

Why Won't the US Help Negotiate a Peaceful End to the War in Ukraine?

For goodness' sake, negotiate!

by Jeffrey D. Sachs,* USA



Jeffrey D. Sachs
(Picture Gabriella C. Marino, 2019)

For the fifth time since 2008, Russia has proposed to negotiate with the U.S. over security arrangements, this time in proposals made by President Vladimir Putin¹ on June 14, 2024. Four previous times, the U.S. rejected the offer of negotiations in favor of a neocon strategy to weaken or dismember

Russia through war and covert operations. The U.S. neocon tactics have failed disastrously, devastating Ukraine in the process, and endangering the whole world. After all the warmongering, it's time for Biden to open negotiations for peace with Russia.

US strategy to weaken Russia

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. grand strategy has been to weaken Russia. As early as 1992, then Defense Secretary Richard Cheney opined that following the 1991 demise of the Soviet Union, *Russia too should be dismembered.*² Zbigniew Brzezinski opined in 1997³ that Russia should be divided into three loosely confederated entities in Russian Europe, Siberia, and the far east. In 1999, the U.S.-led NATO alliance bombed Russia's ally, Serbia, for 78 days in order to break Serbia apart and install a massive NATO military base in breakaway Kosovo. Leaders of the U.S. military-industrial complex *vociferously supported*⁴ the Chechen war against Russia in the early 2000s.

To secure these U.S. advances against Russia, Washington aggressively pushed NATO enlargement, despite promises to *Mikhail Gorbachev*⁵

and *Boris Yeltsin*⁶ that NATO would not move one inch eastward from Germany. Most tendentiously, the U.S. pushed NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia, with the idea of surrounding Russia's naval fleet in Sevastopol, Crimea with NATO states: Ukraine, Romania (NATO member 2004), Bulgaria (NATO member 2004), Turkey (NATO member 1952), and Georgia, an idea straight from the playbook of the British Empire in the Crimean War (1853–1856).

Brzezinski spelled out a chronology of NATO enlargement in 1997,⁷ including NATO membership of Ukraine during 2005–2010. The U.S. in fact proposed NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia at the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit. By 2020, NATO had in fact enlarged by 14 countries in Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union (Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland in 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004; Albania and Croatia, 2009; Montenegro, 2017; and Northern Macedonia, 2020), while promising future membership to Ukraine and Georgia. In short, the 30-year U.S. project, hatched originally by Cheney and the neocons, and carried forward consistently since then, has been to weaken or even dismember Russia, surround Russia with NATO forces, and depict Russia as the belligerent power.

It is against this grim backdrop that Russian leaders have repeatedly proposed to negotiate security arrangements with Europe and the U.S. that would provide security for all countries concerned, not just the NATO bloc. Guided by the neocon game plan, the U.S. has refused to negotiate on every occasion, while trying to pin the blame on Russia for the lack of negotiations.

Russia's first proposal for negotiation

In June 2008, as the U.S. prepared to expand NATO to Ukraine and Georgia, Russian President *Dmitry Medvedev* proposed a *European Security Treaty*,⁸ calling for collective security and an end to NATO's unilateralism. Suffice it to say, the U.S. showed no interest whatsoever in Russia's pro-

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posals, and instead proceeded with its long-held plans for NATO enlargement.

Russia's second proposal for negotiation

The second Russian proposal for negotiations came from Putin following the violent overthrow of Ukraine's President *Viktor Yanukovich* in February 2014, with the active complicity if not outright leadership of the U.S. government. I happened to see the U.S. complicity up close, as the post-coup government invited me for urgent economic discussions. When I arrived in Kiev, I was taken to the Maidan, where I was told directly about U.S. funding of the Maidan protest.

The evidence of U.S. complicity in the coup is overwhelming. Assistant Secretary of State *Victoria Nuland*⁹ was caught on a phone line¹⁰ in January 2014 plotting the change of government in Ukraine. Meanwhile, U.S. Senators went personally to Kiev to stir up the protests (akin to Chinese or Russian political leaders coming to DC on January 6, 2021 to rile up the crowds). On February 21, 2014, *the Europeans, U.S., and Russia brokered a deal with Yanukovich*¹¹ in which he agreed to early elections. Yet the coup leaders reneged on the deal the same day, took over government buildings, threatened more violence, and deposed Yanukovich the next day. The U.S. supported the coup and immediately extended recognition to the new government.

In my view, this was a standard CIA-led covert regime change operation, of which there have been several dozen around the world, including sixty-four episodes between 1947 and 1989 meticulously documented by Professor *Lindsey O'Rourke*.¹² Covert regime-change operations are of course not really hidden from view, but the U.S. government vociferously denies its role, keeps all documents highly confidential, and systematically gaslights the world: "Do not believe what you see plainly with your own eyes! The U.S. had nothing to do with this." Details of the operations eventually emerge, however, through eyewitnesses, whistleblowers, the forced release of documents under the Freedom of Information Act, declassification of papers after years or decades, and memoirs, but all far too late for real accountability.

In any event, the violent coup induced the ethnic-Russia Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine to break from the coup leaders, many of whom were extreme russophobic nationalists, and some in violent groups with a history



If the Minsk II agreement had been taken seriously by France, Germany and Ukraine, there would have been no war in Ukraine. (Picture wikipedia/kremlin.ru)

of Nazi SS links in the past. Almost immediately, the coup leaders took steps to repress the use of the Russian language even in the Russian-speaking Donbas. In the following months and years, the government in Kiev launched a military campaign to retake the breakaway regions, deploying neo-Nazi paramilitary units and U.S. arms.

In the course of 2014, Putin called repeatedly for a negotiated peace, and this led to the Minsk II Agreement in February 2015 based on autonomy of the Donbas and an end to violence by both sides. Russia did not claim the Donbas as Russian territory, but instead called for autonomy and the protection of ethnic Russians within Ukraine. The UN Security Council endorsed the Minsk II agreement, but the U.S. neocons privately subverted it. Years later, *Chancellor Angela Merkel blurted out the truth*.¹³ The Western side treated the agreement not as a solemn treaty but as a delaying tactic to "give Ukraine time" to build its military strength. In the meantime, around 14,000 people died in the fighting in Donbas between 2014 and 2021.

Russia's third proposal for negotiation

Following the definitive collapse of the Minsk II agreement, Putin again proposed negotiations with the U.S. in December 2021. By that point, the issues went even beyond NATO enlargement to include fundamental issues of nuclear armaments. Step by step, the U.S. neocons had abandoned nuclear arms control with Russia, with the U.S. unilaterally abandoning the *Anti-Ballistic Missile* (ABM) Treaty in 2002, placing Aegis missiles in Poland and Romania in 2010 onwards, and walking out of the *Intermediate Nuclear Force* (INF) Treaty in 2019.

In view of these dire concerns, Putin put on the table on December 15, 2021 a draft *“Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees.”*¹⁴ The most immediate issue on the table (Article 4 of the draft treaty) was the end of the U.S. attempt to expand NATO to Ukraine. I called U.S. National Security Advisor *Jake Sullivan* at the end of 2021 to try to convince the Biden White House to enter the negotiations. My main advice was to avoid a war in Ukraine by accepting Ukraine’s neutrality, rather than NATO membership, which was a bright red line for Russia.

The White House flatly rejected the advice, claiming remarkably (and obtusely) that NATO’s enlargement to Ukraine was none of Russia’s business! Yet what would the U.S. say if some country in the Western hemisphere decided to host Chinese or Russian bases? Would the White House, State Department, or Congress say, “That’s just fine, that’s a matter of concern only to Russia or China and the host country?” No. The world nearly came to nuclear Armageddon in 1962 when the Soviet Union placed nuclear missiles in Cuba and the U.S. imposed a naval quarantine and threatened war unless the Russians removed the missiles. The U.S. military alliance does not belong in Ukraine any more than the Russian or Chinese military belongs close to the U.S. border.

Russia’s fourth proposal for negotiation

The fourth offer of Putin to negotiate came in March 2022, when Russia and Ukraine nearly closed a peace deal just weeks after the start of Russia’s special military operation that began on February 24, 2022. Russia, once again, was after one big thing: Ukraine’s neutrality, i.e., no NATO membership and no hosting of U.S. missiles on Russia’s border.

Ukraine’s President *Vladimir Zelensky* quickly accepted Ukraine’s neutrality, and Ukraine and Russia exchanged papers, with the skillful mediation of the Foreign Ministry of Turkey. Then suddenly, at the end of March, Ukraine abandoned the negotiations.

U.K. Prime Minister *Boris Johnson*, following in the tradition of British anti-Russian war-mongering dating back to the Crimean War (1853–1856), actually flew to Kiev to warn Zelensky against neutrality and the importance of Ukraine defeating Russia on the battlefield. Since that



Turkish President Erdogan talks to the negotiators in March 2022 shortly before the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. (Picture ITAR-Tass/imago)

date, Ukraine has lost around 500,000 dead and is on the ropes on the battlefield.

Russia’s fifth proposal for negotiation

Now we have Russia’s fifth offer of negotiations, explained clearly and cogently by Putin himself in *his speech to diplomats at the Russian Foreign Ministry on June 14.*¹⁵ Putin laid out Russia’s proposed terms to end the war in Ukraine.

“Ukraine should adopt a neutral, non-aligned status, be nuclear-free, and undergo demilitarization and de-nazification,” Putin said. “These parameters were broadly agreed upon during the Istanbul negotiations in 2022, including specific details on demilitarization such as the agreed numbers of tanks and other military equipment. We reached consensus on all points.

“Certainly, the rights, freedoms, and interests of Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine must be fully protected,” he continued. “The new territorial realities, including the status of Crimea, Sevastopol, Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics, Kherson, and Zaporozhye regions as parts of the Russian Federation, should be acknowledged. These foundational principles need to be formalized through fundamental international agreements in the future. Naturally, this entails the removal of all Western sanctions against Russia as well.”

About negotiating

Let me say a few words about negotiating.

Russia’s proposals should now be met at the negotiating table by proposals from the U.S. and Ukraine. The White House is dead wrong to evade negotiations just because of disagreements with Russia’s proposals. It should put up

its own proposals and get down to the business of negotiating an end to the war.

There are three core issues for Russia: Ukraine's neutrality (non-NATO enlargement), Crimea remaining in Russian hands, and boundary changes in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. The first two are almost surely non-negotiable. The end of NATO enlargement is the fundamental *casus belli*. Crimea is also core for Russia, as Crimea has been home to Russia's Black Sea fleet since 1783 and is fundamental to Russia's national security.

The third core issue, the borders of Eastern and Southern Ukraine, will be a key point of negotiations. The U.S. cannot pretend that borders are sacrosanct after NATO bombed Serbia in 1999 to relinquish Kosovo, and after the U.S. pressured Sudan to relinquish South Sudan. Yes, Ukraine's borders will be redrawn as the result of the 10 years of war, the situation on the battlefield, the choices of the local populations, and tradeoffs made at the negotiating table.

Biden needs to accept that negotiations are not a sign of weakness. As Kennedy put it, "Never negotiate out of fear, but never fear to negotiate." Ronald Reagan famously described his own negotiating strategy using a Russian proverb, "Trust but verify."

The neocon approach to Russia, delusional and hubristic from the start, lies in ruins. NATO will never enlarge to Ukraine and Georgia. Russia will not be toppled by a CIA covert operation. Ukraine is being horribly bloodied on the battlefield, often losing 1,000 or more dead and wounded in a single day. The failed neocon game plan brings us closer to *nuclear Armageddon*.¹⁶

Yet Biden still refuses to negotiate. Following Putin's speech, the U.S., NATO, and Ukraine firmly rejected negotiations once again. Biden and his team have still not relinquished the neocon fantasy of defeating Russia and expanding NATO to Ukraine.

The Ukrainian people have been lied to time and again by Zelensky and Biden and other leaders of NATO countries, who told them falsely and repeatedly that Ukraine would prevail on the battlefield and that there were no options to negotiate. Ukraine is now under martial law. The public is given no say about its own slaughter.

For the sake of Ukraine's very survival, and to avoid nuclear war, the President of the United States has one overriding responsibility today: Negotiate.

Source: <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/role-of-us-in-russia-ukraine-war>, 19 June 2024

¹ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74285>

² <https://geopoliticeconomy.com/2022/02/01/dick-chenev-us-goal-break-up-russia/>

³ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1997-09-01/geostrategy-eurasia>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/sep/08/usa.russia>

⁵ <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>

⁶ <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard>

⁷ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1997-09-01/geostrategy-eurasia>

⁸ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152>

⁹ <https://www.commondreams.org/tag/victoria-nuland>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoW75J5bnnE>

¹¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/yanukovych-announces-transition-deal-in-ukraine/>

¹² <https://www.amazon.com/Covert-Regime-Change-Americas-Security/dp/1501730657>

¹³ <https://nypost.com/2022/12/09/vladimir-putin-russia-ready-for-ukraine-deal-but-partners-cheated-in-the-past/>

¹⁴ https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en

¹⁵ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74285>

¹⁶ <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/nuclear-armeddon>