

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

The art of the peace deal

Can talks between the US and Russia reach a lasting settlement over Ukraine? So far, argues historian Margaret MacMillan, the signs are

not looking good

Margaret MacMillan

Published 19 HOURS AGO

“Making peace is harder than waging war,” Georges Clemenceau, the French prime minister, said in 1919 of the Paris Peace Conference. It was a lesson those who met at the Congress of Vienna at the end of the Napoleonic wars knew well, as did those who attempted to end the Thirty Years’ War in the 17th century. The clothes are different today, and their wearers arrive by plane and not by horse. They no longer have powdered wigs or embroidered waistcoats but they still sit around grand tables and they still try to guess what the others want. History echoes, as Mark Twain suggested, and in those echoes there are warnings for today.

The longer and more costly the war, the harder the task is of making a durable peace. More than a century after the Paris conference, as he talks about bringing another European war to an end, it is not clear that President Donald Trump and his top advisers realise this.

All negotiations are challenging, whether over business contracts or buying a house, as we know instinctively from our own relationships. When powers come together to end wars, the stakes are of life or death. Incompatible national goals and the high emotions raised by a punishing and costly conflict make establishing peace a hard and painful process. We are seeing this for ourselves with the discussions around ending the war in Ukraine. Russians and Americans have just met in Saudi Arabia, a country that did not even exist in 1919, and already they are disagreeing about what was said or promised.





US and Russian officials, including US secretary of state Marco Rubio on the left and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov on the right, meet in Riyadh on February 18 to discuss Ukraine © Pool/AFP via Getty Images

For nations, as for individuals or businesses, credibility and pride also matter. None wants to appear weak by asking for a deal, especially from a former adversary, only to be rebuffed. And both sides have to be willing to negotiate at the same time. In the first world war, both the Allies and the Central Powers floated the idea of ending their conflict but never at the same time. And, as their losses mounted up, both sides continued to hope for a decisive victory that would allow for a dictated peace and not a negotiated one.

The Allies finally got the upper hand in the summer of 1918. There were negotiations, difficult ones, at the subsequent peace conference, but solely among the Allies as they tried to reconcile different claims and different visions of a world order. The defeated nations were only invited to Paris to be given their terms and deadlines for signing, something many Germans never forgot or forgave.

Mao's China and the US had only abortive attempts to open relations from 1949 until the late 1960s, when both were on bad terms with the Soviet Union. The Americans and the Chinese sent each other hints — President Richard Nixon stopped referring to “Red” China and the Chinese dropped references to bloodsucking capitalists — but since they had no direct contacts they could not know if these were being received and understood. When they finally managed to establish a secure channel and agree that Henry Kissinger, the US national security adviser, would secretly visit Beijing, both sides still had the option of deniability.





US president Richard Nixon and Chinese premier Zhou Enlai at a banquet in Beijing in 1972 © IMAGO/CPA Media via Reuters Conn

Such secrecy might be more difficult today when the danger is that diplomacy by hasty remarks at press conferences or by tweet lock in positions and make the compromises essential to a successful negotiation difficult or impossible. There is a place for publicity: President Woodrow Wilson's letters to the German government when it asked him to broker an armistice in 1918 helped to persuade the German public that the Americans would show them kindness if Germany agreed to a ceasefire.

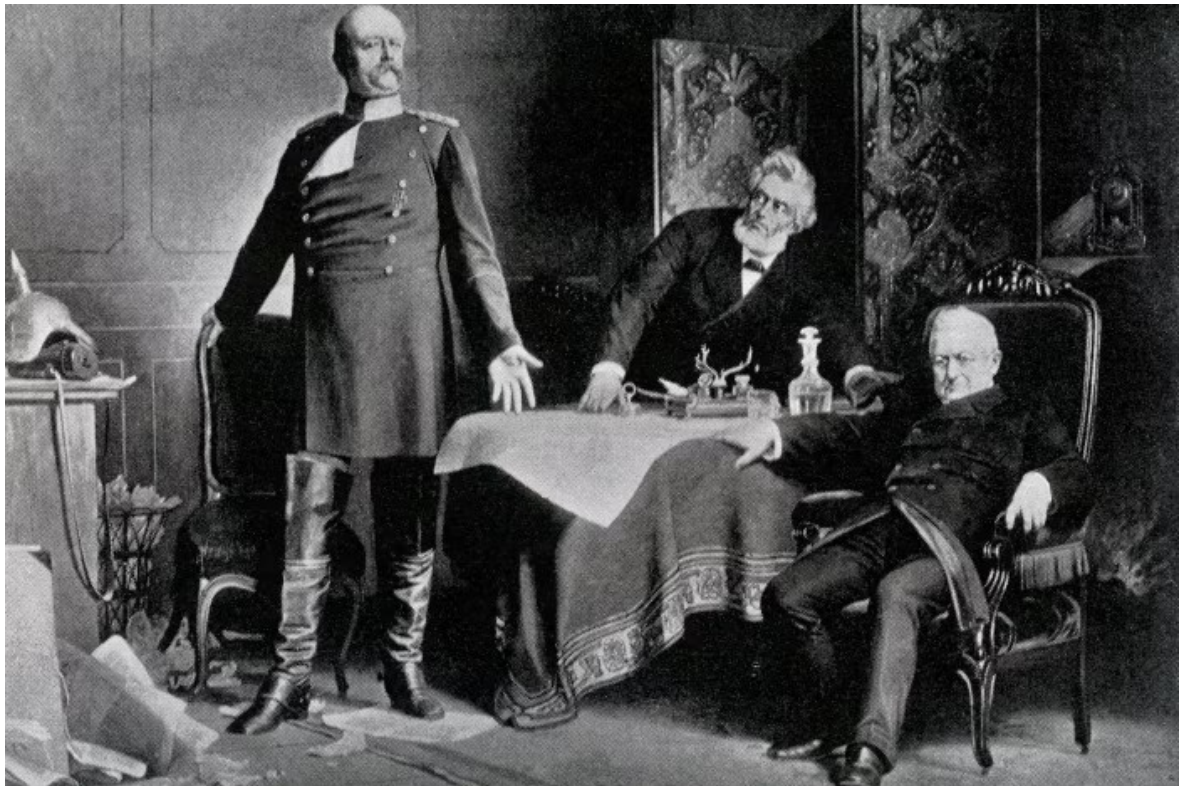
St Augustine held that peace should be the aim of war but too often the ways in which wars end help to fuel new ones. We may dream of better and fairer international orders, of making war an aberration and, worse, a crime, but in the aftermath of conflicts, the accumulated hatreds and the desire for revenge and retribution make it hard to take the high road. In wars fought between coalitions, alliances almost inevitably fall to pieces as the war ends and national interests rise to the surface. The Italians walked out of the Paris Peace Conference because they were not getting all the territory they wanted. At the end of the second world war, the Grand Alliance of Britain, the Soviet Union and the US headed into the cold war as the Soviet Union laid claim to the centre of Europe.

What can pre-empt or sometimes help peace negotiations is the involvement of powerful outsiders. In the 19th century, the Concert of Europe — the great powers of Russia, Austria-Hungary, Prussia (later Germany), France and Britain — intervened repeatedly in the Balkans, for example, to impose new borders on the quarrelling countries emerging out of the Ottoman Empire. After the 1973 war between Israel and its neighbours, the US managed to enforce a ceasefire and, after

...much shuttle diplomacy among Middle Eastern capitals by Kissinger, work out disengagement agreements between Israel on the one hand and Egypt and Syria on the other. The involvement of those affected on the ground helped to make the agreements last.

The talks between the US and Russia about the Ukraine war that took place in Riyadh last week excluded the Ukrainians. What is more, the US has ignored what is surely fundamental to negotiations and that is not to concede at the start to the maximalist demands of the other side. Trump and his spokespeople have apparently assured Vladimir Putin that he is likely to be able to keep land Russia has seized and that Ukraine will not be admitted to Nato.

If Russia and the US impose their sort of settlement on Ukraine (and exploit its mineral wealth as they have suggested), it will leave hostages to fortune — an angry and embittered Ukraine as well as a triumphant Russia. We know from the past how war can be waiting in the wings of peace. When the Germans took the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, those became the focus of France's longing for revenge. And victors are often encouraged to go further.



A depiction of the meeting between Otto von Bismarck (left) and Adolphe Thiers (right) at Versailles in 1871 at the end of the Franco-Prussian war © Ivy Close Images/Alamy

It is hard to be magnanimous at the moment of victory but lasting peace depends

It is hard to be magnanimous at the moment of victory but lasting peace depends either on the total destruction of the enemy, as with Rome and Carthage, or on compromise. To reach that, the parties involved must be clear about their own red lines — what they cannot accept — and know as much as possible about what is essential for the other side or allies.

In Paris, Clemenceau was under huge pressure from the French people to dismember Germany and cripple it with heavy reparations. He agreed instead to measures to reduce Germany's military power and lowered the amounts demanded. In return, so he hoped, he would maintain the alliance with Britain and the US.

In 1972, when Nixon visited Mao, their two countries issued the Shanghai Communiqué, in which, unusually, they agreed to disagree on the status of Taiwan, as they still do. It helped to open up a new relationship and keep half a century of peace.

The road to peace can be eased through the threat — and it has to be credible — of a renewed war. In the early summer of 1919, as the German parliament hesitated over signing the Treaty of Versailles, the Allied leaders in Paris reluctantly made preparations to invade Germany, something they had refrained from doing. In 1995 the warring parties in the Bosnian war agreed to peace talks in Dayton, Ohio, after heavy pressure from the world's powers led by the US and Russia as well as a Nato bombing campaign against Serbian nationalist forces in Bosnia.

Such approaches do not always work. In 1940 Hitler offered Britain a peace deal after the fall of France, and when the Churchill government refused, tried to bomb the British into submission. In 1945, as Germany was being destroyed around him, Hitler refused to contemplate surrender.

Ending the fighting is only the beginning. Getting something that resembles success also takes hard work, patience and an attention to detail. I once met an American diplomat who spent two years in Geneva sitting opposite his Soviet counterpart discussing the same details of an arms deal over and over. And there are the subtle and not so subtle ways of applying pressure. Keeping the room too hot is something the North Koreans like. Zhou Enlai, China's chief negotiator in the early 1970s, once spun out talks with Kissinger, knowing the latter's plane had to leave.

In August 1942, Winston Churchill made the dangerous journey to Moscow to meet Stalin for the first time. Their first encounter was affable and productive, but

at the next ones Stalin was so rude that Churchill talked of leaving, something the Soviets, who had bugged his rooms, would probably have heard. At a final meeting, which lasted for eight hours, the dictator turned on the charm and brought Churchill to his private apartment in the Kremlin, where a lavish feast awaited. Churchill later said he thought he had met the “real Stalin”, a figure he kept trying to find throughout the rest of the war.



From left, Georges Clemenceau, Woodrow Wilson and David Lloyd George — leaders of France, the US and Britain — after signing the treaty of Versailles in 1919 © World of Triss/Alamy

That is not to say that personal relations and mutual trust do not matter; the friendship between Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt as well as between many of their advisers was critical in making the wartime alliance work. Wilson, Clemenceau and David Lloyd George of Britain were very different men but as they worked together in Paris they came to appreciate each other and seek for compromise.

Unfounded optimism, however, can be dangerous. President Roosevelt was convinced that he had charmed Joseph Stalin and could make him share an American vision of a peaceful world order. Yet Stalin and many of his successors, including Putin, respected power only and did not care how many others or of their own people died. And does Putin really respect and like Trump, as the latter seems to think? The US has the capacity to assess Putin and his policies, in think-tanks, the State Department or in universities, but this administration appears to have little use for it.

Being well informed — it seems so obvious — is critical to negotiating successfully. At the Congress of Vienna, which ended the Napoleonic wars, the Austrian spies collected the contents of everyone's waste paper baskets. A century later, in Paris, the French listened in on British telephone conversations and those of the German delegates when they finally arrived.

Knowledge is key, for understanding what both allies and adversaries hope for, what they might accept and what their assumptions are. We are not all the same, as Robert McNamara, the American secretary of defence, admitted ruefully after his attempts to defeat the North Vietnamese. Interlocutors facing each other across a table at a peace conference have different pasts, different cultures and different concerns. Kissinger and his Chinese counterpart Zhou established a good working relationship, which may have helped in their tricky negotiations, but in the end each represented his own country.

The signed documents and public statements are only the start. Like a garden, peace needs to be cultivated and maintained. The complex relationships today between former enemies France and Germany, or between the US and China, have taken decades of work. One of the weaknesses of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles was that it did not have realistic enforcement measures, so that Germany was able to rebuild its military in secret.

Moreover, the other powers were unwilling to confront Germany after Hitler came to power in 1933 and systematically flouted the treaty's provisions. They chose instead to appease German demands, and those of other aggressive powers such as Italy and Japan, with the dreadful consequences we know. It is hard not to think of the parallels with today. By treating Putin as a fellow statesman, by publicly praising him and saying that he wants peace, Trump has given him a stature and a credibility that he does not deserve, and may well have emboldened him to probe further into the spaces along the borders of Russia.





An engraving of the 1814–15 Congress of Vienna, which ended the Napoleonic wars © Getty Images

The US has sent signals that it may be ready to sacrifice Ukraine as Britain and France did Czechoslovakia in 1938 when they forced it to hand over the Sudetenland to Germany. Hitler promised that he would respect the borders of what was left of Czechoslovakia but showed how worthless that promise was in March 1939. Encouraged by western weakness and secure in a new alliance with his rival in the centre of Europe, the Soviet Union, Hitler invaded Poland, the next country on his list, in September 1939, setting off a world war.

Ukraine may, like Czechoslovakia, agree to sacrifice some of its land, but if it is to preserve its sovereignty it will need more economic and political support than that unfortunate country received. If the US won't provide a military guarantee against future Russian invasions, then it will be up to Europe and its allies. The talks that are going on may start to produce the outlines of a workable agreement. Or it may be that they are simply precursors to a closer US-Russia relationship.

The president is a great admirer of Nixon, and apparently hopes to emulate him in shaking up the international order by driving China and Russia apart with the US balancing between them. At the recent Munich Security Conference, Trump emissary Keith Kellogg said the US hoped to offer Russia such a good deal that it would break away from China, Iran and North Korea. And what can Russia offer in return: an incompetent military, a failing economy, a declining population? A Putin changing his spots who no longer interferes in other nations' domestic politics or invades Russia's neighbours? While such a diplomatic reversal could take the world closer to war between the US and China, for the moment it looks like a non-starter. A much weakened Russia has become increasingly dependent on China and, with its long common border, knows where its interests lie.

The US would lose by such a deal as it was seen to abandon allies and embrace the world's authoritarian states. Credibility, that intangible but valuable asset, helps to deter enemies and keep allies. Alliances, like peace itself, need work — and trust, once destroyed, is hard to build back up. The world will lose too, as it is divided

once destroyed, is hard to build back up. The world will lose too, as it is divided into competing spheres of influence. As the US bullies near neighbours, it may — inadvertently — be signalling that it is ready to concede dominance in Asia and the Pacific to China. Trump apparently longs for the Nobel Peace Prize. And why not the award for literature, for good measure, for the author of *The Art of the Deal*?

Margaret MacMillan is emeritus professor of international history at the University of Oxford. Her books include 'Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War' and 'Seize the Hour: When Nixon Met Mao'

Find out about our latest stories first — follow FT Weekend on [Instagram](#) and [X](#), and [sign up](#) to receive the FT Weekend newsletter every Saturday morning

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Life & Arts

Geopolitics

War in Ukraine

US foreign policy

FT Edit