

Analysts: A Simple Cease-Fire Won't Bring Lasting Peace to Ukraine

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

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Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel pictured with France's President Francois Hollande during a welcoming ceremony at an airport near Minsk, Feb. 11.

With all eyes on Minsk as world leaders convened Wednesday night for key talks on the Ukraine crisis, analysts urged the imperative of a fundamental settlement to the conflict, saying that a simple cease-fire won't work.

Against the backdrop of increased violence in Ukraine's turbulent east and signals that Washington may be gearing up to send lethal aid to Kiev, President Vladimir Putin met with his Ukrainian, French and German counterparts as part of a last-ditch effort to find a diplomatic solution to a conflict that has already plunged East-West tensions to a low unparalleled in the post-Cold War era.

Despite the heavy handed role played by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, American representatives were noticeably absent Wednesday,

leaving Washington's hands clean of the outcome of the talks.

In the days leading up to the talks, international headlines were rife with speculation that the leaders would decide on a cease-fire.

Recent history suggests, however, that a mere cease-fire agreement would fail to bring an authoritative end to the conflict, which has claimed more than 5,300 lives since April by the United Nations' count. Similar talks held in September resulted in a shaky cease-fire, but failed to prevent further bloodshed.

Amid a surge in violence in recent weeks, the rebels have made significant advances. They are about as likely to willingly surrender their recent gains as Kiev is unlikely to accept the territorial loss.

Meanwhile, a U.S. decision to go through with plans currently being mulled to provide lethal assistance to Kiev could heighten the possibility of a proxy war in the heart of Europe.

"It is clear that in the current, emotionally charged situation, it will be impossible to discuss any type of fundamental consensus. That must involve a major change to Ukraine's internal structure," Fyodor Lukyanov, head of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

The fact that German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande showed up in person to negotiate a deal with Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko indicates the European leaders' understanding that the talks' failure would constitute a major hurdle to diplomatic efforts to end the crisis, Lukyanov said. "This meeting is being held at the highest level possible, and another failure would cause serious damage to everyone who has an interest in this."

Tense Atmosphere

Tensions were high as the leaders gathered in Minsk, with fighting between pro-Russian separatists and forces loyal to Kiev having claimed numerous civilian lives in recent days.

Since January, the rebels have celebrated several conquests, including the coveted — albeit totally demolished — international airport in Donetsk. They have also encircled the key railway junction of Debaltseve. Kiev-loyal forces launched a counter-offensive Tuesday in the strategically important Black Sea port of Mariupol.

A visibly anxious Poroshenko examined the scene of a rocket strike in Kramatorsk on Tuesday, which his administration said had killed 16 people and wounded 48. "We demand unconditional peace," Poroshenko said in a video statement released Wednesday. "We demand a cease-fire, a withdrawal of all foreign troops and closure of the border."

In an address to government ministers in Kiev later Tuesday, Poroshenko said the upcoming Minsk summit would be the most important meeting of his presidency thus far, which began in June.

And if the talks fail, the Ukrainian government is prepared to introduce martial law across the country, Poroshenko said in comments carried by Interfax.

Speaking with Lukashenko after arriving in Minsk Wednesday evening, Poroshenko said: "Either the situation goes down the road of de-escalation, cease-fire ... or the situation goes out of control," Reuters reported.

American Arms

U.S. President Barack Obama reiterated the threat to arm Kiev in a conversation with Putin on the eve of the talks.

The U.S. leader emphasized to Putin the imperative of "reaching and implementing a negotiated settlement," according to a statement released by the White House on Tuesday. "However, if Russia continues its aggressive actions in Ukraine, including by sending troops, weapons, and financing to support the separatists, the costs for Russia will rise."

The Kremlin's statement on the same conversation reflected a markedly different interpretation of the takeaway message. "The Presidents of Russia and the United States highlighted the importance of resolving the domestic Ukrainian crisis via political dialogue, with an immediate cessation of bloodshed, ensuring the lawful rights and interests of residents of all regions of Ukraine without exception, including the southeast," the Kremlin relayed.

Both Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. Congress have called for \$1 billion in lethal defensive aid to Kiev to help secure Ukraine's "sovereign territory against foreign aggressors," AP reported on Wednesday.

According to Russian military analysts interviewed by The Moscow Times, such a massive military donation to Kiev would likely be viewed by Moscow as a declaration of war, and could spark a global escalation of Ukraine's separatist conflict. (see related story: [Russia Would See U.S. Moves to Arm Ukraine as Declaration of War](#))

U.S. Army Europe Commander Ben Hodges told Reuters on Wednesday that Russia had amassed 10 battalions of soldiers along its border with Ukraine.

As the United States mulls providing lethal aid to Kiev, European leaders have objected vociferously to such a scenario. EU foreign ministers delayed imposing new sanctions on Russia by a week on Monday in hope that the peace talks in Minsk would bear fruit.

At the same time, prospects are slim that the summit will be the source of substantial relief. The most likely scenario is a freeze of the situation for the immediate future, according to Lukyanov.

"With conflicts such as this one, either a diplomatic resolution is established at an early stage, or they deteriorate into a full-scale confrontation," he said.

Russian political scientist Georgy Bovt said the most optimistic possible outcome would be a temporary cease-fire. "This crisis doesn't have a final solution, either in the Normandy or in the Minsk format," he said in comments carried by news site Gazeta.ru.

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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