

How does trading land for peace in Ukraine reshape long-term security architectures and alter the balance of power between Kyiv's domestic political factions and Western strategic commitments?

August 7, 2026 | SnugLab Research

Executive Summary

Evidence suggests that trading land for peace in Ukraine is more likely to structurally lock Kyiv into a vulnerable buffer-state status dependent on shifting Western political will, rather than consolidating its sovereign deterrent capability. This approach risks fracturing Kyiv's domestic political balance by imposing territorial losses against significant public opposition and transferring key financial leverage to foreign entities, while transactional Western strategic commitments undermine transatlantic unity and create long-term dependency on external support.

Key Findings

Reshaping Long-Term Security Architectures

Trading land for peace, particularly under current conditional frameworks, structurally locks Kyiv into a vulnerable buffer-state status rather than consolidating sovereign deterrent capability. Territorial concessions fundamentally weaken Ukraine's strategic depth and increase the likelihood of future Russian aggression [1]. Unconditional territorial concessions in the Donbas would make a route to Kyiv or Kharkiv more feasible for Moscow, raising the probability of a third invasion [13].

The proposed long-term security architecture relies on conditional bilateral guarantees rather than automatic mutual defense treaties like NATO's Article 5 [2]. For example, the Trump administration's November 2025 proposal envisioned vague and conditional US security guarantees that would lapse if Ukraine attacked Russia, even unintentionally [11]. This transactional approach contrasts with the automaticity of NATO membership, which experts suggest is the only truly secure option for Kyiv [3]. President Donald Trump's history of questioning NATO's Article 5 and reneging on agreements makes any US security guarantee less credible [5].

Historical precedents demonstrate that ceding land often initiates prolonged conflict rather than sustained deterrence. Georgia declared independence as a neutral state in 1918, yet Russia invaded and occupied it in 1921 [16]. Similarly, Ukraine declared military neutrality under President Yanukovych to avoid provoking Russia, but Moscow still invaded in 2014 and occupied part of its territory [16]. Moldova's declaration of neutrality in the early 1990s also proved futile in regaining Transnistria [16]. These cases illustrate that Russia frequently uses territorial concessions and neutrality as a geopolitical weapon to expand influence and restrict Western presence [16].

Altering the Balance of Power Between Kyiv's Domestic Political Factions

Trading land for peace, especially through territorial concessions and foreign management of reconstruction funds, risks structurally dividing Kyiv's domestic factions. Most Ukrainians strongly oppose territorial concessions and foreign control over national resources [12, 16]. The "pragmatic path" involves scenarios such as unconditional concessions in Donbas, deferring the status of Crimea and Sevastopol for 10 to 15 years, or ceding territory while being barred from NATO membership [3, 9, 10, 11, 13]. The US 28-point draft proposal specifically envisions recognizing Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk as de facto Russian territory, freezing front lines in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, and requiring Ukraine to withdraw from the portion of Donetsk it still controls [11].

These concessions profoundly impact President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's political capital. While the war has concentrated significant power in Zelenskyy and his Office, diminishing oligarchic influence [14], pushing through constitutional changes or seeking a second term under martial law could create major conflict with a society demanding change [14]. Trading land for peace without durable security guarantees could severely damage his political standing and public trust [9, 14].

The proposed economic integration mechanisms, particularly the Trump administration's draft proposal, envision US control over a significant portion of frozen Russian assets for Ukrainian reconstruction, with the United States receiving 50% of the profits [11]. This framework would transfer key financial leverage from Ukrainian institutions to foreign contractors and governments, prioritizing Western profit shares over direct national compensation [8, 11]. This contrasts sharply with European counterproposals, which demand that frozen assets remain frozen until Russia compensates Ukraine [11]. This divergence complicates a cohesive domestic consensus, potentially deepening the divide between technocratic elites prioritizing immediate reconstruction funding and nationalist

factions defending sovereign control over Ukraine's economic future.

Provincial political factions, historically anchored in local patron-client networks, are viewed by the central government as vulnerable to Russian influence [17, 18]. While wartime centralization has shifted patronage toward the Presidential Administration [12, 15], transferring financial leverage to foreign entities under these terms is more likely to deepen the divide between technocratic elites prioritizing immediate reconstruction funding and nationalist factions defending sovereign control over Ukraine's economic future.

Altering the Balance of Power Between Kyiv's Domestic Political Factions and Western Strategic Commitments

Proposed caps on Ukraine's armed forces and restrictions on heavy weaponry, coupled with deep dependency on Western aid, influence Kyiv's military sovereignty and shift defense policy-making. The Trump administration's November 2025 peace plan caps Ukraine's armed forces at 600,000 personnel and bars Kyiv from NATO membership [4, 7, 11]. This would require the Ukrainian Armed Forces to reduce personnel by approximately 200,000 to 250,000 service members [4, 7]. In contrast, a European counterproposal suggested a higher cap of 800,000 personnel in peacetime, while another European proposal imposed no numerical restrictions [11].

Ukraine has become more sovereign and capable than at any point since 1991, producing over 1.2 million drones in 2024 [16]. However, this domestic capability coexists with deep structural dependency on Western procurement and financing. The United States provided roughly \$162 billion through mid-2025, while European allies have committed billions annually to backfill US aid. Total reconstruction needs are estimated at \$524 billion, with only \$7.4 billion secured for 2025 [12]. This external dependency has mechanically shifted domestic defense policy-making away from traditional electoral accountability, concentrating power in President Zelenskyy's Office due to postponed elections under martial law [14]. Western conditionality attached to aid packages and EU candidate status directly shapes Kyiv's domestic reforms and defense sector governance [14].

The Trump administration's conditional security guarantee model undermines transatlantic unity by prioritizing transactional American interests over collective European defense integration. The US 28-point draft proposal offered vague security guarantees that would lapse if Ukraine attacked Russia, even unintentionally, while claiming a 50%

share of profits from frozen Russian assets for reconstruction [11]. This directly conflicted with European preferences, as the EU counterproposal demanded that the assets remain frozen until Russia fully compensates Ukraine [11]. This divergence has heightened European anxieties about American reliability [5]. In response, European nations have accelerated their own defense integration, with Germany loosening its constitutional "debt brake" to increase military spending, and European governments collectively ratifying a \$90 billion multiyear loan package for Ukraine in early 2026 . This shift toward European strategic autonomy is complicated by internal divisions, but transactional US guarantees may force Europe to confront its structural defense weaknesses more urgently [5, 6].

Implications

The evidence suggests that trading land for peace in Ukraine, under the current proposed frameworks, would fundamentally alter Ukraine's long-term security architecture by embedding it as a vulnerable buffer state. This would be characterized by conditional, rather than automatic, security guarantees, leaving Kyiv highly susceptible to shifting Western political will and continued Russian aggression, as historical precedents demonstrate the inefficacy of territorial concessions without robust defense commitments.

Domestically, such a deal would likely fracture Kyiv's political balance. The imposition of territorial losses, particularly in regions like Donbas, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Crimea, would likely erode President Zelenskyy's political capital and deepen divisions between nationalist factions, who strongly oppose ceding territory, and technocratic elites, who might prioritize immediate reconstruction funding. Furthermore, the proposed Western management of frozen Russian assets, especially the US model claiming a 50% profit share, would transfer significant financial leverage away from Ukrainian institutions, exacerbating internal tensions over national sovereignty and economic control.

Regarding Western strategic commitments, the transactional nature of the US security guarantee model, coupled with its demands for profit from frozen assets, would continue to undermine transatlantic unity. While this might spur greater European defense integration and independent support mechanisms, it also highlights the inherent risks of Ukraine's long-term dependency on external procurement and financing. This dependency would mechanically shift domestic defense policy-making away from elected Ukrainian leadership, making it more responsive to external strategic commitments and conditionality.

Limitations and Caveats

The analysis is based on proposed peace frameworks, which are subject to change and negotiation. The long-term efficacy of any security architecture is inherently speculative and dependent on geopolitical shifts and the commitment of guarantor nations. Direct data on the precise numerical caps for Ukraine's armed forces and heavy weaponry under all proposed frameworks is limited, with some details remaining vague in the provided sources. The impact on specific regional economic patronage networks is inferred from broader trends in wartime centralization and de-oligarchization, rather than direct, granular data on post-peace deal scenarios.

Sources

- [1] [edu] A More Perfect Peace Can The Russia Ukraine War End Justly - publications.armywarcollege.edu - <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/News/Display/Article/4218028/a-more-perfect-peace-can-the-russia-ukraine-war-end-justly/>
- [2] [news] Ukraine Peace Talks Stretch Into Second Day Start Pivotal We - reuters.com - <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-peace-talks-stretch-into-second-day-start-pivotal-week-europe-2025-12-15/>
- [3] [edu] Comparing Pathways Peace Ukraine - daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu - <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/comparing-pathways-peace-ukraine>
- [4] [edu] Unconventional Transactions And Alliances In The Horn Of Afr - gjia.georgetown.edu - <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/global-governance/unconventional-transactions-and-alliances-in-the-horn-of-africa-statehood-dams-ports-and-peace-support-operations/>
- [5] [edu] What Price For Peace In Ukraine - brookings.edu - <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-price-for-peace-in-ukraine/>
- [6] Global Peace Index 2025 Web - visionofhumanity.org - <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Global-Peace-Index-2025-web.pdf>
- [7] Russia Analytical Report Sept 2 8 2025 - russiamatters.org - <https://www.russiamatters.org/news/russia-analytical-report/russia-analytical-report-sept-2-8-2025>
- [8] Peace Through Strength In Ukraine Sources Of U S Leverage In - quincyinst.org - <https://quincyinst.org/research/peace-through-strength-in-ukraine-sources-of-u-s-leverage-in-negotiations/>
- [9] Print - vifindia.org - <https://www.vifindia.org/print/13930>
- [10] Conflict Ukraine - cfr.org - <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>
- [11] Unfinished Plan Peace Ukraine Provision Provision - csis.org - <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unfinished-plan-peace-ukraine-provision-provision>
- [12] Ukraine Regional Realignments Wartime Postwar Reconstruction - carnegieendowment.org - <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/12/ukraine-regional-realignments-wartime-postwar-reconstruction>
- [13] The Russia Ukraine War Wont End Without An Honest Broker - policymagazine.ca - <https://www.policymagazine.ca/the-russia-ukraine-war-wont-end-without-an-honest-broker/>
- [14] Ukraines Political Model Recast - fiia.fi - <https://fiia.fi/en/publication/ukraines-political-model-recast>
- [15] The Ukraine Crisis And The Resumption Of Great Power Rivalry - eng.globalaffairs.ru - <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-ukraine-crisis-and-the-resumption-of-great-power-rivalry/>
- [16] [edu] The War In Ukraine In A Transitional World Order - uc.web.ox.ac.uk - <https://uc.web.ox.ac.uk/article/the-war-in-ukraine-in-a-transitional-world-order>

- [17] Frequently Asked Questions About The Russia Ukraine Negotiat - quincyinst.org - <https://quincyinst.org/research/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-russia-ukraine-negotiations/>
- [18] [peer-reviewed] Article - sciencedirect.com - AUTHORS UNAVAILABLE - <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048733325001519>