

Congress Should Promote Diplomacy to End the Ukraine War

End Bloodshed, Avert a Global Economic Crisis, & Prevent Nuclear Catastrophe

Russia's illegal war of aggression in Ukraine continues to destroy civilian neighborhoods, and impact millions of Ukrainian lives, as the conflict settles into a grim war of attrition. Beyond the conflict zones, the war is fostering a global economic crisis, threatening a ["perfect storm for food security,"](#)¹ particularly in Africa and the Middle East, and risking a catastrophic nuclear catastrophe.

The Ukrainian people have met Russia's cruel invasion with inspiring bravery. Ultimately, however, there is no military solution to such an intractable and complex global crisis. The longer the conflict goes on, the more bloodshed there will be. At the same time, the UN and governments are warning of years of global hardship that include global "stagflation", a refugee crisis and severe disruptions to [trade, food security, and human development.](#)² The UN is calling for urgent action to address this crisis, warning of a "looming catastrophe" that could bring "global destabilization, starvation and mass migration on an unprecedented scale."³

President [Biden is right](#)⁴ that "at some point along the line there is going to have to be a diplomatic settlement." But how long will it take for "some point" to arrive? Wars of attrition can [grind on for years](#), as the belligerents seek to gain territorial advantage and put off inevitably negotiated solutions.⁵ Members of Congress can start to foster political space for diplomacy despite ongoing military dynamics. A recent [U.S. Institute for Peace](#)⁶ report about the possibilities for a diplomatic settlement argues that "strategic preparation now for an eventual peace process can lead to a broader set of choices, with a better chance of success, as Ukraine's government calculates its options." There's no time to waste. It's time for diplomacy to become a centerpiece to our Ukraine strategy, not just a tool used to rally countries to levy sanctions and transfer arms.

President Zelensky, even while dealing with fitful negotiations with Russia, has [repeatedly](#)⁷ argued that the war will only end with a negotiated settlement. Despite his rallying call that "victory will be Ukraine's," [Zelensky has at times added](#),⁸ "Victory is being able to save as many lives as possible. Our land is important, yes, but ultimately it's just territory." That recognition doesn't make negotiating the boundaries of a final peace settlement any less politically fraught, but it puts it into a humane and pragmatic perspective.

With members of Congress appropriating billions of dollars in U.S. aid to Ukraine, they assume a responsibility to foster support for a negotiated solution that can actually bring the war to an end. The precise boundaries of a diplomatic settlement needs to be guided by the Ukrainians. But the outlines of a settlement have been the [topic of international discussions](#)⁹ for months. These broad outlines include security guarantees for a sovereign and independent Ukraine, some form of Ukrainian neutrality, incentives, including sanctions relief, for Russia to remove its troops, and the thorny question of the disposition of territory that Russia occupies. While the United States should not seek to *impose* parameters of a settlement on Ukraine, it can use its diplomatic weight to move diplomacy forward and encourage a ceasefire and peace agreement as soon as possible. Congress can also support direct talks between the U.S. and Russia. This could include a resumption of diplomacy with Russia on arms control which [President Biden](#) (and Russian leaders) say is still needed.¹⁰ These talks could be fruitful in their own right, but would also support peace for Ukraine. The [U.S. Institute for Peace report](#) argues, "A way to draw Putin into eventual peace talks — and into negotiating over his control of Ukrainian territory — will be to offer him the chance to bargain directly with the United States over his broader complaints. Essentially, this will mean a negotiation over what Putin thinks is Russia's unfair marginalization as a great power and the security and economic threats to Russia of expanding NATO and EU strategic influence."

The U.S. Must Avoid and Prevent Escalation, Resist Expanding War Aims

Every day the conflict continues, the risk of dangerous escalation grows. Many ["war games"](#)¹¹ and [expert analyses](#)¹² point toward war spilling over to other countries, dragging the U.S. further into the conflict, or escalating into nuclear war. For example, one [report by the Atlantic Council](#) outlines escalation triggers and projects that, "We can expect more nuclear threats, backed up by the visible deployment of tactical nuclear

systems in the theater of operations. As Western-provided lethal aid becomes more and more decisive, Putin will step up his efforts to interdict ground lines of communication, raising the chances of fires that stray across national boundaries into NATO territory.”¹³

Foreign Minister Lavrov [has, in fact, raised the specter of nuclear war](#)¹⁴ saying: “The danger is serious, real, and we must not underestimate it. NATO, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy and is arming that proxy. War means war.”¹⁴ Lavrov may be indulging in diplomatic bluster. But potential triggers for escalation include attacks inside Russia, direct engagement of European or U.S. troops, or NATO military support to Ukraine that is seen as over the line for Russia. The administration has avoided aid to Ukraine it thinks would trigger escalation, including no fly zones or the transfer of certain weapons systems (e.g. the controversy over MiG 29s). But as the war grinds on, the fog of war makes escalatory tripwires less clear. The possibility of miscalculation increases. The U.S. can’t just pump arms into the region and cross its fingers.

Because of these threats, U.S. policy should be focused on a clear goal: supporting a sovereign Ukraine and ending the bloodshed as soon as possible. Unfortunately, numerous voices from within the administration and Congress have hinted at expanding U.S. war aims in ways that serve to severely muddy U.S. strategy. Media reports say that President Biden was concerned about rhetoric from administration officials, including the Secretaries of State and Defense about “weakening” Russia and “[undercutting](#) Russia’s military and economic power.”¹⁵ Loose militaristic talk about “[bloodying Putin’s nose](#)”¹⁶ by Congressmembers also makes matters worse. Russia *has* paid a price for this wreckless war. But prolonging the war to “bleed” or punish Russia further could harm those outside of Russia far more than the Kremlin. We need to focus instead on ending the war before it causes more pain for millions of Ukrainians and for tens of millions more around the world. Members of Congress should add their voices to those counseling diplomacy and realistic goals. As far as military policymaking, the U.S. should, as the Arms Control Association recommends, “[avoid new](#) and destabilizing military deployments, dangerous encounters between Russian and NATO forces, and the introduction of new types of conventional or nuclear weapons that undermine shared security interests.”¹⁷

Steps Members of Congress Can Take to Support Ukrainians and End the War

- **Co-sign the Rep. Jayapal-led letter to the administration calling for a “proactive diplomatic push, redoubling efforts to seek a realistic framework for a ceasefire” and “pursuing every diplomatic avenue to support a solution that is acceptable to the people of Ukraine.”**
- Support direct U.S. diplomacy to end the war, including willingness to ratchet down U.S. sanctions on Russia in exchange for Russia ending the war. Support wider direct U.S. diplomacy with Russia (e.g. on arms control) that can accomplish its own goals while supporting ending the war.
- Oppose escalatory measures including: no-fly zones, introducing U.S. troops into Ukraine, transferring weapons that could escalate the conflict, or making provocative changes to nuclear posture and policy.
- Support economic and humanitarian aid and debt relief for Ukraine (as well as support for refugees from other countries including Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, and along the U.S. border).
- Support policies that reduce economic “collateral damage” to civilian populations including the food insecurity and poverty caused by the conflict. Mitigate, don’t escalate, the economic war with Russia.

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2 World Bank Group, *Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Global Economy*, April 2022

3 Associated Press, Record number of people worldwide are moving toward starvation, U.N. warns, NPR.org, July 7, 2022

4 *Remarks by President Biden on the May Jobs Report*, whitehouse.gov, June 3, 2022

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6 Diaz-Prinz, Juan, *Another Way to Help Ukraine: Prepare Now for a Peace Process*, US Institute for Peace, June 16, 2022

7 *Zelensky: Only diplomacy can end Ukraine war*, BBC News, May 21, 2022

8 *Volodymyr Zelensky in his own words*, The Economist, March 27, 2022

9 *Western allies meeting regularly to game out potential framework for Ukraine ceasefire as war hits 100th day*, CNN, June 3, 2022

10 Biden, Joe, *Message From the President*, Arms Control Association, June 2, 2022

11 Jensen, Benjamin, *The Coming Storm: Insights from Ukraine about Escalation in Modern War*, CSIS, May 26, 2022

12 Bender, Brian, *How the Ukraine war could go nuclear*, Politico, March 24, 2022

13 Hooker, Richard, *Climbing the ladder: How the West can manage escalation in Ukraine and beyond*, Atlantic Council, April 21, 2022

14 *Russia’s Lavrov: Do not underestimate threat of nuclear war*, Reuters, April 25, 2022

15 Bertrand, Natasha et. al., *Austin’s assertion that US wants to ‘weaken’ Russia underlines Biden strategy shift*, CNN, April 26, 2022

16 McFall, Caitlin, *GOP senators say it’s high time to ‘bloody’ Putin’s nose, call for unified action*, Fox News, January 19, 2022

17 *Russia’s War on Ukraine and the Risk of Nuclear Escalation*, Arms Control Association Briefing, February 28, 2022