragmatically for years.

A lack of realistic assessments has become a hallmark of the decision-making process on foreign policy in Kyiv. The security strategy up to 2022 and beyond was built on an excessive hope that Ukraine's membership of NATO and the EU was just around the corner; on the indefinite support of partners who, for some reason, were referred to as 'allies'; an underestimation of the resilience of the Russian economy and political system; and a belief in 'black swans' favouring Ukraine. Idealistic plans, such as the 'Formula for Peace' or the 'Plan for Victory', appear not only to have served as a source of moral support for society, but also to have generally reflected their authors' assessment of the situation. When President Trump's 'black swans' began to fly in the opposite direction, Kyiv responded with despair and emotion rather than a critical reassessment of its strategy.

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This makes it all the more difficult today to begin or continue discussions about the possible parameters of a peace agreement or truce with Russia. For behind the façade of talk of peace negotiations, which supposedly bring all wars to an end, lies the fear that this will in fact be a discussion of the terms and nature of defeat. The course of the war in its current form, as well as its prospects, give no grounds for viewing talks of peace as a discussion of the details of victory. Which makes these discussions difficult for everyone.

But they are, of course, necessary. International politics is not a fairy tale about a magical world where one can be saved simply by not mentioning the thief's name. Rather, it is a pragmatic game in which the fate of states depends on their ability not only to win, but also to minimise their losses. Assessing the damage, learning lessons and achieving the best possible outcome in every situation increase the chances of survival and historical success.

Being realistic about current circumstances

Due to the emotional sensitivity and political cost involved in Ukraine, the issue of peace with Russia has long since become a tangled web of myths, manipulation and accusations. The categorical nature of statements such as the claim that, in principle, nothing can be negotiated with Russia is emotionally understandable, but strategically it dooms Ukraine to perpetual war with negligible chances of victory, yet significant chances of being destroyed.

However, the agreement with Russia should not be viewed as a guarantee of lasting peace. Even if the Russian leadership adheres to treaties, it will do so only in respect of those it deems acceptable – or those where the cost of breaching them is too high. Russia would not breach a treaty with Ukraine that fully served Moscow's current interests, but Kyiv would not sign such a treaty. The question is not a black-and-white choice between endless war and unconditional peace. Rather, it is a middle-ground compromise that will, to a certain extent, take the parties' interests into account. The quality of diplomacy, preparation for negotiations and the process itself will determine the extent to which these interests are taken into account, but it will not be a panacea. Ending the war does not automatically place Ukraine in a position where Russia is no longer regarded as a threat.

If one views peace not in terms of surrender, disarmament or ignoring strategic realities, then the key question arises: what are the acceptable and unacceptable terms of such an agreement for Ukraine?

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Opinions on this may vary considerably, because it is possible to continue fighting until Russia's collapse, until Ukraine joins NATO, or until the return of the occupied territories – and these would be entirely different wars. The debate over what constitutes 'victory' has never

associated with them.

really taken hold in Ukrainian society, politics or expert circles throughout the years of the war. Nevertheless, one interpretation of victory is a peace that offers prospects no worse than those before the war. The more opportunities such a peace creates, the better it will be for Ukraine.

One of the fundamental of these is the ability to preserve statehood and the prospects for development, given the dramatic decline in demographic and economic potential caused by the war. In terms of potential, Ukraine will no longer be what it was before 2022. Building a new economic model that takes account of the new geographical and social realities will become a matter of survival. Therefore, maintaining maritime trade and access to European markets must be treated as the highest priority and protected to the greatest possible extent. The same applies to the prospect of future EU membership.

This is also linked to the ability to defend oneself. Economic weakness will significantly limit the scope for 'internal balancing' – that is, containing Russia by substantially increasing defence spending. Nor will anyone provide ironclad external security guarantees. And the issue is not just about NATO membership. The fact is that major powers in the modern world are increasingly keen to avoid security commitments and the risks associated with them. We may receive assurances of support and something akin to 'security agreements', but no real guarantees. In these circumstances, another important requirement is added to that of a viable economy: the freedom to cooperate with partners. This should not alarm Russia, because there is no question of NATO membership. Ukraine, however, has every reason to be concerned for its survival. And it is important to retain the freedom to develop its defence capabilities and strengthen them with the help of partners – even if formal alliances remain out of reach.

A scope for pragmatic solutions

It is also important to preserve democracy. Whilst this requirement is unlikely to be explicitly included in a peace agreement with Russia, this objective should remain a key priority. Well-developed institutions, democratic procedures, civil liberties and, ultimately, European values must not be mere slogans, but the substance of state policy. It will be extremely difficult for a country devastated by war, facing the prospect of severe financial problems, to build a democracy; yet without this, the chances of preserving and defending statehood in the next historical cycle will be significantly reduced.

Even if one regards the war with Russia as perpetual, there may well be lulls in the fighting. Of course, a peace perceived by the parties as preparation for the next war will most likely turn out to be just that, but even in this situation there is scope for pragmatic solutions. In this sense, the experience of the Minsk Agreements is both instructive and insufficiently studied.

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One could, of course, dismiss any talk of agreements with Russia. But in that case, one should not be surprised if someone else ends up negotiating with Russia. Trump's decision to ease anti-Russian sanctions could weaken the regime on which Ukrainian diplomacy has staked so much. In the long term, this will create significantly worse conditions for us in future negotiations with the Kremlin.

It will also bring us back to the ever-pressing issue of cost. Ukraine is paying a high price for this war, becoming increasingly vulnerable and dependent. One might hope that this trend will change, but such hopes are hardly a reliable basis for a strategy. There is a theory that the chances of the war resuming are at their lowest following a decisive victory by one of the sides. However, the chances of a scenario involving a decisive Ukrainian victory are still slim.

Of course, the list of Ukraine's priorities, demands and red lines will not automatically translate into an agreement. Russia is guided by its own considerations and assessments and is hardly prepared to engage in substantive negotiations at present. This circumstance, however, does not remove the question concerning Ukraine's own aspirations in this war.



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