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How Wars End



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Abstract:

In February, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the opening of negotiations with Vladimir Putin to end the war in Ukraine. This announcement came right after U.S. Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth's statements suggesting that Ukraine would not return to its pre-2014 borders, would not join NATO, and that the United States would not provide security guarantees to Ukraine after a peace agreement, leaving Europe as the guarantor of its security.

This article reviews theories on the termination of armed conflicts and applies them to the Ukrainian case, whose outcome and future viability will depend on the European Union's ability – traditionally reluctant to employ hard power – to provide security guarantees capable of deterring Russia.

Keywords:

Russia – United States – Ukraine – Security guarantees – Deterrence – Negotiation

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Introduction

On February 12th, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that he had reached an agreement with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, to open negotiations between both countries aimed at ending the war in Ukraine. This announcement came shortly after his Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, stated at the twenty-sixth meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group that it was unrealistic to expect the country to return to its pre-2014 borders, to join NATO, or for Washington to provide security guarantees to Kyiv. And, in case there was any remaining doubt about the U.S. commitment to Ukraine's future, Hegseth emphasized that a lasting peace in the country would require solid security guarantees, but that these would need to be provided by the Europeans. Furthermore, if peacekeeping forces were to be deployed following a potential ceasefire agreement, they would not be NATO troops nor would they be covered by the provisions of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Therefore, any deployment would take place under national responsibility.

Taken together, these statements made the U.S. position unmistakably clear: the country's strategic priority lies in the Indo-Pacific; Ukraine is not a vital interest for Washington[1]; the war in Europe is exclusively a European problem; and neither the European Union nor the countries of the continent are considered strategic actors. In other words, America's top priority is containing China, not sustaining Ukraine.

The announcement took Europe's main capitals by surprise. Paris, London, and Berlin reacted with visible unease. In Brussels, this cold dose of reality was interpreted as a concession to Moscow; in Vilnius, Tallinn, and Warsaw, it was seen outright as a betrayal. The message from the Trump Administration was perceived for what it was: confirmation that Washington was preparing to exit the conflict and shift the burden of implementing peace onto European shoulders. Shoulders that, despite all the rhetoric about "strategic autonomy," their complex security and defense architecture, and the official narrative surrounding the war, remain incapable of offering Ukraine credible security guarantees without Washington's backing. To paraphrase *Top Gun* (1986), the European Union's

[1] Paradoxically, someone diametrically opposed to Trump, like Obama, argued the same point: that Ukraine was a vital interest for Russia, but not for the United States (Jeffrey Goldberg (2016, abril): "The Obama Doctrine", *The Atlantic* [online] https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/

ego when it comes to Ukraine had written checks its body couldn't cash, whether in the form of commitment, sufficient forces, or credible deterrence.

Why is it important to study how wars end?

History shows us that wars do not necessarily end with the signing of a peace agreement, but rather when the risk of their resumption is dissipated through credible deterrence. And the reality is that, despite its military degradation, Russia will remain a relevant military power capable of reversing any outcome it deems contrary to its interests, especially when facing a postmodern European Union that has repeatedly ignored the importance of military security. That is why the U.S. announcement has reopened the old debate in Europe about its own security, the transatlantic bond, and the durability of peace agreements that do not have Washington's unequivocal support. This brings to mind the famous remark by Belgian Foreign Minister Mark Eyskens (1991), describing Brussels as *"…an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm."*

This is no minor issue. Understanding the processes that shape the end of an armed conflict – the resulting balance of power, and the political, social, and economic implications of the cessation of hostilities – is crucial to grasp how the new international order takes shape and how power relations evolve in the post-conflict period. History offers many examples where a war does not truly end with a peace treaty or the demobilization of forces, but only with the creation of a strategic equilibrium that prevents the parties from resuming hostilities. When this balance is unstable, or the conditions that originally triggered the war remain unresolved, a return to armed conflict becomes only a matter of time.

For these reasons, the analysis of how wars end has become a consolidated field of research within Strategic Studies. Its importance lies in several factors. First, because the way a war is resolved has profound repercussions on the nature of the emerging political and strategic order. The circumstances under which peace is achieved – whether through military victory or defeat, mutual exhaustion, conflict freeze, or a negotiated settlement,

to name a few examples – not only determine the stability of the international order but also the likelihood of the conflict reigniting in the short or medium term[2].

Second, because studying these processes allows us to understand the dynamics of negotiation and peacebuilding, two critical phases that shape both how wars conclude and how viable the post-war order will be. In this regard, many civil wars and interstate conflicts drag on when the parties perceive that signing a peace agreement may jeopardize their own political, military, or even physical survival[3]. Specifically, the lack of robust external guarantees or effective verification mechanisms for the agreements reached can fuel mistrust between parties and contribute to the collapse of peace processes[4].

In this context, cases such as the Balkans, Iraq, or Afghanistan offer important lessons for understanding the dynamics involved in implementing ceasefire agreements, deploying peacekeeping operations, and, above all, the challenges Western powers face when managing the final phase of conflicts, commonly referred to as an "exit strategy [5]. This reality was laid bare in Afghanistan (2001–21), where the chaotic withdrawal from Kabul in August 2021 precipitated the immediate collapse of the Afghan government and the triumphant return of the Taliban. In fact, among the various factors that can jeopardize a successful exit from a conflict – lack of planning, ignorance of local political and social realities, shifting strategic objectives, or the absence of internal political consensus in the intervening countries[6] – the last two are particularly relevant to the Ukrainian case, especially as discussions emerge about a potential coalition of the willing led by Europe.

First, because as a conflict (or in this case, a hypothetical peacekeeping, stabilization, reassurance, or interposition operation) drags on, the political objectives that initially justified the intervention tend to fade, be reformulated, or even become contradictory[7]. Second, because the very process of disengagement generates strategic dilemmas that

[2] Fred Iklé: *Every War Must End*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.
[3] Stephen J. Stedman: *Implementing Peace Agreements in Civil Wars: Lessons and Recommendations for Policymakers*. New York: International Peace Academy, 2001.
[4] Barbara F. Walter: *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.
[5] However, it is a controversial concept due to its strategic and political implications (Riley Murray (2021, 11 Aprill): "It's Time to Stop Using the Term Exit Strategy", *Small Wars Journal* [online] https://smallwarsjournal.com/2021/11/04/its-time-stop-using-term-exit-strategy/
[6] Dominic Tierney: *The Right Way to Lose a War: America in an Age of Unwinnable Conflicts*. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2015.
[7] Colin S. Gray: *Modern Strategy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

oscillate between the political need to end the intervention in order to reduce human, economic, and political costs, and the fear that such a withdrawal might create power vacuums to be exploited by other actors[8].

Finally, in the current context of strategic competition and the growing Sino-Russian entente, the analysis of how wars end takes on even greater significance. Understanding the processes that lead to the cessation of hostilities allows policymakers to anticipate conflict dyads, design realistic exit strategies, and build stable security frameworks[9]. In other words, it's not simply about how to end a war, but about how to do so in a way that minimizes the risk of renewed hostilities (something the Minsk Agreements of 2014–15 failed to achieve) or prevents power vacuums from emerging (in Ukraine's case, the risk of transitioning from a buffer state to one with forced neutrality or de facto alignment with Moscow.

As is becoming increasingly clear now, with peace negotiations opening while Russia demonstrates strategic patience, Trump shows impatience, and a European Union is in shock, this will be the moment when the contenders' red lines emerge, power balances are reconfigured, and the foundations of the post-conflict order are laid. In other words, the way in which the war ends will not only shape the postwar stability, and the viability and durability of the peace achieved; it may also set a precedent for the new European concert, test the effectiveness of collective security systems, and influence the deterrence of revisionist actors.

How do wars end?

Returning once again to the literature in Strategic Studies, it is possible to identify several typologies regarding the termination of armed conflicts. The most obvious, of course, is decisive victory[10], which occurs when one party imposes its will by force, causing the political and military collapse of its adversary and establishing the terms of

[8] Without going into detail, this reflects the difficulty external powers face in stabilizing foreign territories without assuming unlimited responsibilities, which leads to domestic tensions and a lack of coordination among allies (Stephen D. Krasner: *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[9] Colin S. Gray: *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*. London: Routledge, 2007.

[10] Stephen Biddle: *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

the new resulting order. In the case at hand, this scenario is highly unlikely. Despite calls from some quarters for direct Western intervention to achieve a strategic victory over Russia – without due regard for the potential consequences – Western strategy soon shifted to a mix of deterrence and bloodletting, aiming to wear down Moscow by prolonging the conflict and increasing its military, economic, and political costs, while avoiding crossing certain red lines that could trigger horizontal or vertical escalation.

In this sense, neither the United States nor European countries have provided Ukraine with the material means necessary to achieve a military victory on the ground. The delivery of advanced weaponry has been gradual, limited, and carefully calibrated, driven as much by the logic of escalation management as by the absence of a clear consensus on the ultimate objective of the intervention: whether to contain Russia or to defeat it[11].

The second way wars end is through negotiation and political agreement, typically the result of military stalemate or a balance in the attrition suffered by both parties—a mutually hurting stalemate[12]. In these situations, the belligerents renounce total victory and opt instead for a compromise to end hostilities. The sustainability of such agreements depends on factors such as credible security guarantees, realistic verification mechanisms, and clear international commitment. Despite the attrition Russia has experienced, its strategic objectives have scarcely changed[13]. In fact, the hypothetical incorporation of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson (and even Kharkiv) into the Russian Federation, the consolidation of the land bridge between Russia and Crimea, or the "Finlandization" of Ukraine would all constitute a significant victory for the Kremlin. While it may not qualify as an outright victory – Ukraine would survive as a state – without credible security guarantees to uphold the new status quo, the situation would remain fragile.

In other cases, conflicts are frozen, with a precarious cessation of hostilities but without any formal political settlement, as seen in many conflicts across the post-Soviet space.

[11] Guillem Colom-Piella (ed): *La guerra de Ucrania: los 100 días que cambiaron Europa*, Madrid: Catarata, 2022; o Beatriz Cózar Murillo y Guillem Colom-Piella (eds.): *La guerra de Ucrania II: De la conquista de Lugansk a la contraofensiva ucraniana*. Madrid: Catarata, 2023.

[12] James D. Fearon: “Rationalist Explanations for War”. *International Organization*, Vol. 49 no. 3 (1995), pp. 379-414.

[13] Guillem Colom-Piella: “Pensamiento militar ruso y suposiciones sobre la zona gris y la guerra en Ucrania”, *Revista de Pensamiento Estratégico y Seguridad CISDE*, Vol. 8 no 2 (2023), pp. 91-103.

Indeed, there was speculation that the war in Ukraine could evolve into such a scenario, with stabilized front lines, a de facto ceasefire, skirmishes along the line of contact, and a grey zone over the remaining free Ukrainian territory, but without any formal political resolution. This would be a highly unstable situation, carrying obvious risks of the conflict reigniting at any moment.

A fourth typology is the disappearance of one of the belligerents as a political entity, as occurred with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire[14]. However, this scenario is highly unlikely in the current case, although, in a certain sense, it was Russia's objective when it decided to move beyond its grey zone strategy over Ukraine and launch its "special military operation," based on the narrative of historic unity between Russia and Ukraine[15].

The fifth scenario involves external intervention by another power or an international coalition to impose peace or guarantee the implementation of agreements, as was the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Dayton Accords (1995) or in Kosovo following NATO's intervention in 1999. In Ukraine, this scenario was ruled out in the early weeks of the conflict when Washington refrained from deploying boots on the ground and instead opted for an indirect intervention strategy aimed at bleeding Russia while managing escalation with Moscow. Trump's recent statements have brought back into discussion the need to establish some form of interposition, implementation, or peacekeeping force, each with very different requirements and conditioned by the lack of U.S. capabilities in such a scenario.

Mutual exhaustion is another pathway, occurring when both belligerents reach a level of attrition that prevents them from continuing hostilities, leading them to end the war de facto without any formal agreement[16]. While the Hundred Years' War is often cited as a paradigmatic example of this dynamic, in the present case – given the asymmetry between the two sides and Clausewitz's own trinity – this scenario appears highly unlikely.

Lastly, some conflicts do not end but rather transform, shifting from open war to insurgency or from intrastate conflict to chronic violence. Afghanistan and many African

[14] Michael Howard: *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.
[15] Vladimir Putin: (2021, 12 July): "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" [online] http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181
[16] Dan Reiter: *How Wars End*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

conflicts are examples of such outcomes[17]. In Ukraine's case, regardless of how the war formally concludes, it is likely that open warfare will give way to a more assertive grey zone dynamic than the one that existed between 2014 and 2022.

As can be seen, analyzing the different typologies for ending wars allows for the construction of various scenarios applicable to Ukraine's case. In the current context of a war of attrition, with stabilized front lines, declining U.S. military support, Europe's inability to fill the gap left by Washington, Trump's determination to secure a peace deal in the short term – potentially without Kyiv's full consent – and a Russia fully immersed in a war economy and convinced that time is on its side, the most probable scenario is that of a more or less negotiated surrender. As the United States has made clear, this would likely entail significant territorial concessions and possibly a status of neutrality that would prevent Ukraine's future integration into NATO. It would be an asymmetric peace, lacking credible security guarantees, once again demonstrating the traditional gap between European rhetoric and reality; weakening deterrence against Moscow in the absence of American military backing; sending a message of impotence in the face of the use of force to alter borders; and interpreted by Russia as a victory and a favorable precedent for future military adventures.

What Now?

The war in Ukraine began as a deterrence failure, driven by two excesses of confidence: the West's belief that Moscow would never cross the threshold beyond the grey zone, and Russia's assumption that it could decapitate Ukraine's leadership through a strategy of faits accomplis. And it will not end until the deterrence provided by the defenders of the liberal international order – through credible security guarantees – becomes believable. That credibility does not reside in a European Union whose rhetoric has never translated into quantifiable military capabilities[18], nor in European countries that failed to undergo a strategic awakening after the shock of February 24th, 2022[19], nor is it generated by the British or French nuclear arsenals. This credibility, grounded in

[17] Mary Kaldor: *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

[18] Guillermo Pulido (2020, 14 February): "Las miserias de la defensa europea", *Ejércitos* [online] https://www.revistaejercitos.com/articulos/las-miserias-de-la-defensa-europea/

[19] Guillem Colom-Piella: "Retorno de la historia", *Ejército*, no 974, 2022, pp. 10-17.

military capability, rests solely with the United States. And Washington has made clear that it does not intend to be part of any security guarantees, neither directly nor through NATO[20]. Unless this refusal is part of a negotiation tactic capable of decisively tipping the balance one way or another, Ukraine's future may depend on a Europe that lacks a strategic culture, military capabilities, or real political will to assume what the defense of Ukraine would entail.

Without delving into details, since the explosive statements by Secretary of Defense Hegseth and President Trump, events have accelerated: Brussels ratified its commitment to Ukraine, explored ways to operationalize it, and launched an ambitious rearmament plan. Meanwhile, the defense ministers of the E5 (Poland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy) began discussing ways to boost the defense industry. In parallel, London and Paris stepped forward to lead a coalition of the willing, open to any country interested in guaranteeing the enforcement of a potential ceasefire in Ukraine. The 200,000 troops proposed by President Zelensky in January 2025[21], or the 100,000 contemplated by the EU-27 in December 2024, were the first figures echoed in European capitals. Although such force levels might be necessary to cover the more than 1,000 kilometers of front line separating Russian and Ukrainian forces—or to be deployed in a second line supporting the Ukrainian army—these numbers were entirely unrealistic. Especially considering that a force of this nature would take years to generate and could easily quadruple in size when factoring in the rotations necessary to ensure its sustainability.

In fact, one doesn't need to be familiar with the *Military Balance* published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London to know that the number of maneuver and support units available to European armies – and their readiness status – falls far short of these figures being discussed by political elites. It may well have been the warning cries from European Defence Staffs about the impossibility of reaching such numbers that led to the consideration of more realistic contingents, ranging from a

[20] Michael O'Hanlon y Paul B. Stares: *Defending Ukraine in the Absence of NATO Security Guarantees*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2025.

[21] Dmytro Basmat (2025, 21 January): "Ukraine-Russia peace deal would require at least 200,000 peacekeepers, Zelensky says", *The Kyiv Independent* [online] https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-russia-peace-deal-would-require-at-least-200-000-peacekeepers-zelensky-says/

symbolic tripwire force of about 5,000 troops[22], to a multinational force of roughly 20,000, to a reassurance force of between 30,000 and 40,000 troops. The latter is considered the absolute minimum necessary to provide credible deterrence and ensure compliance with any hypothetical peace agreements[23]. Agreements that will likely be negotiated without Europe's involvement, but whose implementation will inevitably fall on its shoulders, at a time when no one can predict the strategic assumptions, operational conditions, or, least of all, Russia's posture.

Therefore, considering at this moment the size and structure of a force to be deployed – without knowing such critical aspects as the terms of the ceasefire, the commitments Russia may undertake, whether it will allow the deployment of a mission on Ukrainian territory, the nature of the agreed operation (whether interposition, reassurance, peacekeeping, stabilization, deterrence, capacity-building, etc.), the legal framework under which it would operate, the countries willing to take part in this coalition of the willing, or their potential force and capability contributions – amounts to little more than an intellectual exercise. Especially when Washington seems unwilling (unless this is a negotiating gambit by Trump to force Europe to finally take on its defense responsibilities) to provide any security guarantees or to use NATO's institutional framework. This, in turn, raises further questions regarding the risks such a coalition force would be prepared to assume, the national caveats that might be imposed, the enablers and force multipliers that would need to be provided (ranging from command and control, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, air and missile defense, cyber capabilities, to long-range fires), and Europe's glaring deficiencies in all these areas. It even raises the question of whether such a hypothetical operation – one in which the European Union should play a key role if it is to have any credibility in defense – could use NATO's planning capabilities under the Berlin Plus arrangements (2003).

In short, the political will of the countries forming the coalition, the military capabilities they can deploy, and the credibility of the force and the real security guarantees they can

[22] It is a small military contingent that, on its own, lacks the capacity to stop a large-scale offensive, but whose presence on the ground makes any attack against it an automatic "casus belli" for the entire coalition to which it belongs. In this way, the aggressor faces a fundamental dilemma: either respect the status quo or trigger an immediate military response. This deterrence mechanism relies not so much on the military force deployed as on the political and strategic commitment it represents.

[23] Ed Arnold (2025, 10 March): "Back to the Future: Applying the Chilcot Checklist to Ukraine", *RUSI Commentary* [online] https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/back-future-applying-chilcot-checklist-ukraine

offer Ukraine will ultimately determine Europe's response to the end of this war, which began more than three years ago.

In other words, without knowing the terms of the ceasefire or the provisions of the peace plan that might be agreed upon between the United States, Russia (and Ukraine), it is impossible to define what the configuration, size, and roles of the military force being considered today might be. However, it is highly likely that Europe's Defence Staffs are working hard to provide political leaders with a broad range of realistic military options. But the key question European chancelleries should be asking themselves is not whether they should intervene, but whether this intervention can succeed.

Political declarations grounded in moral argument – asserting that Ukraine will be supported "as long as necessary," without clarifying what "necessary"[24] means or understanding the basic concepts of strategic thinking – do not offer much hope.

This question is anything but trivial. Without a clear consensus shared by all coalition members on the strategic-military problem to be solved; without clear criteria defining what constitutes success in the operation; without a rigorous risk assessment and a plan for military responses if Russia violates the ceasefire; without an exit strategy within a reasonable timeframe to prevent coalition fatigue; without a solid legal framework; without a fair burden-sharing arrangement and credible commitments to sustain the effort; without the provision of adequate capabilities; and without effective leadership capable of preserving the coalition's cohesion in the face of Russia's predictable attempts to undermine it, any military deployment risks becoming an ineffective tool doomed to fail[25].

Conclusions

The outcome of the war in Ukraine, coupled with the strategic disengagement of the United States from Europe, will reshape the continent's security order. The Trump administration's decision to initiate negotiations with Moscow, its refusal to provide security guarantees to Ukraine, and the uncertainties now surrounding the transatlantic link compel Europeans to finally awaken from their long strategic holiday.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Lawrence Freedman: *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

In this context, if the European Union intends to achieve strategic maturity, it faces a dual challenge: on the one hand, managing the end of a conflict that will redraw the geopolitical map of Europe and whose outcome will determine the balance of power on the continent; on the other hand, building a security architecture capable of ensuring compliance with any peace agreement reached and deterring future Russian aggression, all without the backing of a United States in retreat.

In the absence of effective security guarantees, the risk of an unstable peace agreement is high. The outcome of the war in Ukraine therefore looms as a decisive test of the European Union's credibility as a security provider and as the strategic actor it claims to be, though, as some of us have warned for years, it has yet to become one. The consequences of this reality check will not only seal Ukraine's future but may also determine the fate of Europe's security architecture for decades to come.

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