

The Talks That Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine

A Hidden History of Diplomacy That Came Up Short—but Holds Lessons for Future Negotiations

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Russian and Ukrainian negotiators meeting via videoconference in March 2022

Photo posted to Telegram on March 14, 2022 by Vladimir Medinsky / Illustration by Foreign Affairs

In the early hours of February 24, 2022, the Russian air force struck targets across Ukraine. At the same time, Moscow’s infantry and armor poured into the country from the north, east, and south. In the days that followed, the Russians attempted to encircle Kyiv.

These were the first days and weeks of an invasion that could well have resulted in [Ukraine](#)’s defeat and subjugation by Russia. In retrospect, it seems almost miraculous that it did not.

What happened on the battlefield is relatively well understood. What is less understood is the simultaneous intense diplomacy involving Moscow, Kyiv, and a host of other actors, which could have resulted in a settlement just weeks after the war began.

By the end of March 2022, a series of in-person meetings in Belarus and Turkey and virtual engagements over video conference had produced the so-called Istanbul Communique, which described a framework for a settlement. Ukrainian and Russian negotiators then began working on the text of a treaty, making substantial progress toward an agreement. But in May, the talks broke off. The war raged on and has since cost tens of thousands of lives on both sides.

What happened? How close were the parties to ending the war? And why did they never finalize a deal?

To shed light on this often overlooked but critical episode in the war, we have examined draft agreements exchanged between the two sides, some details of which have not been reported previously. We have also conducted interviews with several participants in the talks as well as with officials serving at the time in key Western governments, to whom we have granted

anonymity in order to discuss sensitive matters. And we have reviewed numerous contemporaneous and more recent interviews with and statements by Ukrainian and Russian officials who were serving at the time of the talks. Most of these are available on YouTube but are not in English and thus not widely known in the West. Finally, we scrutinized the timeline of events from the start of the invasion through the end of May, when talks broke down. When we put all these pieces together, what we found is surprising—and could have significant implications for future diplomatic efforts to end the war.

In the midst of Moscow's unprecedented aggression, the Russians and the Ukrainians almost finalized an agreement.

Some observers and officials (including, most prominently, Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#)) have claimed that there was a deal on the table that would have ended the war but that the Ukrainians walked away from it because of a combination of pressure from their Western patrons and Kyiv's own hubristic assumptions about Russian military weakness. Others have dismissed the significance of the talks entirely, claiming that the parties were merely going through the motions and buying time for battlefield realignments or that the draft agreements were unserious.

Although those interpretations contain kernels of truth, they obscure more than they illuminate. There was no single smoking gun; this story defies simple explanations. Further, such monocausal accounts elide completely a fact that, in retrospect, seems extraordinary: in the midst of Moscow's unprecedented aggression, the Russians and the Ukrainians almost finalized an agreement that would have ended the war and provided Ukraine with multilateral security guarantees, paving the way to its permanent neutrality and, down the road, its membership in the EU.

A final agreement proved elusive, however, for a number of reasons. Kyiv's Western partners were reluctant to be drawn into a negotiation with Russia, particularly one that would have created new commitments for them to ensure Ukraine's security. The public mood in Ukraine hardened with the discovery of Russian atrocities at Irpin and Bucha. And with the failure of Russia's encirclement of Kyiv, President [Volodymyr Zelensky](#) became more confident that, with sufficient Western support, he could win the war on the battlefield. Finally, although the parties' attempt to resolve long-standing disputes over the security architecture offered the prospect of a lasting resolution to the war and enduring regional stability, they aimed too high, too soon. They tried to deliver an overarching settlement even as a basic cease-fire proved out of reach.

Today, when the prospects for negotiations appear dim and relations between the parties are nearly nonexistent, the history of the spring 2022 talks might seem like a distraction with little insight directly applicable to present circumstances. But Putin and Zelensky surprised everyone with their mutual willingness to consider far-reaching concessions to end the war. They might well surprise everyone again in the future.

ASSURANCE OR GUARANTEE?

What did the Russians want to accomplish by invading Ukraine? On February 24, 2022, Putin gave a speech in which he justified the invasion by mentioning the vague goal of "denazification" of the country. The most reasonable interpretation of "denazification" was that Putin sought to topple the government in Kyiv, possibly killing or capturing Zelensky in the process.

Yet days after the [invasion](#) began, Moscow began probing to find grounds for a compromise. A war Putin expected to be a cakewalk was already proving anything but, and this early openness to talking suggests he appears to have already abandoned the idea of outright regime change. Zelensky, as he had before the war, voiced an immediate interest in a personal meeting with Putin. Though he refused to talk directly with Zelensky, Putin did appoint a negotiating team. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko played the part of mediator.

The talks began on February 28 at one of Lukashenko's spacious countryside residences near the village of Liaskavichy, about 30 miles from the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. The Ukrainian delegation was headed by Davyd Arakhamia, the parliamentary leader of Zelensky's political party, and included Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov, presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak, and other senior officials. The Russian delegation was led by Vladimir Medinsky, a senior adviser to the Russian president who had earlier served as culture minister. It also included deputy ministers of defense and foreign affairs, among others.

At the first meeting, the Russians presented a set of harsh conditions, effectively demanding Ukraine's capitulation. This was a nonstarter. But as Moscow's position on the battlefield continued to deteriorate, its positions at the negotiating table became less demanding. So on March 3 and March 7, the parties held a second and third round of talks, this time in Kamyanyuki, Belarus, just across the border from Poland. The Ukrainian delegation presented demands of their own: an immediate cease-fire and the establishment of humanitarian corridors that would allow civilians to safely leave the war zone. It was during the third round of talks that the Russians and the Ukrainians appear to have examined drafts for the first time. According to [Medinsky](#), these were Russian drafts, which Medinsky's delegation brought from Moscow and which probably reflected Moscow's insistence on Ukraine's neutral status.

At this point, in-person meetings broke up for nearly three weeks, although the delegations continued to meet via Zoom. In those exchanges, the Ukrainians began to focus on the issue that would become central to their vision of the endgame for the war: security guarantees that would oblige other states to come to Ukraine's defense if Russia attacked again in the future. It is not entirely clear when Kyiv first raised this issue in conversations with the Russians or Western countries. But on March 10, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, then in Antalya, Turkey, for a meeting with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, spoke of a "systematic, sustainable solution" for Ukraine, adding that the Ukrainians were "ready to discuss" guarantees it hoped to receive from [NATO](#) member states and Russia.



Podolyak and Ukrainian Ambassador to Turkey Vasyl Bodnar after a meeting with the Russians, Istanbul, March 2022 *Kemal Aslan / Reuters*

What Kuleba seemed to have in mind was a multilateral security guarantee, an arrangement whereby competing powers commit to the security of a third state, usually on the condition that it will remain unaligned with any of the guarantors. Such agreements had mostly fallen

out of favor after the [Cold War](#). Whereas alliances such as NATO intend to maintain collective defense against a common enemy, multilateral security guarantees are designed to prevent conflict among the guarantors over the alignment of the guaranteed state, and by extension to ensure that state's security.

Ukraine had a bitter experience with a less ironclad version of this sort of agreement: a multilateral security assurance, as opposed to a guarantee. In 1994, it signed on to the so-called Budapest Memorandum, joining the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty as a nonnuclear weapons state and agreeing to give up what was then the world's third-largest arsenal. In return, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States promised that they would not attack Ukraine. Yet contrary to a widespread misconception, in the event of aggression against Ukraine, the agreement required the signatories only to call a UN Security Council meeting, not to come to the country's defense.

Russia's full-scale invasion—and the cold reality that Ukraine was fighting an existential war on its own—drove Kyiv to find a way to both end the aggression and ensure it never happened again. On March 14, just as the two delegations were meeting via Zoom, Zelensky posted a message on his Telegram channel [calling](#) for “normal, effective security guarantees” that would not be “like the Budapest ones.” In an interview with Ukrainian journalists two days later, his adviser Podolyak [explained](#) that what Kyiv sought were “absolute security guarantees” that would require that “the signatories . . . do not stand aside in the event of an attack on Ukraine, as is the case now. Instead, they [would] take an active part in defending Ukraine in a conflict.”

Ukraine's demand not to be left to fend for itself again is completely understandable. Kyiv wanted (and still wants) to have a more reliable mechanism than Russia's goodwill for its future security. But getting a guarantee would be difficult. Naftali Bennett was the Israeli prime minister at the time the talks were happening and was actively mediating between the two sides. In an interview with journalist Hanoach Daum posted online in February 2023, he recalled that he attempted to dissuade Zelensky from getting stuck on the question of security guarantees. “There is this joke about a guy trying to sell the Brooklyn Bridge to a passerby,” Bennett explained. “I said: ‘America will give you guarantees? It will commit that in several years if Russia violates something, it will send soldiers? After leaving Afghanistan and all that?’ I said: ‘Volodymyr, it won't happen.’”

To put a finer point on it: if the [United States](#) and its allies were unwilling to provide Ukraine such guarantees (for example, in the form of NATO membership) before the war, why would they do so after Russia had so vividly demonstrated its willingness to attack Ukraine? The Ukrainian negotiators developed an answer to this question, but in the end, it didn't persuade their risk-averse Western colleagues. Kyiv's position was that, as the emerging guarantees concept implied, Russia would be a guarantor, too, which would mean Moscow essentially agreed that the other guarantors would be obliged to intervene if it attacked again. In other words, if Moscow accepted that any future aggression against Ukraine would mean a war between Russia and the United States, it would be no more inclined to attack Ukraine again than it would be to attack a NATO ally.

A BREAKTHROUGH

Throughout March, heavy fighting continued on all fronts. The Russians attempted to take Chernihiv, Kharkiv, and Sumy but failed spectacularly, although all three cities sustained heavy damage. By mid-March, the Russian army's thrust toward Kyiv had stalled, and it was

taking heavy casualties. The two delegations kept up talks over videoconference but returned to meeting in person on March 29, this time in Istanbul, Turkey.

There, they appeared to have achieved a breakthrough. After the meeting, the sides announced they had agreed to a joint communiqué. The terms were broadly described during the two sides' press statements in Istanbul. But we have obtained a copy of the full text of the draft communiqué, titled "Key Provisions of the Treaty on Ukraine's Security Guarantees." According to participants we interviewed, the Ukrainians had largely drafted the communiqué and the Russians provisionally accepted the idea of using it as the framework for a treaty.

The treaty envisioned in the communiqué would proclaim Ukraine as a permanently neutral, nonnuclear state. Ukraine would renounce any intention to join military alliances or allow foreign military bases or troops on its soil. The communiqué listed as possible guarantors the permanent members of the UN Security Council (including Russia) along with Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, Poland, and Turkey.

The communiqué also said that if Ukraine came under attack and requested assistance, all guarantor states would be obliged, following consultations with Ukraine and among themselves, to provide assistance to Ukraine to restore its security. Remarkably, these obligations were spelled out with much greater precision than NATO's Article 5: imposing a no-fly zone, supplying weapons, or directly intervening with the guarantor state's own military force.

The Istanbul Communiqué called for the two sides to seek to peacefully resolve their dispute over Crimea during the next 15 years.

Although Ukraine would be permanently neutral under the proposed framework, Kyiv's path to EU membership would be left open, and the guarantor states (including Russia) would explicitly "confirm their intention to facilitate Ukraine's membership in the European Union." This was nothing short of extraordinary: in 2013, Putin had put intense pressure on Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to back out of a mere association agreement with the EU. Now, Russia was agreeing to "facilitate" Ukraine's full accession to the EU.

Although Ukraine's interest in obtaining these security guarantees is clear, it is not obvious why Russia would agree to any of this. Just weeks earlier, Putin had attempted to seize Ukraine's capital, oust its government, and impose a puppet regime. It seems far-fetched that he suddenly decided to accept that Ukraine—which was now more hostile to Russia than ever, thanks to Putin's own actions—would become a member of the EU and have its independence and security guaranteed by the United States (among others). And yet the communiqué suggests that was precisely what Putin was willing to accept.

We can only conjecture as to why. Putin's blitzkrieg had failed; that was clear by early March. Perhaps he was now willing to cut his losses if he got his longest-standing demand: that Ukraine renounce its NATO aspirations and never host NATO forces on its territory. If he could not control the entire country, at least he could ensure his most basic security interests, stem the hemorrhaging of Russia's economy, and restore the country's international reputation.

The communiqué also includes another provision that is stunning, in retrospect: it calls for the two sides to seek to peacefully resolve their dispute over Crimea during the next ten to 15 years. Since Russia annexed the peninsula in 2014, Moscow has never agreed to discuss its

status, claiming that it was a region of Russia no different than any other. By offering to negotiate over its status, the Kremlin had tacitly admitted that was not the case.

FIGHTING AND TALKING

In remarks he made on March 29, immediately after the conclusion of the talks, Medinsky, the head of the Russian delegation, sounded decidedly upbeat, explaining that the discussions of the treaty on Ukraine's neutrality were entering the practical phase and that—allowing for all the complexities presented by the treaty's having many potential guarantors—it was possible that Putin and Zelensky would sign it at a summit in the foreseeable future.

The next day, he told reporters, “Yesterday, the Ukrainian side, for the first time fixed in a written form its readiness to carry out a series of most important conditions for the building of future normal and good-neighborly relations with Russia.” He continued, “They handed to us the principles of a potential future settlement, fixed in writing.”

Meanwhile, Russia had abandoned its efforts to take Kyiv and was pulling back its forces from the entire northern front. Alexander Fomin, Russia's deputy minister of defense, had announced the decision in Istanbul on March 29, calling it an effort “to build mutual trust.” In fact, the withdrawal was a forced retreat. The Russians had overestimated their capabilities and underestimated the Ukrainian resistance and were now spinning their failure as a gracious diplomatic measure to facilitate peace talks.

Even after reports from Bucha made headlines in April 2022, the two sides continued to work around the clock on a treaty.

The withdrawal had far-reaching consequences. It stiffened Zelensky's resolve, removing an immediate threat to his government, and demonstrated that Putin's vaunted military machine could be pushed back, if not defeated, on the battlefield. It also enabled large-scale Western military assistance to Ukraine by freeing up the lines of communication leading to Kyiv. Finally, the retreat set the stage for the gruesome discovery of atrocities that Russian forces had committed in the Kyiv suburbs of Bucha and Irpin, where they had raped, mutilated, and murdered civilians.

Reports from Bucha began to make headlines in early April. On April 4, Zelensky visited the town. The next day, he spoke to the UN Security Council via video and accused Russia of perpetrating war crimes in Bucha, comparing Russian forces to the Islamic State terrorist group (also known as ISIS). Zelensky called for the UN Security Council to expel Russia, a permanent member.

Remarkably, however, the two sides continued to work around the clock on a treaty that Putin and Zelensky were supposed to sign during a summit to be held in the not-too-distant future.

The sides were actively exchanging drafts with each other and, it appears, beginning to share them with other parties. (In his February 2023 interview, Bennett reported seeing 17 or 18 working drafts of the agreement; Lukashenko also reported seeing at least one.) We have closely scrutinized two of these drafts, one that is dated April 12 and another dated April 15, which participants in the talks told us was the last one exchanged between the parties. They are broadly similar but contain important differences—and both show that the communiqué had not resolved some key issues.

ORIGINAL

Позиция РФ, не согласованная УС
Позиция УС, не согласованная РФ
*Вопросы, которые УС отказывается обсуждать,
ссылаясь на их отсутствие в «Стамбульском коммюнике»*

**Договор о постоянном нейтралитете
и гарантиях безопасности Украины**

Великобритания, КНР, Российская Федерация, США,
Французская Республика, *(Республика Беларусь, Турецкая
Республика)*, являющиеся гарантами безопасности Украины как
постоянно нейтрального государства (Государства-гаранты), и
Украина, далее именуемые Сторонами,

TRANSLATION (HIGHLIGHTS ADDED)

Position of the R[ussian] F[ederation] that the U[krainian] s[ide] has not accepted
Position of the U[krainian] s[ide] that the R[ussian] F[ederation] has not accepted
*Issues that the U[krainian] s[ide] refuses to discuss, citing their absence in the "Istanbul
Communique"*

Treaty on Ukraine's Permanent Neutrality and Security Guarantees

The United Kingdom, China, the Russian Federation, the United States, France, *(the
Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Turkey)*, as the guarantors of Ukraine's security as
a permanently neutral state, and Ukraine, hereafter referred to as the Parties,

Excerpt of a draft Russian-Ukrainian treaty dated April 15, 2022

First, whereas the communiqué and the April 12 draft made clear that guarantor states would decide independently whether to come to Kyiv's aid in the event of an attack on Ukraine, in the April 15 draft, the Russians attempted to subvert this crucial article by insisting that such action would occur only "on the basis of a decision agreed to by all guarantor states"—giving the likely invader, Russia, a veto. According to a notation on the text, the Ukrainians rejected that amendment, insisting on the original formula, under which all the guarantors had an individual obligation to act and would not have to reach consensus before doing so.

ORIGINAL

Статья 5

Государства-гаранты и Украина соглашаются, что в случае вооруженного нападения на Украину каждое из Государств-гарантов, после проведения между ними срочных и незамедлительных консультаций (которые проводятся в течение не более чем трех дней) в порядке осуществления права на индивидуальную или коллективную самооборону, признаваемого статьей 51 Устава Организации Объединенных Наций, *на основе согласованного всеми Государствами-гарантами решения* окажет (в ответ на официальное обращение Украины и на его основании) помощь Украине как постоянно нейтральному государству, подвергшемуся нападению, путем немедленного осуществления такого индивидуального или совместного действия, которое будет необходимым, включая **закрытие воздушного пространства над Украиной, предоставления необходимого вооружения**, применение вооруженной силы с целью восстановления и последующего сохранения безопасности Украины как постоянно нейтрального государства.

TRANSLATION (HIGHLIGHTS ADDED)

Article 5

The guarantor-states and Ukraine agree that in case of an armed attack on Ukraine, each of the guarantor-states, upon conducting urgent and swift consultations among themselves (which would be conducted in the course of no more than three days), in accordance with the realization of their right to individual and collective self-defense, as recognized by Article 51 of the UN Charter, *and on the basis of a decision agreed to by all guarantor-states*, would provide (in response to an official request by Ukraine and on the basis thereof) **assistance to Ukraine** as a permanently neutral state that had come under attack, through the immediate joint or individual execution of required actions, including **the establishment of a no-fly zone over Ukraine, provision of necessary armaments**, [and] the use of **military force** with the aim of the restoration and the subsequent maintenance of the security of Ukraine as a permanently neutral state.

Excerpt of a draft Russian-Ukrainian treaty dated April 15, 2022. Red text in italics represents Russian positions not accepted by the Ukrainian side; red text in bold represents Ukrainian positions not accepted by the Russian side.

Second, the drafts contain several articles that were added to the treaty at Russia's insistence but were not part of the communiqué and related to matters that Ukraine refused to discuss. These require Ukraine to ban "fascism, Nazism, neo-Nazism, and aggressive nationalism"—and, to that end, to repeal six Ukrainian laws (fully or in part) that dealt, broadly, with contentious aspects of Soviet-era history, in particular the role of Ukrainian nationalists during World War II.

It is easy to see why Ukraine would resist letting Russia determine its policies on historical memory, particularly in the context of a treaty on security guarantees. And the Russians knew these provisions would make it more difficult for the Ukrainians to accept the rest of the treaty. They might, therefore, be seen as poison pills.

It is also possible, however, that the provisions were intended to allow Putin to save face. For example, by forcing Ukraine to repeal statutes that condemned the Soviet past and cast the Ukrainian nationalists who fought the Red Army during World War II as freedom fighters, the Kremlin could argue that it had achieved its stated goal of "denazification," even though the original meaning of that phrase may well have been the replacement of Zelensky's government.

In the end, it remains unclear whether these provisions would have been a deal-breaker. The lead Ukrainian negotiator, Arakhamia, later downplayed their importance. As he put it in a November 2023 interview on a Ukrainian television news program, Russia had “hoped until the last moment that they [could] squeeze us to sign such an agreement, that we [would] adopt neutrality. This was the biggest thing for them. They were ready to finish the war if we, like Finland [during the Cold War], adopted neutrality and undertook not to join NATO.”

The talks had deliberately skirted the question of borders and territory.

The size and the structure of the Ukrainian military was also the subject of intense negotiation. As of April 15, the two sides remained quite far apart on the matter. The Ukrainians wanted a peacetime army of 250,000 people; the Russians insisted on a maximum of 85,000, considerably smaller than the standing army Ukraine had before the invasion in 2022. The Ukrainians wanted 800 tanks; the Russians would allow only 342. The difference between the range of missiles was even starker: 280 kilometers, or about 174 miles, (the Ukrainian position), and a mere 40 kilometers, or about 25 miles, (the Russian position).

The talks had deliberately skirted the question of borders and territory. Evidently, the idea was for Putin and Zelensky to decide on those issues at the planned summit. It is easy to imagine that Putin would have insisted on holding all the territory that his forces had already occupied. The question is whether Zelensky could have been convinced to agree to this land grab.

Despite these substantial disagreements, the April 15 draft suggests that the treaty would be signed within two weeks. Granted, that date might have shifted, but it shows that the two teams planned to move fast. “We were very close in mid-April 2022 to finalizing the war with a peace settlement,” one of the Ukrainian negotiators, Oleksandr Chalyi, [recounted](#) at a public appearance in December 2023. “[A] week after Putin started his aggression, he concluded he had made a huge mistake and tried to do everything possible to conclude an agreement with Ukraine.”

WHAT HAPPENED?

So why did the talks break off? Putin has claimed that Western powers intervened and spiked the deal because they were more interested in weakening Russia than in ending the war. He alleged that Boris Johnson, who was then the British prime minister, had delivered the message to the Ukrainians, on behalf of “the Anglo-Saxon world,” that they must “fight Russia until victory is achieved and Russia suffers a strategic defeat.”

The Western response to these negotiations, while a far cry from Putin’s caricature, was certainly lukewarm. Washington and its allies were deeply skeptical about the prospects for the diplomatic track emerging from Istanbul; after all, the communiqué sidestepped the question of territory and borders, and the parties remained far apart on other crucial issues. It did not seem to them like a negotiation that was going to succeed.

Moreover, a former U.S. official who worked on Ukraine policy at the time told us that the Ukrainians did not consult with Washington until after the communiqué had been issued, even though the treaty it described would have created new legal commitments for the United States—including an obligation to go to war with Russia if it invaded Ukraine again. That stipulation alone would have made the treaty a nonstarter for Washington. So instead of embracing the Istanbul communiqué and the subsequent diplomatic process, the West ramped

up military aid to Kyiv and increased the pressure on Russia, including through an ever-tightening sanctions regime.

The United Kingdom took the lead. Already on March 30, Johnson seemed disinclined toward diplomacy, stating that instead “we should continue to intensify sanctions with a rolling program until every single one of [Putin’s] troops is out of Ukraine.” On April 9, Johnson turned up in Kyiv—the first foreign leader to visit after the Russian withdrawal from the capital. He reportedly [told](#) Zelensky that he thought that “any deal with Putin was going to be pretty sordid.” Any deal, he recalled saying, “would be some victory for him: if you give him anything, he’ll just keep it, bank it, and then prepare for his next assault.” In the 2023 interview, Arakhamia ruffled some feathers by seeming to hold Johnson responsible for the outcome. “When we returned from Istanbul,” he said, “Boris Johnson came to Kyiv and said that we won’t sign anything at all with [the Russians]—and let’s just keep fighting.”

Since then, Putin has repeatedly used Arakhamia’s remarks to blame the West for the collapse of the talks and demonstrate Ukraine’s subordination to its supporters. Notwithstanding Putin’s manipulative spin, Arakhamia was pointing to a real problem: the communiqué described a multilateral framework that would require Western willingness to engage diplomatically with Russia and consider a genuine security guarantee for Ukraine. Neither was a priority for the United States and its allies at the time.

Putin and Zelensky were willing to consider extraordinary compromises to end the war.

In their public remarks, the Americans were never quite so dismissive of diplomacy as Johnson had been. But they did not appear to consider it central to their response to Russia’s invasion. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Kyiv two weeks after Johnson, mostly to coordinate greater military support. As Blinken put it at a press conference afterward, “The strategy that we’ve put in place—massive support for Ukraine, massive pressure against Russia, solidarity with more than 30 countries engaged in these efforts—is having real results.”

Still, the claim that the West forced Ukraine to back out of the talks with Russia is baseless. It suggests that Kyiv had no say in the matter. True, the West’s offers of support must have strengthened Zelensky’s resolve, and the lack of Western enthusiasm does seem to have dampened his interest in diplomacy. Ultimately, however, in his discussions with Western leaders, Zelensky did not prioritize the pursuit of diplomacy with Russia to end the war. Neither the United States nor its allies perceived a strong demand from him for them to engage on the diplomatic track. At the time, given the outpouring of public sympathy in the West, such a push could well have affected Western policy.

Zelensky was also unquestionably outraged by the Russian atrocities at Bucha and Irpin, and he probably understood that what he began to refer to as Russia’s “genocide” in Ukraine would make diplomacy with Moscow even more politically fraught. Still, the behind-the-scenes work on the draft treaty continued and even intensified in the days and weeks after the discovery of Russia’s war crimes, suggesting that the atrocities at Bucha and Irpin were a secondary factor in Kyiv’s decision-making.

The Ukrainians’ newfound confidence that they could win the war also clearly played a role. The Russian retreat from Kyiv and other major cities in the northeast and the prospect of more weapons from the West (with roads into Kyiv now under Ukrainian control) changed the

military balance. Optimism about possible gains on the battlefield often reduces a belligerent's interest in making compromises at the negotiating table.

Indeed, by late April, Ukraine had hardened its position, demanding a Russian withdrawal from the Donbas as a precondition to any treaty. As Oleksii Danilov, the chair of the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council, [put it](#) on May 2: “A treaty with Russia is impossible—only capitulation can be accepted.”



Russian and Ukrainian negotiators meeting in Istanbul, March 2022
Ukrainian Presidential Press Service / Reuters

And then there is the Russian side of the story, which is difficult to assess. Was the whole negotiation a well-orchestrated charade, or was Moscow seriously interested in a settlement? Did Putin get cold feet when he understood that the West would not sign on to the accords or that the Ukrainian position had hardened?

Even if Russia and Ukraine had overcome their disagreements, the framework they negotiated in Istanbul would have required buy-in from the United States and its allies. And those Western powers would have needed to take a political risk by engaging in negotiations with Russia and Ukraine and to put their credibility on the line by guaranteeing Ukraine's security. At the time, and in the intervening two years, the willingness either to undertake high-stakes diplomacy or to truly commit to come to Ukraine's defense in the future has been notably absent in Washington and European capitals.

A final reason the talks failed is that the negotiators put the cart of a postwar security order before the horse of ending the war. The two sides skipped over essential matters of conflict management and mitigation (the creation of humanitarian corridors, a cease-fire, troop withdrawals) and instead tried to craft something like a long-term peace treaty that would resolve security disputes that had been the source of geopolitical tensions for decades. It was an admirably ambitious effort—but it proved too ambitious.

To be fair, Russia, Ukraine, and the West had tried it the other way around—and also failed miserably. The Minsk agreements signed in 2014 and 2015 following Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas covered minutiae such as the date and time of the

cessation of hostilities and which weapons system should be withdrawn by what distance. Both sides' core security concerns were addressed indirectly, if at all.

This history suggests that future talks should move forward on parallel tracks, with the practicalities of ending the war being addressed on one track while broader issues are covered in another.

KEEP IT IN MIND

On April 11, 2024, Lukashenko, the early middleman of the Russian-Ukrainian peace talks, called for a return to the draft treaty from spring 2022. "It's a reasonable position," he said in a conversation with Putin in the Kremlin. "It was an acceptable position for Ukraine, too. They agreed to this position."

Putin chimed in. "They agreed, of course," he said.

In reality, however, the Russians and the Ukrainians never arrived at a final compromise text. But they went further in that direction than has been previously understood, reaching an overarching framework for a possible agreement.

After the past two years of carnage, all this may be so much water under the bridge. But it is a reminder that Putin and Zelensky were willing to consider extraordinary compromises to end the war. So if and when Kyiv and Moscow return to the negotiating table, they'll find it littered with ideas that could yet prove useful in building a durable peace.

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<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/talks-could-have-ended-war-ukraine>