

UKRAINE OPTIONS PAPER

Peace Stabilisation and Demilitarisation

By Peter Jones

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Executive Summary

Stabilising an eventual peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia poses an immense challenge, in whatever circumstances and on whatever timescale conflict ends. There is scope for potential humanitarian, risk reduction and other interventions to complement military disengagement and other Confidence and Security Building Measures. Options include demilitarisation around hazardous or sensitive locations such as nuclear power stations; humanitarian corridors or safe havens; constraints on irregular forces; measures to adhere to international standards on landmines, cluster munitions and other weapons particularly hazardous to civilian populations; securing weapons stockpiles and addressing diversion risks; and maritime safe routes. Short-term measures could build from local application to create a larger deconfliction and demilitarisation zone. Full stabilisation however is likely to require a balance of forces, effective defence, and credible deterrence for the foreseeable future. Longer-term, mutual balanced force limitations and controls might be possible, set in a wider regional framework.

Detail

An [earlier paper](#) in this series considered provisions to enable Ukrainian and Russian forces to disengage from conflict and potential military Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs). This paper complements that assessment and addresses the scope for broader peace stabilisation and demilitarisation. It focuses on conventional weapons.

Challenging Context

At the time of writing, war is in its seventh month after Russia's invasion of February 2022, although the conflict can be considered to have started earlier, and only ever to have paused after 2014. 2022 has seen offensives and counter-offensives across a broad geographical front. Despite recent Ukrainian successes, there is little sign of it ending, including in the context of Russia's decision to hold referendums in the parts of eastern Ukraine that it controls.

Potential disarmament initiatives need to be considered in terms of three broad scenarios:

- a) war continues at high intensity into 2023,
- b) war becomes a protracted but increasingly phased conflict, with variations in intensity and tempo, or
- c) war ends quickly, with a de facto ceasefire or peace agreement.

Of these, b) might be the central planning assumption, but all scenarios are possible. c) might not constitute a definitive end if respective national ambitions remain unfulfilled or security concerns unresolved.

Initiatives and options for demilitarisation should therefore be considered for any local and immediate benefits they may deliver, especially for civilian populations, even if a lasting ceasefire and general peace is elusive.

Optimistically, such short-term or local measures might create building blocks out of which a more durable peace could be created.

There is a chequered history to international demilitarisation initiatives, but also a range of models and reference points to draw on. Demilitarisation can be addressed as *part* of a peace agreement, and in such cases may include demobilisation of personnel, reduction or decommissioning of military infrastructure, regulation of military operations or detailed agreements on weapon deployments. Examples include Ethiopia-Eritrea demobilisation or Sinai Peninsula demilitarisation.

Demilitarisation can also be approached as an *alternative* or *precursor* to a peace agreement, potentially freezing a conflict status quo, and in such circumstances may be less about decommissioning and demobilising and more about marking areas to have reduced or no military personnel, installations, equipment or weapon platforms. Examples include the Military Demarcation Line and Demilitarised Zone between North and South Korea (in the 1953

[Agreement concerning a Military Armistice in Korea](#)), or the Golan Heights Buffer Zone between Israel and Syria (in the 1974 [Separation of Forces Agreement](#)).

In inter-state wars, demilitarisation may centre on *boundary lines* or a disputed border. This is problematic in the case of Ukraine: Ukraine is fighting for continued existence as a sovereign nation-state within all its internationally recognised borders, including Crimea. President Putin's objective has been the reverse. The course of the war in 2022 may have caused short-term Russian objectives to evolve to focus on the Donbas in addition to retaining Crimea. It is unlikely however that Putin's ultimate aims have altered.

Permanently freezing a conflict status quo on a geographical frontline short of its international borders would therefore be difficult if not impossible for Ukraine to accept. So, any potential demilitarisation may, as with the 2014-15 Minsk agreements, need to focus more on trying to stabilise a de facto military frontline and mitigating or reducing the threat of future military action. Such short-term stabilisation could create the time and space in which a more lasting settlement could be achieved. In addition to immediate stabilisation measures, attention would need to be given to military capabilities able to strike at distance across the line of deconfliction, enable future surprise attacks or conduct operations behind frontlines.

With the conflict in flux, it is difficult to determine where such a frontline might rest. Demilitarisation is, however, likely to be an important element in any discussions on the future of the Donbas and Crimea. There would be a formidable set of challenges to address in such discussions, taking in questions not just of security, but also of national sovereignty and territorial integrity; the needs and allegiance of local populations; the local proliferation of armaments including Small Arms and Light Weapons; and any potential role for external parties including as monitors, observers, or peacekeepers.

The vocabulary itself carries baggage. Russia asserted 'demilitarisation' as one of its aims in invading Ukraine. For Ukraine, any discussion of measures framed as 'demilitarisation' is thus problematic. The real-world priority for Ukraine has been not demilitarisation or disarmament, but the reverse: armament to defend itself. An increasing flow of Western military equipment has meant that Kyiv has been able not only to resist initial invasion, but to launch counter-offensives and create the hope that it might be able to eject Russia from all of Ukrainian territory.

There are sensitivities too to concepts of ‘mobilisation’ and ‘demobilisation’. Ukraine mobilised on a national level in an existential defensive struggle. Russia, for whom Putin framed the invasion as a ‘special military operation’, initially did not. But the course of the war has obliged Moscow to direct more and more human and material resources towards it, and in September 2022 Putin [announced](#) a ‘partial mobilisation’, calling up military reservists.

Near-term Options

Despite their immense mutual distrust, Ukraine and Russia have already agreed some limited cooperation measures, which suggests that further agreements are possible. These have included measures with a *humanitarian and economic* dimension, including the [agreement](#) to allow grain exports to resume through the Black Sea from Ukrainian ports, and with a *safety and security* dimension, including granting International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [access](#) to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. Further measures could build on these precedents.

Potential options include:

- a) Demilitarised or deconfliction zones around sensitive or hazardous facilities, including nuclear power plants and critical infrastructure such as dams and water supplies whose destruction or damage could endanger civilian populations. UN Secretary-General Guterres’ [appeal](#) in summer 2022 for an end to military activity in the immediate vicinity of the Zaporizhzhia plant, and for its facilities and surroundings not to be targeted, was rejected by Russia. But Moscow subsequently accepted an IAEA presence at the site, and Russia too should have an interest as regards safeguarding facilities and populations under its control or those of Russian-proxy authorities. Other countries may also judge that they have a direct interest in such zones if they perceive a risk of conflict creating environmental hazards that could affect them, especially nuclear contamination, and might wish to be involved.
- b) Humanitarian corridors for assisting or evacuating civilians or delivering food, medical and other supplies. There is precedent in the [humanitarian evacuation corridor](#) established for residents of Mariupol in spring 2022, albeit a problematic one, given the continuation of shelling and other threats to civilians while they attempted to flee. Further civilian population centres will come at risk as the conflict continues, perhaps

increasingly within Russian-controlled territory. Safe passage may become a shared concern. Winter conditions may drive a need for intervention in the coming months.

- c) Safe havens where civilian populations stay in place to be protected and supplied. These have a [problematic history](#), most tragically in Srebrenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in that case with UN peacekeepers present but ineffective. As with humanitarian corridors, successful implementation and avoiding safe havens becoming targets requires all parties to commit to and respect agreements, and credible international protection. It is unclear who could hypothetically provide the latter in Ukraine and how this could be done: a UN mandate and muscular interposition force would be needed. Problematic though recent history is, it is possible to conceive of a network of demilitarised zones, humanitarian corridors and perhaps safe havens that could underpin or help to create a broader zone of deconfliction between Russian, Ukrainian and separatist forces.
- d) Commitments to respect and protect civilian populations, including in urban areas, in accordance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and international norms and agreements. Ukrainian commanders have been reluctant to engage in military operations which could damage or destroy Ukrainian cities and harm their own population. Russia too ought to have an interest in affirming and upholding such commitments and standards, including to protect its own citizens as Russian Federation territory comes within range of Ukrainian weapons. When war ends, all parties must be held to international account for their actions, on this issue and more broadly.
- e) Commitments will need to apply to all forces involved in conflict, including separatist and non-regular units and partisan forces. Such irregular forces have played an increasing role and present a greater challenge than regular armed forces, including in terms of training and understanding of obligations to respect IHL and protect civilian populations, and the capacity and willingness to ensure that such obligations are implemented. Here too, some form of international oversight and inspection is likely to be necessary.
- f) Applying the provisions of relevant international agreements, including the [Ottawa Convention on the Prohibition of Anti-Personnel Landmines](#)

and [Oslo Convention on Cluster Munitions](#). There is broad though not universal international agreement to ban such weapons, given their devastating impact on civilian populations, which may extend for years after conflict has ended. One dilemma is the countries' limited current adherence to such arrangements, though Ukraine is signatory to the Ottawa Convention. Ukraine and Russia are driven by immediate military imperatives, but they should also see an interest, not just in minimising civilian suffering now, but also in preventing the toxic legacy and negative economic impact that such weapons would leave in territory that they seek to control in future. Even if use of munitions such as landmines cannot immediately be halted, there is scope for information provision on where weapons have been deployed, so that hazardous areas can be mapped accurately, and a basis created for potential future cooperation between national authorities and international partners. In a post-conflict phase, it may be possible to envisage cooperative clearance operations or even joint monitoring units.

- g) Measures to address weapons proliferation, including of Small Arms and Light Weapons, within and beyond the conflict zone. All parties should have an interest in the secure and safe management of weapon and ammunition stores, given the risk of diversion to criminal networks and other non-state actors. With significant quantities of Western arms and ammunition supplied to Ukraine, this should be of interest to Russia and its proxies as well as to Ukraine. In addition to transparency measures relating to equipment holdings, there should be practical arrangements relating to the security of arms depots, the secure disposal of stocks and associated verification measures. There might be scope for post-conflict cooperation between the two countries, again with international assistance.
- h) Further maritime safe routes could be developed, building on the Black Sea Grain Initiative brokered by the United Nations and Turkey in summer 2022 that allowed grain shipments to resume from Ukrainian ports. This deal worked well after initial missile strikes on southern Ukraine and could be renewed after its initial 120-day period if both parties agree. Ukraine and Russia should both see economic and security interests in additional safety and security measures relating to the Black Sea. For Ukraine, there remains the risk, even if Russia is no longer able to seize its entire Black Sea coast in the short-term, that this remains a

long-term threat. Ukraine also remains vulnerable to a possible Russian blockade of its ports. For Russia, concerns must have increased about its own ports and naval bases, given that Russian advantage in ships and submarines has been countered by Ukraine's system of coastal defences including drones and missiles.

Long-term Stabilisation: Defence and Deterrence

Many of the measures discussed above could start small or local and build up as part of a broader ceasefire or peace agreement. Longer-term peace stabilisation is more challenging. It is possible to frame a spectrum of options:

- i. Comprehensive force limitation, reduction and disarmament measures, covering regular armed forces, as well as separatist and irregular groups,
- ii. Disarmament and demobilisation focused on certain armed groups and actors; for example, focusing on irregular forces,
- iii. Reduction or withdrawal of specific weapon systems, for example artillery and other indirect fire systems,
- iv. Freezing a front line and deployments with a view to future reduction or withdrawal, or
- v. Acceptance that military reduction, disarmament, and demobilisation are not achievable soon, and that any peace will be stabilised instead based on a balance of forces, effective defence, and credible deterrence.

At the time of writing, option i) is a distant and unlikely prospect. Option ii) addresses the idea that, if disarmament or demobilisation of core national armed forces is unrealistic, limitation or control of certain military or paramilitary elements and irregular forces might be more achievable. For Ukraine, this would include constraining Russian-backed separatist forces in the Donbas and irregular forces including the Wagner Group. For Russia, it could address potential concerns about pro-Ukrainian partisan activity.

On option iii), the earlier paper in this series on CSBMs noted the 2014-15 Minsk agreement provisions for both countries to pull out heavy weapons to equal distances with the aim of creating security zones of between 50 and 140 km, linked to the range of specific artillery or missile systems (see e.g. [Minsk II](#), paras. 2 and 3). These agreements were intended to apply to the then zone of

conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Their principles could be applied across a broader frontline.

The course of war in 2022 has underlined the importance of artillery, missile, and other indirect fire weapons for both countries. Russian weapons have caused significant damage and suffering within Ukraine. Over time, Ukraine has acquired increasingly sophisticated and long-range Western systems, including with potential to strike targets within the territory of the Russian Federation.

Western Governments have been clear in forbidding such use. Nonetheless, Russia might consider that it has an interest in restrictions on such weapons if Ukraine continued to recover occupied territory and pushed closer to Russian borders. The ability to put at risk Russian supply lines and command locations at any range has made it harder for Russia to keep fighting on Ukrainian territory, and, if Russian forces withdrew further, would increase Ukraine's ability to deter future cross-border strikes.

Option iv) could apply in a situation where Ukraine and Russia had fought to a standstill or had paused for regrouping. It also relates to each country's capacity to sustain long-term conflict. Both Russia and Ukraine have suffered significant losses in the war. In summer 2022, a senior United States official [estimated](#) that total Russian casualties, dead and wounded, nearly six months after the invasion stood at 70 – 80,000. Other estimates have suggested a higher figure. Ukrainian losses have been estimated by international observers as lower but still considerable: perhaps a half to two thirds of Russia's losses.

There have also been significant losses of materiel. By September 2022, Russian forces were estimated to have lost (destroyed, damaged, abandoned or captured) over 6,000 items of significant military equipment, including more than 1,000 main battle tanks. Ukraine's estimated losses were over 1,500 items of significant military equipment, including more than 200 main battle tanks.

The ability to sustain conflict is linked not only to the ability to replenish such losses, but also to ammunition stockpiles and production capacity. In certain areas, Russia may have stockpiles capable of sustaining combat operations for several years. For Ukraine, a key consideration is the willingness and capacity of Western partners to continue to supply arms and ammunition, including the higher precision anti-tank, artillery and Multiple Launch Rocket Systems that

have had an impact, including in destroying Russian armoured vehicles and command posts, and disrupting logistics lines.

This willingness is not much in doubt, but capacity is an issue. Few Western armed forces have weapons or munitions to spare, and some have already sent a significant portion of their stocks to Ukraine. Western governments and industry are making efforts to speed up production to replace what has already been supplied.

Supply constraints on Ukraine and Russia, and on Ukraine's Western partners, could provide motivation for an agreement to freeze or pause conflict, or to consider limitations on armament levels, especially if both sides doubt their ability to sustain high-intensity military operations over the long-term.

Reality Check

It is important also to consider option v), recognising that any peace agreement may be possible for the foreseeable future only based on armament rather than disarmament, a balance of military forces, effective defence, and credible deterrence. This is the model which underpinned peace in Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact in the Cold War.

Peace stabilisation through a balance of forces, defence and deterrence may need to be accompanied by CSBMs, including transparency measures and the ability to verify military capabilities, deployments, and activity. It may also need a regional dimension, including from Ukraine's perspective Belarus, and from Russia's perspective assurance about the extent and nature of Western Allies' military support to Ukraine.

Ukraine will need continued backing from the West. Russia probably has the internal capacity to sustain and regenerate its own military capabilities, and underlying deterrence provided by nuclear and other non-conventional weapons. But it may now start to fear the challenge posed by increasingly well-armed and capable Ukrainian armed forces.

NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation evolved during the Cold War. A decades-long stand-off between massive conventional armed forces combined with a nuclear tripwire underpinned an at times precarious but increasingly stable peace from the 1950s to 1990s. As détente built from the 1970s, NATO and the Warsaw Pact were able to discuss [Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions](#). Those negotiations provided a basis for what became the [Conventional Armed](#)

[Forces in Europe Treaty](#): a framework for hard limitations and reductions in military equipment holdings, underpinned by intrusive verification and inspection arrangements.

Only at that point could real disarmament take place, in tandem with and supporting peaceful evolution in the European security environment. This may provide the most realistic pattern for any eventual disarmament and demilitarisation between Ukraine and Russia.

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