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Article

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### THE RUSSIA–UKRAINE WAR AND THE COLLAPSE OF DIPLOMACY

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#### Abstract

This article explores the failure of diplomacy during the Russia–Ukraine war, probing both the proximate ruptures in negotiation and the deeper structural forces that undercut diplomatic possibility. The research problem centers on understanding why repeated diplomatic engagements have failed to prevent escalation or achieve meaningful settlement, even as global actors have committed to normative frameworks of dialogue, mediation, and international order. The analysis unfolds in three stages. First, it reconstructs the major diplomatic efforts - from the Minsk processes to the early 2022 ceasefire talks - highlighting how negotiations were undermined by asymmetrical war aims, mistrust, and incompatible red lines. Second, it interrogates structural constraints: competing geopolitical interests (notably by NATO, the EU, and the United States), the logic of coercive diplomacy, and the role of international institutions constrained by great-power rivalries. Third, it assesses the global repercussions: how the collapse of diplomacy in this conflict erodes norms of interstate negotiation, exacerbates polarization in world politics, and creates a precedent for conflict as a first resort. The article showed that the failure is not simply a matter of bad faith or miscalculation but reflects a deeper crisis in diplomatic architecture under conditions of asymmetric power and existential stakes. Finally, it offers reflections on whether and how a path back to diplomacy might yet reopen, and what lessons this case holds for managing future high-stakes conflicts.

**Keywords:** Russia–Ukraine War, International Negotiations, Conflict Resolution, Minsk Agreements, Collapse of Diplomacy.

#### Introduction

The Russia–Ukraine war, which began in full scale with the invasion on February 24, 2022, has become one of the most consequential international conflicts of the 21st century. It has not only reshaped European security but has also tested the durability of international

norms, institutions, and diplomatic mechanisms. While armed conflict is not a new feature in Russia–Ukraine relations - given the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war in Donbas—the scale, intensity, and geopolitical fallout of the 2022 invasion mark a critical rupture in global diplomacy (Charap & Colton, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2022). At the heart of this article lies a central research question: Why did diplomacy fail to prevent or contain the Russia–Ukraine war, despite repeated negotiations, multilateral involvement, and widespread international engagement? The repeated breakdown of diplomatic efforts - ranging from the Minsk Agreements to early 2022 ceasefire talks - raises concerns about the effectiveness of contemporary diplomatic institutions and the willingness of major powers to prioritize negotiated outcomes over unilateral strategic gains (Götz, 2022; Kuzio, 2023).

This article argues that the collapse of diplomacy in the Russia–Ukraine war is not solely due to miscommunication or poor negotiation strategies, but is symptomatic of a broader crisis in international relations. The crisis includes conflicting national interests, strategic mistrust, institutional weakness, and a breakdown of shared norms. By analyzing key diplomatic initiatives, their failure points, and the global consequences of these breakdowns, this paper seeks to illuminate the limits of diplomacy in high-stakes geopolitical conflicts and explore what the war reveals about the current state of global order. The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, it reviews the historical context of Russia–Ukraine relations and key pre-war diplomatic efforts. Second, it examines the structural, strategic, and normative reasons for diplomatic failure. Finally, it considers the global repercussions, including the erosion of international norms and the challenges facing future diplomatic efforts in similar conflicts.

### **Historical Background to the Russia–Ukraine Conflict**

The roots of the Russia–Ukraine conflict lie deep in the intertwined histories of the two nations, shaped by imperial legacies, ideological divisions, and competing visions of national sovereignty. Understanding this historical context is essential to grasp why diplomacy has repeatedly failed to produce a sustainable resolution. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine declared independence and began forging closer ties with the West, particularly through its aspirations to join the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This aspirations challenged Russia's post-Soviet regional ambitions, as Moscow viewed Ukraine not only as part of its traditional sphere of influence but also as a culturally and historically linked nation (Sakwa, 2015). For many in the Russian political elite, Ukraine's full alignment with the West was unacceptable, both strategically and ideologically (Götz, 2022). Tensions escalated significantly during the 2004 Orange Revolution and again in 2013–2014 during the Euromaidan protests, which led to the ousting of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. In response, Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014 - a move widely condemned by the international community as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and international law (Allison, 2014). The annexation marked a dramatic turning point, setting off a proxy war in Eastern Ukraine's Donbas region, where Russian-backed separatists fought against Ukrainian government forces. Over 13,000 people were killed in the conflict between 2014 and 2021 (United Nations, 2021).

In the wake of the 2014 crisis, multiple diplomatic efforts were launched to de-escalate tensions. The most notable of these were the Minsk Agreements - Minsk I (2014) and Minsk II (2015) - brokered by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), with participation from Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany (the "Normandy Format"). These agreements aimed to implement a ceasefire, ensure withdrawal of heavy weapons, and pursue constitutional reforms in Ukraine to grant special status to the Donbas

region (Charap & Colton, 2017). However, these efforts largely failed due to mutual mistrust, conflicting interpretations of the agreements, and continued violations by Russia backed armed illegal formations. Between 2015 and 2021, diplomatic stalemates continued. While Ukraine remained committed to reintegrating its territories and asserting sovereignty, Russia increasingly portrayed itself as a security guarantor for Russian-speaking populations in Eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile, Russia expressed growing hostility toward NATO expansion, especially after Ukraine's 2019 constitutional amendment committing to future NATO membership (Kuzio, 2022). By late 2021, Russia began a massive military buildup near Ukraine's borders, and despite international mediation efforts - including diplomatic visits by European leaders and dialogue between the U.S. and Russia - these tensions exploded into full-scale war on February 24, 2022. The invasion represented not only a failure of diplomacy but a complete rupture in post-Cold War European security architecture. It suggests that the underlying historical grievances - particularly Russia's rejection of Ukraine's Western alignment - could never be resolved through dialogue, and that diplomatic mechanisms such as the Minsk process had been insufficient to address the deeper strategic impasse. This historical backdrop illustrates the depth of the conflict and the longstanding diplomatic challenges that preceded the war. It also underscores how the collapse of diplomacy was not sudden but the result of a slow erosion of trust, incompatible political goals, and structural weaknesses in international negotiation frameworks.

#### **Analysis of Failed Diplomatic Efforts.**

The failed diplomatic efforts focuses on the key diplomatic initiatives from 2014–2022, why they failed, and what those failures reveal about broader issues in international diplomacy. Diplomatic efforts to resolve the Russia–Ukraine conflict began long before the full-scale invasion of 2022. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of war in the Donbas region, numerous negotiations have taken place under various international frameworks. However, despite these attempts, diplomacy consistently failed to achieve a sustainable resolution. Such key diplomatic initiatives - include the Minsk Agreements, Normandy Format, and the early 2022 peace talks - The synopsis is presented below:

- i. **The Minsk Agreements (2014 & 2015):** The Minsk Protocol (Minsk I) was signed in September 2014, following heavy fighting in Eastern Ukraine. It was brokered by the Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and supported by France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, the agreement aimed to implement a ceasefire, withdraw heavy weapons, and initiate political reforms in Ukraine, including decentralization and special status for the Donbas region (Kostanyan, 2014). However, the agreement quickly unraveled. Both sides accused each other of violating the ceasefire, and fighting resumed within weeks. The vague wording of several clauses, particularly around the sequencing of political reforms and security arrangements, led to differing interpretations (Sasse, 2017). In February 2015, Minsk II was signed after further escalation, including the Battle of Debaltseve. This second agreement, while more detailed, suffered from similar flaws. Ukraine viewed political concessions as a threat to its sovereignty, while Russia insisted on constitutional changes before ending support for separatists. The result was a diplomatic stalemate (Charap & Colton, 2017). Over time, the Minsk process was seen by many Ukrainian leaders as a tool used by Russia to freeze the conflict on its terms rather than as a genuine path to peace (Kuzio, 2022).
- ii. **The Normandy Format and Western Mediation:** The Normandy Format—a quadrilateral diplomatic group composed of France, Germany, Ukraine, and Russia—was

established in 2014 to support implementation of the Minsk Agreements. It was intended to facilitate high-level dialogue and build mutual trust among parties. However, it struggled to produce lasting outcomes due to deeply entrenched positions and lack of enforcement mechanisms. European mediators, particularly France and Germany, emphasized diplomatic dialogue and conflict de-escalation but were constrained by their limited leverage over Russia. Meanwhile, Ukraine often perceived Western efforts as overly conciliatory toward Moscow, especially regarding the political concessions embedded in the Minsk framework (van der Togt, 2021). However, the Normandy Format succeeded in keeping lines of communication open, but lacked the coercive tools or political consensus required to enforce compliance. Its inability to adapt to changing dynamics—such as increasing militarization and the growing irrelevance of the Minsk formula—contributed to the breakdown of diplomacy in the years leading up to 2022.

- iii. **The Early 2022 Peace Talks:** In the months leading to the full-scale invasion in February 2022, a flurry of diplomatic activity emerged aimed at preventing war. Western leaders engaged in intense shuttle diplomacy, with French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and U.S. President Joe Biden holding multiple discussions with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Russia submitted draft treaties demanding security guarantees, including a halt to NATO enlargement and a rollback of NATO forces from Eastern Europe (Trenin, 2022). While maintaining openness to dialogue, Ukraine refused to make concessions that would undermine its sovereignty or its aspirations to join NATO and the EU. Russia's demands were widely viewed as incompatible with the existing European security architecture. The diplomatic impasse culminated in the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, suggesting that Moscow had already concluded that force would serve its interests more effectively than diplomacy (Hill, 2022). Subsequent peace talks—held in Belarus and later in Istanbul—offered limited progress. In March 2022, Ukraine proposed a neutral status in exchange for security guarantees. However, Russia continued military operations while pursuing negotiations, undermining trust. By April, the talks had collapsed completely, with both sides accusing the other of insincerity (Götz, 2022).

### **Key Reasons for Diplomatic Failure**

The failure of diplomacy in this conflict can be attributed to several interrelated factors:

- i. **Asymmetric Objectives:** Ukraine sought to preserve territorial integrity and national sovereignty, while Russia aimed to fundamentally alter Ukraine's geopolitical orientation and security posture. These positions were irreconcilable without significant compromise, which neither side was prepared to make (Menon & Rumer, 2015).
- ii. **Lack of Trust:** Years of conflict, disinformation, and violations of previous agreements eroded any mutual trust. Diplomatic talks were increasingly viewed as stalling tactics rather than good-faith efforts.
- iii. **Flawed Frameworks:** The Minsk Agreements, while ambitious, were poorly structured. Their vague language and lack of sequencing clarity created room for manipulation and differing interpretations (Sasse, 2017).
- iv. **External Pressures:** The involvement of NATO, the EU, and the United States shaped the negotiating environment. Russia perceived Western support for Ukraine as a threat to its regional dominance, while Ukraine relied on Western backing to resist Russian pressure.

- v. **Strategic Use of Force:** Ultimately, Russia appeared to view diplomacy not as an alternative to war but as a complementary tool to strengthen its negotiating hand while pursuing military goals - a classical example of coercive diplomacy (Schelling, 1966).

### **Structural and Systemic Barriers to Diplomacy**

Despite the high level of international engagement, multiple rounds of negotiations, and mediation by global and regional powers, diplomacy failed to prevent or contain the Russia–Ukraine war. While incompatible objectives and mistrust between the belligerents are crucial, the failure also reflects deeper structural and systemic barriers within the international system that limit the effectiveness of diplomacy in high-stakes geopolitical conflicts. This section identifies and analyzes four core barriers: the security dilemma, the erosion of international institutions, the asymmetry of power, and the impact of information warfare and domestic politics.

### **The Post-Cold War Security Dilemma**

One of the most enduring structural barriers to diplomacy between Russia and the West is the security dilemma. While Russia views NATO expansion as a direct threat to its national security and regional influence, countries like Ukraine see NATO membership as essential for protection against Russian aggression (Mearsheimer, 2014). Each side's pursuit of security creates a perception of threat for the other, fueling escalation and undermining trust. The absence of a stable, mutually accepted European security architecture after the Cold War left a vacuum in which adversarial narratives could thrive. The failure to fully integrate Russia into the post-Soviet security order—combined with NATO's continued expansion, has been interpreted by Moscow as Western encirclement (Trenin, 2022). Consequently, diplomatic dialogue becomes ineffective when one side sees the very framework of negotiations (e.g., NATO, the EU) as inherently biased or hostile.

### **Weakness of International Institutions**

The United Nations, OSCE, and other multilateral institutions were central to mediation efforts in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, but their structural limitations proved fatal. The UN Security Council, where Russia holds veto power, has been paralyzed on Ukraine-related resolutions, rendering the body largely symbolic in managing the crisis (Weiss, 2016). Similarly, the OSCE, which played a key monitoring role in Donbas and supported the Minsk Agreements, lacked enforcement authority. While the organization documented ceasefire violations and maintained dialogue forums, it was unable to impose consequences or compel compliance (Sasse, 2017). The institutional weakness reflects a broader problem: when great powers are parties to a conflict, the international system offers few mechanisms to restrain them. Although, diplomatic forums like the G20 and the UN General Assembly have issued strong rhetorical condemnations of Russian aggression, these symbolic measures have not shifted behavior on the ground. The limits of these institutions in coercing or incentivizing diplomatic solutions reflect the declining utility of multilateral diplomacy in an increasingly multipolar and polarized world order (Ikenberry, 2018).

### **Asymmetry of Power and Strategic Leverage**

Another major obstacle to successful diplomacy is the asymmetry in power and leverage between the involved actors. Russia, as a nuclear power with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, holds significant strategic autonomy. Ukraine, while supported militarily and economically by the West, lacks comparable leverage in negotiations and cannot compel Russian concessions on its own. This imbalance was visible during both the Minsk process

and the 2022 peace talks. Russia could escalate militarily or withdraw from talks with limited international consequences, whereas Ukraine remained heavily dependent on continued Western support and thus constrained in its diplomatic flexibility (Charap & Colton, 2017). Moreover, major Western powers have their own divergent interests. While the U.S. has prioritized containing Russian aggression and defending NATO's credibility, European states, especially Germany and France, have at times emphasized economic stability and energy security over confrontation. These competing agendas have complicated diplomatic coherence, enabling Russia to exploit divisions within the Western alliance (Van der Togt, 2021).

### **Information Warfare and Domestic Political Pressures**

The digital age has introduced new barriers to diplomacy in the form of information warfare, propaganda, and politicized public discourse. Both Russia and Ukraine have used mass media and digital platforms to frame narratives about the war, delegitimize the other side, and shape global opinion. These efforts harden public sentiment and limit leaders' ability to compromise without facing domestic backlash (Pomerantsev, 2019). In Russia, the state-controlled media has portrayed the war as a defensive operation against Western encroachment and neo-Nazism in Ukraine. This narrative has been essential to maintaining domestic support and suppressing dissent, making diplomatic concessions politically costly for the Kremlin (Galeotti, 2022). In Ukraine, President Zelenskyy has framed the war as a fight for national survival, further entrenching the view that any concession to Russia would amount to betrayal. Additionally, domestic political constraints in Western democracies - such as the U.S. or EU member states - have influenced the scope and tone of diplomacy. Leaders must navigate domestic expectations, electoral pressures, and ideological divides when formulating foreign policy, making coherent, sustained diplomatic engagement more difficult (Kupchan, 2020). The collapse of diplomacy in the Russia-Ukraine war is not merely a result of poor negotiation tactics or bad timing; it reflects systemic failures in the global diplomatic order. From the security dilemma and ineffective institutions to asymmetries of power and political polarization, the international system is ill-equipped to manage conflicts involving major powers with incompatible visions of the world order. Unless these structural barriers are addressed, future efforts at diplomacy - whether in Ukraine or elsewhere - may suffer the same fate.

### **Global Repercussions of the Collapse of Diplomacy**

The failure of diplomacy in the Russia-Ukraine war has produced far-reaching consequences that extend well beyond the region. As the most direct confrontation between great powers in Europe since World War II, the war has reshaped global alliances, undermined norms of international conflict resolution, and exacerbated geopolitical polarization. This section explores the three key global repercussions of the diplomatic breakdown: (1) the erosion of international norms, (2) the realignment of global alliances and security frameworks, and (3) the precedent set for the use of force over negotiation in future conflicts.

### **Erosion of International Norms and Legal Order**

Perhaps the most fundamental global repercussion is the erosion of key international norms, particularly those surrounding state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. The United Nations Charter, which explicitly prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state (UN, 1945, Art. 2[4]), has been flagrantly violated in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While international

condemnation has been widespread, including multiple UN General Assembly resolutions, these responses have had little practical effect. Russia's status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council has shielded it from meaningful consequences within that body, highlighting the limitations of international law when confronted with raw geopolitical power (Weiss, 2016). This reality has deepened global cynicism about the effectiveness and impartiality of international legal mechanisms. The war also undermines long-standing diplomatic norms, such as the belief that war is a last resort, only pursued after exhausting all other peaceful options. Russia's apparent use of diplomacy as a façade for preparing military aggression has contributed to a broader crisis of confidence in negotiation as a credible tool, especially in conflicts involving power asymmetries or revisionist states (Götz, 2022).

### **Shifting Alliances and Strategic Realignments**

The war has triggered a major realignment of global alliances, particularly in Europe and across the broader international system. In direct response to the invasion, NATO has experienced a revival in purpose and cohesion. Countries such as Finland and Sweden - long-time neutrals - have sought and obtained NATO membership, signaling a major strategic shift in Northern Europe (Cohen, 2022). Simultaneously, the European Union has taken unprecedented steps to reduce dependence on Russian energy, provide military support to Ukraine, and strengthen its common foreign policy mechanisms. These developments mark a deepening of transatlantic security ties, reversing decades of hesitation and highlighting how the war has reinvigorated the Western alliance system (Lute & Burns, 2023). Outside of the West, however, the picture is more complex. Countries in the Global South, including India, Brazil, and South Africa, have adopted more ambivalent stances - condemning aggression in principle but refraining from direct confrontation with Russia (Acharya, 2023). Meanwhile, Russia and China have drawn closer, emphasizing their shared opposition to Western dominance and liberal internationalism. This has further entrenched a multipolar world order, where competing blocs prioritize national interest over shared diplomatic norms.

### **Precedent for Future Conflicts and Crisis Management**

The collapse of diplomacy in Ukraine risks setting a dangerous precedent for other conflicts worldwide. If great powers can violate sovereignty with impunity - while neutralizing diplomatic mechanisms through obstruction or manipulation - other actors may be emboldened to resolve disputes militarily rather than through negotiation. This precedent is especially relevant in Asia, where rising tensions over Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Korean Peninsula mirror some elements of the Russia-Ukraine dynamic: contested territorial claims, power rivalries, and polarized alliances. The war in Ukraine has also affected international crisis management frameworks, crowding out attention and resources for other conflict zones such as Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Nagorno-Karabakh (UNHCR, 2023). Additionally, the war has militarized international diplomacy to an unprecedented degree. Countries are increasing defense spending, reviving conscription, and developing new arms strategies in response to the war's lessons. The diplomatic toolbox, in contrast, appears increasingly marginalized - a trend that could have lasting effects on how the global community manages security challenges (Ikenberry, 2023). The collapse of diplomacy in the Russia-Ukraine war has not only intensified the conflict itself but has also destabilized core structures of international relations. Norms have been weakened, alliances redrawn, and diplomacy itself devalued. In the absence of a robust, trusted, and enforceable diplomatic

order, future conflicts may follow similar trajectories—escalating rapidly, evading mediation, and resulting in protracted violence. Rebuilding faith in diplomacy will require not only reforms to global institutions but also a recommitment by major powers to engage in good-faith negotiation, even amid geopolitical rivalry.

### **Conclusion: The Strategic Costs of Diplomatic Failure**

The collapse of diplomacy in the Russia–Ukraine war marks a watershed moment in international relations. As this article has demonstrated, the war is not simply the product of bilateral hostility between two neighboring states; rather, it reflects the convergence of historical grievances, structural dysfunctions in international diplomacy, and the waning influence of multilateral institutions in a fractured global order. At the core of this research was a central question : why diplomacy failed despite numerous opportunities, frameworks, and international stakeholders committed to negotiation ?. This study has shown that the breakdown was not the result of a single failed meeting or flawed agreement but the accumulation of systemic barriers over time. These include the long-standing security dilemma between Russia and the West, the decay of international legal norms, the dysfunction of global institutions like the United Nations and OSCE, and the competing strategic interests of involved actors. The Minsk Agreements, the Normandy Format, and even early 2022 peace talks all failed, not simply due to miscalculations or mistrust, but because they attempted to operate within a broken diplomatic architecture. The war’s diplomatic failure also reveals how modern diplomacy is increasingly overshadowed by coercion, power asymmetry, and narrative warfare. In such environments, dialogue is often reduced to a tactical delay rather than a strategic path toward compromise. Russia’s use of diplomacy in 2021–2022 as a stalling tactic—while it prepared for a full-scale invasion—illustrates this shift. Ukraine’s firm stance against concessions that would jeopardize its sovereignty, while morally and politically justified, also limited room for negotiation. The West, though largely united in condemnation, struggled to mediate effectively or prevent escalation.

Beyond the immediate conflict, the global repercussions are sobering. The erosion of diplomatic norms threatens to undermine conflict resolution efforts in other parts of the world, while the re-militarization of international politics raises the risks of future confrontations. The crisis has deepened the divide between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, hastened the realignment of global alliances, and destabilized the already fragile rules-based international order. Yet, even in this bleak landscape, diplomacy remains essential. If the world is to avoid future escalations between nuclear-armed powers or the proliferation of regional wars, the restoration and reinvention of diplomacy is imperative. This includes strengthening the capacity and credibility of international institutions, rebuilding trust among adversaries, and reasserting the value of negotiation as a first - not last - resort. It also requires revisiting the global norms and frameworks that guide diplomacy, particularly in the light of emerging challenges such as cyber conflict, disinformation, and non-state actors. In sum, the Russia–Ukraine war is not just a test of battlefield endurance; it is a test of diplomacy’s relevance in the 21st century. Whether global actors can draw meaningful lessons from this failure will shape not only the outcome of this war but also the contours of international security for decades to come. The choice is stark: renew diplomacy, or risk its continued decline - and with it, the increased likelihood of violent resolution becoming the global norm.

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