War in Ukraine

What neutrality would mean for Ukraine, Russia and the war

Moscow's goals leave little room for compromise on 'Finlandisation' or treaty-based security guarantees

While Nato membership is an objective in Ukraine's constitution, Volodymyr Zelensky's government may only be able to achieve security guarantees in return for remaining neutral © FT montage/AFP/Getty Images

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Could neutrality offer a way out of the Ukrainian war?

Although a meeting between the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers ended in failure on Thursday, there were hints of a possible diplomatic path based on the idea of neutrality.

Ukrainian officials have in recent days suggested that neutral status with security guarantees could be an alternative to Nato membership, a red line for Moscow for years.

"Regarding [joining] Nato, I have cooled down regarding this question a long time ago, after we understood that Nato is not prepared to accept Ukraine," President Volodymyr Zelensky said in an interview with ABC News this week.

His foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Thursday: "The real issue for Ukraine is hard security guarantees, similar to the ones that members of Nato have."

He added: "We need these guarantees primarily from Russia, because it's the country

that committed an act of aggression against us. But also from other countries, including permanent members of the UN Security Council."

Sergei Lavrov, Russian foreign minister, said: "We want Ukraine to stay neutral . . . We are ready to talk about security guarantees for the Ukrainian state along with security guarantees for the European state and of course for the security of Russia. Judging from what President Zelensky is saying, he is starting to understand this approach; it makes us cautiously optimistic."

What would neutrality mean for Ukraine?

The objective of Nato membership is written into Ukraine's constitution. But the alliance has never put Kyiv on a firm path to membership. The country's recognition, in Kuleba's words, that "despite all of our efforts, Nato is not ready to integrate us" does not mean Ukraine is willing to give up its aspirations in return for nothing.

François Heisbourg, an adviser to the Paris-based Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique think-tank, said there are basically two forms of neutrality.

The first is armed neutrality, the model that has served countries such as Switzerland and Finland: they have not joined larger pacts but bolstered their defences all the same.

Some commentators this year suggested that Ukraine's "Finlandisation" — giving up on its Nato aspirations and assuming a non-aligned status — could have avoided war. But Helsinki — which objects to the "Finlandisation" term — has a strong and well-equipped armed forces that would be hardly compatible with the demilitarisation Russia wants with Ukraine.

Heisbourg said that two of Russia's main goals for the war — so-called denazification, which he takes to mean regime change, and demilitarisation — "run counter to any ability to maintain neutrality", supposedly the third of the Kremlin's objectives.

What about security guarantees?

The other model referred to by Heisbourg is treaty-based neutrality, involving the sort of security guarantees Kuleba referred to. One example of this is the 1839 Treaty of London, which played a huge role in the start of the first world war, when Britain declared war after Germany invaded neutral Belgium.

Ukraine insists security guarantees would have to underpin neutrality. But its experience of similar commitments has hardly been a happy one. In 1994 it was given

security assurances by the US, UK, and Russia under the so-called Budapest Memorandum, in return for giving up the nuclear weapons left on its territory after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Heisbourg said the credibility of such a model — where neutrality is guaranteed by a group of outsiders — "is essentially zero, because there was a three-power guarantee after independence . . . in return for Ukraine getting rid of the nuclear weapons that happened to be on its territory." He added: "That didn't go very well" — a reference to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and this year's invasion.

With such a history, Ukrainians are hardly going to be reassured by Russian guarantees and it is hard to see what kind of western defence commitment to Kyiv would be acceptable to Moscow.

What now?

The two warring countries still seem to suggest that talk of neutrality might help silence the guns.

"Russia is not ready to make an agreement today, it doesn't mean they won't be ready to do so tomorrow," said Kuleba.

Zelensky suggested on Tuesday he could also be open to a compromise on the future status of the Russian occupied regions of Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea.

But Moscow's wider military objectives — notably the replacement of a democratically elected government with one aligned with the Kremlin — seemingly leave little room for compromise.

Cliff Kupchan, chair of Eurasia group, a political risk consultancy, described the "common vocabulary" on neutrality and security guarantees as "a start that's better than nothing" but cautioned: "Is [Russian President Vladimir] Putin really ready to live with Zelensky?"

He added: "The Russians seem poised to control the Black Sea coast, they are underperforming but still moving — if they think they can control more territory in the east, encircle Kyiv and achieve the relative destruction of the Ukrainian military, why would they cut a deal?"

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