

French, German, Russian & Ukrainian leaders sign second ceasefire agreement between Russian & Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine



Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President François Hollande & Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko after signing second ceasefire agreement in Minsk, February 11, 2015.

On February 11, 2015, the leaders of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine met in Minsk, where representatives of Ukraine, Russia and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine had agreed in September to a ceasefire – one that, unfortunately, failed to stop a conflict that has resulted in more than 5,400 deaths and the displacement of more than 1.5 million civilians. After a marathon 17-hour meeting, the leaders agreed on a new ceasefire that will take effect February 14. The fact that the leaders were willing to negotiate for 17 hours testifies to their resolve to end the hostilities. Many key issues – most notably, the political and constitutional status of the territory now held by the separatists and the control of the border between that territory and Russia – remain unsettled. Nevertheless, the ceasefire is an essential first step in resolving the conflict.

The meeting followed a hectic week of high-level diplomacy that began February 5 when German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande met with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in Kiev. They met the next day with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. Subsequently, the four leaders agreed to meet in Minsk. Two days before the meeting Merkel met with President Barack Obama in Washington.

The meeting was prompted by a dramatic escalation in the intensity of the violence as the separatists sought to extend the territory they control well beyond the boundaries established in the September ceasefire. Shelling in Donetsk and other cities has resulted in heavy civilian casualties, and a pitched battle was fought for control of the Donetsk airport, which now lies in ruins. Mariupol on the Sea of Azov also was shelled and endured heavy civilian casualties, foretelling a possible effort to establish a “land bridge” from separatist-controlled territory to Crimea. Meanwhile, some 8,000 Ukrainian troops are encircled in a pocket in the area around the vital rail and road junction of Debaltseve between Donetsk and Luhansk. No one, least of all Merkel, was certain the new initiative would produce a ceasefire and a durable peace. But as she told the Munich Security Conference several days before the Minsk meeting, she and Hollande felt it was definitely worth trying: “We owe it to the people affected in Ukraine, at the very least.”

No doubt one reason Merkel believed a new initiative was needed, besides the increasing suffering being borne by the civilian population and imminent threat to the Ukrainian troops trapped in the Debaltseve pocket, was growing disarray among EU member states about what to do about Ukraine. A number of governments – for example, those in Hungary, Slovakia and Austria, joined by the new Syriza-controlled government in Greece – have been increasingly unhappy about the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia. Other governments – notably those of Poland, the Baltic states and the UK – have leaned toward the position of those in the US who want to provide Ukraine with lethal defensive weapons. Indeed, in recent days Poland, Lithuania and the UK have expressed willingness to join the US should it decide to supply such weapons. For Merkel and others, the prospect of American, British and Polish weapons being used in Ukraine against Russian forces in eastern Ukraine would run the risk of a dangerous escalation.

While the new ceasefire represents a laudable achievement, the unfortunate reality is that it is unlikely to produce an enduring peace, let alone a comprehensive settlement to the conflict, for one simple reason: Russia and its proxies are winning the war and have little incentive to end the hostilities. Last September’s ceasefire was to a large extent the result of Ukraine’s success in late summer driving back the separatists from a considerable portion of the territory they had taken in April to the area in and around the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. By the end of August Luhansk had been cut off from water and electricity for several weeks and partially retaken; Donetsk had been encircled and cut off from supplies.

At that time, Ukraine appeared to be on the verge of defeating the separatists. Russia was not about to let that happen. And so, as the Ukrainian military drove the separatists back into their enclaves, Russia countered, first by sending several hundred trucks in long convoys, claiming to carry humanitarian supplies and then by sending large numbers of troops, including special forces, and tanks, heavy artillery and anti-aircraft weapons across the border. It appeared increasingly likely that, if need be, Russia would

undertake a “peacemaking” military intervention designed to preserve the separatists’ control of the territory they still held.

At that point, in last August, Merkel, who had been in close touch with Putin, intervened. She persuaded Poroshenko to stop attacking Donetsk and Luhansk and negotiate a ceasefire with the separatists. At some political cost to himself, Poroshenko agreed. His personal emissary, former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, signed the Minsk Protocol on September 5. But five months later, after frequent skirmishes along the frontlines, the protracted fight for control of the Donetsk airport, the efforts by the separatists’ Donetsk People’s Republic to push out its territorial boundaries beyond the September ceasefire lines, including toward Mariupol and, most recently, the precarious situation of the Ukrainian troops in the Debaltseve pocket, it was clear not only that the September ceasefire was a dead letter but that the situations for the two sides had reversed.

It’s not surprising it took a marathon negotiation to reach agreement on the ceasefire; the two sides were – and remain – far apart on many issues. Ukraine wanted the new ceasefire to be on the lines established last September rather than the lines now existing between the forces. Russia, speaking for the separatists, wanted the new demarcation lines to include at least all of the expanded territory they now control if not all of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

As difficult as it was to agree on the new ceasefire, any comprehensive settlement will require resolution of a more difficult – perhaps intractable – issue: the constitutional status of the territories controlled by the separatists. Ukraine wants its territorial integrity restored, meaning restoration of its full constitutional authority over the area controlled by the separatists as well as removal of Russian troops and weapons, disarming of the separatists, and full control of the border with Russia. The separatists want the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics to be fully independent, all Ukrainian troops withdrawn, and control over the border between their territory and Russia.

Russia insists, as it has from the outset, that the rights of Russian speakers to use their language in education and all aspects of government must be constitutionally protected, that Ukraine must transform itself into a highly decentralized federation in which the regions in eastern Ukraine control their economy, including economic relations with neighbors, and that Ukraine must resume funding the full range of social services cut off for areas controlled by the separatists. Russia also insists that Ukraine must embed in its constitution a commitment that it will not join NATO – the concern that, more than any other, lies at the root of Russia’s intervention.

Perhaps the ceasefire will prove to be effective and reduce the hostilities in eastern Ukraine. But a ceasefire alone won’t produce a comprehensive settlement to the conflict. That will require resolution of the underlying, and possibly intractable, dispute over the constitutional form of the Ukrainian state. Minsk may represent the last stop on

the road to a “frozen” conflict – one like those in Moldova and Azerbaijan in the 1990s and Georgia in 2008. While the shooting has stopped, the conflict remains unsettled, with the territory in question controlled by a miniscule "statelet" through which Russia intrudes upon the sovereignty of its post-Soviet neighbor and in so doing destabilizes and weakens that neighbor.

David R. Cameron

Professor of Political Science & Director, Yale Program in European Union Studies.

Feb. 12, 2015.