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Ukrainian crisis must not become a frozen conflict

U.S., EU and Russian leaders must find political resolution soon or face ever-present threat of renewed hostilities

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By [Emma Ashford](#)

The Ukrainian crisis appears increasingly intractable. Despite successful Ukrainian national elections in late October, illegal separatist elections held a few days later have undermined the fragile peace plan, leaving the region effectively in limbo. As a result, many argue that eastern Ukraine is [on its way to becoming a frozen conflict](#), joining the ranks of other post-Soviet crises in which no political solution could be achieved. But letting the Ukrainian violence fester is a terrible solution, increasing the long-term risk of confrontation between Russia and the West. It may be tempting for leaders to simply denounce Russian President Vladimir Putin at this weekend's G-20 summit. But if they don't want the Ukraine crisis to linger for years to come, they must instead look for a political solution that formally ends hostilities.

Despite the nominal cease-fire, fighting near Donetsk has intensified in the last week, with increased shelling by both sides. More worrying, sources in Ukraine and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe report that [large convoys](#) of heavy weapons and armor, including tanks, have been seen crossing into eastern Ukraine from Russia. There is concern that the rebels intend to make a major push in the coming days, perhaps to seize the port city of Mariupol. The White House has expressed [grave concern](#) about the situation, and NATO Commander Gen. [Phillip Breedlove](#) told journalists that he considers the situation a cease-fire "in name only."

This buildup might seem at odds with recent descriptions of the conflict as entering a frozen phase. But frozen conflicts often include periods of high tension and hostilities. The uncertainty created by the lack of any peace treaty often increases tensions, making future hostilities more likely. Other post-Soviet frozen conflicts have experienced similar swings. Strife in the Georgian separatist enclaves of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Adjara, for example, were frozen for a decade or more but saw frequent skirmishes, major insurgencies (in 1998 and 2004) and, ultimately, the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. The ambiguity created when a conflict freezes means that key differences are never resolved, creating the ever-present threat of renewed hostilities.

Allowing the Ukraine crisis to solidify into a frozen conflict, then, effectively guarantees future clashes in the region. It leaves the government in Kiev with a long-term insurgency within its borders, [costing it dearly](#) and inhibiting greatly needed political reform. Such a situation might be acceptable to Russia in the absence of any better option, as it keeps Ukraine weak and unstable. But it also keeps Russia and the West locked in a diplomatic stalemate and sanctions war that benefits no one. Unfortunately, there are only three policy alternatives for the United States: arm Ukraine and possibly engage in fighting Russia directly, add sanctions or find a political solution acceptable to both sides.

The first option — raising the ante — is sheer madness. Sending lethal aid to Ukraine is the start of a slippery slope that could lead to a direct confrontation between Russia and NATO. At the very least, arming Ukraine would escalate the situation substantially, destroying any chance of a settlement. To its credit, Barack Obama's administration has [rejected calls to arm Ukraine](#) and supplied only humanitarian and nonlethal aid. This is an excellent decision, but if the conflict is not resolved soon, the [upcoming Republican majority](#) in Congress may seek to pass any of several bills currently stalled in committee, each of which directs the president to provide military assistance to Ukraine. These bills enjoy broad support from congressional Republicans, and John McCain, widely expected to be the next chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, promised to work closely with his colleagues on the Intelligence and Foreign Relations committees to arm Ukraine. Even without the inherent risk of escalation, it is unlikely that Ukraine could fend off a Russian military incursion in the near future even with lethal aid, as the Ukrainian military needs [substantial reform and retraining](#).

The second option — ratcheting up sanctions on Russia — is less risky, but is also unlikely to work. Sanctions are certainly hurting Russia: The ruble is down [21 percent over the last three months](#), and the Russian economy is stagnant. But they are not having their intended effect. The Kremlin continues to interfere in eastern Ukraine, and targeted sanctions seem ineffectual. Further sanctions are unlikely to alter this trend.

This leaves only one viable policy option for U.S. leaders: Find a political solution to the Ukrainian crisis while it is still possible. The most obvious solution is a deal that guarantees effective autonomy for rebel areas in Donetsk and Luhansk while keeping them nominally within Ukraine. Any deal would also likely have to accept Russia's hold on Crimea. In exchange, the rebel enclaves and Russia would have to guarantee that the insurgents will not attempt to take further territory, accept that they will never be absorbed into Russia and acknowledge Ukrainian territorial integrity. Such a deal is not the first choice of any party, but it offers the best chance to resolve the conflict soon, without substantial further bloodshed. In the long run, resolving the crisis would allow Ukraine to focus on rebuilding its economy and solidifying good governance, benefiting its citizens far more than a protracted war. Tying Western aid to Kiev to its support for a negotiated end to the crisis would help.

Russia may be harder to convince, as there are some benefits to Russia in a frozen conflict in Ukraine. Yet this settlement would be far more generous than any prior offer from the United States and the EU, which at present continue to stand by their demand that Russia withdraw entirely from Crimea and that Ukrainian rebels disarm. There are also financial and [humanitarian](#) costs to the violence that the Kremlin may be keen to avoid. Offering to lift sanctions in

exchange for Russian support of this generous diplomatic settlement may be enough to bring Moscow to the table.

Frozen conflicts tend to be prolonged — and the crisis in Ukraine, worryingly, has begun to solidify into one. The resurgence of fighting in eastern Ukraine only highlights this problem, emphasizing the importance of seeking a political solution now. Although no [official meetings](#) on the topic are planned, this weekend's G-20 summit in Brisbane, Australia, offers an ideal opportunity for U.S., European and Russian leaders to begin to seek a resolution to the Ukrainian crisis. Let's hope they take it.

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