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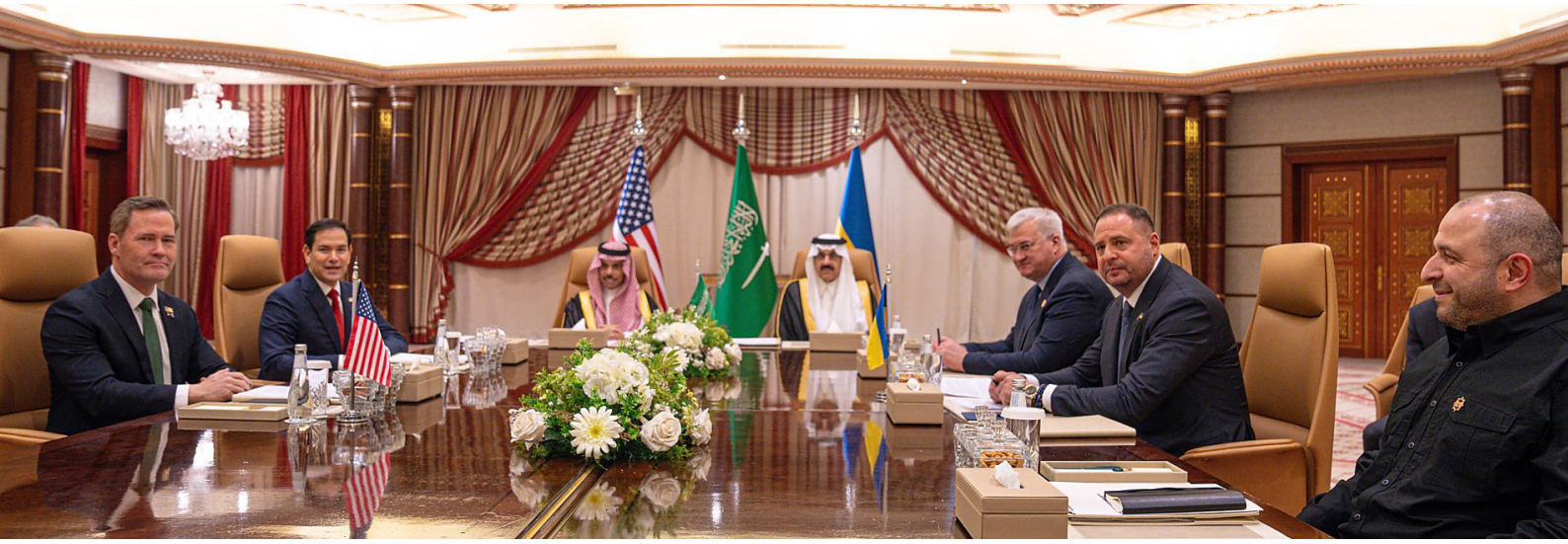
Outcome Neutral?



The Limits of Third-Party Mediation in Ending the War Against Ukraine

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If you only read one page...

1 Most potential third-party negotiators – namely Brazil, China, India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey – oppose Russia's war on Ukraine but also see it as an opportunity to increase their status in a changing world order.

2 European leaders should be pragmatic about their mostly transactional motivations. While they can learn from third-party actors to think about negotiations in incremental steps, hopes for any of them to unlock an "easy" solution to the war are misplaced.

3 Most of these actors prefer to engage in lower-stake activities like hosting talks or passing messages that still leverage their third-party status.

4 Some third-party actors should be approached not only as partners, but also as potential spoilers of diplomatic efforts.

5 European decision-makers should engage with justified criticisms of Western hypocrisy by third-party actors, while also working to actively counter Russian narratives.

Introduction

Since the election of Donald Trump for a second term, public discourse in Europe about a negotiated settlement between Russia and Ukraine has increasingly focused on the bilateral dynamics between Russia and the US and their respective presidents. However, although less pompous than those of Trump and Vladimir Putin, there have already been numerous attempts to create communication channels between conflict parties since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. So far, none of these efforts have succeeded in ending the war.

What is more, debates among political elites in Germany and the EU about the best way to overcome this negotiation puzzle tend to be underpinned by several misconceptions, including the popular but empirically wrong[1] notion that "all wars end at the negotiation table," or by a false, binary understanding of fighting and battlefield developments as separate from negotiated talks.[2] In fact, the interplay between war and diplomacy is complex[3] and in the case of Ukraine, "it will be the course of the war itself that determines whether ceasefire negotiations are likely or possible."[4] Behind the renewed diplomatic engagement between the US and Russia, German and EU actors continue to struggle with the key questions: What kind of diplomatic negotiations constitute a reasonable approach to ending this war? And who should take part in them?

Some global leaders have suggested that an impartial third-party mediator is crucial to the success of negotiations. Proponents of this position cite examples such as the Cold War, when non-aligned states offered their "good offices"[5] to mediate between the great powers at various occasions. Their impartiality and a certain "outcome neutrality"[6] were seen as an advantage. In the Russia/Ukraine context, several third-party actors — namely Brazil, China, India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey — have been cited as potential mediators and have already engaged in various ways in diplomatic initiatives since the start of the war.[7]

Drawing on 27 interviews with officials and researchers in and from these six countries, as well as 14 background conversations with other experts, this policy paper explores the role of these states in negotiations around the war against Ukraine. It offers an in-depth exploration of the positioning, motivations, calculations and actions of third-party actors in mediating between Russia and Ukraine by answering: How and why have these third-party actors engaged in mediation efforts in the Russia-Ukraine war? And, despite the limitations of these efforts, can they make a difference in the future? It finds that these countries are highly unlikely to be driving forces of any successful negotiation efforts, as they have been mostly motivated by status concerns in a changing global order and only engaged with the war when it came with benefits and without any risks to their international reputation. However, third-party actors can play a role in the pragmatic facilitation of incremental steps towards peace.

This brief shows that many countries see the war in the context of a struggle for a new, potentially more just, international order characterized by a decline of American and European power, in which Russia is an indispensable player. In this context, the rationale for most of the third-party actors to engage with Russia and Ukraine includes partially overlapping considerations related to their economic interests, concerns about their status on the global stage, and the personal ambitions of their leaders. Some are driven by a desire to be seen as promoting global peace or choose to engage simply because they are asked by other leaders to mediate or host. Their involvement tends to be shaped by their geopolitical positioning as well as a willingness (or lack thereof) to take risks. For this reason, these findings are relevant to European diplomacy beyond Ukraine. At the end of this brief, the findings are translated into five concrete recommendations for European leaders.

How and why have third-party actors engaged in mediating the Russia-Ukraine war?

These countries approach mediation from a position of non-alignment, which is not the same as impartiality and is often misunderstood by Western powers.

All third-party actors examined here, with the slight exception of Turkey, have much closer ties to Russia than to Ukraine. This is based on their historically important relations with Russia and its prominent role in their vital economic interests. For these reasons, many non-Western countries have rejected the notion put forward by Ukraine's key supporters that they must choose[8] between their relationship with Russia and an overall commitment to principles of international law such as territorial integrity or the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Figure 1: Voting behavior of selected countries in the UN General Assembly on resolutions pertaining to the war against Ukraine between 2022-2024

Date	Resolution						
March 2022	ES-11/1: Aggression against Ukraine	✓	●	●	✓	●	✓
April 2022	ES-11/3: Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council	●	✗	●	●	●	✓
October 2022	ES-11/4: Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations	✓	●	●	✓	●	✓
November 2022	ES-11/5: Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine	●	✗	●	●	●	✓
February 2023	ES-11/6: Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine	✓	●	●	✓	●	✓
July 2024	78/316: Safety and security of nuclear facilities of Ukraine, including the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant	●	●	●	●	●	✓

✓ in favor ● abstained ✗ against

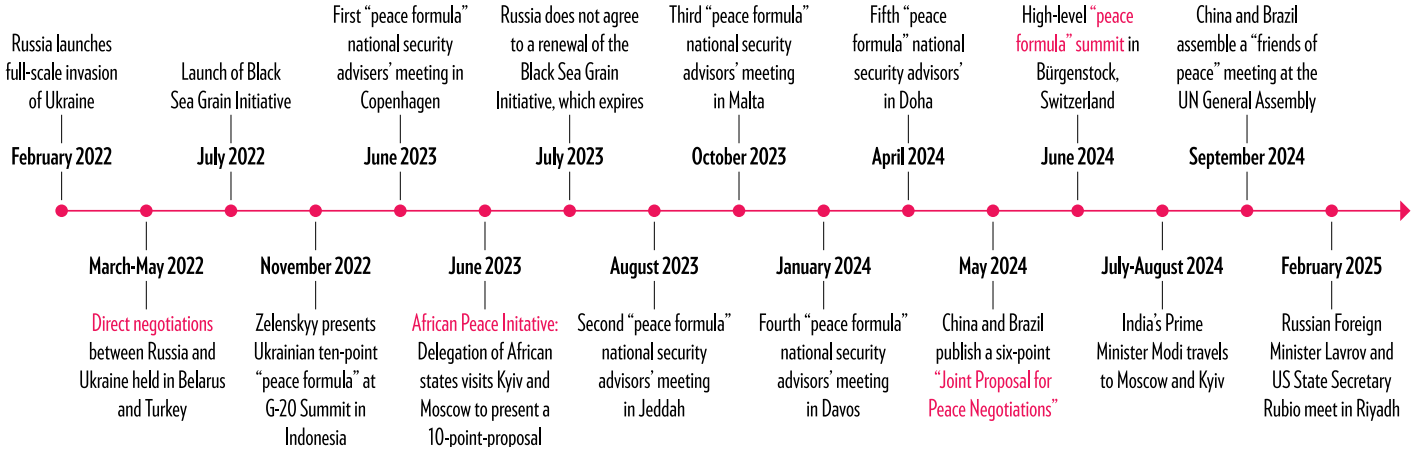
Instead, they approach the conflict from a non-aligned stance, which, to them, does not imply a position of equidistance. This can be seen reflected in the voting dynamics at the UN General Assembly (UNGA), where the key third-party actors discussed here have often chosen to abstain from votes condemning the invasion and naming Russia as the aggressor in this conflict. These countries choose non-alignment as an expression of independence and sovereignty and a position from which to engage with the warring parties. And yet, as this research shows, the fact that these countries have a transactional relationship with Russia that runs much deeper than their ties to Ukraine has played into their behavior in and around negotiations — and will likely continue to dictate their actions.

Interviewees from different countries expressed a certain frustration that non-alignment remains poorly understood among Western counterparts and criticized Western governments for exerting pressure on them to disengage from Russia. As stated by an interviewee from Saudi Arabia: "Saudi Arabia does not see that its ties with Western countries, especially the United States, add a layer of complexity to its relationship with Russia."[9] An interlocutor from South Africa called out Western governments for having an inadequate understanding of their own positionality when they accused Pretoria of hypocrisy in defending Russia: "it's an entirely different thing if we call you hypocritical, or if you call us that,"[10] due to the European position as former colonizer.

Their engagement is driven by status concerns, pragmatism and economic considerations.

To many of these potential mediators, the war represents, above all, a hindrance to multilateral discussions on other issues of importance to them, such as development.[11] It also represents an economic challenge: In 2022, South Africa and Turkey were highly concerned over grain shortages and the blockade of Black Sea ports that followed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This was one of the reasons that Turkey hosted the only bilateral negotiations between Russia and Ukraine to date, in the spring of 2022. These talks, which first took place in Belarus and later in Antalya and Istanbul, did not result in an agreement, though exactly why they failed has been the subject of fierce debate.[12] Nonetheless, these talks were the closest the warring parties have come to a negotiated deal of any kind and were therefore cited by several interviewees as a reason that Turkey would make a good potential mediator or host for talks between Russia and Ukraine. Turkey has also been considered for this role because of the central part it played in the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which facilitated the export of grain from Ukrainian ports between July 2022 and July 2023 (when its extension was halted by Russia).

Figure 2: Timeline of negotiation efforts and initiatives involving third-party actors between 2022-2025



While the countries investigated in this brief are generally opposed to the war, some also perceive it as an opportunity to establish a different world order: one that is less dominated by the US and includes several centers of power. In this endeavor, Russia is a key transactional partner, since, for all its flaws, Moscow represents an important element of balancing American influence in the world[13] or, in the case of India, an important factor in balancing China.[14] For instance, while the Brazilian government has stated that the war should be

ended as soon as possible, one expert explained that it would also "be detrimental to Brazil's worldview to see a defeat of Russia or a rapid decline of it."[15] Beijing is firmly in the Russian camp, since, as the government line goes, "there is no room for China to join a ring-fencing alliance against Russia"[16] in its global competition with the US. Saudi Arabia, a traditional US ally, took the war as an opportunity to diversify its partnerships to include Russia following Riyadh's increasing disappointment with Washington over what it perceives as declining security commitments.[17] Turkey has successfully balanced its NATO membership with close economic and political relations with Russia over the last decade, despite the countries' many differing geopolitical interests.[18] However, compared to 2022 when Turkey hosted the peace talks, bilateral relations between Turkey and Russia seem to have momentarily cooled.[19]

Taking part in attempts to resolve the war in Ukraine is above all a matter of international status.

For most of these countries, taking part in attempts to resolve the war in Ukraine is above all a matter of international status: they wish to secure a seat at the table in an emerging multipolar world order. For instance, despite Saudi Arabia's sometimes complicated relationship with Russia, playing the role of mediator is meant to demonstrate to the world "the Kingdom's rise to global power."[20] The initiative by China and Brazil to publish a "six-point peace plan"[21] in May 2024 can be seen in a similar light. Beijing and Brasilia even organized a corresponding "Friends of Peace"[22] meeting at UNGA in September 2024. Putin's positive public comment about the initiative led one Brazilian expert to conclude: "If the Russians say they like it, Brazil will sit at the table. It's now unthinkable to have a negotiation that doesn't involve Brazil."[23]

Contrary to such high-level diplomatic efforts, more secret conversations about pragmatic, usually humanitarian questions which offer countries a similar promise of international recognition have had much more tangible successes. Such efforts have been led by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, and included prisoner exchanges and the return of abducted Ukrainian children. Interviewees from Saudi Arabia stressed that they are helping when approached — rather than making unsolicited (substantive) suggestions. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the other Gulf states pretended to be taking on the role of a negotiator. They see their added value in hosting and facilitation, based on experience from other conflict contexts, and their achievements have generally been rooted in the relatively apolitical nature of their role. Importantly, however, Saudi Arabia's good offices seem to be accepted by all actors — as evidenced by their past successes and the fact that they were the primary host of high-level talks on the war in early 2025.

The ambitions of individual leaders drive mediation efforts.

Beyond status concerns, several interviewees cited the personal ambitions of their countries' male leaders as a reason for pursuing mediation efforts in the first place. An expert on Brazil claimed that Lula "was dreaming of a Nobel prize."[24] India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's intense diplomatic efforts during the summer of 2024, passing messages between Moscow and Kyiv, were described in similar terms: as an expression of Modi's wish to "tell the population that he is a great global statesman."[25] Modi's actions sparked international hopes that he might lead parties to negotiations — mostly because he was more trusted by both sides than other world leaders. Interviewees from India, however, were much more measured in their assessment: "all he's doing is passing on messages,"[26] they argued, not leading any kind of real negotiation effort.

This individual ambition plays a particularly important role in political systems with a highly personalized governance. Several interviewees from Turkey stressed the importance of the personal relationship between President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Putin as a key factor

in Turkey's involvement in efforts to end the war. One went as far as saying that every few months, Erdogan would "wake up and think 'we should do something,'"[27] which would then result in new initiatives coming out of Ankara.

Leaders use mediation efforts to present their countries as a force for global peace.

Experts and officials across the board emphasized that their engagement with the war in Ukraine stems from a desire to contribute to a de-escalation of the confrontational rhetoric between Russia and the West at large. For China, the goal has mainly been to demonstrate its peacemaking capabilities to countries in the Global South.[28] Although Beijing is profiting from a deeper partnership with Russia, drastically increased Russian dependence on its exports, and cheaper oil and gas imports,[29] according to experts, the Chinese policy elite still see the war as an annoyance[30] and most do not actively support Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[31]

For African stakeholders to play a constructive role to potentially resolving a European crisis was a success.

Some countries have offered historical precedence to justify their peace-making role. In the case of Brazil, experts cited the country's leading role in peaceful conflict resolution on the South American continent. Interviewees from South Africa pointed to their learnings from overcoming Apartheid when suggesting that no matter how difficult, it is essential that parties sit down at a table. Passing on these lessons was one of the reasons for the African Peace Initiative. Through this initiative, six African countries, led by South Africa, traveled to Kyiv and Moscow with a ten-point plan for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This plan was not warmly received in either capital, and the initiative received mixed reviews[32] internationally. Interviewed officials and experts in South Africa, however, stressed that it should not be seen in isolation but as one of many efforts, "less about an immediate resolution," more about "positioning."[33] They considered the reversal of roles — "for African stakeholders to play a constructive role to potentially resolving a European crisis"[34] — a success.

It was perhaps based on their desire to be seen as champions of peace that all third-party actors engaged, at least to some degree, in the series of national security adviser-level meetings regarding Ukraine's ten-point "Peace Formula", which was initially presented at the G20 summit in Indonesia in November 2022. During the second of these meetings, hosted by Saudi Arabia, even the Chinese special envoy on Ukraine took part. Although these meetings allowed, from a Ukrainian point of view, productive engagement with a wider range of actors, their culmination in a "peace summit" at Bürgenstock in Switzerland in June 2024 was a partial success at best. 60 heads of state participated,[35] but Saudi Arabia, India and South Africa did not sign the final communiqué,[36] and Brazil attended only as an "observer" because of its joint "peace plan" with China. China did not attend at all. The main official reason cited by these countries for being absent or not signing the communique was that Russia did not attend. China reportedly also pressured countries from the Global South not to join the summit, showing that their hope of being seen as advocates for peace is by far subordinate to Beijing's desire to support Moscow. It also illustrates the risk that some of the third-party actors, in particular China, might act as spoilers in peace efforts led by Ukraine.[37]

Their engagement is limited by a low appetite for risk.

It is evident from these past initiatives and activities by third-party actors that the risks of putting skin in the game to broker a substantive deal by far outweigh any expected benefits

for the countries investigated here. Interviewed experts and former officials from India explained that anyone who tries to end the war "will end up being burned."[38] Experts on Saudi Arabia similarly contended that the Kingdom will avoid doing anything that might jeopardize its domestic agenda.[39] None of the third-party actors analyzed in this brief showed any desire to go beyond presenting peace plans and initiatives — which they perceived to be a risk-free means of showing engagement with global issues — or to assume responsibility for a substantive solution to the conflict. To most, the risks of action have so far exceeded the risks of inaction: while interviewees in Turkey and China expressed concern about a nuclearization or escalation of the war, to the other third-party countries this does not constitute a grave concern.

Xi cannot simply call Putin and tell him to stop.

Risk aversion was most strongly pronounced in the responses of Chinese interviewees and other experts on China, who stressed that Beijing does not have the interest or diplomatic capacity to take any gambles. Effectively, this means that China aims to "present itself as a responsible global power while evading responsibility if efforts fail."[40] Some analysts still contend that Beijing presumably holds "the one trump card," which is the ability to get Russia to the table[41] — if and when this is in Beijing's interest. This important caveat was ignored by Western countries in the first years of the war.[42] Chinese interviewees, often following the official party line, stated that China is "not the answer"[43] to this war, that it has "no responsibility to play a direct role in ending the war,"[44] and is "not well-placed to play first initiator."[45] They also stressed that "Xi cannot simply call Putin and tell him to stop,"[46] a statement true insofar as a mere phone call could not have this effect but also ignoring the fact that China does have substantial leverage over Russia. Perhaps it just has no good reason to use it.

Generally, third-party actors do not think about brokering peace in terms of leverage. Contrary to Western analysts who focus on how to sway or coerce Russia into negotiations or a settlement, for China (and others) the peace broker role "would rest on what Russia and Ukraine want."[47] A former official in India confirmed as much: "let the Ukrainians with whatever weight they can get through support work it out with the Russians."[48] Presumably for this reason, interviewees rarely answered questions about leverage in these terms. Experts in South Africa and Brazil did answer, but emphasized that they do not have such leverage. The latter stressed that only China might be able to "move the needle."[49]

What are the limitations of mediation by third-party actors between Russia and Ukraine?

Third-party actors have offered few substantive propositions, and neither Russia nor Ukraine have been interested in them.

There has been very little interest from Russia and Ukraine in the (so far highly limited) substantive ideas for political solutions put forward by third-party actors, often because of the way the underlying assumptions of these actors are reflected in the initiatives.

All the third-party actors examined here see the war as a result of a breakdown of the European security architecture. Although most seem to accept that Russia invaded Ukraine, the view that the West "co-created"[50] an environment in which international law could be breached is also prevalent. In many cases, interlocutors suggested Ukraine's push to join NATO was a Western provocation against Russia, which is one of the narratives used by Moscow to justify the war. The blame for this provocation is mostly attributed to the US, not Ukraine, which was not always considered by interviewees to be an independent actor: "people look at Ukraine mostly in terms of a strategic miscalculation."[51] Interviewees explained then, that the main problems needing to be solved are not between Russia and Ukraine but between Russia and the West. From this vantage point, most third-party actors view Ukrainian neutrality as a solution to this wider security architecture challenge, ignoring the fact that Ukraine was a neutral state before the war.[52] In almost all interviews, Ukraine's demands were reduced to the question of territorial integrity, rather than being seen as part of a larger struggle for independence.

The view that the West "co-created" an environment in which international law could be breached is also prevalent.

Most interviewees stressed that any sustainable agreement will need to give both sides a victory to sell at home, which, for Russia, would mean territorial concessions from Ukraine. In most interviews, victory for Ukraine was not specified, though it was implied that Ukraine's survival as a sovereign state constituted a victory in itself. Most interviewees stressed that at the end of the day, Russia cares more about Ukraine than the West does, and due to the unlikelihood of Western supporters sustaining Ukraine's war effort under a Trump presidency,[53] it would be better to accept territorial concessions sooner rather than later. The precise mechanism through which Ukrainian territorial concessions would lead to a ceasefire or peace was not specified. Some interviewees stressed that a Russian victory was inevitable or, in fact, already happening. Interlocutors in Turkey and Saudi Arabia felt that there is no good plan at hand to get Moscow to a negotiation table since nobody will force Russia to stop the war. It was therefore unlikely, they speculated, to withdraw troops.[54]

Given that Russia is considered the much more powerful actor, those interviewed consider it Ukraine's responsibility to concede to negotiations to end the war. More than one interviewee stressed their belief that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy himself is an obstacle to negotiations because of his October 2022 decree that he would not negotiate with Putin

after Russia illegally annexed four Ukrainian regions. The decree does leave the door open for negotiations with Russia under a different President.

It is important to note that both populations and governments in most third-party countries discussed here have a limited understanding of Ukraine in general. There was little clarity about the Ukrainian democratic system, which would require the broader public to accept any peace agreement. Most interviewees seemed to think that Kyiv could simply be told by the US what to do. There is a reciprocal element to this relative ignorance: Ukraine has, since its independence in 1991, invested very little in establishing ties to significant players in Africa, South America or Asia. Since February 2022, Kyiv has stepped up its diplomatic capacity, notably in Africa, which South African interlocutors appreciated. The Ukrainian attempt to frame the war as an anticolonial struggle, however, has been rejected by most in the Global South, including in the countries analyzed for this research.

Potential mediators have made very few suggestions on process, format and entry points for a successful end to the conflict.

Interviewed experts and officials were unanimous in stating that any peace process has to include all parties — specifically Russia, which was not part of the Ukraine-led "Peace Formula" meetings in November 2022. Several also stressed that the US and European countries should also be included, because they consider them party to the war, especially as it relates to the dispute over the European security architecture. Beyond this, interviewees offered few concrete format suggestions or had much to say regarding the involvement of third parties. As a former Indian official put it: "that is for Russia and Ukraine to work out."[55]

Interviewees underscored again and again that you have to "start at some point" to build trust.

It was evident in interviews that experts and officials see a degree of competition in terms of who will end up mediating — one person called it a "crowded space,"[56] where not everyone will get a seat at the table. However, there was also a sense that multi-stakeholder initiatives could be a solution. Many interlocutors stressed that there could be more than one potential mediator involved in securing peace between Russia and Ukraine and that existing initiatives are not mutually exclusive. Several experts in South Africa suggested that it is not so much a question of one negotiation effort leading to one peace; rather, they emphasized the need for small incremental steps to build trust. Drawing from their own experience, interviewees underscored again and again that you have to "start at some point"[57] to build trust. Involving multiple third parties in a potential peace process could also mitigate the risk-aversion of several of these actors, since the collective risk would be shared.

Humanitarian affairs were cited most frequently as potential entry points when it comes to getting warring parties to the negotiating table. Although some agreements have been successfully reached between Russia and Ukraine on humanitarian issues — resulting, for instance, in prisoner exchanges — they have not built sufficient trust to allow parties to discuss more sensitive issues. Nobody interviewed had suggestions on how to bridge this gap, to allow discussions between the warring nations to progress from humanitarian to political issues. The only other concrete entry point suggested by interviewees came from a Chinese interlocutor and concerned nuclear escalation — though this was perhaps more reflective of China's agenda and concerns than anything else.

Very few third-party actors are willing to offer anything in terms of guarantees of a peace agreement.

Once a deal of any kind is brokered between Russia and Ukraine, it will have to be guaranteed — and the jury is still out whether this will happen through security guarantees, some kind of international peacekeeping mission, European boots on the ground, arming Ukraine, or some mix of these approaches.

Interviewees held quite diverging views on this topic, but it seems that, in general, third-party actors are being careful not to commit too strongly to any type of guarantee of a potential ceasefire or peace agreement. Experts in Brazil, and to a certain extent India, were ready to consider participating in a peacekeeping mission if mandated by the UN Security Council — though this is quite unlikely given Russia's permanent seat. Chinese experts said that the topic of guarantors was being discussed in Beijing. They suggested that while it would be "difficult to see China as the sole guarantor,"[58] it could potentially be part of a larger group of guarantors. Turkish experts and former officials were divided, citing that a Turk headed the former Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Special Monitoring Mission, but also stating that Turkey currently does not have the economic means to engage. However, both Turkish and Chinese interviewees stressed that their countries want to participate in the reconstruction of Ukraine. Interlocutors from South Africa indicated they are unlikely to invest any resources into guaranteeing peace as did experts in Saudi Arabia, who even remain lukewarm on their interest in investing to rebuild Ukraine.

How can European leaders better engage with third-party mediators regarding Russia's war on Ukraine?

This research shows that Brazil, China, India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey, which have all been heralded as potential mediators for a diplomatic end to the war in Ukraine, are highly unlikely to drive successful negotiation efforts. Hopes for any of them to unlock an "easy" solution — like China using its leverage over Russia to force it to end its aggression towards Ukraine — are misplaced.

These countries engage with the war in Ukraine based on a variety of motivations, including a desire to play a role in shaping a multipolar world order and increase their international status. In the three years since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these countries have, at various points, been involved in peace plans and initiatives, shuttle diplomacy or closed-door talks about prisoner exchanges; however, they have only offered their good offices when it came without any real risk to their international reputation or if they expected gains from doing so. That's because, on balance, the expected benefits of being the actor who brought peace between Russia and Ukraine do not outweigh the risk of being perceived by others as having failed. It is because of this cost-benefit analysis that even when putting forward ideas and plans for peace between Russia and Ukraine, these countries tend not to take any responsibility for the execution or follow through of the plans. Third-party actors have offered very few substantive solutions to the political problems underlying the war. The few attempts that were made in this regard did not result in notable progress or success, in part since neither Russia nor Ukraine — nor, for that matter, the US or Europe — seemed particularly intrigued by the substance.

Negotiations may end up being a concerted effort with others, but for this type of orchestra you need a conductor – and this can only be the US.

All in all, this suggests that the only deal broker with leverage and diplomatic capacity substantial enough to pull off a negotiation accepted by all sides in this conflict was, and remains, the US. Despite all the talk of a multipolar world order, none of the third-party actors examined here — not even China who is the largest and most powerful among them — are willing to play the part of the hegemon: "negotiations may end up being a concerted effort with others, but for this type of orchestra you need a conductor — and this can only be the US."[59] At a time when the US is increasingly withdrawing from Europe, has firmly expressed the limits of its engagement with Ukraine, and is focusing on bilateral dynamics between the White House and the Kremlin, this leaves Europeans in a bind. For Europe to be part of a peace process regarding Ukraine, they will need all the help they can get.

What, then, should Europe consider when engaging with Brazil, China, India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey on the war against Ukraine? And what can European leaders realistically expect from these third-party actors in a potential diplomatic peace process?

1. **European leaders should be pragmatic** about the role these third-party actors can and want to play in a peace process and should approach them with a realistic understanding of their mostly transactional and status-driven motivations to engage with Russia and Ukraine.

2. **European leaders can and should engage these countries in lower-stake activities that still leverage their third-party status — which most of them prefer, anyway**. These countries are well placed to offer neutral venues for negotiations and support diplomatic efforts by passing messages between the warring parties, as several of them have in the past. Engaging with Russia through third-party intermediaries can also help European powers avoid lending legitimacy to Putin through direct engagement with the Kremlin.

3. **Europeans can learn from third-party actors to think about negotiations in incremental steps**. In a debate that is still quite focused on either negotiating *or* continuing to fight, thinking in small steps can help foster a clearer understanding of these two pathways as likely parallel processes that do not preclude one other — and of negotiations as slow processes that often reflect developments on the battlefield.

4. Rather than considering third-party actors only as potential partners in brokering a sustainable peace, **European leaders should also think about spoiler management**. Given how firmly China sides with Russia, they should ensure that Beijing does not undermine Ukraine's standing in negotiations, as was the case when China pressured other countries not to attend the June 2024 summit in Switzerland.

5. **Europe must consider the increasing multipolarity of global power in its approach to diplomacy**. This means European decision-makers should address the reasons why third parties did not join the West's condemnation of the Russian invasion by both engaging with justified criticisms of Western hypocrisy and actively countering Russian narratives.[60]

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