



The Ukraine Peace Offensive

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The diplomatic side of the Ukraine war is heating up. The Wall Street Journal reports that a global summit is in the planning stages that would bring together major world powers to begin crafting the terms of a peace deal. As of now, Russia is not invited.

The objective of the summit would be to formulate “a unified plan of the responsible civilized world that really wants to live in peace,” according to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s chief of staff, Andriy Yermak. Russia would be excluded so long as its troops continue to occupy Ukrainian territory. If they left, the summiteers would have a much easier job. The summit agenda will be based on a modified version of the 10-point peace plan Zelenskyy proposed last December. The points included provisions for nuclear security, food security, energy security, releasing prisoners and deportees, restoring Ukraine’s territory, withdrawing Russian troops, war crimes tribunals, environmental restoration, security guarantees, and a declared end to the war (i.e., not just an armistice). The objective would be to come up with a version of the plan that is more acceptable to powers such as India, Brazil, Saudi Arabia and China, which have either been neutral in the conflict or leaned towards Russia.

Some of the points, such as nuclear and food security, and environmental restoration, are non-controversial and could be the foundation for common ground. Things like withdrawing troops, restoring territory and holding war crimes tribunals are obviously a bit more difficult. Russia of course has flatly rejected the Ukrainian plan. The summit idea is a blow to the People’s Republic of China, which had been setting itself up as the peace broker. Even though Beijing has generally supported Moscow during the war, China has maintained official neutrality and refused to send arms, stylizing its posture as an “objective and fair position on Ukraine.” Beijing proposed its own 12 point peace plan, which has some overlap with Zelenskyy’s proposal but is ambiguous about troop withdrawals and seeks also to “abandon the Cold War mentality,” a turn of phrase clearly aimed at NATO.

China has courted European powers, such as France, to detach the United States from the peace process, and Beijing’s special envoy for Eurasian affairs, Li Hui, has met with leaders on all sides of the conflict. For a time, it seemed as though there could be a Beijing Peace Accord in which the United States would be sidelined.

But Chinese President Xi Jinping is not fooling anyone. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has called out China for “practicing pro-Russian neutrality” and said the relationship with Europe “will not be so good” unless Beijing pressures Moscow to the peace table. Last Thursday, the EU’s deputy secretary general for political affairs, Enrique Mora, reiterated this stance after a meeting with Li, and issued a statement calling on China to convince Russia “to stop the bloodshed and indiscriminate targeting of civilians by immediately and unconditionally withdrawing all forces and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.”

Whether Xi can convince Russian President Vladimir Putin to do anything is questionable. The “no limits partnership” between the two countries is not necessarily a warm friendship. The Kremlin’s recent revelation of the arrest, last August, of a Russian scientist charged with spying for China could be a signal of discontent. Beijing’s response, that Sino-Russian relations were based on “non-alignment, non-confrontation and non-targeting of third parties,” is somewhat muted compared to April, when Chinese defense minister Li Shangfu fantastically praised Putin as “an extraordinary state leader” who has made “important contributions to promoting world peace and development.”

The subject of the proposed peace summit will no doubt come up during this week’s meeting of the BRICS economic bloc at Cape Town, South Africa. Russian and Chinese foreign ministers will confer with their counterparts from Brazil, India and South Africa, and perhaps set the stage for an appearance by Putin and Xi in August. It will clearly be in Moscow’s interest to seek guarantees that other powers would not attend the European-backed meeting, and Beijing could perhaps secure pledges that no country would agree to attend without all agreeing – effectively achieving veto power over the summit.

A wild card is the outcome of the expected Ukrainian summer offensive. Broad territorial gains could give Kyiv a more favorable posture at the summit and stronger international support. But expectations for the offensive have run so high recently that Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov had to tell the world to scale them back. “The expectation from our counteroffensive campaign is overestimated in the world,” he said. “Most people are... waiting for something huge,” which may lead to “emotional disappointment.” Kyiv would clearly prefer that people expect little while they achieve much, rather than the opposite.

In some respects, the diplomatic peace offensive is as important as the Ukrainian ground offensive, because conflict termination will ultimately come from the bargaining table and not the battlefield. This phase of the conflict is critical. Success in war is only partly determined by facts on the ground, and—as the U.S. experience in Afghanistan showed—a bad deal poorly executed can erase even the most dramatic military gains in a matter of days.

