

The Risks of a Russian Ceasefire Offer

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Ukraine may soon face a new threat in this war—Russia’s ceasefire offer. It seems odd to say that a ceasefire is a threat. Once war begins, the default position in the West is to seize the earliest opportunity to “stop the fighting.” But while some ceasefires lead to peace, others lead to more war—as the Russians have repeatedly shown. The frontlines frozen in a ceasefire set the conditions for the negotiations and reconstruction that follow. They also set conditions for future conflict. Those seeking enduring peace in Ukraine must resist the temptation to accept a Russian ceasefire offer that sets conditions for renewed conflict on Russia’s terms or gives Russia leverage on Ukraine with which to force concessions and surrenders.

Russia is on the ropes in Ukraine today. It has not achieved any of Putin’s central objectives. The Russian army is suffering damage that will take years to repair if repair is even possible. Ukrainian forces are conducting counteroffensive operations, steadily pushing the Russians back from their positions around Kyiv and Kharkiv. A ceasefire can stop the fighting, for a time, but it will also give Moscow a chance to reset and prepare to renew the fighting on more advantageous terms. Vladimir Putin has used this approach successfully in Syria and Ukraine since 2014. He will likely try to use it again soon, and we must recognize it for what it is—a trap.

Properly supported, the Ukrainians may well be able to reclaim much of their territory from the exhausted and demoralized Russian forces. The West must back Kyiv in that endeavor, providing military aid that Ukraine needs and disregarding Russian ceasefire offers meant to freeze the battlefield in what is likely close to the best configuration Putin can hope for and in a way that supports maximalist Russian “peace” demands that have only one goal—stripping Ukraine of its sovereignty.

Any consideration of a Russian ceasefire offer must take account of six primary risks.

Putin’s intentions toward Ukraine have not changed and likely never will. Putin’s goals in Ukraine always exceeded countering NATO or forcing Ukraine into neutrality. Putin has made it clear in word and action over the past 20 years that he will accept nothing less than Russian control over Ukraine. He explicitly said that Ukraine “never had its own statehood” in advance of the Feb 24 invasion.¹ There is no room for an independent Ukraine in Putin’s “Russian World.”

Putin’s intent has remained constant, but his ability to act on it has varied. Ukraine has fended off Putin’s attempts to control Ukraine for years: by denying the Kremlin’s proxies the ability to dominate Ukraine’s politics in 2004 and 2013; by halting Russia’s offensive in 2014 and since refusing Putin’s manipulative peace frameworks; and now by defeating the first phase of Russia’s full invasion.

The Kremlin will use any ceasefire to adapt, not scale down, its ambitions to erode and ultimately destroy Ukraine’s sovereignty. We must help Ukraine ensure that any ceasefire it accepts makes it harder, not easier, for the Kremlin to resume political, economic, or military activities to deprive Ukraine of its independence.

Russia has a long history of ceasefire violations. Russia regularly violated ceasefires in Syria and framed its troop rotations as “withdrawals” to buy time for its military operations, as ISW analyzed in detail.²

The Kremlin has also repeatedly violated ceasefire agreements in Ukraine since 2014.³ Russia exploited ceasefires in attempts to manipulate Ukraine in Russia-favorable peace frameworks.⁴ A ceasefire with Russia can only be acceptable, therefore, if it freezes the lines in positions favorable to Ukraine. The ceasefire must reflect a Russian defeat, not a draw.

Russia would use a ceasefire to try to break the momentum of Ukraine’s Armed Forces. Ukraine has defeated Russian objectives in the first phase of this war. Russia has not achieved its explicit goals of seizing Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa and changing Ukraine’s government.⁵

Ukraine is gaining the initiative and conducting limited but successful counteroffensive operations.⁶ Ukraine would likely be able to prevent any consolidation of Russian gains and reclaim more of its territory with an increase in the quantity and speed of assistance from the West, including more of the advanced weapons systems needed to conduct counteroffensive operations.

A ceasefire is one of the few options Putin has available to him to interrupt Ukraine’s initiative, as well as to shift the Russian invasion off the losing trajectory it is currently on. Ukraine should seek, provided full Western support, to continue counteroffensive operations until it has reached a position and situation of its choosing at which to freeze the fighting.

Russian forces would use a ceasefire to regroup. Ukraine has forced Russia to slow and scale back some of its efforts but there is no indication that Russia has defined down its overall military objectives—despite the rhetoric about concentrating on Ukraine’s east.⁷

Russian forces are likely already regrouping and preparing to launch a new campaign. But Russian units are badly damaged and repairing them will take a long time. If the currently planned Russian push in Ukraine’s east does not quickly go Moscow’s way, Putin might offer a ceasefire to buy time to rebuild some of his units.

Russia can use a ceasefire to consolidate gains and freeze the frontline in the best configuration Putin can hope for. Make no mistake—Russia will dig in and establish a long-term military foothold in Ukraine to threaten its statehood and NATO in perpetuity if undeterred. But Ukraine’s south is the only place where Russia has made substantive gains and even they are not solidified.

Driving Russian forces out of Ukraine, especially from the south, is critical to Ukraine’s long-term viability, given the south’s military and economic significance. Ukraine might be able to do that with proper Western support. Russian forces are militarily controlling some places, like Kherson, but they cannot yet govern them. The local population, including many Russian speakers, is challenging Russia’s rule despite Russia’s brutal efforts to force the locals into submission.⁸ Ukrainian troops are also contesting Russia’s military gains in the south.⁹

A ceasefire would allow Russia to focus on consolidating its gains in the south, which would inevitably mean increased terrorizing of the local population as the Kremlin tries to establish governance and a military foothold. A ceasefire would also halt any Ukrainian military counter-offensive in the south.

The Kremlin will use a ceasefire to introduce ambiguity in the information space. The Kremlin is on the defensive in the information space domestically and globally, where Ukraine has a clear advantage. The Kremlin would use a ceasefire to put Ukraine's forces on the defensive in the information space by blaming Ukraine for any ceasefire violations.

The Kremlin has effectively used ceasefires to muddy the diplomatic waters in the past. And the West has shown that it does not cope well with Russia-introduced ambiguity—especially in long-lasting conflicts. The Kremlin would use the appearance of ceasefire negotiations to discourage more reluctant Western countries from continuing military aid to Ukraine.

A ceasefire would give the Kremlin a breather to adjust its domestic narrative. Many Russians pushed back against even a mention of scaling down Russian objectives in Ukraine on March 29.¹⁰ If given time, the Kremlin would likely find a way to solidify a new storyline domestically to explain the Kremlin's failures and delays in Ukraine—and then prepare for and justify a renewed military effort to avenge its losses.

The West should resist Russian ceasefire offers that give Putin leverage on Ukraine and instead provide Ukraine with everything it needs to win as long as the Ukrainians are willing to fight. Ukraine has a chance to defeat Russia's objectives in the second phase of this war. The West's highest priority should be providing all the lethal aid that Ukraine needs to do so.

Specifically, the West should prioritize helping Ukraine defend its cities from Russia's air and artillery strikes, deny Russia the ability to resupply, and increase the mobility of the Ukrainian armed forces. The priority capabilities include long and mid-range ground-based air defense systems, combat aircraft, counter-battery radars, tanks, armored vehicles, demining vehicles—in addition to an increased supply of Javelins, Stingers, and combat drones.

Faster Western assistance is critical to helping Ukrainian forces maintain their momentum and reducing the number of lives it takes to preserve Ukraine's sovereignty.



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¹ <https://lenta dot ru/news/2022/02/21/state/>

² <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Report%20-%20Russia%E2%80%99s%20Dead-End%20Diplomacy%20in%20Syria%20-%20November%202019.pdf>

³

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-russian-deployments-near-ukraine-likely-intended-pressure-zelensky-not>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-crisis-update-march-18-2016>;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-update-16>;

Russia also used a negotiated 'green corridor' during the battle of Illovaisk as an opportunity to massacre retreating Ukrainians soldiers.

⁴ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-putin-accelerates-ukraine-campaign-amid-converging-crises>; P. 18, p. 22 -

<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Putin's%20Offset%20The%20Kremlin's%20Geopolitical%20Adaptations%20Since%202014.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-19>

⁶ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-28>;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-27>;

⁷ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-29>;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-30>

⁸ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-28>;

<https://www.economist.com/europe/ordinary-ukrainians-are-resisting-vladimir-putins-occupying-force-in-kherson-and-elsewhere/21808101>; <https://hromadske dot ua/ru/posts/v-hersone-okkupanty-pytalis-razognat-mirnyj-protest-strelboj-smi-soobshayut-o-ranenyh>

⁹ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-18>;

https://twitter.com/KyivIndependent/status/1509488688627175427?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9EfSgPIymo>; https://t dot me/RKadyrov_95/1690;

<https://twitter.com/clzeeman/status/1508827067395235842>; <https://t dot me/MariaVladimirovnaZakharova/2263>; <https://t dot me/MariaVladimirovnaZakharova/2260>