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Tear Down the Wall of Silence Around Negotiations To End Russia-Ukraine War

By Mikhail Troitskiy

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A man holds a Ukrainian national flag. **Sergei Gapon / AFP**

Russia's war against Ukraine is entering another dangerous phase with both sides relying heavily on long range strike systems, including Ukraine executing attacks at depths of over 2,000 kilometers from its borders. As the risk of further escalation rises as fall and winter approach, Washington should now make more aggressive use of selective disclosure: revealing more about what each side is demanding, rejecting and tentatively accepting.

U.S. mediation since early 2025 has produced limited restraints involving Black Sea navigation and attacks on energy facilities and a three-day ceasefire, but no lasting ceasefire. U.S.-mediated negotiations in Geneva in February ended without a breakthrough and the Kremlin said in July there was no immediate prospect of resuming formal negotiations, though President Trump and President Volodymyr Zelensky recently discussed reviving the peace talks.

The parties remain far apart. Moscow insists on control of all of the Donbas, including Ukrainian-held territory. Kyiv is unwilling to surrender it. Even if a ceasefire can be reached, Ukraine would struggle to accept terms that look like defeat: surrender of territory it still controls, a permanent bar on NATO membership without credible alternative guarantees, or abandonment of its claim to reparations. Recent Ukrainian polling underscores this difficulty, finding that 57% categorically rejected withdrawing from Ukrainian-held Donbas in exchange for U.S. and European security guarantees.

The contrast with the public debate surrounding diplomacy over the Strait of Hormuz and Gaza is striking. Those negotiations are not fully transparent either, but key bargaining positions have been publicly reported in considerable detail. In the current Hormuz crisis, reporting has laid out disputes over Iranian control of inbound shipping and oversight of outbound traffic, as well as proposed transit fees and demands for unimpeded, toll-free passage. In Gaza, the sequencing of Hamas's disarmament and Israel's withdrawal is openly debated. Stakeholders can see who is accepting which terms and where the talks are stuck.

The Russia-Ukraine negotiations are more opaque in this crucial respect. Observers know the broad disputes, but much less about the exact trades, sequencing, commitments and authoritative negotiating text. Is Moscow asking only for Ukraine's withdrawal from the rest of Donbas? What commitments would Russia make if that happened? What are the details of Kyiv's counteroffer? Is a peace treaty under discussion? What third-party security guarantees are on the table? Public reporting confirms that territory and security guarantees are major issues. But even after recent high-level U.S.-Russian contacts, Washington declined to explain the Russian position in detail. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stunningly confessed in a recent interview that while trying to obtain Patriot missile defenses for Ukraine, he is discussing things that he "cannot even share."

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The parties' public answers have been elusive and at times inconsistent. Talks have proceeded largely behind closed doors for understandable diplomatic reasons: secrecy can protect sensitive bargaining and insulate negotiators from domestic backlash. The Kremlin in particular has kept important details undisclosed.Research on secret international negotiations finds that secrecy is regarded as more legitimate when it protects sensitive information or raises the likelihood of an agreement, but substantially less legitimate when its purpose is to avoid criticism.

Confidentiality often helps diplomacy. After four and a half years of full-scale war, however, it increasingly protects the parties from accountability rather than the talks from disruption. Peer-reviewed work on back-channel negotiations likewise stresses that secret channels can be crucial for breaking deadlocks, while recognizing the accountability and constituency problems that secrecy creates.

First, the parties feel too little pressure from their own constituencies and international partners. Russia's economy has slowed sharply and some among its business and political establishment see economic advantages in ending the war. If they knew that realistic options were available, some might support the concessions needed to reach them. Ukrainians

likewise deserve a clear view of the proposed off-ramps and of whether they have been rejected for legitimate national-security reasons or narrower political ones. It was reported in June that Russian businesses saw ending the war as the best route to reviving growth.

Second, secrecy is creating an opening for attacks on Washington's credibility as mediator. Moscow has repeatedly invoked alleged "understandings" reached at the August 2025 U.S.-Russia summit in Anchorage and accused Washington of retreating from them. Yet United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio says there was a proposal at Anchorage but no agreement, despite Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisting that the exchanges amounted to an understanding. Because no peace agreement or was announced at the summit, outsiders have been left to guess what Moscow believes Washington promised and whether the American position later changed. That allows Moscow to portray Washington rather than itself as an obstacle to peace.

Selective disclosure does not mean publishing transcripts or exposing every bargaining position. After each round, Washington could issue a structured account of the issues discussed, areas of provisional agreement, proposals each party accepted or rejected, and questions still unresolved. When either side mischaracterizes an American proposal, the U.S. should release enough of the record to correct the claim. Negotiators could be told in advance what categories of information may be disclosed. This approach is consistent with a practice documented in negotiation research: leaders sometimes communicate progress or disclose interim arrangements to test reactions among the public, media and key constituencies.

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Such transparency carries risks. Public bargaining can improve accountability but also impose costs on negotiations, and a leaked compromise can become politically toxic. Research on peace bargaining shows how domestic challengers can seize on concessions to discredit pro-settlement leaders. Yet controlled disclosure after a long period of secret diplomacy around the Russia-Ukraine war is unlikely to make the current impasse worse. It could make obstruction more costly and compromise easier to defend.

Some workable solutions may already exist but remain hidden from the officials, business leaders and citizens whose support would be needed to carry them out. Public pressure informed by the realistic contours of a settlement can help decision makers accept necessary concessions. Scholars of peace negotiations note that constituency support matters both for reaching a deal and for implementing one and that negotiators sometimes deliberately communicate negotiating progress to assess or shape that support. Exposing negotiated terms to light will not produce peace by itself. It may reveal who is preventing it and illuminate a path to ending the war before the next escalation.

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