

# Ukraine and the great powers

Like most westerners I blame Russia for the murderous assault on Ukraine and for the violent siege tactics now being deployed to try to wrestle territory away from those who live there who wish to remain self governing. Russia's troops have been killing civilians in frustration at not being able to occupy and overwhelm as easily as they expected. Proof of this will be used as evidence of war crimes. We are all appalled at some of the scenes we are now being shown.

Like most westerners I would like to see an early truce and a negotiated settlement. I understand how difficult this will prove as the two sides have such a different view of the rights and wrongs of the situation, and neither side has yet been able to achieve enough by force of arms to enforce their settlement on the other. Ukraine has fought bravely but cannot rid themselves of Russian troops and artillery on their land. Russia has failed to capture any of the major cities on its list and has shown it lacks the ability and force to maintain control over areas it has thought it had conquered.

As peace talks continue the aims of the two sides remain incompatible with each other. Ukraine wishes all Russian troops to withdraw, to be followed by discussion of the government of those parts of Ukraine which Russia has occupied and a referendum on a possible new constitutional settlement. Russia is holding out for Crimea to become part of Russia, and for new governing arrangements for a swathe of territory from the Russian border to Crimea that would give it control or substantial influence. That is why the fighting is likely to continue.

There seems to be a bit more flexibility over the ability of Ukraine to choose its own allies and international policy. It seems unlikely NATO will offer membership to Ukraine any time soon, having notably refused to come to Ukraine's assistance with any NATO forces. Russia's aim of excluding Ukraine from NATO might in practice occur. The issue of EU membership also hangs over the conflict. The EU intervened in Ukraine to help topple the elected Ukrainian President in 2014 when he wished to walk away from the draft EU/Ukraine Association Agreement and be closer to Russia. This was the background to Russia's annexation of Crimea and civil war in Donbas. Today Ukraine has applied for formal membership and the EU needs to respond. The EU says it sees Ukraine as part of Europe and talks of Ukraine's European destiny in terms that implies in due course it does want Ukraine as a member state. This is a complication for a Russia which dislikes the expansion of the EU as well as of NATO close to its borders.