



# Ukraine Peace Proposals – The Limits of Normative Settlements

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## **Ukraine Peace Proposals – The Limits of Normative Settlements**

*By Wu Yijie*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*This commentary argues that peace in Ukraine cannot rest on normative settlement frameworks alone. Drawing on historical precedents and post-2014 experience (defined by Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea territory), it shows that settlements lacking credible enforcement and deterrence are structurally fragile. Durable peace depends on power projection as well as the consequential cost/benefit assessment, and not just on principles or promises alone.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Recent discussions about a potential settlement in Ukraine have gained renewed momentum. In mid-November, US President Donald Trump advanced a 28-point peace proposal, presented as a comprehensive framework to end the war and stabilise Europe's eastern flank. The proposed points – twice as many as those in US President Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points" proposal for peace following World War I – implicitly signal the US ambition: a rules-based settlement intended to reset the regional order, laying bare Trump's desire for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The critical analytical question, however, is not whether the proposal is normatively attractive, but whether it addresses the underlying structural conditions that have rendered previous peace arrangements in Ukraine unstable.

Historical precedent and Ukraine's post-2014 experience suggest that peace initiatives grounded primarily in principles rather than enforceable power are unlikely to endure. Instead of evaluating the viability of current proposals, this analysis will focus on the structural conditions needed for any settlement to endure.

## **The Structural Constraint**

The war in Ukraine is not the result of diplomatic miscalculation or informational failure. It is the manifestation of a persistent structural imbalance between Russian revisionist motives and Ukraine's security position. In such environments, negotiation alone cannot generate durable outcomes. Agreements may pause hostilities, but they do not resolve the incentives for renewed conflict.

Since 2014, Ukraine has participated in multiple diplomatic efforts aimed at managing escalation and fighting a war. The failure of these arrangements was not accidental. Each relied on voluntary compliance, vague enforcement, or self-restraint by the more powerful party. When the expected costs of violation fell below the perceived strategic gains, these agreements naturally fell apart.

This pattern reflects a deeper constraint in international politics: commitments not backed by credible enforcement mechanisms to deter belligerent and errant behaviour by one state actor against another are not likely to last. Promises made under pressure tend to lose their force once circumstances change. In Ukraine's case, the absence of automatic penalties for non-compliance turned peace agreements into temporary arrangements rather than binding commitments to secure Ukrainian territorial integrity and sovereign independence.

## **The Record of Guarantees**

Ukraine's diplomatic history offers a clear empirical record. The 1994 Budapest Memorandum – which required Ukraine to give up its nuclear weapons – replaced nuclear deterrence with political assurances that imposed no operational costs on guarantors or violators. When those assurances were tested in 2014, they proved non-binding.

The Minsk I and II agreements followed a similar logic. Russia was regarded both as a negotiating party and a guarantor. Future promises were prioritised over verified compliance. Deterrence was replaced with proceduralism. The outcome was predictable: once Moscow reassessed the balance of costs and benefits, the agreements collapsed.

In contrast, Ukraine's continued survival after 2022 has rested on fundamentally different foundations. Sustained military assistance, intelligence integration, training assistance, and economic pressure altered Russia's cost-benefit analysis. These measures did not end the war, but they constrained its trajectory. The distinction is instructive. Where power was present, agreements held. Where it was absent, they dissolved.

## **The Limits of Normative Peace**

The appeal to a Wilsonian-style settlement reflects a broader tendency in international diplomacy to treat peace as a legal endpoint rather than a strategic condition. Wilson's Fourteen Points sought to replace balance-of-power politics with normative commitments and collective guarantees. Their failure was not moral but

structural. The post–World War I order lacked enforcement capacity, depended on voluntary restraint, and was ultimately abandoned by its principal architect.

The lesson is not that norms are irrelevant, but that they are insufficient in the absence of power. Increasing principles does not correct enforcement deficits. A 28–point framework that does not specify how violations will be punished risks reproducing the same vulnerabilities that undermined earlier settlements.

### **What a Viable Settlement Requires**

If peace in Ukraine is to be sustainable, it must be anchored in a transformation of incentives rather than an expansion of promises. This entails several conditions.

First, Ukrainian security cannot be premised on neutrality or self-restraint. Previous attempts to institutionalise neutrality failed because they reduced Ukraine’s defensive capacity without constraining Russian options.

Second, enforcement mechanisms must be automatic rather than discretionary. Agreements that require political deliberation to trigger consequences invite probing behaviour. Deterrence functions only when responses are predictable and costly.

Third, territorial questions must be managed without hasty premature legal finality. Freezing lines of control while shifting the underlying balance of power is strategically preferable to formal concessions that legitimise force.

Finally, any settlement must be embedded in material integration. Ukraine’s inclusion in Western defence-industrial, logistical, and training networks is not an optional matter; it is central to the sustainability of peace. Structural integration generates facts on the ground that are costly to undo.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this analysis is not to oppose negotiation, but to clarify the conditions under which negotiation can produce positive results. The current push for a comprehensive peace plan reflects understandable fatigue with prolonged conflict. However, history suggests that peace initiatives that prioritise closure over enforcement cause instability rather than resolution.

Ukraine’s war will not be settled by a single document, no matter how comprehensive. It will be influenced by deterrence, institutional embedding, and the gradual reconfiguration of power. Negotiations may end phases of fighting but cannot on their own prevent recurrence.

The enduring lesson of Wilson’s legacy is not the failure of ideals, but the fragility of ideals unsupported by power. Any peace framework that does not internalise this lesson risks becoming yet another interim arrangement – stable on paper, unstable in practice.

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