
Negotiating Security with Autocracies: Implications for the Russo-Ukrainian War

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The ongoing war against Ukraine has cast into relief the dilemma of choosing between an imperfect peace, on the one hand, and continued fighting in pursuit of a fairer solution, on the other. Aside from the moral aspect, the main argument against peace through negotiations with Russia has been the challenge of [achieving](#) security for Ukraine in a post-conflict environment. What kind of guarantees of peace can Ukraine get through a negotiated settlement should NATO membership not be immediately available? More broadly, can security post-war be achieved through negotiation—a give-and-take process—in the absence of firm guarantees from major powers? Autocratic regimes usually loath principled negotiations of the type necessary for ending conflicts short of a decisive victory by one of the sides. Russia, one such regime, has a limited record of abiding by principle-based international agreements—due in no small part by Russia’s reluctance to bind itself by consensual formulas. This makes the outlook bleak for a negotiated solution to the war in the foreseeable future. Indeed, it may take a dramatic change in Russia’s approach to conflict resolution to stop the fighting.

Theory and Practice

Most schools of thought on international politics agree that negotiation as a form of mutual signaling can at least prevent unnecessarily adversarial behavior and at best rule out armed confrontation as a policy option for collaborating states. But can security be reliably achieved by negotiating with autocracies prone to expansionist behavior?

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On that question, the existing schools of thought are more ambivalent. Some say the nature of a country's political regime does not matter for that country's ability to make, follow, or break agreements. Others, however, believe that deals with unaccountable or manipulative governments are unreliable because their leaders are prepared to sacrifice international agreements on the altar of perpetuating their own power.

Resolution and prevention of conflicts requires negotiation behavior conducive to durable agreements that can withstand pressures on both sides to achieve better terms by resuming the conflict. One way of making an agreement last in the absence of enforcement by powerful mediators is to [anchor](#) the agreement in the principles of justice shared by the sides. But to what extent can autocratic states accept and abide by such principles as they negotiate agreements?

While it is difficult to prove a correlation between the type of domestic political regime and its favored style of negotiation, there is enough evidence to posit at least several connections. I argue that authoritarian governments are averse to using justice principles as anchors in negotiations. Negotiation counterparts thus have reasons to be concerned about the durability of any agreements they may reach with authoritarian governments – particularly if the correlation of forces with them is changing. Among other implications, this creates additional obstacles to terminating wars with expansionist non-democratic states through negotiation.

The Russian case is instructive in this regard and warrants a closer look, given the high stakes involved in the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Since the start of the new millennium, Russia's view of conflict resolution and negotiation has been [evolving](#) toward a zero-sum approach based on the belief that conflict outcomes are largely determined by power potentials – usually not even those of the conflicting parties, but of their puppet-masters pulling the strings.

Equal Security or Bust

Autocratic regimes find it politically risky to discuss the principles underlying their foreign policy because those principles are often no more than a disguise for the desire to [maintain](#) the ruling group's grip on power or to implement a whimsical foreign policy project that an autocratic leader sees as his mission. Pursuing an important mission without compromises provides an additional pretext for an autocrat to perpetuate his tenure in power. Russia's insistence, over the course of the three post-Cold War decades, on "equal security" with the West and "no dividing lines" in the European security architecture is an example of an unreasonably inflexible demand with ulterior motives.

The equal-security principle has looked fair on its face but has been impossible to implement because in the post-Cold War world (just as at any earlier time) all countries have been of different sizes and had different demographic and economic resources and

military potentials. Russia, for example, could be both insecure vis-à-vis the powerful NATO alliance and a source of insecurity for any smaller neighbor.

What is achievable in a world of unequal states is collective security. Unlike equal security, collective security is a recognized principle of international law that allows states to build coalitions, thereby increasing their combined power and offsetting the impact of bigger states on smaller states' security.

The Kremlin's persistent – if unrealistic – demand for equal security could only be seen as requiring the security of the Russian political regime. In turn, Russian regime security, as perceived by the country's leadership, required that Russia's neighbors have similar political regimes. After all, if the government or leader of a former Soviet republic acquired a true popular mandate through free and fair elections, it became difficult for Moscow to influence that government through informal networks.

The case for demanding equal security was strengthened when the annexation of Crimea in 2014 showed that Russia's domestic regime received a significant boost from the territorial acquisition, which had been justified by the pursuit of equal security with the West. As a result, Russia became totally inflexible, refusing to negotiate security solutions outside of the far-fetched equal-security paradigm. In particular, once Moscow [became](#) preoccupied with ensuring Ukraine's participation in Russia-led projects in post-Soviet Eurasia, Moscow could no longer afford the flexibility required to negotiate with Kyiv on any compromise "formulas" that might [guide](#) relations between Russia, Ukraine, the European Union, the United States, and others. Russia's has thus become an "all or nothing" approach that never lends itself to expression in the language of widely accepted principles.

Looking Strong

Autocrats may [have](#) difficulty selling a relaxation of negotiation principles to their domestic and international constituencies. Agreeing to endorse a less adversarial principle guiding relations with the autocrat's international counterparts may undermine the autocrat's legitimacy, which is often derived from his record of uncompromising strongman policies. A shift to a softer posture could imply that the autocrat's former policy represented an error in judgment and point to his unfitness for unconstrained exercise of power. Therefore, an autocrat often cannot afford to update his conceptions of fairness during negotiations and agree to a consensual formula – even if doing so would carry the promise of resolving a longstanding and costly conflict.

Traumatized by the loss of its superpower status and looking for a new overarching principle to undergird its post-Communist foreign policy, by the mid-1990s Russia set its sights on anti-hegemonic concepts. It soon came up with a doctrine that posited the fundamental instability of a world with just one remaining superpower and focused on doing away with such an "unnatural" status quo by supporting the rise of alternative

“centers of power.” Once Moscow [locked](#) in what is called “multipolarity” as its official foreign policy doctrine, premised on the need to counterbalance the influence of the United States and its allies globally, it became futile for domestic critics of multipolarity to question that doctrine’s economic and social consequences for Russia and [propose](#) alternatives – regardless of the costs of doubling down on multipolarity.

Those costs may have been insignificant until Russia – sometime around Vladimir Putin’s fiery anti-U.S. speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 – started going down the rabbit hole of consummate anti-Americanism and direct assault on transatlantic alliances and European integration. As the interlude of the U.S.-Russian “reset” showed in 2009-11, Russia could gain plenty of economic benefits and social optimism by shedding at least the most virulent and manipulative components of its anti-American rhetoric and policy. Unfortunately, however, soon after the reset ended, Russian foreign policy took an abrupt turn toward the most conservative forms of multipolarity, in which Putin was strongly invested – whether due to uncritical personal conviction, rational calculation, or both. By the end of the 2010s, Moscow had fully embraced anti-colonialist rhetoric, trying to position itself as a champion of anti-Western resentment.

The key arguments [deployed](#) by the Kremlin to deny Ukraine an autonomous foreign policy followed organically from Russia’s doctrines of multipolarity and anti-colonialism. Ukraine supposedly needed to be cleansed of the Western – mainly American – influence that had allegedly turned the country into an “anti-Russia.” It would be extremely difficult for today’s Kremlin to voluntarily negotiate a way out of this catastrophic logic, which it spent many years instilling in the Russian policymaking community as the undisputed truth.

Indeed, the stability of Russia’s entire foreign policy edifice, if not of the country’s current system of governance, would be threatened if the Russian public were to be allowed to openly question the arguments that underpinned the invasion of Ukraine. If Russia were to accept the right of an elected government in a neighboring country to build a very close relationship with the United States, NATO, and the European Union, then the viability of the multipolarity doctrine could easily be disputed. This knowledge makes the Kremlin a particularly inflexible negotiator in the context of the war.

Freedom of Hands vs. Principles

Domestic constituencies usually support an autocrat’s rhetorical and practical commitment to intransigent principles vis-à-vis the outside world. But the flip side of these rigid principles is that autocrats view rules and norms grounded in fairness concepts as unwanted constraints on their ability to use foreign policy to shore up support at home. The base of an autocratic regime usually appreciates the autocrat’s defiance of the principles that international counterparts allegedly seek to impose on the authoritarian leader, seeing this as a sign of the leader’s strong willpower and resolve.

Indeed, Vladimir Putin has proudly [claimed](#) on several occasions that Russia remains one of the few “truly sovereign” countries globally, implying Russia’s immunity and autonomy from U.S. influence and its ability to live by its own rules. Russian officials have [dismissed](#) as a Western ploy the notion that Russia is working to undermine the international legal order. According to the Kremlin, Moscow only rejects the Western concept of the “rules-based order” because it is little more than an attempt by the United States and its allies to [contain](#) and box in Russia by applying double standards, as the West itself allegedly twists or jettisons these rules as it sees fit.

A similar dynamic has [characterized](#) Russia’s official approach to collective efforts to address the negative consequences of climate change. Around a decade ago, the Kremlin was interested in exploring the benefits of participation in multi-sided efforts based on the assumption of the global impact of climate change and the principle of global responsibility for addressing the problem. As time passed, however, this interest waned, crowded out by the conviction that in promoting the climate change agenda, the West looked to [impose](#) unfair costs on naïve rule-takers.

Are They Cheating Us?

In addition to concerns with looking weak, autocrats tend to consider fairness principles as mere smokescreens standing in the way of pragmatic bargaining. Having little appreciation for the expression of people’s will, autocratic leaders tend to believe that ulterior motives and hidden forces—among them the interests of obscure transnational networks, big corporations, the military-industrial complex, and other “puppet-masters” — guide other actors’ preferences and policies.

Officials in post-Cold War Russia have frequently described the principles of democracy promotion and the international community’s responsibility to protect civilian populations in other countries as guises for Western expansionism and the destruction of unwanted political regimes across the globe. The usual cases marshaled in support of this argument include the war in Kosovo and the U.S. and NATO interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.

While in most of these cases considerations other than public interest may have been at play, the Kremlin’s criticism missed the point: once public opinion in the United States and its allies began to shift to anti-interventionist views, the governments had to reverse course, ending or minimizing Western countries’ military engagement on the ground. This happened within weeks in the cases of Kosovo and Libya, where military operations had to be wrapped up quickly, and within years in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the war phase of interventions lasted only a few months—due primarily to the reluctance of Western societies to support open-ended heavy fighting.

Public preferences eventually prevailed over any parochial group pressures in favor of interventionism and defined constraints on interventionist policies. Public skepticism

about protracted U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan eventually led the Biden administration to undertake a fast withdrawal from the country in August 2021. Similar considerations in large part determined the United States and its European allies' gradual approach to supplying powerful weapons to Ukraine. Even if Western governments used principles as smokescreens in some of those cases, they soon had to reckon with critical public reactions, justify their policies, and often reverse course.

For its part, Russian public opinion has never seriously demanded that the principle of territorial integrity of Russia's neighbors—especially Ukraine—be honored. Moscow [recognized](#) the post-Soviet borders of Ukraine in a series of documents starting with the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 and the Russo-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty of 1997—only to scrap those principles within the next two decades, citing changes in circumstances. The Kremlin has argued that guarantees of the territorial integrity of a Russian neighbor are contingent on Russia's assessment of domestic politics in that country—incidentally, the same reasoning that Moscow refused to accept from NATO when the latter pointed out that Russia's nationalist shift around 1993 gave good reason for East European countries to seek membership in the alliance.

Conclusion

Political scientists have [found](#) that autocrats are no less likely than democratically elected leaders to face domestic repercussions if they back down during international crises or renege on agreements with international counterparts. Domestic audiences tend to punish democratic and authoritarian leaders alike for failing to deliver on their popularly supported commitments. In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, this means that the leadership on both sides will assess as high the risks of underachievement for their political standing. For that reason, reaching even a ceasefire agreement will be difficult should neither side gain the military momentum.

Making a negotiated end to the Russo-Ukrainian war even less likely, autocrats—as the above analysis has shown—are reluctant to enter into durable agreements based on broadly supported principles of fairness. While the durability of an agreement is not determined solely by its underlying principles, the ability of the sides to negotiate principles instead of proceeding from the situation on the ground is key to successful conflict resolution. The record of successful security negotiations involving the incumbent Russian government over the last two decades has been limited in no small part by Russia's reluctance to bind itself by consensual formulas. Russia's attack on Ukraine represents a culmination of this trend, suggesting that it may take a dramatic change in Russia's approach to conflict resolution to stop the fighting.