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Faltering ceasefires as substitutes for peace agreements

The cases of Gaza, Ukraine and Myanmar

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Summary

- Ceasefires in their various shapes and forms have become substitutes for comprehensive peace agreements at a time when geopolitical contestation between great powers has intensified to such an extent that the prospects for forging sustainable peace processes have greatly diminished.

- This trend is visible in recent cases in Gaza, Ukraine and Myanmar, where ceasefires have not led to lasting settlements.

- Ceasefires alone do not resolve the underlying drivers of conflicts. They do, however, reduce civilian suffering, create space for conducting negotiations, and build trust. In other words, they serve as stepping stones on the pathways to peace.

- The effectiveness of any ceasefire depends on how it is implemented. Ceasefire monitoring is a highly technical endeavour requiring specialist know-how and expertise, including transitional security arrangements and the use of technology.

- A ceasefire needs to be linked to a political process that will lead to resolving the conflict. Although the pursuit of peace is a worthy cause, the conditions for sustainable peace in many ongoing conflicts are limited, and expectations therefore need to be moderated. Even so, securing a ceasefire is a notable achievement in any violent situation.

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Introduction

When President Donald Trump met with a group of European leaders in late August 2025 to discuss the prospects for peace in Ukraine, their language around 'peace' diverged in important ways. Trump emphasized the need to stop the killing in Ukraine, while the European leaders talked about a ceasefire as the first step towards a broader settlement between Russia and Ukraine. In all likelihood, the US president was referring simply to the cessation of hostilities, whereas the European leaders had a more comprehensive agreement in mind – one that would involve provisions on objectives, timelines, security agreements, and mechanisms for monitoring and verification. A similar pattern has played out in discussions surrounding the war in Gaza, where debates about a ceasefire, and about the ways and means of achieving a sustainable settlement, have been interpreted in different ways by the conflict parties and their respective supporters.

There is confusion in the public debate about what ceasefires actually mean and when they can be an effective tool for ending hostilities and opening pathways to peace. Most conflicts go through several ceasefires. Terms such as "ceasefire", "armistice", "truce" and "cessation of hostilities" are often used interchangeably, although they are not the same thing. Recent discussions around ceasefires in the Ukraine and Gaza wars have highlighted the need to distinguish clearly between these terms. Ceasefires and peace agreements are related but essentially different, and confusion or different understandings of these concepts can impede cooperation on peacemaking.

When ceasefires are debated, it is important to underscore the fact that traditional models premised on mediation leading to a 'national peace accord' or settlement between belligerents have become rare. Contemporary violent conflicts tend to operate as an intertwined set of local, national, transnational and geopolitical conflicts. As a result, conflict resolution now centres more on risk management than on minimizing violence.[1] This is because, in a world where comprehensive peace agreements have become uncommon and addressing the root causes of conflict is increasingly difficult, diplomatic efforts often seek mainly to manage flashpoints, signal red lines, and avoid mishaps and miscalculations, rather than resolve the conflict outright.

Ceasefires – or more precisely, attempts to broker them – figure prominently in contemporary peace- mediation efforts. In fact, between 1989 and 2020, more than 2,000 ceasefires of various types were reported across 66 countries and 109 civil conflicts.[2] However, most of these agreements focused solely on the cessation of hostilities and did not include monitoring (75.8%). Only a small fraction (7.2%) were definitive ceasefires, and just 17% involved monitoring.[3] There was also variation in geographic coverage, as some ceasefires were partial, while others applied to the whole state. This reflects the nature of many contemporary conflicts, particularly intra-state conflicts, in which violence affects only parts of the countries while other regions remain relatively peaceful. In other cases, of course, the whole country is engulfed in war.

1 Ruohomäki, Olli (2024) "Peace Mediation in the Age of Geopolitical Contestation. Navigating the New Reality". *FIIA Briefing Paper* 399. The Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

2 Clayton, G., Nygård, H. M., Strand, H., Rustad, S. A., Wiehler, C., Sagård, T., Landsverk, P., Ryland, R., Sticher, V., Wink, E., & Bara, C. (2022) "Introducing the ETH/PRIO Civil Conflict Ceasefire Dataset". *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 67(7–8), 1430–1451. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00220027221129183.

3 Ibid., 9.

In principle, ceasefires offer a major opportunity to lay the foundation for inclusive and comprehensive peace talks. Effective ceasefire agreements protect civilians and enable humanitarian access to vulnerable populations. They also create space for negotiations in which the parties define what a ceasefire entails in their context, including its scope, obligations, and monitoring arrangements.

This Briefing Paper first briefly unpacks current knowledge on ceasefire mediation, transitional security arrangements, and monitoring mechanisms, including the use of technology in contemporary conflicts. It then examines how ceasefires have been used in three contemporary contexts: Gaza, Myanmar and Ukraine. The paper outlines which elements of ceasefire agreements are determined by the conflict parties themselves and which aspects can be shaped by external actors. Its main argument is that ceasefires in their various shapes and forms have become substitutes for comprehensive peace agreements in an age when geopolitical contestation has become so intense that the prospects for forging sustainable peace processes have greatly diminished. A further aim is to level-set expectations about what ceasefires can realistically achieve, while acknowledging that a ceasefire itself is nevertheless a notable achievement.

Concepts and modalities

Ceasefires are not a substitute for peace agreements. They do, however, serve crucial functions in the transition from war to peace, and there can be no path to peace without a ceasefire as the first step. While there is no universally accepted definition of a ceasefire, it is broadly understood as an arrangement in which a conflict party commits to a temporary or permanent suspension of violence.[4] Although ceasefires do not attempt to resolve the underlying drivers of a conflict, they reduce civilian suffering and can create spaces for conducting negotiations, building trust and signalling intent for talks. In this sense, they can function as stepping stones on the pathways to peace.

4 Buchanan, Cate et al. (2021) "Ceasefire monitoring: Developments and complexities". *Conciliation Resources*. https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Ceasefire_monitoring_Developments_and_complexities.pdf.

"Ceasefires serve crucial functions in the transition from war to peace, and there can be no path to peace without a ceasefire as the first step."

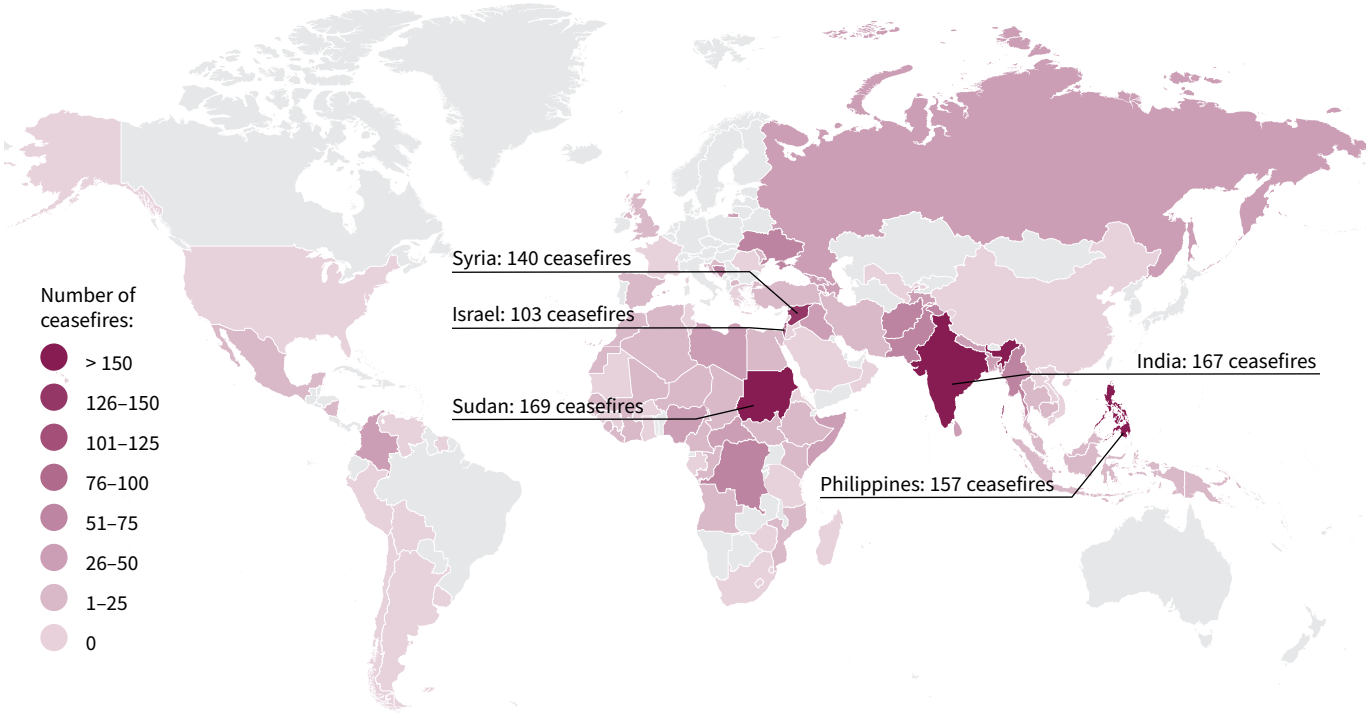
While no peace agreement can be reached without a ceasefire, ceasefires increasingly break down and lead to renewed violence. In other cases, they result in so-called frozen conflicts, in which active armed fighting has ended but no peace treaty has been put in place, leaving the area in constant danger of hostilities resuming. The situation on the Korean Peninsula is a prime example: the 1953 armistice ended the fighting, but not the conflict itself.

At times, calls for a ceasefire are not welcomed by one of the parties involved or their supporters, even when a ceasefire would provide a much-needed respite from violence for the civilians caught up in warfare. This has been the case in the war in Gaza. When the war started in October 2023 following the Hamas terrorist attack on Israeli soil, many parties in the West did not support the call for a ceasefire, fearing that Hamas would use the break to regroup and continue fighting.

The way in which ceasefires are crafted, brokered and implemented is of critical importance. Effective monitoring is essential: monitors serve as the eyes and ears on the ground, and they report incidents that take place after an agreement has been reached. Ceasefires that are agreed between belligerents but that lack third-party monitoring tend to break down quickly in a cycle of recrimination. By contrast, properly planned and implemented ceasefire-monitoring mechanisms can help build trust between the parties and create structures for how incidents and ceasefire violations are managed.

Monitors can be drawn from international organizations such as the United Nations or regional and sub-regional bodies like the African Union or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. While many monitors have a military background, monitoring missions typically include civilians in various capacities among the staff. In some instances, representatives of civil society and local communities are involved in the monitoring process. Such arrangements have become part and parcel of intra-state conflicts, including in Myanmar, the Philippines and Colombia.

Geographical distribution of ceasefires since 1989



Map 1. Geographical distribution of ceasefires since 1989. The five countries with the highest number of recorded ceasefires are Sudan (169), India (167), the Philippines (157), Syria (140), and Israel (103).
Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)

Third-party monitors are often accused of failing to do their job when violence breaks out. This criticism usually stems from a misunderstanding of what outside monitors are mandated to do. Monitors are not peacekeepers or enforcers of an agreement. They cannot sanction the behaviour of conflict parties, and attempting to do so would compromise their impartiality and erode the trust of one of the parties.

The regulation, management and control of combat forces and weapons are also key elements of a ceasefire.[5] When a ceasefire is brokered, the parties must agree on what happens to their forces and their weapons. Questions as to whether forces are "frozen in situ" at their last-held positions or whether they are redeployed to new areas or zones need to be addressed. At a minimum, the opposing forces need to be separated. Separating forces requires a carefully planned and phased process, involving the movement of units from one location to another and, in some cases, the adoption of defensive postures or withdrawal from the direct line of fire. Comprehensive planning and management of these movements, along with communications, information-sharing, and security protocols for the regulation and control of weapons, are required.

Codes of conduct can also establish norms of behaviour for the conflict parties. Ceasefires often include detailed provisions that specify which actions are permitted and which are prohibited. The devil is in the details: misunderstandings in implementation often contribute to ceasefire breakdowns, particularly when political actors wish to 'pull the rug out' from under the complex negotiation processes involved.

Furthermore, technology plays a crucial role in contemporary ceasefire monitoring. It can be deployed to cover large swaths of land that would be difficult for human monitors to access, to mitigate security risks, and to overcome movement

5 United Nations (2022) *Guidance on Mediation of Ceasefires*. United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. https://peacemaker.un.org/en/documents/guidance-mediation-ceasefires.

restrictions imposed by conflict parties.[6] Imagery from unmanned aerial vehicles, cameras, and satellites, along with data from acoustic sensors, provides monitors with high-quality, reliable information that supports their work. Technology also reduces the costs of monitoring compared to the use of human patrols. However, as with all technologies, these tools are not a substitute for human judgment and analysis, but rather efficient tools of the trade.

Three contemporary case studies – Gaza, Myanmar and Ukraine

Ceasefires can take many different forms. Some are unilateral, meaning that only one party to the conflict declares a ceasefire for a limited period, often to signal political intent vis-à-vis the desired outcome of the conflict. Bilateral ceasefires involve two conflicting parties and may aim to initiate a peace process, facilitate prisoner exchanges, or freeze the situation on the ground for the time being. Multilateral ceasefires are typical in conflict situations involving multiple actors.

In many cases, however, the lack of political will on the part of one or both sides makes achieving a ceasefire an almost impossible endeavour. The following three brief case studies illustrate the nature and diversity of ceasefire arrangements in different current conflict contexts.

Gaza – Mistaking short-term truces for lasting peace

The most recent round of fighting between the terror group Hamas and the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), which started on 7 October 2023, has seen numerous attempts at establishing ceasefires. A short-lived ceasefire took effect from 19 January to 18 March 2025, during which a number of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners were exchanged, and humanitarian assistance was allowed into the Gaza Strip. While the arrangement did diminish bloodshed temporarily, the ceasefire was more of a brief pause in fighting than a genuine ceasefire – one that was supposed to lead to a more comprehensive post-war plan for Gaza.

Another attempt at bringing the fighting to an end was the peace plan proposed by President Donald Trump on 29 September. Whether this latest effort will bring lasting peace to Gaza remains uncertain. There are many hurdles on the way from a ceasefire to a peace agreement, including the need for a stabilization force to monitor developments on the ground. For a lasting peace to take hold, the deep-rooted political and systemic factors driving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict need to be tackled – more specifically, issues of Palestinian identity recognition and self-determination.[7] Of course, Israel's security concerns need to be addressed as well.

Ceasefire capitalism in Myanmar

Ever since the 1990s, the military in Myanmar (the Tatmadaw) has allocated land concessions in ceasefire zones as an explicit military strategy to govern land and populations. This practice continued even during the brief period of civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi from 2016 to 2021. The ceasefires have allowed the formation of military–private partnerships in these areas with the aim of resource extraction (such as timber, gemstones, minerals, and opium) and the control of trade flows. This process can be described as 'ceasefire capitalism'.[8]

It is no coincidence that the ceasefire zones have been established in resource-rich borderlands along Myanmar's frontiers with China and Thailand, populated by different ethnic groups that often maintain their own armed forces. The leaders of these ethnic armed groups benefit economically from these arrangements, just as the Tatmadaw does. The ceasefires have lasted as long as both the military and local elites have profited from the business ventures. Reductions in violence are therefore not driven by political progress, but by the cost–benefit calculations of the parties involved.

6 Hug, Alexander (2024) *Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification and the Use of Technology: Insights from Ukraine 2014–2022*. CSS Mediation Resources ETH Zurich. https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/MediationResources21_CeasefireMonitoringTechnology.pdf.

7 Al-Auqaili, Ameer (2025) Why Gaza's Ceasefire Won't Last. *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 8 July. https://fpif.org/why-gazas-ceasefire-wont-last/.

8 Woods, Kevin (2011) "Ceasefire capitalism: military–private partnerships, resource concessions and military–state building in the Burma–China borderlands". *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 38:4, 747–770.

Ceasefire in Ukraine – a non-starter?

The war between Ukraine and Russia continues to rage despite President Donald Trump's attempts to craft a peace deal between the belligerents. The Ukrainian position, supported by its European backers, has been that a ceasefire must precede any direct talks with Russia. This is not surprising, as any credible talks are usually preceded by a ceasefire, which serves as a substantive confidence-building measure (CBM) that signals political intent.

The record of previous truces, however, is bleak. For instance, the 2025 Easter truce was breached by Russia with over 2,000 recorded violations. The record of the pre-invasion ceasefires since the conflict first started in February 2014 is at least as dismal. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has accused Russia of violating 25 ceasefire agreements since 2014 and has argued that no ceasefire would hold without credible security guarantees.

To date, the Kremlin's responses have been vague, offering only to "analyse" the idea of a limited truce. According to international observers such as the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Russian forces have continued their attacks on multiple fronts, despite President Vladimir Putin's ambiguous nods towards a ceasefire, which are likely statements to placate the Americans. The deliberations on ceasefires in Ukraine underscore the challenge of negotiating with a party unwilling to honour even short-lived truces.

Elements determined by the parties and shaped by outsiders

To understand why ceasefires succeed or fail, it is useful to distinguish between what is determined by the parties and what can be influenced by outsiders. When ceasefires are crafted, several elements are determined by the parties themselves. Firstly, the sustainability of a ceasefire depends on the degree of ownership the parties have over the process. A ceasefire that is accepted and owned by the parties involved is much more likely to be sustained than one that is forced on the parties by outsiders.

Secondly, the leadership and organization of the parties matter a great deal. Strong leaders can better control their rank and file, while loosely structured groups tend to struggle with internal divisions that hinder the quick decision-making processes required at negotiation tables. This is particularly relevant in the case of armed non-state actors.[9]

Thirdly, the intentions of the conflict parties figure prominently in whether ceasefires succeed or fail. In some cases, it is easier to start a negotiation over ceasefires than it is to actually conclude one. Belligerents may be willing to engage in talks because doing so brings legitimacy and publicity, yet they may prefer to negotiate indefinitely rather than face the hard compromises that are part and parcel of any agreement.[10] At times, conflict parties may use ceasefires to strengthen their positions, including rearmament, intelligence gathering, and the instrumentalization of the whole monitoring setup. They may even deliberately break the ceasefire agreement to test the reaction of the other party or the monitors themselves.

There are still several elements of ceasefires that can be shaped by outsiders. Firstly, the quality of a ceasefire counts for a lot, and it has a direct impact on whether the ceasefire holds. External actors can support the design of these arrangements, including force separation and the management of weapons, which are central to determining the quality of a ceasefire.

Secondly, the presence of third-party monitors and the use of technology shape ceasefires. It is, of course, possible that in the inception phase only the basic parameters are agreed upon, with additional details negotiated as positive momentum builds and trust develops between the parties. Third parties such as civil society organizations, international agencies, and other states can support the conflict parties in monitoring these agreements in practice. In conflict zones across the world, civilians are holding their communities together under extreme pressure, and consequently, their voices need to be heard and considered in the implementation of agreements. It is worth noting, however, that ceasefire monitoring and accountability are separate issues. Monitors should not be involved in holding the parties accountable for violations, as doing so would jeopardize their impartiality and risk drawing them into the conflict dynamics. Their role is instead

9 Cronin, Audrey Kurth (2009) *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton University Press.

10 Powell, Jonathan (2014) *Talking to Terrorists: How to End Armed Conflicts*. Vintage.

to report incidents to separate bodies responsible for dealing with infractions.

Thirdly, outsiders can shape the cost–benefit calculations that determine whether conflict parties continue the violence. The example of ceasefire capitalism in Myanmar and the interests of external parties in promoting a ceasefire for their own benefit is instructive here.

Conclusions: Why do some ceasefires succeed, and others fail?

Why do some talks lead to a peace process and an agreement, while others fail? The nature of public support is a critical element. In some cases, the public is weary of conflict and wants a ceasefire and a path towards peace, while in other cases the constituencies vehemently oppose making peace with the enemy. Many conflicts are characterized by a deadly mix of fragmented armed groups and political interests, funded by criminal activities, while external actors meddle in the internal affairs of other states, fuel dissent, and cause harm. Little wonder, therefore, that peace agreements have become so elusive in the modern age.

Ceasefires need to be linked to a political process that addresses the underlying causes of the conflict and leads to resolving it. Otherwise, they are likely to collapse, as recent experiences from Gaza, Myanmar, and Ukraine attest. In many other instances, ceasefires have led to frozen conflicts, such as those on the Korean Peninsula, Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the Caucasus, or the Line of Control in Kashmir. When different conflict contexts are considered, it is worth noting that Russia has never allowed ceasefire monitoring on its territory, nor has it accepted peacekeepers on its soil – and notably, there are several conflicts that continue to simmer in the post-Soviet space.

While ceasefires may reduce battle-related fatalities, they can also transform the conflict in other ways – for instance, by shifting the use of violence into domains like cyber warfare.[11] Depending on the nature of the conflict and the behaviour of the parties, ceasefires may also contribute to the escalation of conflict rather than its resolution. In some cases, they lead to a situation where the main priority is to prepare for future war rather than to reconstruct devastated economies and ravaged societies.

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For a conflict to be truly resolved, more than a lull in the fighting is required. Imposing ceasefires from outside seldom yields sustainable outcomes. The rare exceptions are cases in which one of the conflict parties is crushed and, in such instances, it is more about capitulation by one of the belligerents than a negotiated ceasefire. Most conflicts, however, do not end this way and require a profound examination of historical grievances and wounds. Without this, despite the emotional impulse to stop human suffering, ceasefires can have little impact or even prolong fighting as forces regroup and acquire new resources.[12] This appears to be the case in the current war in Ukraine.

Considering the above discussion, it is apparent that the quest for, and attempts to secure, ceasefires have become substitutes for comprehensive peace agreements in an age where geopolitical contestation has become so intense that the prospects for forging sustainable peace processes have greatly diminished. Although aiming for peace is a worthy cause, the expectations for sustainable peace in many ongoing conflicts need to be tempered, while at the same time acknowledging the fact that a ceasefire is nevertheless a notable achievement in any violent situation. ⬢

11 Kane, Sean and Govinda Clayton (2020) "Cyber-Ceasefires: Incorporating the Cyber Dimension into the Conflict Management Toolbox". CSS Mediation Resources.

12 Luttwak, Edward (1999) "Give War a Chance". *Foreign Affairs* 78:36–44.

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