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Ukraine: The Next 10 Months Can Shape Hopes for Peace

By summer 2024, three evolutions can help open a path for a just and lasting peace.

Wednesday, September 27, 2023 / **By:** Ambassador William B. Taylor

As Russia's invasion of Ukraine moves toward its second full winter, observers note that typically heavy rains and then cold may enforce a season of slower fighting. But the war's most meaningful "next season" may well be not the winter but the nine to 10 months until next summer. Three factors critical to Ukraine's defense and Europe's security will evolve by the summer in ways that could open a path toward a just and lasting peace — or could leave the region facing indefinite warfare and threat.



Ukrainian soldiers fire a howitzer August 28 at Russian defenses in Bakhmut, one of several fronts in Ukraine's counteroffensive to Russia's invasion. Ukraine vows to recover its Russian-occupied territories. (Tyler Hicks/The New York Times)

A Next Chapter

Conversations this month with Ukrainians in Kyiv, and European and NATO officials in Brussels, helped several colleagues and me envision ways that this next chapter might open a realistic path toward a sustainable peace. Creating such a path was a focus of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit last week to the United Nations, where he promulgated Ukraine's peace plan for the first time on the world's most global stage. That plan relies on three elements that must advance by next summer to offer the most realistic chance of progress in 2024 toward a just, durable peace:

- **Ukraine's recovery of its territory.** It will be vital to support Ukrainian forces' progress in reversing Vladimir Putin's armed seizures in Ukraine. Ukrainians have shown unity in seeking only a peace process that guarantees the liberation of their compatriots and territory from Russia's brutal occupation. Ukraine's four-month-old counteroffensive against entrenched Russian forces has been gritty, determined and slow, as many military professionals predicted. Zelenskyy's visit to Washington last week yielded news reports quoting U.S. officials saying that the United States will soon provide at least some longer-range missiles, known as ATACMs. A key question for the months before next summer will be how far Ukraine's troops can push the Russians back, notably around Bakhmut in the east and in a drive southward to sever Russia's land bridge to Crimea.
- **Ukraine's path to the European Union.** Ukrainians have firmly cast their economic, cultural and political future with Europe — a choice that Putin and other zealots of a new Russian empire find intolerable. European officials spoke positively this month about the prospects of elevating Ukraine's candidacy for EU membership into more formal, detailed negotiations by early 2024. Ukraine has made "a lot of progress" since receiving EU recognition as a candidate for membership 15 months ago, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said. An EU conference in December will decide whether to elevate Ukraine's candidacy to the next stage.
- **Ukraine's bid to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).** This factor is what mainly defines the next nine to 10 months as a chapter, for next July's NATO summit conference will consider anew how to handle Ukraine's request to join the alliance. This year's NATO summit, in Vilnius, Lithuania, reinforced the alliance's commitment to accept Ukraine's application for membership at some point and created a NATO-Ukraine Council to help guide that process. Although the organization will not formally admit any new member while it is embroiled in a war, the military, political and strategic conditions by summer 2024 should enable NATO to invite Ukraine to begin membership accession talks in the NATO-Ukraine Council.

Vital Tasks

While these three elements of a sustainable peace can be advanced by next summer's NATO summit, each is also an arduous task that may require more time. In any war, progress on the battlefield is seldom predictable. Ukraine and its soldiers are showing extraordinary resilience and creativity. Their current counteroffensive is advancing in part through the heroism of small infantry units that have been clearing Russian minefields *at night*, under cover of darkness, to let armored forces break through Russian lines. Promised new weaponry may help the Ukrainians' advance, but they remain outweighed in this war by an attacker with more than three times the population, and nearly nine times the prewar economy, of their own.

In the coming months, President Zelenskyy will continue to advance the 10-point peace plan that Ukraine has presented for discussion at conferences in Copenhagen, Jeddah, and now the U.N. Security Council and General Assembly. Ukraine is moving toward convening a "peace summit" at which it aims to win support from the widest range of heads of state. As former assistant secretary of state Wess Mitchell has observed, the United States can support this effort by working "behind the scenes to encourage participation by developing countries, many of which have longstanding military and aid relationships with the United States." Another U.S. line of effort can be "to keep the coalition [of Ukraine's supporters] unified, emphasizing the strategic logic and potential benefits of Zelenskyy's approach," notes Mitchell, a senior advisor at USIP.

As Ukraine pursues accession to the European Union and NATO, recent weeks illustrate that its leadership is sustaining the necessary focus on rooting out the corruption that has been systemic in governments and economies in Ukraine and other ex-Soviet republics. Authorities have dismissed defense officials and senior military recruiters over evidence of financial corruption. A court ordered the detention of the billionaire businessman, Ihor Kolomoisky, who backed Zelenskyy's 2019 election and who now faces corruption allegations. That Ukraine is pursuing such difficult cases while fighting a nearly all-consuming war underscores its determination to succeed. EU and NATO officials have acknowledged Ukraine's anticorruption progress.

A 'Bridge' Toward Peace and Security

Ukraine will need the political and economic security of EU membership and the strategic security of joining NATO as it contemplates its future beside a hostile Russia. The Kremlin's behavior for years, in Ukraine and other parts of the ex-Soviet sphere, makes clear that Putin would readily use even a temporary ceasefire with Ukraine as an opportunity to regroup and rearm for a new assault. So even if Ukraine is able to push Russian forces out of its territory, how can it hope to achieve a measure of security while preparing to join NATO?

A creative response to that conundrum has been emerging this year — and we can advance it in the vital coming months. In July, the Group of Seven (G7) countries launched what effectively can serve as a bridge toward the permanent EU and NATO memberships that Ukraine seeks. During that NATO summit conference in Vilnius, the G7 members announced that they will commit to sustaining the disparate types of support for Ukraine — arms supplies, training, financial help and others — until Ukraine becomes a member of NATO.

To relatively little public attention so far, dozens of nations have joined that commitment in the past 11 weeks, creating an informal, multilateral instrument built of numerous bilateral agreements. That step toward better long-term security for Ukraine and Europe requires close coordination amid the exigencies of a war — and the logical coordinator is NATO itself.

What's Really at Stake

Putin's regime responded last week to Zelenskyy's speeches at the United Nations and in Washington as it typically does to events it does not like: with brutal attacks. Thursday, on what the world recognizes as the International Day of Peace, Russia launched its heaviest daily air strike in more than a month at several Ukrainian cities.

That was the 575th day of Vladimir Putin's all-out assault on 44 million Ukrainians, and they responded to his brutality as they have from day one — with determination to defend their independence. They again dug into the rubble of buildings to rescue their injured neighbors and recover their dead; they again worked to clear Russian-laid minefields and fought to regain Russian-occupied towns and villages.

As this war moves into its second full winter, policymakers worldwide should acknowledge the unavoidable reality that the outcome in Ukraine will significantly determine whether our children's and grandchildren's world will be governed by laws or by callous violence. This obligates us to humility and gratitude for the Ukrainian people's extraordinary sacrifices to defend justice, liberty, and laws. A line in their national anthem evokes it: "Soul and body we will lay down for our freedom," Ukrainians sing. More viscerally and visibly, millions of Ukrainians demonstrate it daily, much as determined Britons did under the savage assault of Nazi bombs and missiles during World War II.

So, amid our many debates worldwide over details of policies and postures around this wretched war, we must recognize our debt to Ukrainians for their defense of *our* freedoms as well as their own.

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where most of the United States' natural partners are not democracies, we will need to be pragmatic and appeal to the shared interests of preserving the independence and sovereignty of individual states against revisionist encroachments.

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By: Douglas Farah; Román D. Ortiz

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