

Russia, Ukraine hold peace negotiations as US continues to ratchet up tensions

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The Russian and Ukrainian negotiating teams met on Tuesday for talks hosted by Turkey's Recep Erdogan in Istanbul, on ending the month-long war in Ukraine.

The talks, initially scheduled for two days, ended after the first day, with both sides speaking of "positive signs."

Ukraine has submitted its proposals for a "peace agreement" to the Kremlin, which include:

1) In exchange for security guarantees from a number of states, including Russia, Ukraine would accept a formally neutral status, involving a guarantee that the country would not join any military alliance (i.e., NATO), not host foreign military bases and not conduct joint military exercises with alliances, unless all states that had issued security guarantees agreed;

2) Talks about the status of the Crimean Peninsula would be held for the next 15 years, during which neither Russia nor Ukraine would try to resolve the dispute through military means;

3) Ukraine would not try to return the Donbass, controlled since 2014 by pro-Russian separatists, through military means;

4) Russia would accept Ukraine's entrance into the European Union.

These proposals would be tantamount to Ukraine reneging on its current military strategy, adopted in March 2021, which explicitly aimed at retaking Crimea and the Donbass. The strategy was one of the main provocations that led up to the current war. However, right after the meeting had ended, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky declared that he was not willing to make concessions on Ukraine "territorial integrity," i.e., the status of Donbass and Crimea.

Russia, for its part, declared that it would "drastically" reduce its military operations in the direction of Ukraine's capital Kiev and Chernigov, to

facilitate further negotiations. The Kremlin will now review Ukraine's proposals and said Vladimir Putin would be ready to meet with Zelensky once a peace agreement had been drawn up.

Even before the talks, there were signs of shifts in Russia's military strategy. On Friday, the vice-head of Russia's general staff and head of the military operation in Ukraine, Sergei Rudskoi, declared that the focus of Russian military operations would now shift to the Donbass in East Ukraine, because the "first phase" of the operation had been "successfully completed."

While several Russian air strikes on targets in West Ukraine have since been reported, media reports have also pointed to an apparent retreat of Russian forces in large parts of southern Ukraine as well as around Kiev.

Over the past month of war, Russia's army has suffered heavy losses. While the Defense Ministry now acknowledges that 1,351 Russian troops have died and 3,925 were wounded, estimates by the Pentagon put the figure as high as 7,000 dead and almost 30,000 wounded. For comparison, in the almost ten-year long war in Afghanistan from December 1979 to February 1989, Soviet forces lost just under 15,000 troops.

The casualty figures among Russian senior military leaders have been particularly staggering. Reports suggest that 15 generals and senior officers were killed, with *Business Insider* noting that the "the Russian officer elite is being decimated in Ukraine."

Tuesday's peace talks came just days after a visit by US President Joe Biden to Warsaw, in which one highly provocative "gaffe" followed another: First, Biden told members of the 82nd US Airborne Division that "you're going to see when you're there" how strong the resistance in Ukraine is, suggesting that they would soon be deployed to the war zone. Then, on Saturday, he publicly announced what has long been an

aim of US strategy — regime change in Moscow, and declared that the US had to be prepared for “decades” of war.

Biden, who had earlier denounced Putin as a “war criminal,” deliberately bringing US-Russian relations to the brink of collapse, also called the Russian President a “butcher.”

While quickly walked back by his staff, either one of these public statements by the US President could have formed the basis of a major military escalation of the war. They were, unsurprisingly, interpreted by Russian foreign policy circles as a clear sign that Washington had no interest whatsoever in a peaceful resolution of the war.

On Monday, Biden made yet another extraordinary statement, claiming that the US was “helping train the Ukrainian troops that are in Poland”—something both the White House and the US military had earlier denied. Also on Monday, the White House submitted a request to Congress for yet another record war budget of \$813 billion for 2023, including \$682 million for Ukraine.

It is thus hardly surprising that, when asked about the outcome of talks and the Kremlin’s assurance that it would scale back its military operation around Kiev, Biden displayed everything but enthusiasm: “I don’t read anything into it until I see what their actions are.”

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby similarly dismissed the Kremlin’s assurances, claiming that “nobody should be fooling” themselves by believing them.

A recent piece in *Foreign Affairs* indicates that, even if Washington were to accept some kind of settlement of the war for the time being, it would only be one that, in all but words, ensures the continued status of Ukraine as a proxy of imperialism. In the piece, A. Wess Mitchell, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia under Trump from 2017 to 2019, argued that “a deal doesn’t have to be a death sentence.”

Even while accepting formal neutrality, he argued, Ukraine could get an agreement “that ensures that renunciation of NATO membership does not come at the expense of the country’s self-defense or its prospects for an economic and political future in the West.”

Such an agreement would involve “a commitment [by the West] to support its military development with

foreign assistance and weapons procurement”—i.e., a continuation of the massive multibillion-dollar weapons shipments to Ukraine that have been under way for years and have been dramatically accelerated with the war.

However, it is everything but certain that any sort of deal would be accepted by either Washington or the Ukrainian far right, which wields enormous influence in Ukrainian politics and the state apparatus and is now heavily armed with NATO weapons and tanks.

Since the war began, the Ukrainian secret service (SBU), which openly places itself in the tradition of the Nazi collaborationist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), has conducted a campaign of terror against members of the Ukrainian negotiating team and pro-Russian oppositionists. One member of the negotiating team was killed, and at least one other arrested on charges of “treason.” Many more politicians have been arrested or disappeared.

On Monday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the oligarch Roman Abramovich, who has been involved in peace negotiations with Ukraine, as well as several members of the Ukrainian negotiating team, may have been poisoned during talks earlier this month. The report was based on a joint investigation by the *Journal* with Bellingcat, a highly dubious “investigative” consortium with documented ties to NATO. Bellingcat was also behind the “revelations” about the alleged poisoning of right-wing US-backed Putin critic Alexei Navalny.

The *Wall Street Journal* was quick to suggest that “hard-liners in Moscow” were behind the suspected poisoning. However, if, indeed, there was an attempted poisoning of Abramovich and other negotiators, it may just as likely have been perpetrated by the Ukrainian SBU or any of the numerous far-right militias in the country that have time and again proven, including through assassinations, that they will do everything in their power to prevent a settlement of the conflict.



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