Policy Backgrounder

US-Ukraine Negotiations and Possible Ceasefire

It was a better week in US-Ukraine relations as the countries met in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia for talks. Ukraine accepted the concept of a ceasefire and at least privately, the principle of territorial concessions, but tough negotiations – and continued fighting – remain ahead at a very dangerous time as Russia seeks a maximalist position before accepting a ceasefire to which the US and Ukraine have agreed.

Key Insights

- After the Jeddah meeting, the US resumed military and intelligence aid that had been suspended. There was no public agreement, however, on the proposed minerals deal between the US and Ukraine.
- The US and Ukraine agreed to a proposal for a general 30-day ceasefire (Ukraine had originally wanted a more verifiable air and sea ceasefire) and the US promised, at least publicly, to pressure Russia to agree.
- Russia is reportedly considering a maximalist position requiring major concessions on all key issues before agreeing to a ceasefire, conditions which Ukraine will likely find unacceptable for its own future security.
- Many questions remain about the outlines of any peace deal or ceasefire, including the extent of Western security guarantees for Ukraine and territorial concessions.

A Positive Meeting in Jeddah

After the meeting at the White House between the President and President Zelensky on February 28, the US suspended military aid and cut off (officially, a "pause" in) intelligence sharing with Ukraine. US officials indicated this was done to pressure Ukraine into making concessions to support a peace process. At a subsequent meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the two sides met, leading to a generally positive result.

In the war itself, Russia has continued significant missile attacks and pressed hard, making advances in the Kursk salient occupied by Ukraine. Ukraine's large-scale drone attack on Moscow (337 drones, 91 targeting the Moscow region), done during the pause in US intelligence support, showcased Ukraine's own capabilities.

In response to continued Russian attacks after the aid pause, the President said of President Putin "I actually think he's doing what anybody else would do. I think he wants to get it stopped and settled, and I think he's hitting them harder than he's been hitting them. And I think probably anybody in that position would be doing that right now." This statement, though, raised questions as to whether Russia truly desires peace, or an end to conflict only on harsh terms. The President continued that "I have to know [Ukraine wants] to settle. . . . If they don't want to settle, we're out of there," adding to pressure on Ukraine.

Prior to the meeting, however, the Administration had also signaled that it could resume military and intelligence support if Ukraine committed to the peace process the Administration supports. Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated that the suspension "came about because we felt the Ukrainians were not committed" to the negotiations but that he hoped the US would "be in a different place" after it. Along with this, Rubio remarked that the proposed US-Ukraine minerals deal was important but "doesn't necessarily have to be done tomorrow." Further smoothing the path for the meeting, on Sunday, the President said, "we really just about have [lifted the intelligence pause], and we want to do anything we can to get Ukraine to be serious about getting something done."

To show seriousness, Ukraine sent a high-level delegation to the meeting, including the foreign and defense ministers. It did not include President Zelensky to show that the negotiations were not at head of state level, but Zelensky did visit Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh in advance of the meeting, another signal of its importance (and that of Saudi Arabia as host for these meetings). Zelensky also added that "we are fully committed to constructive dialogue . . . . Realistic proposals are on the table. The key is to move quickly and effectively."

Prospects for a Ceasefire?

The US did lift the suspension of military and intelligence aid following the meeting, and Ukraine supported a 30-day ceasefire, which the US would then present to Russia. As Rubio stated, "[w]e're going to tell them this is what's on the table. Ukraine is ready to stop shooting and start talking. And now it'll be up to them to say yes or no. If they say no, then we'll unfortunately know

what the impediment is to peace here." More pointedly, perhaps speaking so that the President would be pleased, National Security Adviser Mike Waltz said that the Ukrainian delegation "made something very clear, that they share President Trump's vision for peace." This result, though, came at a cost: Ukraine's proposal for a ceasefire in the air and at sea (similar to a proposal from French President Emmanuel Macron), was upgraded to a full ceasefire, agreed only after confirmation by both the US and Ukrainian Presidents. In exchange, Ukraine seems to have been promised "strong steps" against Russia if it does not accept the ceasefire proposal. Secretary Rubio added that, "[i]f they say no, then obviously we'll have to examine everything and sort of figure out where we stand in the world and what their true intentions are."

Russian Reaction

After calling the Ukraine talks a "great success," the US began talks with Russia. The President also appeared to change his public statements on Russia, writing on social media that "[b]ased on the fact that Russia is absolutely 'pounding' Ukraine on the battlefield right now, I am strongly considering large scale Banking Sanctions, Sanctions, and Tariffs on Russia until a Cease Fire and FINAL SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT ON PEACE IS REACHED [.]" But the US already has significant sanctions on Russia and its banking sector, and US-Russia trade has fallen sharply, to very low levels. The statement, therefore, serves to highlight the differences in applying pressure to each side, with far more public pressure falling on Ukraine.

It was unclear whether Russia would accept the proposal; some officials reportedly want to continue fighting until Russia regains the entire Kursk salient, thus taking away territory Ukraine could trade in negotiations. To this point, Russia has opposed any temporary ceasefires without fundamental concessions from Ukraine and the West in advance – a position that would strengthen Russia and weaken the West, precisely what Ukraine fears. In addition, monitoring a ceasefire on land would be far harder than at sea and in the air.

Russian officials first said that the ceasefire proposals gave Russia "nothing," "other than a temporary respite for the Ukrainian military [.]" On Thursday, after appearing in camouflage to discuss the battle in the Kursk region with commanders, President Putin stated there were "nuances" that required "painstaking research" before accepting the proposal, noted that the decision will depend "on how the situation develops on the ground" (how much territory Russia can take quickly), and suggested that Russia would impose strong conditions for a ceasefire and that Russia "should talk to our US colleagues, maybe in a call with President Trump."

Maximalist Position

Russian demands reportedly include Ukraine not joining NATO (and possibly the European Union as well); no deployment of any foreign (not just NATO) troops in Ukraine as peacekeepers; international recognition of the five Ukrainian oblasts Russia has seized (Crimea, Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia); and possibly other conditions such as stopping US military aid to Ukraine during the ceasefire or disarmament of Ukraine, leaving Ukraine vulnerable to further Russian attack.

For Russia, this maximalist position would be a *condition* of a ceasefire, a prelude to negotiations. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the reporting is a statement that that "sources said Russian and American officials discussed the terms in detail for the past three weeks [.]" If this is true, then US-Russia negotiations are more advanced than previously publicly known, and Ukraine could be placed in an exceptionally difficult position: accept onerous terms as a start to negotiations or face continued Russian advances without US aid (which could be suspended again if the President believes Ukraine is not "serious" about peace). The question then becomes whether the US will put sufficient pressure on Russia to accept or enforce a ceasefire or whether the bulk of the pressure will fall on Ukraine. Earlier, Secretary Rubio said that "the Russians will have to do difficult things," but there is no indication of what those "difficult things" might be or how deeply the US will pressure Russia.

More broadly, the President at times continued to take a hard attitude towards Ukraine, noting in an interview that "it may not survive anyway," even as he said that Zelensky is "smart" and "tough." The President also declined to answer a question as to whether President Putin was "disrespecting" him by continuing to attack Ukraine. All this highlights the question of whether pressure on Russia will match that placed on Ukraine.

Many questions remain for negotiations, among those the composition of any peacekeeping force. Russia has insisted no NATO nations may take part and may have expanded its position to include any foreign forces. Russia warned Australia not to consider sending troops for that mission, terming it "irresponsible adventurism in the zone of the special military operation" (wording which itself implies that Russia regards Ukraine as a "zone of the special military operation" even after a ceasefire or peace agreement is signed). Foreign Minister Penny Wong rejected the statement, saying Australia has "a proud tradition of supporting peace . . . . We won't be intimidated from working towards a just peace for the people of Ukraine." Meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Zelensky said he considered Türkiye "a partner in terms of security guarantees" and said Ukraine will ratify a Free Trade Agreement -- important developments as Türkiye has sought to balance relations between Ukraine and Russia.

Conclusion

The Jeddah meeting reaffirmed that the diplomatic format is two sets of negotiations with the US in the middle rather that for which Ukraine and Europe had hoped of negotiation between Ukraine, supported by the West, and Russia. If it is true that US and Russian negotiators have been working for several weeks on a proposal, that adds a new dimension to an already difficult situation. From one perspective, the positive meeting this week may have shown that the negative aspects of the earlier meeting could have backfired somewhat and that at least some senior US officials see the importance of a more supportive approach for Ukraine. But it remains unclear what concessions Russia will and how hard the US will pressure Russia. Ukraine's position is, as Zelensky said, "a reliable, durable, and decent peace" and that "US pressure will be sufficient to compel Russia to end the war." Russia's is "a settlement on Ukraine that addresses Moscow's interests and concerns." At some level, the positions seem irreconcilable. Even as a ceasefire begins to be considered, it remains a moment of significant danger.

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