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Peace Talks in the Russia-Ukraine War: When, Who, and How?

Isabel Bramsen[1] | ORCID: 0000-0002-7534-1075
Lund University, Lunds Universitet, Lund, Sweden
isabel.bramsen@svet.lu.se

Isak Svensson[2] | ORCID: 0000-0002-1242-4180
Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Sweden
Isak.Svensson@pcr.uu.se

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1 Isabel Bramsen is Director of Peace and Conflict Studies and Associate Professor at Lund University, Department of Political Science. In her research she applies a micro-sociological framework to study diplomacy, peace processes, nonviolent resistance and violence in a variety of contexts in the Middle East, Europe, South America, and Asia. She is author of several books on conflict resolution and her most recent book, *The Micro-Sociology of Peace and Conflict* was published at Cambridge University Press 2024. She is member of Nordic Women Mediators (NWM) and mediator at Centre for Conflict Resolution (CFK).

2 Isak Svensson is the holder of the Dag Hammarskjölds Chair of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, Sweden. Svensson's research focuses on conflict resolution, in particular international mediation in civil wars, religious dimensions of armed conflict, and dynamics of nonviolent civil resistance. His works appear in journal articles published in leading journals such as International Studies Quarterly, Journal of Peace Research, Journal of Conflict Resolution, European Journal of International Relations, International Negotiation, Research and Politics, as well as in book chapters with academic publishers including Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press. Svensson has been the Director of Research, The National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (NCPCS), University of Otago, New Zealand, (2010–2012). He is a working-group leader of the international working group on international negotiations, at the Alva Myrdal Centre for Nuclear Disarmament at Uppsala University. His most recent books are *Confronting the Caliphate: Civil resistance in jihadist proto-states* (Oxford University Press, 2022, (co-authored)), and *Conflict Mediation in the Arab World* (Syracuse University Press, 2023; co-edited).

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Abstract

This study explores the designs and dynamics of past, present, and potential mediation and negotiation efforts to stop the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Applying insights from mediation and negotiation literature, the article explores three questions relating to negotiating peace in Ukraine: who is best positioned to negotiate or mediate such a process (who should be presented at the table), when should such diplomatic efforts be launched, and how should the processes of peace talks be designed. The study examines the dynamics of the initial peace talks in the spring of 2022 as well as Ukraine's Peace Formula, which has been discussed by up to 92 countries, excluding Russia. The article discusses the unusual process of negotiating peace without the presence of one of the main parties (Russia) and the challenges and potential of negotiations in this form of international, asymmetric war.

Keywords

peace talks – Ukraine – Russia – mediation – diplomacy – international conflict – negotiation

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 has created a fundamental challenge to the current security order in Europe and is an evident breach of the UN charter.[3] It has devastated a developed country and caused deaths and destruction in numbers that, while they are far from certain at this point, without a doubt make this one of the most brutal wars in the present time. When the authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin launched its invasion, it was the first time since the Second World War that a country had been invaded with the stated goal of both achieving territorial and regime change (Davies et al. 2023). While there have been border wars and military invasions in the past, the Russian invasion is a rare example of an attempt by an authoritarian state to achieve regime change in a democratic country. On top of this, the cost in terms of destruction of the environment, the increased risk and threats of the use of nuclear weapons, and the implications of world food prices and exports have all contributed to making the Russian aggression

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against Ukraine—what we will here term the Russia-Ukraine War—a very particular type of war.

Peace talks are often understood as an alternative strategy to trying to win the war through military combat. Our departure for this article, however, is that peace talks are not necessarily an alternative to military engagement but rather a complementing strategy of seeking to achieve one's aspirations through the negotiation table. Negotiations, even during intense fighting on the ground, can lead to agreements that safeguard Ukraine's territorial integrity and political independence. Even if the immediate prospects for fruitful peace talks look bleak at present, peace negotiations will be necessary at some point in this conflict to bring it to an end. Negotiations can have a role to play, we surmise, in leading to "peace through victory" as this concept is defined by Landau and Kyselova in this special issue as "a just and lasting peace that ends the external aggression by restoring independence and territorial sovereignty of the nation which was attacked" (Landau & Kyselova 2024).

This article builds on the assumption that bringing the Ukraine case into dialogue with previous research on negotiation and mediation can be a fruitful way to better understand the potential and limitations of different attempts to end the Russia-Ukraine War through diplomatic efforts. While the literature that we draw on in this article has studied mediation and negotiation in both interstate conflicts and civil wars, the last decades of research have been dominated by studies focusing on civil wars. The Russia-Ukraine War is distinct in the regard that it represents a full-scale invasion of a sovereign state, in violation of international norms and previous commitments. While this is not a case of a civil war, we still think it is valuable to borrow insights from the body of research studying mediation and negotiation processes more generally, while taking into account the distinct characteristics of this conflict—something we will return to throughout the article. While there have been several studies on track 2 and 3 dialogue efforts in Ukraine (Chaban et al. 2019; Hopmann 2024; Kyselova 2019, 2023; Kyselova et al. 2017; Holper & Kyselova 2021; Kalenychenko 2023; Kyselova & Axyonova 2024) and the Minsk talks (Åtland 2020; Van Severen 2021) this is the first academic study to analyze talks on peace in and around Ukraine since the Russian invasion in 2022. It seeks to contribute to an academic debate applying insights from the field of conflict resolution when analyzing the Russia-Ukraine War (Miall 2023; Jones 2022; Weller 2022).

The empirical basis of our analysis is the different negotiation and mediation attempts that have hitherto been suggested and carried out during the Russia-Ukraine War, including the 2022 negotiations and the Peace Formula track. Empirically, the study is based on news coverage, tweets by negotiators, pictures from relevant negotiation situations and publicly available informa-

tion about initiatives. Analyzing pictures of diplomatic efforts to end the war in Ukraine, we apply visual data to get insights into the set-up of the different negotiation formats (Bramsen & Austin 2022; Austin & Bramsen 2023). While there have been several attempts to establish back-channel communications, information about these initiatives is for obvious reasons scarce, and we do not attempt to include any of such initiatives in the present analysis. With this article, we do not seek to forecast the future. The unsuccessful attempts to settle this conflict peacefully do not necessarily provide information about how this conflict *could* be resolved. Our ambition is more limited: to take stock of where we are now, and which attempts that have been made so far in this conflict, and analyze those from the perspective of mediation and negotiation theory.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we address the question of *when* peace talks potentially could take part, discussing the issue of timing and ripeness. Second, we engage with the question of *who* sits at the table in past, current, and potential diplomatic efforts to end the Russia-Ukraine War in terms of both parties/negotiators and mediators, mapping out the attempts by various actors to address the war diplomatically. Third, we discuss and analyze the "*how*" of peace talks, mapping the various formats, including the Peace Formula format of one-sided multilateral consultations. Finally, we discuss what potential peace talks between Russia and Ukraine could look like and how lessons from other peace talks can be integrated.

Peace talks – When?

Whereas the parties already began talks four days into the invasion, there have not been any direct talks between Russia and Ukraine since the spring of 2022. As the conflict has escalated, the parties have moved further away from each other, which makes the applicability to direct negotiations between the parties more difficult to implement in the future. After negotiations fell apart, the Ukrainian government formally banned negotiations with the present regime in Russia. In September 2022, Zelensky confirmed through a decree the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine "to state the impossibility of conducting negotiations with the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin" (Zelensky 2022). Thus, currently, to engage in negotiations is forbidden by the Ukrainian side. Half a year into the war, both Ukraine and Russia expressed preconditions for even initiating talks that are completely unacceptable for the other side (Bengali 2022), and prior to the Ukrainian Peace Summit in June 2024, Putin reiterated that preconditions for negotiations were that Ukraine give up the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zapor-

izhzhya regions, although large parts of these areas are controlled by Ukraine (Astier 2024). However, at other times, Russia has expressed openness to negotiations without mentioning preconditions (Dress 2024) or based on a more moderate point of departure (Euronews 2024).

All in all, this makes up very challenging conditions for future peace talks, although changing conditions on the battlefield, developments in world affairs, or domestic political changes within the two countries might change this. For the parties to potentially be open to direct negotiations with each other without unacceptable preconditions, timing is critical. Timing has been an intensively discussed issue in mediation research (Haass 1988; Rubin 1991; Kleiboer 1994; Zartman 2000; Greig 2001; Vuković 2022) where debates often revolve around the basic insight from mediation practice; that mediation rarely succeeds unless the parties are ready to engage in mediation efforts.

The discussion on conflict *ripeness* can provide some analytical leverage that we can use to identify conditions for the upstart of a serious peace process (Zartman 2001). Openings for resolution can come through battlefield development. The cost of conflict can create the basic incentives for seeking a solution (it should be noted that higher conflict costs can also decrease the propensity for solution, on the dual impact of ceasefires on ripeness see Sticher 2021). Notably, this can occur when the parties perceive they have reached a stalemate, which is sufficiently costly (coined "mutually hurting stalemate" by Zartman (2001)). Likewise, regime change can create openings for conflict resolution as new leaders may not be as tied to previous ones to hold on to an established policy (Stedman 1991). There may also be ripeness on a second layer of analysis: secondary supporting actors can feel that the cost of the conflict has risen and then put pressure on the sides they support in order to get them to the table (Stedman 1996). Mutually enticing opportunities can also incentivize parties to move towards solutions (Zartman 2019; Ohlson 2008; Vuković 2022), especially when the stakes are at a generally lower level and the conflict has not yet escalated dramatically.

All of these (except perhaps for mutually enticing opportunities) are applicable to the Russia-Ukraine War. A negotiation process is unlikely to take off before the parties experience the costs of continued warfare as too high. Given the high stakes on the two sides, both Ukraine and Russia have shown themselves to be ready to absorb considerable costs, in economic and human terms, and for Russia, in terms of deterioration of (some) international relations and international reputation and image. When the increasing costs would be sensed as unbearable is impossible to know, but war fatigue and the inability of any of the sides to make significant progress on the battlefield despite considerable investments in military and human resources, may increase

the chance that a ripe moment arrive. In terms of ripeness as achieved through regime change, it is a plausible but not likely scenario, at least not in the near future. The aborted coup attempt by Prigozhin in the summer of 2023 revealed the inherent weaknesses of the Putin-regime and demonstrated that regime change can potentially happen unexpectedly and quickly. That said, whether a regime change would open up the door for negotiations is not certain, a new leadership on the Russian side could as well be more hawkish and nationalist. On the Ukrainian side, as a democratic country, more orderly processes of regime change may happen if the conflict drags out over time. And while Ukrainian political leaders with less maximalist political demands may come to challenge the current government in Kyiv, there is little sign to detect regime change in the close future. Lastly, external pressure may get the parties to an agreement. Political developments may here play into the calculus. A big unknown factor at the time of writing is the return of Donald Trump as the president of the US, with the potential downgrading or withdrawal of American support to the Ukrainian war efforts. The withdrawal of (part of) the US support from Ukraine would leverage considerable pressure on Ukraine to come to the negotiation table and end the conflict, but then under conditions favorable to the aggressor. On the Russian side, pressure from China—the country currently with the most leverage over Russia—to end the conflict, could pave the way for a negotiation process to start.

Besides ripeness, there is another basic insight about mediation regarding time, namely that time spent together is a critical element of peace talks (Bramsen & Hagemann 2021). Peace agreements are rarely constructed overnight; they take time—physical time spent together and engaging on difficult matters (Bramsen 2023). Time is critical for fostering "approachment"[4] (Bramsen & Hagemann 2021) but also for all the technical aspects of a potential peace agreement to be investigated, discussed, and eventually decided upon.

In the case of Ukraine, one could therefore argue that even if the situation on the battle ground may not be perceived as ripe for negotiations yet, given that peace talks need a lot of time, it might make sense to initiate negotiations sooner rather than later. Moreover, since there is also a psychological element in "ripeness" in terms of believing one can gain more at the battle ground than through an agreement, the negotiations might even ripen the conflict in the process. While ripeness theory relates to factors external to negotiation processes shaping incentives to enter into an agreement, a peace process itself

4 Approachment refers to the act of opponents approaching each other, if only momentarily (Bramsen & Hageman 2021) —similar to rapprochement but much more fragile and momentary.

can ripen a conflict by generating social bonds (Bramsen 2022b), changing the relationship (Arévalo 2024), and influencing the perception of the parties that there is a way out (enticing opportunities) (Zartman 2019; Vuković 2022). On the other hand, engaging in peace negotiations prematurely may lead to parties rejecting proposals or ways forwards that would have been instrumental later down in the process when the moment would be more opportune. Thus, deciding on the moment of ripeness requires weighing the contextual factors against the potential process advantages.

Importantly for the question of timing, negotiations need not take place along with a ceasefire, what Paffenholz et al. (2023) refer to as a *sequential approach*. The US and Ukraine have expressed resistance to having a ceasefire as this could be a de facto acceptance of Russia's illegal invasion. But negotiations can take place parallel with war (parallel approach).

Peace talks – Who?

A critical dimension of peace talks is the composition of actors – who should be present at the table? Here we will discuss two dimensions of this who-question: parties at the table and the question of third-party mediators.

Who negotiates?

Research on peace negotiations and mediation emphasizes the importance of including the main conflict parties in peace talks to ensure ownership and commitment from both or all parties involved, but also the potential challenges that come with such inclusion. In particular, two contradictory principles for inclusion—a normative principle against inclusion of actors responsible for atrocities and aggression against a realist principle for inclusion of those military actors necessary for any settlement to be reached and sustained—need to be weighed against each other (Lanz 2011). The research on spoilers have pointed to the risk of excluding those actors who have the potential to affect a peace process, but also different ways of managing actors with the intent of not constructively contributing to a peace process moving forward (Stedman 1997; Greenhill & Major 2007; Nilsson & Söderberg Kovacs 2011; Nilsson & Söderberg Kovacs 2023). The need to sort out the question of valid spokespersons is often perceived as prerequisite for the start of meaningful peace talks (Engvall & Svensson 2020; Zartman 1995).

Direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine were held early on in the conflict. Four days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, peace talks were initiated at the border to Belarus. Here, lower-level officials represented

Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. At a later meeting in Turkey, Ukraine, and Russia were represented by their respective foreign ministers. Whereas the ministers of foreign affairs have more decision-making power the meetings between lower-level officials representing Russia and Ukraine are likely to have been more direct (see section on the setup of the talks) and productive, operating in different working groups, presumably addressing various aspects of a potential agreement. The Ukrainian negotiator, Mykhailo Podolyak, for example, tweeted on March 13, 2022:

> Again. Negotiations go non-stop in the format of video conferences. Working groups are constantly functioning. A large number of issues require constant attention. On Monday, March 14, a negotiating session will be held to sum up the preliminary results.
>
> Podolyak 2022

The negotiations according to Ukrainian chief negotiator, Davyd Arakhamia (Roshchina 2023), were close to a solution, centered around a formula in which Ukraine would become constitutionally neutral in return for security guarantees and territorial integrity. Why the parties were not able to reach a conclusive deal at this point is a question that remains to be answered, but lack of trust of Russian intention most probably can help to explain the lack of closure. Russia has a questionable track record of adhering to agreements, both in the case of previous agreements with Ukraine, such as the Budapest memorandum and the Minsk agreements, as well as in agreements with Georgia. These credibility problems deepen commitment problems (Fearon 2004) that pose great challenges for any successful peace talks. Moreover, further escalation of the conflict, including the Bucha massacre, contributed also to rendering the agreement irrelevant, as Ukrainian trust in Russia deteriorated.

Not seeing any meaningful avenues for direct talks between the two main antagonists, Ukraine has instead sought to create a wider process with broadened participation. The Ukrainian Peace Formula consists of 10 points and the process around them. Ukrainian diplomats have been trying to build an emerging international coalition that would coalesce around the Peace Formula. Security advisors from a very diverse set of countries met first in Denmark in June 2023, again in Saudi Arabia in August 2023, in Malta in October 2023, in Switzerland in January 2024 and again in June 2024, now with participation of state leaders. The meetings are focused on discussing and gaining support for Ukraine's Peace Formula, what is often referred to as Zelenksy's 10-point plan (Ukraine 2023). At the meeting in Copenhagen, 31 countries participated and in the meeting in Jeddah, 40 countries were represented, now also with the

participation of China, due to diplomatic efforts by the Saudi diplomats. At the meeting in Malta, 66 countries participated, now however with the absence of China. A statement was issued from the meeting in Malta, specifying that the themes for discussion were "Nuclear and radiation safety," "Food security," "Energy security," "Release of all prisoners and deported persons," and "Restoration of territorial integrity of Ukraine" (Zelensky 2023) and that discussions were ongoing in several working groups. In Davos 2024, 83 countries gathered to discuss the Ukrainian Peace Formula. The meetings were seen as steps in a larger process aiming to create a *Peace Summit*, where world leaders would try to find ways to resolve the conflict. After the meeting in Davos, Switzerland agreed to hold the larger peace summit (Revill 2024) which was carried out in June 2024 with the participation of high-level representatives from 92 countries and eight organizations in total (FDFA 2024). While these meetings cannot be seen as peace negotiations, as one of the two main parties, Russia, was not represented, and presumably not invited to either of these meetings, they represent an innovative diplomatic approach to increase support for Ukraine's perspective but also to prepare the ground for a wider engagement with more actors in any type of future settlement of the conflict. In particular, it has been critical for Ukraine to get Global South countries on board, as stated directly by Zelensky, "We would like the Global South to be present… it is important for us to show that the whole world is against Russia's aggression, and the whole world is for a just peace" (Revill 2024). This reflects the changing global power dynamic, with increasing power for Global South countries.

From Ukraine's perspective, the territorial integrity of Ukraine is the most fundamental question and it is therefore important that the process is anchored in a framework of international law and respect for the UN Charter, which forbids military invasions of other countries. At the same time, Ukraine seems to recognize that countries have different interests and incentives and that not all of the points in Zelensky's peace plan are immediately agreeable to all international actors. Instead, Ukraine has said it is willing to break out and work on the agreements on different parts of the 10-point framework.

A critical question regarding who should be presented at peace negotiations relates to inclusion. In recent years, the concept of inclusion has emerged as a pivotal focus area in peace talks. Historically, peace negotiations were often conducted among a select group of political elites or representatives, neglecting the diverse voices and perspectives of marginalized or underrepresented communities. However, contemporary peacebuilding efforts recognize the importance of inclusive processes that involve a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including women, ethnic and religious minorities, and civil society organizations (Bramsen 2022a; Hirblinger & Landau 2020; Nagel 2020; Nilsson 2012;

Krause et al. 2018). This recognition stems from the understanding that lasting peace can only be achieved when the concerns and aspirations of all segments of society are taken into account. A more inclusive process could ensure greater ownership and links to society at large, and therefore potentially greater legitimacy and sustainability of an agreement. However, inclusion might also slow down a process (Bramsen 2022a, 2024), including when more veto players increase the complexity of peace efforts (Cunningham 2006). Neither the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine in 2022, nor the multilateral process on the basis of the Zelensky´s peace plan was characterized by inclusion of civil society, women, or diverse representatives from the respective society. A critical question for future negotiations would therefore be the degree to which the inclusive aspect of peace negotiations should be taken into account. It should be recognized that there are challenging questions in terms of legitimacy, independence, and representation, as Russia is an autocratic state that does allow for very little space for independent civil society actors, and Ukraine is a democracy with established constitutional channels for representation.

Previous research has also demonstrated the usefulness of informal negotiation process as parallel and complementing to formal, state-centered negotiations. This has been explored through analysis of track two diplomacy (Montville 1993), track one and a half diplomacy (Nan 2004), and problem-solving workshops (Mitchell & Banks 1999), which are negotiation efforts that bring in other or broader segments of a warring society into the dialogue efforts. Informal negotiations have most likely played an important role in specific issues during the Russia-Ukraine War, but due to the confidential nature of such efforts and lacking reliable documentation during wartime, it is too early to assess its impact.

Who mediates?

A critical actor in peace talks is the third party in the form of a mediator, facilitator, or guarantor, depending on the mandate. Who would be acceptable as a third party in the case of negotiations about ending the Russian invasion of Ukraine (on this, see Sarı 2023)? Existing research shows that mediation is a consequence of a trilateral decision-making process: the two main parties in conflict need to agree on who would mediate in their conflict, and the prospective mediator needs to agree to be engaged. Behind these three interdependent decisions of mediation lie different combinations of altruism, national self-interests, and reputational benefits. Previous research shows that mediators are more likely to offer their services if they have ties to the parties, are neighbors, or if they have interests to defend, for example, trade relationships (Greig & Regan 2008; Bercovitch & Schneider 2000; Melin 2019). Mediation can be a way for a country that has invested in relationships with conflicting sides be-

fore a conflict to escape taking sides and maintain contact with both sides, but avoid critique of not caring about the situation. Particular and one-sided ties to one side can make the role of the mediator more complicated, but not necessarily impossible (Svensson 2007). Previous research also points to different motives behind the choice to offer oneself as a mediator. It can be related to the prestige of the role of being a mediator, especially in conflicts that are high on the international agenda. It can also be related to the prospect of a settlement, the possibility to influence the outcome of a negotiation process (Mitchell 1988; Greig & Regan 2008; Crescenzi et al. 2011).

The war in Ukraine has been subject to one of the most diverse diplomatic engagements in history. A diverse set of countries have offered their assistance as mediators, from Israel and Turkey to China, Indonesia, and South Africa. The fact that several countries around the world engage in suggesting peace plans/frameworks reflects the increasing multipolarity in the world and shows how the Russian invasion of Ukraine effects not only Ukraine and the region, but countries across the globe. Table 1 lists the currently known examples of mediators in the Russia-Ukraine War. Turkey has been the most influential mediator so far (Butler 2023; Cheterian 2023). The Turkish mediation efforts has been implemented in a two-pronged, subsequent, approach: first bilateral negotiation attempts at the onset of the conflict (March 2022) including the foreign ministers Sergey Lavrov of Russia and Dmytro Kuleba of Ukraine, and then efforts to negotiate a grain export deal, which was done in collaboration with the UN team under the leadership of UNSG Gueterres, resulting in the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Turkey has also mediated exchange of prisoners of war. Turkey had several motivations behind taking up the role of a mediator in Ukraine. Maintaining contacts with both sides, including Russia, with which Turkey has extensive and complicated relationship is an important reason behind seeking to take up the mediation role. Turkey also has more direct links and interests originating in historical ties—for example, the Crimean Tatar is a Turkic language group.

China has presented itself as a possible mediator, but has not engaged in any active mediation efforts. The great advantage of China as a mediator lies in its leverage of Russia, given the close ties that have developed between the two countries, and Russian dependence on Chinese economic and political cooperation. China has come out as a significant peace broker, not at least in the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Burton 2023). If China would find it to be beneficial to its interests to end the war, it could leverage much pressure on Russia to come to the negotiation table and make critical concessions. However, for geopolitical reasons, it is unlikely that the US would accept China as a mediator as such.

There are many others who have taken mediation initiatives. Brazil has also sought a role as a mediator but has taken a different approach than the others. For President Lula de Silva it has been a priority to advocate for larger multilateral format for coming negotiations—a "peace club" (Marcondes & de Almeida Silva 2023). Such a peace club of countries would include important major powers in the Global South including countries such as China, India, Indonesia, and Turkey (Carreño 2023). For Brazil, it is important to champion a fairer world order. It has economic interests in maintaining a relationship with Russia, not at least to safeguard the import of fertilizers from Russia, a critical resource for the Brazilian agricultural sector. For Saudi Arabia, the efforts to play the role of peacemaker is part of a larger project of reshaping the international image of the country (Dazi-Héni 2023). It has achieved some prison exchange deals, which has demonstrated its capacity to find agreement between Russia and Ukraine (Neuhoff 2022). The hosting of the Ukraine peace meeting in Jeddah, as well as efforts seeking to act as a mediator in the on-going crisis in Sudan, demonstrates that Mohammad bin Salman is keen on carving out a different role and image for the kingdom. Another Gulf-country, Qatar, has also positioned itself as a possible mediator, and has been able to achieve some progress on the humanitarian front: the release of kidnapped Ukrainian children (O'Grady 2023). India, with its contacts with both sides, its historical role as a leader of the non-aligned movement, and with an interest to be seen as a global player, has tried to bridge the gap between the parties (Grossman 2023, Thakkar 2024). The Vatican efforts to mediate between the two parties never achieved any momentum (Mikhelidze 2023). Israel, with its diaspora ties to both countries and strategic interests in maintaining contacts and good relationships with both the US and Russia, also tried to mediate in the conflict (Freedman 2022). Indonesia took mediation initiatives during its Presidency of G20 (Purwati et al. 2023).

TABLE 1 Overview of mediation attempts in the Russia-Ukraine War.

Mediator actor	**Relationships with the parties**	**Type of diplomatic engagement**	**Progress / outcome**
African leaders (South Africa, Egypt, Senegal, Congo-Brazzaville, Comoros, Zambia, and Uganda)	Relationships with both sides	Shuttle diplomacy	Unsuccessful
Belarus	Pro-Russia	Direct facilitation	Unsuccessful
Brazil	Relationships with both sides	Suggesting format for peace diplomacy ("Peace club")	On-going
China	Russia's most important ally, but notionally neutral in this conflict	Offering to mediate, peace process framework proposal	On-going
India	Relationships with both sides	Shuttle diplomacy	May have contributed to the de-escalation of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant crisis
Indonesia	Relationships with both sides	G20 Forum	Unsuccessful
Israel	Relationships with both sides	Shuttle diplomacy	Unsuccessful

TABLE 1 Overview of mediation attempts in the Russia-Ukraine War. (*cont.*)

Mediator actor	**Relationships with the parties**	**Type of diplomatic engagement**	**Progress / outcome**
Saudi Arabia	Relationships with both sides	Hosting of international meeting and shuttle diplomacy	On-going
Turkey	Relationships with both sides	Direct facilitation	PoW exchange Grain export deal
United Nations (Secretary-General Guterres)	UN General Assembly has condemned Russia	Shuttle diplomacy	Grain export deal; on-going
Vatican	Relationships with both sides, outspoken against the Russian invasion	Offering to mediate	Unsuccessful
Qatar	Relationships with both sides	Meetings in Qatar with representatives from both sides	Reunification of some Ukrainian families

Peace talks – How?

Along with the composition of actors, the set-up of peace talks is critical for the dynamics of negotiation and potential outcomes. The following figure illustrates five different forms of negotiations.

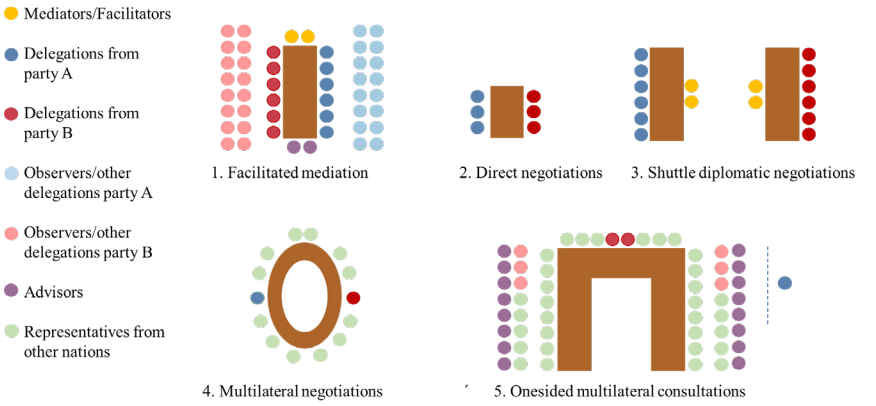

FIGURE 1 Five different formats of negotiation.

The meetings between Russian and Ukrainian officials at the border to Belarus four days after the 2022 invasion correspond to the direct negotiations illustrated as format 2 in Figure 1. With this smaller table and fewer people, the interaction is likely to have been more focused and engaged, both with more potential of direct conflictual engagement but also with greater chance of finding common ground on critical issues, because misunderstandings can be resolved more easily and the interaction can be more focused and direct (Bramsen 2023).

On the contrary, the two meetings in Turkey, one between the ministers of foreign affairs and one between a larger delegation representing Ukraine and Russia, are likely to have had a stiffer form. Looking at the pictures from the meetings alone, one can assume, with insights from other peace negotiations, that the meeting between the foreign ministers with the large horseshoe-shaped table was significantly more formal and "stiff" with a slow rhythm of interaction than the more intimate meeting on the border with Belarus. In the photo, it can be seen that the Ukrainian and Russian foreign ministers are sitting far from each other and may even have to talk to each other via the microphone available on the table (Bramsen 2023).

A critical part of most but not all peace talks involving a third party is shuttle diplomatic meetings where each party meets with a mediator/facilitator

without the opponent being present (Format 3, Figure 1). This can be, for example, pre-meetings preparing for direct negotiations or simply sowing the ground for any form of rapprochement or willingness to negotiate. The mediation efforts by Turkey and the African delegation, manifested themselves in this way. At times, when parties refuse to meet for various reasons, an agreement can thus be negotiated solely through shuttle diplomacy. The Ukrainian decree forbidding negotiations with Russia as long as Putin is in power does not necessarily exclude all forms of indirect dialogue between the parties. It is not unusual that there are legal restrictions on contacts with an enemy in an armed conflict, but this does not exclude negotiations and dialogue through go-betweens and indirect channels. The formal ban of negotiations also did not exclude the Grain Deal, which bypassed this ban by allowing for two parallel agreements (Russia-UN and Ukraine-UN). The Grain Deal was mediated by the UN, without direct meetings but with one mediator negotiating a deal, in two separate but related tracks (Pedrozo 2023). In Figure 1 we illustrate this as shuttle diplomatic negotiations (Format 3, Figure 1). The Grain Deal demonstrates that there is scope for finding solutions even with the legal restrictions on negotiations in place.

Finally, Figure 1 also illustrates the approach currently being undertaken as a multilateral track of peace talks, which can be considered what we would label as *one-sided multilateral consultations* (Format 5, Figure 1). This is a process of multilateral dialogue, done on the basis of Zelensky's 10-point peace plan and excluding Russia (Fischer 2023). With more and more countries taking part, this Peace Formula process holds increasing legitimacy in terms of global support. However, the format of up to 92 countries meeting often gives a very stiff format of representatives reading out statements and stating positions, often with limited space for direct engagement on difficult issues of disagreement. The meeting was hybrid, with Zelensky participating online, which is likely to produce an even more formal and stiff form of interaction (Bramsen & Hageman 2021, 2022).

In June 2024, a Peace Summit was held in Switzerland also following the "one-sided multilateral negotiations" format (Format 5, Figure 1). Here Zelensky took part in person, so the hybrid dimension was not there, and importantly not only security advisors but also state leaders and ministers of foreign affairs participated. Unlike previous Peace Formula meetings, great parts of the meeting were recorded and thus had more a character of "statements to the world" than engaged negotiations. Out of 150 countries allegedly invited to the Peace Summit, 92 accepted the invitation, of which 39 (44.3%) were European countries (FDFA 2024). The meeting resulted in a Joint Communiqué supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity, nuclear security, food security,

and the release of prisoners of war, which was initially signed by 78 of the participants and later 6 other countries. However, several big countries such as India, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia did not sign, and China did not participate. Before the meeting, China and Brazil even launched a common peace plan, which focused on three points to prevent further escalation of the conflict, a peace plan which can be seen as an attempt to signal an alternative, competing track to the Peace Summit process (Reuters 2024). The reason given by the absentees for not participating or signing was that Russia was not invited to the negotiations. These efforts to build global consensus around core issues such as the inviolability of territorial integrity and food security without one of the main protagonists are diplomatically innovative and potentially powerful for increasing diplomatic pressure on Russia, and ideally pave the way for meaningful negotiations. However, the dynamics at the Switzerland meeting indicate that Russian participation, or at least an invitation to Russia, is critical for future steps in the Peace Formula track. Zelensky has stated that later in the process, Russia should be presented with proposals for how to end the war (France24 2024). In any case, the likelihood of achieving broader, wider participation in the process would increase significantly if Russia was to be formally invited, even if Russia refrains from participating. At the June 2024 Summit, the Swiss host stated that the importance of Russia's participation is "clear to all" and that they "wish to discuss how and under what conditions Russia can also be involved a future peace process" indicating an interest in including Russia in future talks (YouTube 2024).

Considering potential peace talks?

As we have shown, previous and ongoing attempts to end the Russia-Ukraine War are complex and challenging. While direct negotiations between Ukraine and Russia would most likely hinge on Kyiv lifting the negotiation ban, it is worth considering what format would be conducive for potential future peace talks, thinking through the room and the composition of actors, mediators, and approach. Considering the composition of actors, one setup that might produce fruitful conditions for negotiating peace in Ukraine would be to have talks not just between Ukraine and Russia, but at the multilateral level with ministers of foreign affairs from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5), Ukraine, and the EU (Format 4, Figure 1). This setup was seen in the negotiations that successfully led to a nuclear agreement with Iran in 2015. Having talks at this level might be more attractive to both Russia and Ukraine. First, it would take the negotiation to the geopolitical level where Russia might

be more inclined to enter talks without preconditions, as it reflects their perspective on the war as a "war against the West" and their desire to change the world order (and in the context of the Security Council, Russia enjoys status as a great power). Second, Ukraine might be more interested in having talks at this level, not facing Russia in an asymmetric power relation but having a majority of its Western allies at the table, and critically, China's support for respecting sovereignty while being an ally of Russia could play positively into the talks. Having the EU and the US at the table also enables bargaining about the economic and cultural sanctions regimes.

Related to the question of what potential peace negotiations could look like, it is also important to consider whether peace talks should follow an incremental approach where minor agreements like the grain deal and other potential smaller deals are built upon each other, or whether the talks follow a logic of "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed," as was the case in Northern Ireland and Colombia (Strömbom et al. 2022). While there are benefits to waiting to address difficult issues like the state of Crimea till a later time, it can also be problematic to celebrate partial agreements. One of the primary reasons for the failure of the Oslo Accords was the lack of a clear framework addressing critical issues like the status of Jerusalem, the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. This was a deliberate move in the negotiations, a so-called incremental approach, where less controversial issues are resolved first, saving the most challenging issues for last (Mitchell & Sachar 2017). While it makes sense to do it this way to get negotiations going, it risks damaging the peace process. Peace efforts are extremely vulnerable processes that often incite insecurities around core identity matters such as who one is if not understood in relation to an evil other, what is known as "ontological insecurity" (Rumelili 2015, Kinnvall et al. 2018). For this reason, making handshake ceremonies and awarding peace prizes risks inciting anger and fear in the population, and if this is done before core matters are solved, people are more likely to resist a peace plan. Likewise, the approach of waiting to solve critical matters in an asymmetric conflict risks putting the weaker part in an even weaker situation.

One of the sticking points in discussions about potential peace talks between Russia and Ukraine is the respective demands that each party proposes as conditions for entering talks (Bengali 2022) or alternatively, but related to this, what framework or issues should be the point of departure for negotiations. Ukraine is open to direct diplomatic engagement with Russia to the extent that it is within the Peace Formula framework, stating that Russia should withdraw its troops and be prosecuted for war crimes, while Russia has suggested the draft agreement from the 2022 negotiations as "the basis for starting

negotiations" (Euronews 2024). While it can make sense to try to safeguard talks through pre-conditions or baselines, it is important to note that neither the negotiation literature nor historical examples of peace talks point towards the importance of agreeing to certain terms of baselines for negotiations. On the contrary, research shows that negotiations potentially change the parties and their positions (Arévalo 2024). While it is necessary to agree on the agenda of a given negotiation meeting, any form of agreement on core issues prior to the talks is not necessary, in fact disagreement is the very reason for meeting.

While we have provided input to a potential process of negotiation here, drawing on insights from the negotiation literature, we deliberately refrain from proposing or hinting towards possible peace agreements. Several observers have come up with ideas for potential elements of an agreement, such as Henry Kissinger suggesting Ukraine to give up land (Bella 2022). However, at the end of the day, it is for the parties themselves to discuss possible solutions and eventually agree on how to address the conflict. At times, it can be problematic for outside parties/observers to propose solutions, not only because of ownership and sustainability (that the parties themselves are the ones to live with the consequences of a potential agreement), but also because different input from the outside may discredit otherwise valuable ideas because the sender of a proposal may be controversial on one side. Moreover, the rejection of a publicly made proposal can make useful ideas politically unfeasible in future negotiations. Furthermore, while specific ideas for solutions are often presented, ultimately any such solution must be a piece in a larger package solution with multiple trade-offs and horse-trading mechanisms. Thus, if an agreement eventually is found all aspects of such an agreement would be intricately tied together, under an overall formula for how to end the conflict. This formula the parties themselves need to come up with and agree to.

Conclusion

This article has applied insights from negotiation literature to investigate and discuss the *when, who*, and *how* of previous, ongoing, and potential peace talk attempts in the Russia-Ukraine War. Is it possible to have peace talks between Russia and Ukraine? Currently, neither party recognize the other as a valid partner in serious peace negotiations and Ukraine upholds a ban on negotiating with Russia as long as Putin is in power. Countries with leverage over Russia have not sufficiently used this to pave the way for a peace process. In this perspective, the current prospects for peace talks seem limited. On the other hand, the stalemate on the battleground indicates that it is equally difficult to move

forward militarily and might make negotiations seem necessary to change the status quo. This could indicate ripeness in the form of a mutually hurting stalemate. Moreover, the current diplomatic efforts through the one-sided multilateral consultation process (Peace Formula) do offer some potential for the future, particularly if the process could be broadened to include China and potentially Russia by invitation, and deepened to include civil society voices. The process may also pave the way for some type of broader multilateral effort to seek to settle the conflict. This article has discussed the potential of broader high-level peace talks including not only Ukraine and Russia, but also the five permanent members of the UN Security Council following a similar model as the Iranian nuclear talks. Whether and how peace talks including Russia will be initiated in the future depends on various factors, including the willingness of the involved parties to engage in sincere and constructive talks, the nature of their demands, developments in the battlefield, dynamics of negotiations, and the geopolitical context. This study has contributed with reflections on dynamics and lessons from previous and current diplomatic efforts, as well as theoretical insights that may feed into considerations on future talks.

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