

Colonial and Anti-Colonial Discourses of Peace in Ukraine

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This article analyses competing discourses of peace in the Russo-Ukrainian war by asking how they reproduce, enable, or resist relations of colonial domination. It examines peace proposals advanced by Russia, Ukraine, and aspiring mediators, in particular, Trump's diplomatic blitz and the Group of Friends for Peace on the Ukraine Crisis, founded by China and Brazil at the UN. We argue that these peace discourses are structured by three competing logics: Russia's colonial entitlement, mediators' colonial enablement, and Ukraine's anti-colonial resistance. Russia framed peace as a pacification of an allegedly chaotic Ukraine in a great-power concert with the US, demanding limits on Ukraine's internal and external sovereignty. The Trump administration and the China-Brazil initiative did not fully reject these premises: they treated Ukrainian concessions as a route to stability and validated spheres-of-influence thinking. Ukraine articulated peace as sovereign agency and justice, advancing a distinct variety of anti-colonialism that rejected self-victimisation and sought alignment with European modernity. By reframing peace discourses as sites of colonial politics and extending existing accounts of anti-colonial agency, the article contributes to the scholarship on wartime diplomacy, the normative foundations of multipolarity, and varieties of anti-colonialism.

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Diplomatic efforts to end the Russo-Ukrainian war have generated competing discourses of peace that reflect rival assumptions about sovereignty, acceptable violence, and whose security counts. This article conducts a comparative discourse analysis of peace proposals advanced by Russia, Ukraine, and aspiring mediators: the Trump administration's diplomatic efforts and the China-Brazil initiative at the UN. It investigates how they reproduce, enable, or resist relations of colonial domination. We advance the following central argument: peace discourses in the Russo-Ukrainian war reflect explicit colonial entitlement (Russia), colonial enablement disguised as pragmatism (the US) or neutrality (Brazil and China), and a distinct variety of anti-colonialism (Ukraine).

These logics produced diverging understandings of what constitutes a just and durable peace. Russia framed 'peace' as a form of pacification that would curtail Ukraine's sovereignty, limit its capacity for self-defence, and restore US-Russia management of European security. US mediation efforts under the Donald Trump administration deprioritised Russia's accountability for aggression, subscribed to a great power-centric vision of the international order, and questioned Ukraine's ability to secure a favourable settlement. China and Brazil framed compromise in a war of conquest as a route to global stability, thereby legitimising spheres-of-influence thinking and reproducing the illegibility of land-based colonialism. Ukraine articulated a distinct variety of anticolonialism that positioned Ukraine as a contributor to regional and global security while drawing on vocabularies of European modernity through partial adaptation to dominant geopolitical languages.

The article makes four contributions. First, it shifts the analytical focus from the causes and conduct of war to competing discourses of peace, showing that colonial logics operate not only through narratives justifying violence but also through rival projects for ending the war. We develop the analytical category of colonial enablement to demonstrate how mediators, wittingly or unwittingly, reproduced colonial discourses. We also show that Russia expressed colonial entitlement not only through narratives justifying the war but also in its 'peace' proposals. Second, the article advances the emerging scholarship on Ukrainian agency and visions of peace.² We argue that Ukraine, in contrast to conventional anti-colonial discourses, rejected self-victimisation by positioning itself as a security provider able to offer 'peace

² Fabienne Bossuyt et al., 'The subaltern strikes back, or how Ukraine is claiming agency from Russia and the European Union', *European Security* 33: 4, 2024, pp. 644–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2410011>; Tetiana Kyselova and Dana M. Landau, 'Ukrainian visions of peace: (re-)shaping peace through victory', *International Negotiation* 30: 1, 2025, pp. 13–42, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10111>.

through strength'. Third, the article contributes to debates on the normative foundations of emerging multipolarity by demonstrating how ostensibly anti-hegemonic projects may remain wedded to hierarchy, spheres of influence, and unequal distribution of agency. Fourth, the article contributes to decolonial and postcolonial scholarship by showing how anti-colonial resistance may be articulated through vocabularies associated with European modernity. More broadly, our study lays the groundwork for further comparative research on varieties of anti-colonialism.

The article proceeds in five parts. In the next section, we investigate how decolonial and postcolonial literatures have addressed the questions of colonial domination and liberation in the context of the Russian invasion. In the following section, we outline our methodology. In the three subsequent sections, we examine, in turn, discourses of the Russian regime and mainstream opposition; discourses underpinning Trump's mediation efforts and the China-Brazil diplomacy at the UN; and discourses of the Ukrainian leadership and civil society. We conclude by highlighting our conceptual and empirical contribution and outlining a research agenda on varieties of anti-colonialism.

Colonialism, Coloniality, and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The issues of domination and liberation are central to decolonial and postcolonial scholarship. We investigate how these literatures have made sense of the Russian invasion, grouping scholars who have written about the subject, with unavoidable generalisations, into five categories: decolonial scholars; postcolonial thinkers; critical legal scholars; Global International Relations (GIRS) academics; and experts on the region. While most of the analyses have not focused explicitly on peace proposals, they are informative of the scholarship's understanding of the key concepts that shape such discourses: the nature of the war, the legitimacy and the prospects of resistance, and criteria for evaluating a potential settlement's fairness. These concepts, in turn, are reflected in peace discourses, as we demonstrate in the subsequent sections. We also review the emerging literature on peace in the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Several decolonial scholars from South America and the Caribbean, accustomed to opposing Western political and cultural domination, in part due to their region's historical experiences

with the US, presented the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine as ‘anti-Western’ and, therefore, purely reactive.³ Ramón Grosfoguel opined that the West provoked Russia, which then ‘had no other choice than to enter Ukraine as a defensive intervention, not as an imperialist intervention’.⁴ Grosfoguel also held misconceptions about Ukraine by alleging that the 2013-2014 events in Ukraine constituted a ‘CIA coup d’état’ (while it was a homegrown democratic revolution), that ‘Nazis’ controlled the Ukrainian army with the aim of exterminating ‘Slavic people’ (both Russians and Ukrainians are Slavic; far-right parties failed spectacularly in Ukraine’s most recent parliamentary elections; and the Nazi ideology is prohibited in Ukraine), and that the Minsk Agreements were signed between ‘the Ukrainian army and the Ukrainians of Russian origin’ (while they were signed by the Ukrainian government and Russian-installed puppet ‘separatist’ leaders).⁵ Furthermore, Grosfoguel condemned discussions about Ukraine’s possible nuclear rearmament as ‘talking about giving nuclear weapons to these crazy Nazis’,⁶ reproducing colonial tropes of irrationality and radicalism while referring to Ukraine’s democratically elected government. Similarly, Walter Mignolo suggested that Russia, by invading Ukraine, was ‘dismantling the international world order controlled by the North Atlantic and the United Nations’,⁷ downplaying Russia’s (and the Soviet Union’s) central role in shaping the UN’s institutional foundations and current functioning. Overall, with the exception of regional experts discussed below, decolonial scholarship largely viewed the Russian invasion as ‘resistance’ to the Western international order.

By contrast, postcolonial scholarship, attentive to the continuation of empire in other forms after the end of formal colonisation, was more attuned to Russia’s continued domination over Ukraine after the latter re-established independence in 1991. Siba Grovogui condemned the ‘recklessness and brutality shown by Russia’ and called out Putin’s lies, such as allegations of Ukraine’s ‘fascism’ or ‘Russian claims of unbroken historical, cultural, and religious ties to Ukraine’.⁸ Tarak Barkawi acknowledged the long history of Russia’s attempts to ‘re-establish control over a former possession, initially through hierarchical relations with a formally

³ See also Tereza Hendl et al., ‘(En)countering epistemic imperialism: a critique of “westsplaining” and coloniality in dominant debates on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,’ *Contemporary Security Policy* 45: 2, 2024, pp. 171–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2288468>.

⁴ Ramon Grosfoguel, ‘Interview by Melanie E. L. Bush’, *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies* 7: 1, 2025, p. 167, <https://doi.org/10.13169/intecritdivestud.7.1.0157>.

⁵ Grosfoguel, ‘Interview by Melanie E. L. Bush’, p. 167.

⁶ Grosfoguel, ‘Interview by Melanie E. L. Bush’, p. 168.

⁷ Walter D. Mignolo, ‘It is a change of era, no longer an era of changes’, *Postcolonial Politics*, 29 Jan. 2023, <https://postcolonialpolitics.org/it-is-a-change-of-era-no-longer-the-era-of-changes>.

⁸ Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui, ‘Putin’s Ukraine aggression: how should an African respond?’, *International Politics* 60: 1, 2023, p. 227, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00411-x>.

sovereign Ukraine and then through more direct means of subjugation'.⁹ However, in characterising state-society relations in both countries as 'fraught',¹⁰ Barkawi subsumed autocratising Russia and democratising Ukraine under the label of 'Eastern European illiberalisms'. Furthermore, unlike Grovogui who called out Russia's lies about Ukrainian 'fascism', Barkawi recalled stories of Ukrainian nationalists' collaboration with the Germans during WWII,¹¹ yet without contextualising them within the overall history of Ukraine's liberation struggle.¹² Thus, postcolonial scholarship, while offering a correct diagnosis of the invasion, differed in the degree of familiarity with Ukraine's anti-colonial resistance.

In turn, critical legal scholars, given their orientation towards exposing the inequities in the global legal order, have prioritised critiques of Western hypocrisy and selective norm enforcement.¹³ Some analyses have argued that the unprecedented Western response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, from sweeping sanctions to supposedly swift International Criminal Court action,¹⁴ contrasted sharply with the indifference or impunity for similar crises in other parts of the world.¹⁵ Many scholars in this tradition have highlighted how Russia's justifications, such as humanitarian intervention or self-defence, echoed those used by Western states in Iraq and Kosovo, thereby relativising the invasion as another episode in an inter-imperial legal struggle.¹⁶ Many contributions have been reluctant to acknowledge Ukraine's anti-colonial agency: for example, Kotova and Tzouvala portrayed Ukraine's predicament as a 'limited choice to decide the terms of which imperialist block it will use to defend its sovereignty, those of the EU/United States or those of Russia'.¹⁷ This framing did

⁹ Tarak Barkawi, 'War and decolonization in Ukraine', *New Perspectives* 30: 4, 2022, p. 317, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X221132935>.

¹⁰ Barkawi, 'War and decolonisation in Ukraine', p. 319.

¹¹ Barkawi, 'War and decolonisation in Ukraine'.

¹² See Maryna Shevtsova, 'Looking for Stepan Bandera: the myth of Ukrainian nationalism and the Russian "special operation"', *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 16: 3, 2022, pp. 132–50, <https://doi.org/10.51870/GWWS9820>.

¹³ Robert Knox, 'Imperialism, hypocrisy and the politics of international law', *TWAIL Review* 3, 2022, pp. 25–67.

¹⁴ Vasuki Nesiah, 'The fog of peace: who profits from economic sanctions?', *Yale Journal of International Law*, 27 Jun. 2023, <https://yjil.yale.edu/posts/2023-06-27-the-fog-of-peace-who-profits-from-economic-sanctions>; John D. Haskell, 'Cold comforters and hot law: what international lawyers are getting wrong about the Ukraine conflict', *Opinio Juris*, 13 Dec. 2022, <https://opiniojuris.org/2022/12/13/cold-comforters-and-hot-law-what-international-lawyers-are-getting-wrong-about-the-ukraine-conflict>.

¹⁵ Ralph Wilde, 'Hamster in a wheel: international law, crisis, exceptionalism, whataboutery, speaking truth to power, and sociopathic, racist gaslighting', *Opinio Juris*, 17 Mar. 2022, <https://opiniojuris.org/2022/03/17/hamster-in-a-wheel-international-law-crisis-exceptionalism-whataboutery-speaking-truth-to-power-and-sociopathic-racist-gaslighting>; Jaya Ramji-Nogales, 'Ukrainians in flight: politics, race, and regional solutions', *AJIL Unbound* 116, 2022, pp. 150–54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/aju.2022.22>.

¹⁶ Anastasiya Kotova and Ntina Tzouvala, 'In defense of comparisons: Russia and the transmutations of imperialism in international law', *American Journal of International Law* 116: 4, 2022, p. 714, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ajil.2022.48>.

¹⁷ Kotova and Tzouvala, 'In defense of comparisons', p. 719.

not envision the possibility of Ukraine's genuine preference for a European social and political model and its rejection of a Russian one. It also failed to differentiate between the negotiated, partial, and reversible sovereignty transfer inherent in the choice to join the EU versus Russia's violent efforts to subjugate its neighbours. Many critical legal scholars have also often paid limited attention to Ukrainian sovereignty, reparations, or the pursuit of a just peace, and some have explicitly dismissed initiatives such as a special tribunal for the crime of aggression as selective justice.¹⁸

Scholars in the GIRS tradition, such as Amitav Acharya and Shiping Tang, have mostly taken a geopolitical and statist view of the war, portraying Ukraine as a prisoner of geography. They have framed Russia's aggression as reactive by listing Ukraine's (so far unreciprocated) aspiration to join NATO among the war's causes. Acharya, referring to Baltic states whose Euro-Atlantic path Ukraine wished to follow, lamented that Europe's security was 'driven by its smaller and ideologically more zealous new members, who are reaping the benefits of NATO's military protection'.¹⁹ This view implied that smallness rendered states somehow suspect and that the foreign policy independence of formerly colonised countries (i.e. Baltic countries formerly colonised by Russia) was undesirable. Furthermore, Acharya noted that 'Global South' countries did not see Russia as a threat,²⁰ yet without investigating whether this reflected geographical distance rather than political judgement; nor did he consider whether those countries included only governments or also people bombed by Russian warplanes in Syria, massacred by Russian paramilitaries in Mali, raped by Russian soldiers in the Central African Republic, or deceptively recruited into the Russian army from Kenya. By contrast, Tang expressed an understanding of Russian neighbours' alliance-seeking behaviour given their 'unpleasant experiences first in the Russian empire and then the USSR'.²¹ Tang also perceptively noted that 'a new Russian empire is impossible without first incorporating Ukraine'.²² However, even after the Russo-Georgian war, he refused to see 'credible signs that Russia wants to reconfigure its former colonies into a new empire by force and intimidation'.²³

¹⁸ Kevin Jon Heller, 'Creating a Special Tribunal for Aggression Against Ukraine is a bad idea', *Opinio Juris*, 7 Mar. 2022, <https://opiniojuris.org/2022/03/07/creating-a-special-tribunal-for-aggression-against-ukraine-is-a-bad-idea>.

¹⁹ Amitav Acharya, 'A multiplex world: the coming world order', in Muqtedar Khan, ed., *Emerging World Order after the Russia-Ukraine War Archives* (Washington, DC: New Lines Institute, 2023), p. 9.

²⁰ Acharya, 'A multiplex world'.

²¹ Shiping Tang, 'Ukraine as a solution', *Pekingnology*, 2009, <https://www.pekingnology.com/p/ukraine-as-a-solution-by-shiping>. In 2025, he affirmed that he stood by his analysis. <https://x.com/ShipingTang/status/1893978213988147503>.

²² Tang, 'Ukraine as a solution'.

²³ Tang, 'Ukraine as a solution'.

Tang's conclusion, made in the late 2000s, that neutrality was the best option for Ukraine was proven wrong when Russia attacked neutral Ukraine in 2014,²⁴ while neutral and compliant Belarus still ended up *de facto* colonised by Russia and used as a launchpad for attacks from its territory.

Finally, many experts on the region, who may come from or live in countries that have experienced Russian or Soviet domination, have adopted an explicitly anti-colonial perspective. In a not-so-subtle critique of decolonial scholarship's misperceptions of the Russian invasion, Madina Tlostanova criticised '[d]isappointing political utterances of the leading decolonial scholars' and called for unmasking 'the Russian and later Soviet imperial matrix and its *current distorted resurrections*'.²⁵ Maria Mälksoo viewed Ukraine's military resistance as existential given Russia's desire 'to correct the allegedly mistaken cultural code of Ukrainianness which does not recognise the superiority of Russianness'.²⁶ The prevalence of supremacist views towards Ukrainians in Russia was highlighted by Ukrainian scholars after the start of the military aggression in 2014,²⁷ as well as following its escalation in 2022.²⁸ In terms of international reactions to the full-scale invasion, often framed as Eurocentric, Patryk Labuda reminded that during the 2014-2022 stage of the war, Ukrainians did not enjoy privileged treatment,²⁹ and that it was largely through military, diplomatic, and legal resistance post-2022 that Ukrainians turned their struggle into a *cause célèbre*. Labuda likewise emphasised that the aggression tribunal for Ukraine, rather than a case of Western double standards, is better understood as a long overdue corrective to international law's selectivity *vis-à-vis* Eastern Europe.³⁰ In contrast to decolonial and postcolonial scholarship's negative view of NATO, Tereza Hendl and colleagues highlighted that for Central European and Baltic

²⁴ Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine: entangled histories, diverging states* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2023).

²⁵ Madina Tlostanova, 'The deadlocks of memory and the (no longer) post-Soviet coloniality, or can memory be decolonized?', *Baltic Worlds* 17: 4, 2024, p. 63; p. 58; emphasis ours.

²⁶ Maria Mälksoo, 'The postcolonial moment in Russia's war against Ukraine', *Journal of Genocide Research* 25: 3-4, 2023, p. 476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2022.2074947>.

²⁷ Mykola Riabchuk, 'Ukrainians as Russia's negative "Other": history comes full circle', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49: 1 (2016): 75-85, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.12.003>.

²⁸ Yulia Ioffe, 'Forcible transfers of Ukrainian children: indoctrination as a tool of Russia's imperialism', *German Yearbook of International Law* 66: 1, 2023, pp. 205-35, <https://doi.org/10.3790/gyl.2024.373902>; Kseniya Oksamytna, 'Imperialism, supremacy, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy* 44: 4, 2023, pp. 497-512, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2259661>.

²⁹ Patryk I. Labuda, 'Beyond rhetoric: interrogating the Eurocentric critique of international criminal law's selectivity in the wake of the 2022 Ukraine invasion', *Leiden Journal of International Law* 36: 4, 2023, pp. 1095-116, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0922156523000237>.

³⁰ Patryk I. Labuda, 'Countering imperialism in international law: examining the special tribunal for aggression against Ukraine through a post-colonial Eastern European lens', *Yale Journal of International Law* 49, no. 2, 2023, pp. 271-310.

countries, 'NATO's defensive dimension has functioned as the most effective deterrent of Russia's invasions'.³¹ A similar view was offered by David Chioni Moore, a postcolonial scholar with deep regional expertise, who called NATO and the EU 'decolonial accelerators' for countries in Russia's neighbourhood.³² Therefore, experts on the region have highlighted Russian imperialism's continuities, the specificities of Ukraine's postcolonial condition, and the importance of accountability and security guarantees given Russia's persistent ambitions to subjugate Ukraine.

While the scholarship on the causes and conduct of the war has been extensive, the literature on peace in Ukraine has started to grow only recently. Scholars have sought to conceptualise Ukraine's peace diplomacy, for instance, by offering the concept of 'peace through victory'.³³ Several studies have argued that Ukraine's victory, rather than concessions, is more likely to lead to durable peace.³⁴ Another category of studies has linked the prospects of durable peace with Ukraine's resilience,³⁵ and scholars have highlighted the importance of Russia's accountability.³⁶ However, these studies have not explicitly analysed peace discourses with a view to investigating how they reproduce or challenge colonial domination.

Overall, while decolonial and postcolonial theory should have offered a readily available toolkit for analysing an imperial invasion (as well as resistance and reactions to it), the scholarly debate has been fragmented, contradictory, and incomplete. The literature has not offered an unequivocal answer regarding what a just and sustainable peace in the Russo-Ukrainian war could look like. Some of those contradictions transpired in diplomatic discourses as well. Therefore, interrogating discourses of peace in diplomatic circles is necessary for offering a

³¹ Hendl et al., '(En)countering epistemic imperialism', 179.

³² David Chioni Moore, 'East, West, and South: complex asymmetries in postcolonial/post-Soviet debates since 2001', *Ab Imperio* 1, 2024, p. 34, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/imp.2024.a927442>.

³³ Kyselova and Landau, 'Ukrainian visions of peace'.

³⁴ Mykola Riabchuk, 'War in Ukraine: Peace-talking versus peace-making', *Notes Internacionais CIDOB*, no. 288, 2023, pp. 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.24241/NotesInt.2023/288/en>; Paul D'Anieri, 'Fool me twice, shame on me: security guarantees, commitment problems and the problem of peace through victory in Ukraine', *International Negotiation* 30, no. 1, 2025, pp. 72–96, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10117>; Andriy Tyushka, 'Post-war, past Russia: Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, regional unpeace and the imperatives of post-war European security (re)Ordering', *International Politics* 62, no. 5, 2025, pp. 1035–57, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00643-z>.

³⁵ Mila O'Sullivan, 'Women, Peace and Security as deterrence? NATO and Russia's war against Ukraine', *International Affairs* 100, no. 2, 2024, pp. 549–68, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae003>; Kateryna Zarembo, Michèle Knodt, and Jannis Kachel, 'Smartphone resilience: ICT in Ukrainian civic response to the Russian full-scale invasion', *Media, War and Conflict* 18, no. 3, 2025, pp. 305–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352241236449>.

³⁶ Kristina Hook, 'Constructing a sustainable just peace: post-war accountability for Russian atrocities in Ukraine as tools of trauma healing and conflict transformation', *International Negotiation* 30, no. 1, 2024, pp. 206–38, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-bja10112>.

nuanced and historically situated account of twenty-first-century colonialism, colonial enablement, and anti-colonial resistance.

Methodology

In conducting discourse analysis of competing peace proposals, we approach discourse as a meaning-making practice that does not simply describe political reality but simultaneously helps constitute it.³⁷ Discourse analysis is particularly useful for understanding the capacity of peace proposals to construct legitimate actors, define acceptable sacrifices, and shape the normative terms on which any potential settlement becomes thinkable. Comparative discourse analysis allows us to examine how otherwise dissimilar actors compete to claim legitimacy and, in the process, allocate agency and political worth unevenly to Russia and Ukraine.

We undertake discourse analysis of a bounded corpus of peace proposals that sought to shape understandings of how the Russo-Ukrainian war should end. We focus on the parties to the conflict, Russia and Ukraine, as well as two mediation initiatives: by the US, which under Trump focused on the organisation of direct talks between Russia and Ukraine, and by China and Brazil, which focused on diplomacy at the UN. Rather than attempting to reconstruct entire national discourses on peace, we analyse internationally salient texts that publicly defined the desirable terms, means, and timing of a potential settlement. In order to ensure comparability between the cases, we organise the analysis around three questions: 1) What peace is being proposed, and by what means is it to be achieved? 2) How does this discourse position Russia and Ukraine? 3) How does this discourse imagine a desirable global order?

In practical terms, the analysis proceeded in several steps. For each actor, we assembled a corpus of texts, produced between February 2022 and February 2026, that defined its position on ending the war. This included peace plans, manifestos, statements and speeches by heads of state or ministries of foreign affairs, and respective countries' contributions to debates on the Russo-Ukrainian war in the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council (further details on corpus construction are provided below). The authors coded this material separately before

³⁷ Audrey Alejandro, Marion Laurence, and Lucile Maertens, 'Discourse analysis', in Fanny Badache, Leah R. Kimber, and Lucile Maertens (eds.), *International Organisations and Research Methods: An Introduction* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2023), pp. 162-170.

comparing their readings and treating points of divergence as prompts for returning to the texts. Guided by the above questions, the coding traced how each text defined peace; characterised Russia and Ukraine; how it distributed agency, responsibility, and vulnerability between them; and what global order it projected as desirable. Throughout, we attended to what each settlement presented as legitimate, necessary, or expendable, and the presuppositions that made it appear natural. We attended in particular to how the contested terms ‘peace’, ‘sovereignty’, and ‘security’ were invested with conflicting meanings, and the moments at which colonial relations were rendered visible or obscured. In particular, we noted the presence of colonial tropes, such as irrationality, weakness, and belligerence,³⁸ in their references to Russia or Ukraine as evidence of actors’ views on (il)legitimacy of colonial domination.

Our analysis of Russian peace discourses is based on official and media statements by senior Russian state representatives and leading figures in the mainstream opposition. In selecting the latter, we have prioritised groups and individuals with the greatest access to international audiences, namely activists from the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) established by the late Alexei Navalny and currently led by his widow, Yulia Navalnaya. We have examined texts that explicitly addressed a potential settlement, negotiations, postwar order, territorial questions, or the future political status of Ukraine.

Our analysis of aspiring mediators’ discourses focuses on two main actors. First, we analyse discourses of peace accompanying the Trump administration’s efforts to engineer a swift end to the war, including by encouraging Russia and Ukraine to hold direct talks. In particular, we focus on Trump’s 28-point peace plan, his statements to the media, and the US’s drafting activities at the UN. Second, we examine peace discourses advanced by China and Brazil in the context of the Group of Friends for Peace on the Ukraine Crisis at the UN that the two countries co-chair by analysing their UN speeches, official communications from their ministries of foreign affairs, and media statements by their leaders. The focus on China and Brazil does not do justice to the diversity of aspiring peacemakers: countries ranging from Turkey to Indonesia also sought to mediate in the war. Yet in forming the Group of Friends at the UN, China and Brazil positioned themselves as representatives of the ‘Global South’: the Group’s self-proclaimed goal was to represent ‘Global South countries’ efforts to promote a

³⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 2016).

ceasefire and achieve lasting peace’.³⁹ We analyse their discourses without judging the legitimacy of their claim to such representation.

Our analysis of Ukrainian peace discourse builds on official and media statements by Ukrainian senior political leaders, primarily Zelenskyy, and public communications by civil society organisations, which have often taken the form of peace manifestos. We include civil society discourses because civil society in Ukraine has, in recent years, enjoyed considerable influence over government policy and significant access to international audiences.

We are cognisant that discourses might be advanced in a hypocritical manner, concealing their genuine intentions. Nevertheless, we believe that discourses play an important role in international politics by constructing focal points on which negotiations concentrate, (re)shaping standards for evaluating processes and outcomes, and establishing legitimate participants and outsiders to various international arenas. We do not evaluate the sincerity of particular discourses but rather interrogate the ideas that underpin them, especially in relation to the logics of colonial domination and liberation. We also do not seek to explain conflict parties’ or mediators’ behaviour. Another limitation of our analysis is that it covers only English-language sources. Yet diplomacy at the UN mostly takes place in English, and the parties to the conflict most likely engaged with English-language discourses in deciding whether to use, contest, or amplify them.

Russia’s Colonial Entitlement

Russian peace discourse centred on undermining Ukraine’s internal and external sovereignty, erasing Ukrainian national identity, and resurrecting a system of great power management with Russia and the US at the core. We argue that this vision embodied an explicit colonial entitlement that, while unsurprising for a country that wages a war of aggression to occupy and subjugate its neighbour, is nevertheless puzzling given the delegitimation of overt colonialism in the 21st century and Russia’s positioning as a critic of (neo)imperialism.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “‘Friends for Peace’ Group on the Ukraine Crisis Set up in the United Nations,” Sep. 28, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202409/t20240929_11500459.html.

⁴⁰ Maxime Audinet, “‘Down with neocolonialism!’ Strategic narrative resurgence and foreign policy preferences in wartime Russia,” *European Journal of International Security*, 2025, pp. 1–22,

From the outset, Russia's vision of peace was inflexible. It insisted that the 2022 Istanbul Protocol serve as a foundation for any potential settlement. Drafted while Ukraine reeled from the initial shock of the full-scale invasion, the document demanded that Ukraine adopt permanent neutrality; recognise Russian as an official language; repeal decommunisation laws; renounce the right to foreign military assistance; and accept restrictions on its armed forces comparable to those imposed on Germany after World War I. In exchange, Ukraine would receive 'security guarantees' from the US, UK, China, France, and Russia, yet any defensive action would require unanimous approval by the guarantors, effectively giving Russia a veto.⁴¹ The proposed structure mirrored the UN Security Council that had failed to prevent, stop, or punish Russian aggression. Furthermore, Putin called for the international community to recognise the occupied Ukrainian territories as part of Russia and requested the lifting of sanctions in exchange for a 'peaceful resolution' to Russia's invasion. Putin's suggestion that peace could be achieved through Ukraine's demilitarisation and 'denazification' revealed ambitions to replace the Ukrainian government with a pro-Russian puppet regime and erase Ukrainian national identity. In terms of parallels with the academic discourses, some decolonial scholars have repeated the allegations of Ukrainian 'Nazism',⁴² while scholars with regional expertise have countered that the rhetoric of 'denazification' is in fact a cover for Russia's attempts to erase Ukrainian national identity.⁴³

Russia's colonial entitlement was evident in the denials of Ukraine's sovereignty: Putin declared that Ukraine was on its way to 'complete desovereignisation'.⁴⁴ Putin's claim rested on a particular positioning of Ukraine (and, by contrast, Russia) through two narratives: 'loss of control' by Kyiv and the need for a more 'competent' government in Ukraine.⁴⁵ Russia used the first narrative, which celebrated its own authoritarian stability while branding Ukraine

<https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10011>; Yuliia Kurnyshova, 'Ukraine and the Global South: the ambiguities of a postcolonial perspective', *New Perspectives* 32: 3, 2024, pp. 272–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X241240924>.

⁴¹ Mykhailo Soldatenko, 'In the shadow of the Minsk Agreements: lessons for a potential Ukraine-Russia armistice', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 10 Feb. 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/02/ukraine-russia-ceasefire-security-agreement?lang=en>.

⁴² Grosfoguel, 'Interview by Melanie E. L. Bush', p. 168.

⁴³ Tetyana Malyarenko and Borys Kormych, 'New Wild Fields: How the Russian war leads to the demodernization of Ukraine's occupied territories,' *Nationalities Papers* 52: 3, 2024, pp. 497–515, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2023.33>.

⁴⁴ RBC, "Путин назвал отличие между суверенным государством и колонией [Putin elaborated on distinctions between a sovereign state and a colony]," Jun. 9, 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/09/06/2022/62a1fbf39a79478868eacf78>.

⁴⁵ BBC, 'Putin floats idea of UN-led government in Ukraine', 28 Mar. 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crlxl37wnnyo>.

chaotic and misgoverned,⁴⁶ to argue that peace on Russia's terms would be desirable both for Ukrainians and the international community. The second narrative, which cast doubt over the Ukrainian government's competence, resembled nineteenth-century discourses that questioned the ability of colonised (or soon-to-be-colonised) peoples to govern themselves.⁴⁷ To make the colonial nature of his 'peace' visions less obvious, Putin proposed a UN transitional administration in Ukraine,⁴⁸ likening it to transitional administrations in Timor-Leste and Kosovo. Yet those UN missions aimed to protect newly decolonised nations from recolonisation (by Indonesia and Serbia, respectively), while Putin's sought to use this rhetoric to construct Ukraine as needing external management and, in his view, recolonisation by Russia.

Already at the outset of Russia's military aggression in 2014, Putin developed a conviction that 'some states are more sovereign than others, and major powers define their own approach to international law'.⁴⁹ In 2021, he made an offer of protection-through-subjugation to Ukraine when he claimed that 'true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia'.⁵⁰ It represented a reincarnation of an early twentieth-century vision of peace 'secured by a system of imperial coordination'.⁵¹ To maintain inter-imperial stability, Russia invited the US to join it in managing Ukraine as a 'security threat'. Russian media speculated whether the two superpowers would be able to 'jointly liquidate uncontrollable Ukraine'.⁵² By resorting to the familiar imagery of 'state failure',⁵³ this portrayal revealed a nostalgia for an era when great powers jointly upheld 'security' by redrawing the borders of lesser powers and pacifying restive populations. Russia's deputy permanent representative to the UN invited the US to

⁴⁶ Oksamytna, 'Imperialism, supremacy, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine'.

⁴⁷ Joanne Yao, 'The power of geographical imaginaries in the European international order: colonialism, the 1884–85 Berlin Conference, and model international organizations', *International Organization* 76: 4, 2022, pp. 901–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818322000182>.

⁴⁸ BBC, 'Putin floats idea of UN-led government in Ukraine'.

⁴⁹ David S. Yost, 'The Budapest Memorandum and Russia's intervention in Ukraine', *International Affairs* 91: 3, 2015, p. 537, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12279>.

⁵⁰ President of Russia, 'On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians', 13 Jul. 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁵¹ Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of race: empire and the utopian destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 336.

⁵² Sergei Marzhetskiy, 'Могут ли Россия и США совместно ликвидировать вышедшую из-под контроля Украину? [Can Russia and the US jointly liquidate uncontrollable Ukraine?]', *Reportyor*, 4 Mar. 2025, <https://topcor.ru/57294-mogut-li-rossija-i-ssha-sovmestno-likvidirovat-vyshedshuju-iz-pod-kontrolja-ukrainu.html>.

⁵³ Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, 'The afterlives of state failure: echoes and aftermaths of colonialism,' *European Journal of International Relations* 30, no. 2 (2024): 255–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661231215582>.

‘work together to make Ukraine sane again’,⁵⁴ relying on the colonial trope of irrationality to position Ukraine, again displaying parallels with a particular strand of decolonial scholarship as discussed above.

Ultimately, Russia proposed to the US to settle ‘the Ukrainian crisis’ on the basis of a ‘balance of interests’, a term resurrected from Cold War détente.⁵⁵ This rhetoric revealed a yearning for a great power concert, yet one envisioned as a bilateral US-Russian affair, excluding European powers. To justify European powers’ exclusion, Russia accused Europe of descending into ‘Eurofascism’, allegedly like in the Nazi era.⁵⁶ Thus, Russia sought to embed its vision in a ‘new Eurasian security architecture’, which would entail the co-management of the entire ‘troubled’ European continent by Russia and the US, a marked departure from Russia’s prior attempts to purify Europe from American influence.⁵⁷ This view resembled the tendency by some GIRS and critical legal scholars to portray smaller European countries as prisoners of geography who needed to appease or join neighbouring empires to save themselves from war.

The mainstream Russian opposition partially challenged and partially reproduced the regime’s ‘peace’ discourses. Alexei Navalny, before his death in 2024, condemned the full-scale invasion but carefully framed it as ‘Putin’s aggression’, locating blame solely in Putin’s ambitions,⁵⁸ thereby presenting Putin’s potential departure as a path to peace. He dismissed accusations of broader Russian imperialism, arguing that the empire was economically unviable given Russia’s vast territory and declining population, without addressing its ideological appeal. In contrast to Ukrainian visions of peace centred on territorial integrity and the rejection of the ‘brotherhood’ narrative, Navalny did not endorse the idea of returning Crimea to Ukraine and, like Putin, insisted that ‘Russians and Ukrainians are the same people’.⁵⁹ Navalny acknowledged the need for reparations but controversially proposed that

⁵⁴ Pravda Turkey, ‘To love Russians: Polyansky suggested to Ukrainians the only way to salvation’, 8 Jan. 2025, <https://turkey.news-pravda.com/en/turkey/2025/08/01/46193.html>.

⁵⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, ‘The concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation’, 13 Mar. 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586.

⁵⁶ Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, ‘Еврофашизм, как и 80 лет назад — общий враг Москвы и Вашингтона [Eurofascism, like 80 years ago, is a common enemy of Moscow and Washington]’, 16 Apr. 2025, <http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2025/04/evrofashizm-kak-i-80-let-nazad-obshchiy-vrag-moskvy-i-vashington2.htm>.

⁵⁷ Iver B. Neumann, ‘Russia’s Europe, 1991–2016: inferiority to superiority’, *International Affairs* 92: 6, 2016, pp. 1381–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12752>; Tyushka, ‘Post-war, past Russia’.

⁵⁸ Alexei Navalny, ‘15 theses of a Russian citizen who desires the best for their country’, 20 Feb. 2023, <https://navalny.com/p/6635>.

⁵⁹ Anna Dolgov, ‘Navalny wouldn’t return Crimea, considers immigration bigger issue than Ukraine’, *The Moscow Times*, 16 Oct. 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/10/16/navalny-wouldnt-return-crimea-considers-immigration-bigger-issue-than-ukraine-a40477>.

the US, the EU, and the UK also provide them to Ukraine,⁶⁰ a view contradicting international law that holds that the state responsible for a wrongful act (in this case, Russia) must pay reparations alone. His proposal to fund reparations through Russian oil and gas revenues – contingent on a change in leadership and the lifting of sanctions – ignored the efforts to seize frozen Russian assets for Ukraine’s reconstruction, casting further doubt on the willingness to take full accountability. Crucially, Navalny opposed military aid to Ukraine, a position later echoed by his then-chief of staff, Leonid Volkov, and Yulia Navalnaya.⁶¹

After Navalny’s death, Yulia Navalnaya continued calling the Russian invasion ‘Putin’s war’, asserting that only a minority approved of it and presenting the prospects of peace as realistic in the case of Putin’s potential departure. In the meantime, research on public opinion in Russia indicated sustained domestic support for the invasion (even after discounting for the unreliability of polling under authoritarianism): in the spring of 2025, 75% of the respondents reported supporting – definitely or mostly – the actions of the Russian forces in Ukraine. The polls also revealed that the war was not seen as an anti-Western crusade but a colonial one since Russians saw keeping captured Ukrainian territory as a precondition for ‘peace’: asked about the invasion’s benefits, 30% of respondents mentioned territorial expansion or ‘return of Russian lands’, the most popular answer, while standing up to NATO/the West was one of the least popular answers, receiving 4%,⁶² in contrast to the tendency of some decolonial and GIRS scholars to see it as a cause of the war. Navalnaya also did not commit to restoring Ukraine’s territorial integrity, calling Crimea a ‘complicated issue’ because of ‘millions of people [in Crimea who] now have Russian passports’,⁶³ as if the success of the colonial policy of passportisation vindicated the conquest.

Together, Russia’s discourses stemmed from colonial entitlement and sought to impose the kind of ‘peace’ on Ukraine that would undermine its territorial integrity, self-defence ability, and cultural and political sovereignty. Russia hoped for a return to an era of great power (or, more specifically, US-Russian) arbitrage over foreign and domestic affairs of smaller states.

⁶⁰ Aleksandar Djokic, ‘Russia’s opposition and the Ukrainian government: divergent interests?’, *Riddle Russia*, 8 Nov. 2024, <https://ridl.io/russia-s-opposition-and-the-ukrainian-government-divergent-interests>.

⁶¹ Lena Glockner, ‘Yulia Navalnaya criticized for remarks on Ukraine’, *Espresso*, 29 Oct. 2024, <https://global.espresso.tv/world-about-ukraine-yulia-navalnaya-criticized-for-remarks-on-ukraine>.

⁶² Levada Center, ‘Конфликт с Украиной в апреле 2025 года [Conflict with Ukraine in April 2025]’, 6 May 2025, <https://www.levada.ru/2025/05/06/konflikt-s-ukrainoj-v-aprele-2025-goda-vnimanie-podderzhka-otnoshenie-k-peregovoram-i-predlozheniyu-30-dnevnogo-peremiriya-otnoshenie-k-uchastnikam-svo>.

⁶³ Ukrainian News, ‘Yulia Navalnaya calls Crimea "de facto Russian" and "complicated Issue"’, 28 Jun. 2025, <https://ukranews.com/en/news/1090620-yulia-navalnaya-calls-crimea-de-facto-russian-and-complicated-issue>.

The construction of Ukraine as uncontrollable, and of Russia as capable and stable, necessitated, in Russia's view, inter-imperial pacification. Mainstream Russian opposition figures failed to reject the regime's discourses: although some criticised the invasion, this did not always translate into a commitment to a just peace based on Ukraine's sovereignty and postcolonial justice.

Peacemakers' Colonial Enablement

After winning the second presidential term, US President Donald Trump promised a quick end to the Russo-Ukrainian war. His approach, veiled as pragmatism, entailed lending a sympathetic ear to Russia's demand for a revival of a system of great power management while deprioritising Ukraine's territorial integrity and Russia's accountability for aggression. China and Brazil's initiative at the UN, despite being grounded in neutrality and pacifism, also carried multiple colonial undertones. The US, Brazil, and China shared a pessimistic view of Ukraine's ability to continue effective self-defence and saw an unjust peace as acceptable for the sake of global stability. We categorise such peace discourses as colonial enablement.

Trump's 28-point peace plan, devised by American and Russian negotiators without Ukraine's involvement, sought to achieve peace by limiting Ukraine's foreign policy independence and choice of alliances, in particular by forcing it to amend its constitution to renounce aspirations for NATO membership. Ukraine would have had to make other significant concessions, including withdrawing from Ukraine-controlled territory in the Donetsk region (the so-called Donbas fortress belt) and agreeing to Russia's use of 50% of electricity from the occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. By contrast, the plan demanded very little of Russia except proclaiming a policy of non-aggression towards Europe and Ukraine. (Russia already committed to this policy in the 1997 Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership with Ukraine, violating it in 2014.) Furthermore, this approach to achieving peace would have allowed Russia to enjoy the fruits of its conquest without accountability: the 28-point plan envisaged full amnesty for actions during the war.

Trump's discourse of peace positioned Ukraine as a security problem. The 28-point plan mirrored Russia's narrative of Ukraine as beset by 'radicalism' – again reminiscent of the narratives of some decolonial scholars – and asked Ukraine to reject 'Nazi ideology', already

illegal under Ukrainian law. Since Russia viewed any manifestation of Ukrainian identity as 'Nazism', this point opened the possibility of reinterpretation of a potential peace deal by Russia that could justify continued or renewed aggression. The history of imperial conquest points to the high likelihood of war resumptions as 'reactions to even minor threats to peace on invaders' terms'.⁶⁴ Trump's plan obliged the parties to 'guarantee the rights of Ukrainian and Russian media and education', which would have enabled Russian cultural products to dominate the Ukrainian market again and allowed Russia to accrue profits that it could channel into rebuilding its military.⁶⁵ The plan also included a cap on the size of the Ukrainian army, while the aggressor, Russia, was not asked to limit its armed forces. In his public rhetoric, Trump doubled down on positioning Zelenskyy as a 'warmonger', suggesting that the Ukrainian president 'got approval to go into war and kill everybody', while complaining about Ukraine's constitutional constraints on ceding territory.⁶⁶ Trump's displeasure at Zelenskyy's commitment to Ukrainian laws indicated an affinity with Russian-style personalistic governance.

As a further indicator of Trump's interest in Russia's offer of great power management of Ukraine, the US spearheaded the first UN Security Council resolution on Russia's war. Adopted in February 2025, it offered a revisionist view of the purposes of the UN Charter. The resolution mentioned the maintenance of international peace and security as the main purpose of the UN, omitting other foundational principles, such as sovereign equality and territorial integrity. An amendment affirming those Charter principles was supported by European countries, China, South Korea, Guyana, Sierra Leone, and Somalia. The US notably abstained on the amendment, and Russia exercised its veto. The Russo-American alignment suggested a shared vision not just of a great power oligarchy but of two nuclear superpowers acting as the arbiters of international law. The resolution retained the terminology of the 'Russian Federation-Ukraine conflict' after a European-led amendment to replace it with 'the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation' failed. (Russia's proposed amendment to call the invasion 'conflict around Ukraine', which portrayed Ukraine as a passive object of great power rivalry, also failed.)⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Lauren Benton, *They Called It Peace: Worlds of Imperial Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), p. 11.

⁶⁵ Oksamytna, 'Imperialism, supremacy, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine'.

⁶⁶ Financial Times, 'Zelenskyy faces his "moment of maximum pressure"', 14 Aug. 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/6f40b8f5-32d2-4ed8-b43e-bcb055df6309>.

⁶⁷ UN, 'Security Council 9866th meeting: maintenance of peace and security of Ukraine' (2025), p. 5.

In general, Trump's discourse of peace positioned Russia as a superpower and Ukraine as a small state not entitled to a seat at the table, reminiscent of some GIRS scholars' suspicion of small states willing to pursue independent foreign policies. Trump blamed Ukraine for Russia's invasion, remarking that 'you don't start a war against someone 20 times your size',⁶⁸ and (in)famously claimed that Zelenskyy 'does not have the cards'.⁶⁹ He thus portrayed Ukraine in a typical orientalist way – as weak, irrational, and naïve. This differed from his rhetoric regarding Russia: during the US-Russia Alaska summit in August 2025, Trump argued that 'it's good when...two big powers get along, especially when they're nuclear powers'.⁷⁰ This echoed Putin's framing of US-Russia disagreements during the Biden era as a dangerous but fleeting moment when 'bilateral relations...had fallen to the lowest point since the Cold War...[which was] not benefiting our countries and the world as a whole'.⁷¹ This showed an alignment of American and Russian visions of inter-imperial stability as a desirable global order.

As for China and Brazil, they put forward a six-point plan for the settlement of what they called 'the Ukraine crisis'. The plan expressed a commitment to sovereignty and non-interference but offered no practical solutions for how Ukraine could restore them. Both countries condemned military aid to Ukraine. During Biden's presidency, when the US provided extensive support to Ukraine, China accused the US of scheming 'for Russia to be weakened and defeated through the war so that the United States can dominate European security'.⁷² This suggested that China did not work towards peace based on non-domination but rather against US domination, seeking an accelerated end to Russia's invasion so that Moscow could conserve remaining military and political power. In a potential peace settlement, China emphasised that Russia's 'legitimate security interests' had to be taken into account and opposed 'strengthening or expanding military blocs',⁷³ mirroring Russia's (and some decolonial and GIRS scholars') language on NATO 'expansion' as a justification for the invasion. Both China and Brazil

⁶⁸ BBC, 'Trump blames Zelensky for starting war day after massive Russian attack', 15 Apr. 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg5q0mev07lo>.

⁶⁹ BBC, 'Trump-Zelensky: what it was like in the room during shouting match', Feb. 28, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2019j0w9glo>.

⁷⁰ CNN, 'Trump-Putin summit ends without concrete deal', 15 Aug. 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/trump-putin-meeting-news-08-15-25>.

⁷¹ CBS, 'Here's the transcript of what Putin and Trump said in Alaska', 15 Aug. 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-of-what-putin-trump-said-in-alaska>.

⁷² UN, 'Security Council 9839th meeting: maintenance of peace and security of Ukraine' (2025), p. 19.

⁷³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'China's position on the political settlement of the Ukraine Crisis', 24 Feb. 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367485.html.

suggested ‘security guarantees for Ukraine and Russia’,⁷⁴ yet did not elaborate on why a nuclear-armed state, Russia, needed ‘security guarantees’ from a non-nuclear and (until the beginning of Russia’s aggression in 2014) friendly neighbour, Ukraine. Such ‘security guarantees’ would effectively mean acquiescing to Russia’s demands for Ukraine’s demilitarisation (hindering Ukraine’s ability to defend itself) and neutrality (denying Ukraine freedom to choose alliances).

Paradoxically, China and Brazil viewed Russia’s centuries-long history of colonial domination over Ukraine as a reason to be optimistic about potential reconciliation. Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil’s former president, called Russians and Ukrainians ‘practically brother nations’,⁷⁵ a metaphor that validated the ‘hegemonic view of Ukrainians as “younger brothers” who should be both patronized and censured for improper behaviour’,⁷⁶ despite some postcolonial scholars’ critique of Russia’s manipulation of such ties for their advantage.⁷⁷ While China admitted the existence of separate Russian and Ukrainian people, it noted that they had ‘lived together on the same land, creating a shared history’.⁷⁸ The reference to living on the ‘same land’ rendered Russia’s land-based colonialism invisible, reflecting the blind spots in traditional decolonisation discourses that ignored land empires and settler states by focusing on overseas colonisation.⁷⁹ China and Brazil, both victims of overseas colonisation in the past, adhered to the ‘blue water thesis’ in their definition of colonialism, which allowed them to downplay their domination over nations like Taiwan or Indigenous peoples like Uyghurs (in the case of China) or Indigenous Peoples like Xukuru-Kariri (in the case of Brazil).

Both Trump’s peacemaking efforts and China-Brazil’s plan posited that peace should be achieved through ‘compromise’. For instance, China suggested that Russia and Ukraine ‘meet each other halfway in their dialogue’.⁸⁰ Trump accused Zelenskyy of not wanting to ‘make a

⁷⁴ UN, ‘Security Council 8980th meeting: maintenance of peace and security of Ukraine’ (2022), p. 6.

⁷⁵ Reuters, ‘Bolsonaro won’t condemn Putin, says Brazil will remain neutral over invasion’, 27 Feb. 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/bolsonaro-wont-condemn-putin-says-brazil-will-remain-neutral-over-invasion-2022-02-27>.

⁷⁶ Riabchuk, ‘Ukrainians as Russia’s Negative “Other”’, p. 75; see also Mälksoo, ‘The Postcolonial Moment in Russia’s War Against Ukraine’.

⁷⁷ Grovogui, ‘Putin’s Ukraine aggression’.

⁷⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “‘Friends for Peace’ Group on the Ukraine Crisis Set up in the United Nations”, 28 Sept. 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202409/t20240929_11500459.html.

⁷⁹ Barbara Arneil, ‘Colonialism versus imperialism’, *Political Theory* 52: 1, 2024, pp. 146–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917231193107>; Vitaly Chernetsky, ‘Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine’, *Urbandus Review* 7, 2003, pp. 32–62.

⁸⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “‘Friends for Peace’ group on the Ukraine Crisis’.

deal’.⁸¹ Ultimately, peacemakers’ rhetoric of ‘compromise’ presupposed that some Russian demands were either justified or that meeting them would enhance collective well-being. These assumptions, in turn, rested either on the acceptance of Russia’s entitlement to a sphere of influence or the view of Ukrainians in the Russian-occupied territories as disposable. The latter perspective was evident in Brazil’s call upon Ukraine to ‘give up Crimea’ because the world needed ‘tranquillity’.⁸² This framing obscured the fact that Russian control did not mean tranquillity for everybody, such as Indigenous Crimean Tatars subject to surveillance and persecution. The calls for Ukraine to accept a frozen conflict and partial occupation for the greater collective good, such as the ‘stability of global industrial and supply chains’,⁸³ positioned Ukrainians as a peripheral population that could be sacrificed – and even convinced of the necessity of such sacrifice.

The key difference between the US, on the one hand, and Brazil and China, on the other, was in their views on acceptable means of pursuing a settlement. The Trump administration threatened and applied sanctions as a central element of its diplomatic strategy (even if their imposition and lifting were at times erratic). By contrast, China and Brazil opposed sanctions against Russia as ‘unilateral’ due to the absence of UN Security Council approval. Their position, in effect, implied that the permanent members of the Council were perpetually exempt from ‘legitimate’ sanctions since they could veto them. For China, a permanent member, and Brazil, an aspirant to a permanent seat, the UN Security Council thus represented ‘a great power oligarchy...rather than a general system of collective security’.⁸⁴ At the UN’s founding, the Soviet Union vehemently – and ultimately successfully – defended both the veto and the permanent members’ right to vote in disputes to which they were parties.⁸⁵ By doing so, Russia acquired the ability to shield itself from ‘legitimate’ sanctions in armed conflicts that it initiated. This demonstrates Soviet and subsequently Russian centrality in the UN-centric

⁸¹ NBC, ‘Trump says Iran is ready to negotiate a ceasefire but he’s not ready to make a deal,’ Mar. 14, 2026, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/iran-negotiate-ceasefire-deal-trump-kharg-hormuz-oil-rcna263474>.

⁸² Euronews, ‘Ukraine urged to give up Crimea by Brazil’s Lula’, 4 Jul. 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/04/07/the-world-needs-tranquillity-ukraine-urged-to-give-up-crimea-by-brazils-lula>.

⁸³ Government of Brazil, ‘Brazil and China present joint proposal for peace negotiations with the participation of Russia and Ukraine’, 23 May 2024, <https://www.gov.br/planalto/en/latest-news/2024/05/brazil-and-china-present-joint-proposal-for-peace-negotiations-with-the-participation-of-russia-and-ukraine>.

⁸⁴ Vaughan Lowe et al., ‘Introduction’, in *The United Nations Security Council and war: the evolution of thought and practice since 1945* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 53.

⁸⁵ Jennifer Trahan, *Existing legal limits to Security Council veto power in the face of atrocity crimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

international order, despite some decolonial scholars' tendency to view Russia's behaviour as a rebellion against this order.

Overall, the Trump administration offered a vision of peace that would reward Russia for its conquest, thwart attempts at accountability, and render Ukraine a security problem to be co-managed by the US and Russia without much concern for international law or norms. In turn, Brazil and China framed Russia's 'security concerns' as legitimate, Russia's colonisation of Ukraine as 'brotherhood', and Ukrainian resistance as 'disruptive', suggesting that Ukraine should give in to Russia as a path to peace. Aspiring peacemakers' discourses amounted to colonial enablement disguised as pragmatism or performative pacifism, reproducing the invisibility of land-based colonialism and devaluing populations deemed peripheral.

A Ukrainian Variety of Anti-Colonialism

In contrast to Russian and aspiring peacemakers' discourses, Ukraine articulated peace as sovereign agency secured through justice, resistance, and protection against renewed Russian domination. Rather than a mere suspension of hostilities and de-occupation, peace entailed the restoration of conditions under which Ukraine could exist as a sovereign political community. This understanding of peace positioned Ukraine as an agent rather than an object of mediation and as a global security provider rather than a victim, while Russia was represented as an aggressor whose demands could not be accommodated without reproducing colonial domination.

This understanding of peace was reflected, first, in the rejection of territorial concessions. For example, Zelenskyy's 10-Point Peace Formula demanded the restoration of Ukraine's internationally recognised borders, Russia's accountability for war crimes, and protection against a renewed attack.⁸⁶ Civil society discourses broadly echoed this anti-appeasement logic. For example, 'Ukraine Peace Appeal' argued that 'calls for negotiations with Putin without resistance are, in reality, calls to surrender our sovereignty and territorial integrity'.⁸⁷ Peace

⁸⁶ President of Ukraine, 'Ukraine has always been a leader in peacemaking efforts; if Russia wants to end this war, let it prove it with actions – speech by the President of Ukraine at the G20 Summit', 15 Nov. 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-zavzhdi-bula-liderom-mirotvorchih-zusil-yaksho-rosi-79141>.

⁸⁷ Ukrainian civil society organisations, 'Ukraine peace appeal: towards a more informed solidarity', 1 Jun. 2023, <https://www.ukrainepeaceappeal2023.info>.

was thus defined not as a midpoint between two equally legitimate claims, but as a reversal of Russia's conquest, suggesting parallels with peace scholarship's emphasis on 'peace through victory'.⁸⁸ Ukrainian discourses also stressed that postwar reconciliation should not entail going back to the pre-2014 situation when Russian influence was pervasive in Ukraine, thus pushing back against the Trump's peace plan point on the 'rights of Russian media' to operate in Ukraine at a time when the US and the EU have either banned or sanctioned Russian media, such as RT and Sputnik. A 2025 Ukrainian manifesto 'Survive, Endure, Prevail!' emphasised that 'the return to Ukraine of Russian political, cultural, religious and media organisations...would entail the continuation of war by other means'.⁸⁹ In line with postcolonial scholars' warning, formal decolonisation does not equal the end of colonial domination if ex-colonies do not defend themselves from informal encroachment by former metropolises.

With respect to the means of achieving peace, Ukrainian state discourses consistently rejected the idea that diplomacy alone, or diplomacy under pressure on Kyiv, could produce a durable settlement. Instead, peace was linked to unwavering resistance, military support from partners, pressure through sanctions, and binding security guarantees. This logic, articulated in the 2022 Kyiv Security Compact, became more pronounced as external pressure for rapid negotiations grew.⁹⁰ Reliable security guarantees were framed as central to peace: Zelenskyy reminded that Russia had exploited ceasefires and negotiations in the past and would do so again if given the opportunity.⁹¹

Instead, Zelenskyy insisted on achieving peace 'through strength, wisdom, and unity'.⁹² Ukraine borrowed the 'peace through strength' phrase from the Republican lexicon, but in the US context it had served as a language of deterrence aimed primarily at adversaries.⁹³ In the Ukrainian case, however, the phrase was aimed primarily at allies and aspiring mediators. In

⁸⁸ Kyselova and Landau, 'Ukrainian Visions of Peace'.

⁸⁹ Andrii Dligach et al., 'Survive. Endure. Prevail!', December 1, 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2025/12/01/8009732>.

⁹⁰ International Working Group on Security Guarantees for Ukraine, *The Kyiv Security Compact: international security guarantees for Ukraine: recommendations*, 13 Sept. 2022, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/semon9-giki0/2022-09-13-Ukraine-The-Kyiv-Security-Compact.pdf>.

⁹¹ President of Ukraine, 'Ceasefire is impossible without clear security guarantees for Ukraine', 7 Nov. 2024, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/pripinennya-vognyu-ne-mozhe-buti-bez-chitkih-garantij-bezpek-94325>.

⁹² President of Ukraine, 'We must win peace through strength, wisdom, and unity', 24 Feb. 2025, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-mayemo-zdobuti-mir-siloyu-mudristyu-ta-yednistyu-nashoyu-96305>.

⁹³ Trevor McCricken and Maxwell Downman, "'Peace through strength": Europe and NATO deterrence beyond the US nuclear posture review', *International Affairs* 95: 2, 2019, pp. 277–95, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz002>.

his appeal to the US administration, Zelenskyy suggested that ‘President Trump, being a strong president of a strong country, must be on Ukraine’s side’.⁹⁴ After the beginning of the US-Iran war, Zelenskyy highlighted that ‘[e]verything Ukrainians have learned for their own defense can serve as a global foundation for security’, stressing in particular Ukraine’s expertise in anti-drone warfare and the protection of shipping lanes.⁹⁵ Civil society reinforced such messages, encouraging the EU and NATO to welcome Ukraine as ‘a significant contributor to European security and stability,’ thus pushing back against the Russian narrative of Ukraine as ‘an incapable, failing state’.⁹⁶ The ‘Survive, Endure, Prevail!’ manifesto similarly argued that Ukraine could ‘strengthen the European family...as a unique carrier of practical knowledge regarding how to confront modern forms of aggression and threats’.⁹⁷ Such discourses repositioned Ukraine from a state in need of protection to an actor whose strength enhanced Euro-Atlantic security, thereby rejecting the role of a passive victim and avoiding what decolonial scholars call ‘subaltern self-victimisation’.⁹⁸

More broadly, Ukrainian peace discourses consistently positioned Ukraine as a subject rather than an object of peace, in contrast to the view by some GIRS and critical legal scholars of the country as a buffer between rival blocs. Countering the attempts to sideline Ukraine in discussions between great powers, Zelenskyy stressed that ‘any negotiations on peace in Ukraine are impossible without Ukraine’.⁹⁹ This sentiment resonated with Ukrainian civil society organisations that pushed back against the misrecognition of Ukraine’s resistance as a proxy war: they saw claims that ‘Ukrainian soldiers are somehow fighting as [a] proxy for the West’ as demeaning denials of Ukrainian agency.¹⁰⁰ Ukrainian peace discourse thus challenged a colonial logic in which smaller nations are discussed, traded, or stabilised by stronger ones.

⁹⁴ CBC, ‘Ukraine’s Zelenskyy says the security of the world is at stake amid Russia war’, 13 Apr. 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy-russia-60-minutes>.

⁹⁵ President of Ukraine, ‘Our team is now on its way to the Gulf region, where they can help protect lives and stabilize the situation,’ Mar. 10, 2026, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zaraz-nasha-komanda-na-shlyahu-v-region-zatoki-de-nashi-hlop-103317>.

⁹⁶ Ukrainian civil society representatives, ‘Sustainable peace manifesto: never again 2.0’, 2023, <https://sustainablepeacemanifesto.org>.

⁹⁷ Andrii Dligach et al., ‘Survive. Endure. Prevail!’

⁹⁸ Madina Tlostanova, ‘Postsocialist ≠ postcolonial? On post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48; 2, 2012, p. 138, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2012.658244..>

⁹⁹ President of Ukraine, ‘Any negotiations on peace in Ukraine are impossible without Ukraine, as they will have no results’, 25 Jan. 2025, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/bud-yaki-peremovini-shodo-miru-v-ukrayini-bez-ukrayini-nemoz-95713>.

¹⁰⁰ Ukrainian civil society organisations, ‘Ukraine peace appeal’.

Russia, by contrast, was positioned as the aggressor whose claims to territory and postwar influence lacked legitimacy.

In comparison to state discourses, civil society discourse more consistently foregrounded postcolonial justice and the rights of those most affected by the occupation and war, suggesting parallels with peace scholars' emphasis on accountability.¹⁰¹ The feminist manifesto 'The Right to Resist' defended 'women's right to independently determine their needs, political goals, and strategies for achieving them', and demanded 'a just peace, based on the self-determination of the Ukrainian people'.¹⁰² Another civil society statement, the 'Sustainable Peace Manifesto', stressed that 'peace cannot be achieved at the expense of justice or justice at the expense of peace', outlining specific requirements for peace: prosecution of war crimes; reparations, including to survivors of torture and illegal detention (a systematic practice of Russian authorities); and the return of civilians, archives, and cultural or historical artefacts taken from Ukraine by the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or the Russian Federation.¹⁰³

At the same time, Ukraine struggled to have its resistance recognised as anti-colonial by parts of the decolonial and postcolonial debate,¹⁰⁴ partly because its discourses of peace were linked to aspirations for European and transatlantic integration, while reflecting a teleological view of progress. This was visible, for instance, in the 'Sustainable Peace Manifesto', which portrayed Russia as acting 'in the worst tradition of the Dark Ages' and presented Ukraine's future as that of a 'European democracy'.¹⁰⁵ The 'Survive, Endure, Prevail!' manifesto stressed that Russia sought to prevent 'Ukraine's return to the European civilisational space'.¹⁰⁶ Ukrainian peace discourses at times drew a rigid boundary between 'the European democratic Self against the Russian imperial and authoritarian Other'.¹⁰⁷ For example, a Ukrainian MP argued that Ukrainians have 'always lived on the frontier, near the division of the world into civilisation and terrorism',¹⁰⁸ tapping into Central European and Baltic memories of being 'colonized by

¹⁰¹ Hook, 'Constructing a sustainable just peace'.

¹⁰² The Feminist Initiative Group, "'The right to resist': a feminist manifesto", 2022, <https://commons.com.ua/en/right-resist-feminist-manifesto>.

¹⁰³ Ukrainian civil society representatives, 'Sustainable peace manifesto'.

¹⁰⁴ Kurnyshova, 'Ukraine and the Global South'.

¹⁰⁵ Ukrainian civil society representatives, '.

¹⁰⁶ Dligach et al., 'Survive. Endure. Prevail!'

¹⁰⁷ Bossuyt et al., 'The subaltern strikes back'.

¹⁰⁸ Westminster Foundation for Democracy, *The impact of the Russian full-scale invasion on the priorities of Ukrainian MPs: a gendered analysis* (London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2025).

civilizational inferiors'.¹⁰⁹ This illustrates a broader dilemma in Ukraine's anti-colonial peace discourse. Despite rejecting Russian colonial domination, it sometimes relied on civilisational language that could itself reproduce colonial hierarchies. The Ukrainian case thus complicates decolonial analysis by showing that anti-colonial resistance may be directed against an empire outside of what is conventionally considered 'the West' while simultaneously being articulated through vocabularies of Europeanness.

Read comparatively, the Ukrainian case therefore reveals a distinct variety of anti-colonialism – one that refuses peace through subordination, insists on Ukrainian agency and justice, but does so through vocabularies that sit uneasily with parts of the decolonial canon. Its anti-colonial character lies in the way Ukrainian peace discourses rejected the core premises of colonial ordering, where Ukraine's territory is divisible, its sovereignty conditional, and its future negotiable by others. Still, the Ukrainian variety of anti-colonial resistance occasionally appeared to speak through the dominant languages of power even as it contested the hierarchies that those languages sustained.

Conclusion

The analysis of competing discourses of peace in Ukraine reveals the continued salience of colonial logics and the emergence of new varieties of anti-colonial resistance. The deep divisions in the literature over the meaning of sovereignty, (non)alignment, and justice in the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war found a reflection in diplomatic discourses. Russia framed peace as a form of pacification, portraying Ukraine as a failed state and a security problem requiring great power management. The mainstream Russian opposition challenged this vision only partially, retaining core assumptions about Ukraine's contingent sovereignty.

Aspiring mediators, in turn, treated Ukrainian concessions as a legitimate route to 'peace', though in distinct registers. The Trump administration positioned Ukraine as weak, irrational, and undeserving of a seat at the table, embracing Russia's vision of a system of great power management as a desirable global order. China and Brazil framed Ukrainians as a peripheral population that could be sacrificed for global stability, misrecognising Russia's land-based

¹⁰⁹ Moore, 'East, West, and South', p. 47; see also Epp Annus, *Soviet postcolonial studies: A view from the Western borderlands* (Routledge, 2017).

colonialism as ‘shared history’ and mistaking paternalistic hierarchies in the Russo-Ukrainian relations as ‘brotherhood’. By presenting Ukrainian resistance as equally disruptive as Russian aggression, these visions revealed how a decolonial ethos centred on pacifism and neutrality could enable colonial domination.

Against those logics, Ukraine articulated a distinct variety of anti-colonialism: peace as sovereign agency secured through justice, resistance, and protection against renewed domination. This discourse positioned Ukraine as a subject, rather than an object, of international politics and as a contributor to, rather than a recipient of, security. Yet, it occasionally drew on civilisational vocabularies associated with European modernity that imported colonial hierarchies. Overall, the ways in which actors talked about the pursuit of peace revealed their views on the desirable global order, which ranged from (inter)imperial pacification, to *de jure* condemnation but *de facto* recognition of conquest, to subaltern liberation.

These findings demonstrate that both academic and diplomatic discourses are shaped by particular experiences of colonial domination, and the clarity with which they oppose one form of colonialism may be bound up with the difficulty of registering others. Anti-colonial rhetoric can also be used strategically to advance agendas that reproduce colonial domination, especially when paired with invocations of other normatively appropriate goals, such as stability or prosperity. These findings, in turn, set the agenda for future research: how colonial entitlement persists where overt imperialism is disavowed, how neutrality and pragmatism come to enable it, and how anti-colonial resistance can speak through the very vocabularies of power it seeks to escape.