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# The Russia-Ukraine War in 2024: Assembling the Building Blocks for a Settlement

A long war carries with it an unacceptable risk of escalation. While a ceasefire in Ukraine remains unlikely in 2024, Western countries can begin to assemble the necessary ingredients. This will require continued support for Ukraine, but also an openness to engaging with Russia's concerns over the shape of the European security order.

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Russia's war against Ukraine is approaching the two-year mark, with no end in sight. NATO's Deputy Secretary General [recently acknowledged](#) that hostilities will not cease in 2024, and perhaps not even in 2025, suggesting several more years of bloodletting for a territorial outcome that may differ little from the status quo.

Optimistic assessments [contend](#) that Ukraine may be able to return to the offensive in 2025. But this can only occur if several requirements are met. Western support will need to remain robust, while Ukraine will need to prove adept at recruiting more troops and wearing down Russian forces this year. Given Moscow's [reported ability](#) to replace between 25,000 and 30,000 personnel each month, this will be no small task.

In the meantime, both belligerents are likely to test the limits of dangerously escalating their conflict in 2024. In important ways, both Russia and Ukraine enter 2024 worse off than they were at the war's outset. Ukraine has lost even more of its territory to Russia, while Moscow has seen its forces suffer major losses and its geopolitical room for manoeuvre shrink since the collapse of its relations with the West. With neither side willing to talk, this leaves a logic of escalation as the only means through which each belligerent can achieve its core aims.

Given the political and military risks that lie ahead – not least the possibility of a second Trump administration in the United States – a stocktaking exercise on the nature of the war and the task of rebuilding European security is warranted at this juncture. While a ceasefire in Ukraine appears unlikely in the immediate future, 2024 will remain a crucial year for managing the risk of escalation,

reducing the chances of an even longer war, and putting in place the prerequisites for a diplomatic process to take hold.

Although it has morphed into a contest over territory, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is not territorial at its core. In one sense, it holds a “national” dimension, flowing from unresolved questions over what constitutes the Russian nation. Rendered even more complex by the Soviet Union's collapse, Russians have wrestled with this dilemma for centuries.

Among the perspectives expressed is a widely held belief, articulated most infamously by Vladimir Putin in a [2021 essay](#), that Russians and Ukrainians constitute [a single people](#) – the implication being that Moscow considers an “anti-Russian” Ukraine [to be unacceptable](#). This debate will continue to play out for decades – and the West's ability to control it is limited. For those Russians who posit Eastern Slavic unity, even Ukraine's accession to NATO would more likely breed resentment rather than an admission of Ukrainian separateness.

In another sense, the war is a proxy for Russia's longstanding grievances over the shape of the post-Cold War European security order, including the privileges that Moscow believes it is owed as a great power to determine the security orientation or force limitations of certain European states. The implication here is clear: efforts to de-escalate hostilities in Ukraine are unlikely to succeed without a visible Western willingness to discuss broader issues of pan-European security. This somewhat contravenes the established notion that [“business as usual”](#) can only return once the Ukrainian conflict has been resolved, a mentality

reflected in the European Union's 2016 "[Mogherini principles](#)", which [posited](#) the full implementation of the Minsk agreements as a precondition for restoring normal relations with Russia.

Put differently, a linear or sequential logic to rebuilding European security comes with significant practical limitations. Rather, the task of gradually restoring security and predictability to the OSCE space will rely on a series of parallel processes, not all of which may bear fruit, but which will nonetheless serve to build trust between interlocutors.

This thesis comes with two implications. First, there is no ironclad guarantee that any Russo-Ukrainian ceasefire will remain durable – or even enforceable – once reached. But this is not a silver bullet argument for those who oppose a negotiated settlement. Armed conflict may continue now, or it may resume later – it can only be avoided by a careful and evolving equilibrium between deterrence and diplomacy.

Here again, NATO membership does not offer Ukraine an unassailable security guarantee, especially given that foreclosing Ukrainian accession to the Alliance formed part of Russia's nominal pretext for launching the current war. In the event of Ukraine's admission, Moscow would undoubtedly seek to probe the limits of the West's commitment to Kyiv, given its reluctance to offer Ukraine a realistic prospect of membership since the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit, nor even a concrete pathway to Article 5 guarantees at the organisation's Vilnius summit last year. In response, NATO members would face the unpalatable choice of undermining the credibility of Article 5 or choosing to embark on a direct great-power war.

Second, rebuilding European security entirely without Moscow's input [is unrealistic](#). Russia remains Europe's most populous country and retains many sources of national power, even if one may quibble over whether it should rank among the world's great powers.

Some institutions, such as NATO and the EU, will exist to bolster European security without Russia – or even against it. But Moscow's continued ability to wage war despite heavy losses and a robust Western sanctions regime illustrates how a deterrence-based system cannot easily replace the demise of cooperative security on the continent. Nor would it be in the West's interest to see Europe partitioned along early Cold War lines, which would make the task of restoring a collective commitment

to the principles laid down in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act even more intractable.

The path to rebuilding European security will be tortuous and will require a careful equilibrium in Western foreign policy. On the one hand, Western countries must demonstrate their resolve. The conditions for rebuilding European security will not exist so long as Moscow believes that it suffices to continue pursuing a strategy of outlasting the West. Continued US engagement will also remain crucial, given the difficulty that EU member states may have in arriving at substantive common positions when the time for ceasefire negotiations comes.

The prerequisites for a successful diplomatic process – new assistance packages and some kind of security guarantees for Ukraine – will take up the first half of 2024, culminating with the July NATO summit in Washington. This implies that the risk of military escalation will need to be carefully managed by way of careful communication and elements of external pressure throughout the calendar year. Although all eyes will be on the US presidential election in November, it is not too early to begin putting the pieces in place so that the next US administration can seriously attempt to imbue Russia-West relations with added stability.

On the other hand, the Ukraine war is also evidence that the West no longer enjoys a monopoly on determining the norms that constitute Europe's security order. Unable to exercise a veto at the diplomatic table, Moscow is now doing so on the battlefield. In building a new continental order, Western countries will need to shift their approach away from repeatedly invoking inflexible and conveniently interpreted principles such as the "[right to choose](#)" and focus instead on the more pragmatic task of shaping and negotiating new pan-European security arrangements that are broadly consistent with their interests.