

After Two Years of War in Ukraine, It's Time for Peace. The U.S. Sabotage of Peace Talks

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As we mark two full years since Russia invaded Ukraine, Ukrainian government forces have withdrawn from [Avdiivka](#), a town they first captured from the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in July 2014. Situated only 10 miles from Donetsk city, Avdiivka gave Ukrainian government forces a base from which their artillery bombarded Donetsk for nearly ten years. From a pre-war population of about 31,000, the town has been depopulated and left in ruins.

The mass slaughter on both sides in this long battle was a measure of the strategic value of the city to both sides, but it is also emblematic of the shocking human cost of this war, which has degenerated into a brutal and bloody war of attrition along a nearly static front line. Neither side made significant territorial gains in the entire 2023 year of fighting, with a net gain to Russia of a mere 188 square miles, or 0.1% of Ukraine.

And while it is the Ukrainians and Russians fighting and dying in this war of attrition with over [half a million](#) casualties, it is the United States, with some its Western allies, that has stood in the way of peace talks. This was true of talks between Russia and Ukraine that took place in March 2022, one month after the Russian invasion, and it is true of talks that Russia tried to initiate with the United States as recently as January 2024.

In March 2022, Russia and Ukraine met in Turkey and negotiated a [peace agreement](#) that should have ended the war. Ukraine agreed to become a neutral country between east and west, on the model of Austria or Switzerland, giving up its controversial ambition for NATO membership. Territorial questions over Crimea and the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk would be resolved peacefully, based on self-determination for the people of those regions.

But then the U.S. and U.K. intervened to persuade Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to abandon the neutrality agreement in favor of a long war to militarily drive Russia out of Ukraine and recover Crimea and Donbas by force. U.S. and U.K. leaders have never admitted to their own people what they did, nor tried to explain why they did it.

So it has been left to everyone else involved to reveal details of the agreement and the U.S. and U.K.'s roles in torpedoing it: President Zelenskyy's [advisers](#); Ukrainian [negotiators](#); Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt [Çavuşoğlu](#) and Turkish [diplomats](#); Israeli Prime Minister Naftali [Bennett](#), who was another mediator; and former German Chancellor Gerhard [Schroder](#), who mediated with Russian President Vladimir Putin for Ukraine.

The U.S. sabotage of peace talks should come as no surprise. So much of U.S. foreign policy follows what should by now be an easily recognizable and predictable pattern, in which our leaders systematically lie to us about their decisions and actions in crisis situations, and, by the time the truth is widely known, it is too late to reverse the catastrophic effects of those decisions. Thousands of people have paid with their lives, nobody is held accountable, and the world's attention has moved on to the next crisis, the [next series](#) of lies and the next bloodbath, which in this case is Gaza.

But the war grinds on in Ukraine, whether we pay attention to it or not. Once the U.S. and U.K. succeeded in killing peace talks and prolonging the war, it fell into an intractable pattern common to many wars, in which Ukraine, the United States and the leading members of the NATO military alliance were encouraged, or we might say deluded, by limited successes at different times into continually prolonging and escalating the war and rejecting diplomacy, in spite of ever-mounting, appalling human costs for the people of Ukraine.

U.S. and NATO leaders have repeated ad nauseam that they are arming Ukraine to put it in a stronger position at the "negotiating table," even as they keep rejecting negotiations. After Ukraine gained ground with its much celebrated offensives in the fall of 2022, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General [Mark Milley](#) went public with a call to "seize the moment" and get back to the negotiating table from the position of strength that NATO leaders said they were waiting for. French and German military leaders were reportedly even more adamant that that moment would be [short-lived](#) if they failed to seize it.

They were right. President Biden rejected his military advisers' calls for renewed diplomacy, and Ukraine's failed 2023 offensive wasted its chance to negotiate from a position of strength, sacrificing many more lives to leave it weaker than before.

On February 13, 2024, Reuters Moscow bureau broke the story that the United States had recently [rejected](#) a new Russian proposal to reopen peace negotiations. Multiple Russian sources involved in the initiative told Reuters that Russia proposed direct talks with the United States to call a ceasefire along the current front lines of the war.

After Russia's March 2022 peace agreement with Ukraine was vetoed by the U.S., this time Russia approached the United States directly before involving Ukraine. There was a meeting of intermediaries in Turkey, and a meeting between Secretary of State Blinken, CIA Director Burns and National Security Adviser Sullivan in Washington, but the result was a message from Sullivan that the U.S. was willing to discuss other aspects of U.S.-Russian relations, but not peace in Ukraine.



Image of Russian troops in Ukraine. Credit: Ukraine MoD/Facebook

And so the war grinds on. Russia is [still firing](#) 10,000 artillery shells per day along the front line, while Ukraine can only fire 2,000. In a microcosm of the larger war, some Ukrainian gunners told reporters they were only allowed to fire 3 shells per night. As Sam Cranny-Evans of the U.K.'s RUSI military think-tank told the Guardian, "What that means is that Ukrainians can't suppress Russian artillery any more, and if the Ukrainians can't fire back, all they can do is try to survive."

A March 2023 European initiative to produce a million shells for Ukraine in a year fell far short, only [producing](#) about 600,000. U.S. monthly shell production in October 2023 was 28,000 shells, with a target of 37,000 per month by April 2024. The United States plans to increase production to 100,000 shells per month, but that will take until October 2025.

Meanwhile, Russia is already producing [4.5 million](#) artillery shells per year. After spending less than one tenth of the Pentagon budget over the past 20 years, how is Russia able to produce 5 times more artillery shells than the United States and its NATO allies combined?

RUSI's Richard Connolly [explained](#) to the Guardian that, while Western countries privatized their weapons production and dismantled "surplus" productive capacity after the end of the Cold War in the interest of corporate profits, "The Russians have been... subsidizing the defense industry, and many would have said wasting money for the event that one day they need to be able to scale it up. So it was economically inefficient until 2022, and then suddenly it looks like a very shrewd bit of planning."

President Biden has been anxious to send more money to Ukraine—a whopping \$61 billion—but disagreements in the U.S. Congress between bipartisan Ukraine supporters and a Republican faction opposed to U.S. involvement have held up the funds. But even if Ukraine had endless infusions of Western weapons, it has a more serious problem: Many of the troops it recruited to fight this war in 2022 have been killed, wounded or captured, and its recruitment system has been plagued by corruption and a lack of enthusiasm for the war among most of its people.

In August 2023, the government fired the heads of military recruitment in all 24 regions of the country after it became widely known that they were systematically [soliciting bribes](#) to allow men to avoid recruitment and gain safe passage out of the country. The Open Ukraine

Telegram channel [reported](#), “The military registration and enlistment offices have never seen such money before, and the revenues are being evenly distributed vertically to the top.”

The Ukrainian parliament is debating a new [conscription](#) law, with an online registration system that includes people living abroad and with penalties for failure to register or enlist. Parliament already voted down a previous bill that members found too draconian, and many fear that forced conscription will lead to more widespread draft resistance, or even bring down the government.

Oleksiy Arestovych, President Zelenskyy’s former spokesman, told the Unherd website that the root of Ukraine’s recruitment problem is that only 20% of Ukrainians believe in the anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism that has controlled Ukrainian governments since the overthrow of the Yanukovich government in 2014. “What about the remaining 80%?” the interviewer [asked](#).

“I think for most of them, their idea is of a multinational and poly-cultural country,” Arestovych replied. “And when Zelenskyy came into power in 2019, they voted for this idea. He did not articulate it specifically but it was what he meant when he said, ‘I don’t see a difference in the Ukrainian-Russian language conflict, we are all Ukrainians even if we speak different languages.’”

“And you know,” Arestovych continued, “my great criticism of what has happened in Ukraine over the last years, during the emotional trauma of the war, is this idea of Ukrainian nationalism which has divided Ukraine into different people: the Ukrainian speakers and Russian speakers as a second class of people. It’s the main dangerous idea and a worse danger than Russian military aggression, because nobody from this 80% of people wants to die for a system in which they are people of a second class.”

If Ukrainians are reluctant to fight, imagine how Americans would resist being shipped off to fight in Ukraine. A 2023 U.S. Army War College study of “Lessons from Ukraine” [found that](#) the U.S. ground war with Russia that the United States is [preparing](#) to fight would involve an estimated 3,600 U.S. casualties per day, killing and maiming as many U.S. troops every two weeks as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq did in twenty years. Echoing Ukraine’s military recruitment crisis, the authors concluded, “Large-scale combat operations troop requirements may well require a reconceptualization of the 1970s and 1980s volunteer force and a move toward partial conscription.”

U.S. war policy in Ukraine is predicated on just such a gradual escalation from proxy war to full-scale war between Russia and the United States, which is unavoidably overshadowed by the risk of nuclear war. This has not changed in two years, and it will not change unless and until our leaders take a radically different approach. That would involve serious diplomacy to end the war on terms on which Russia and Ukraine can agree, as they did on the March 2022 neutrality agreement.

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Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J. S. Davies are the authors of [War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict](#), published by OR Books in November 2022. They are regular contributors to Global Research.

Featured image: The ruins of Avdiivka. Photo Credit: Russian Defense Ministry

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