

Ceasefire Talks: A Kaleidoscope of Divergent Positions

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Introduction

The ceasefire talks between Russia and the United States (US) in Saudi Arabia did not result in any breakthrough. Currently, there is a collision between the US pursuit to end the war and Russia harping on addressing its core concerns.

The concluding statements from the White House and Kremlin suggest that the parties agreed to a moratorium on strikes against energy infrastructure, but it is unclear how compliance will be monitored, which is evident from the reported violations. The US also announced a ceasefire in the Black Sea, but Russia responded by making it clear that the condition for its commencement would be the lifting of certain sanctions.

Following the talks in Riyadh, the White House issued two separate statements: One, on the outcome of talks with Russia and the other, with Ukraine. The content of the two texts is the same; that the parties agreed to return to safe navigation, eliminate the use of force, and not use commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea. It also stated that the parties agreed to develop measures to ensure compliance with the moratorium on strikes against energy facilities and to continue working toward achieving a durable and lasting peace.

Russia, in its statement, said that it would agree to a Black Sea ceasefire only if a few conditions were met. The West must lift sanctions against Rosselkhozbank (the state-owned Russian Agricultural Bank) and reconnect it and other Russian banks involved in the food trade to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) international payment system.

This kaleidoscope of divergent positions was clear when the Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy suggested that Ukraine knew nothing about Russia's condition for sanctions to be lifted. As far as Kyiv is concerned, the ceasefire in the Black Sea is already in effect and applies not only to ships, but also to ports. The moratorium on strikes against energy facilities, according to the Ukrainian side, has been in effect since 25 Mar.

Russia's Stance

The talks were meant to be a prologue to peace. However, it seems that Russia is making it clear that it is the US who is pressing for a quick ceasefire, implying that President Vladimir Putin is in a strong position and can dictate terms while continuing to use violence as leverage against Ukraine. There is also a feeling that Ukraine's fighting reserves will dwindle from early summer, since it is highly unlikely that the Donald Trump administration will agree for another military aid package for Kyiv, whereas Europe struggles to fill the gap.

There will be goodwill gestures, along with minor concessions like the energy ceasefire, to keep President Trump's belief in Russian commitment to keep negotiations alive. For Russia, conditions are favourable with relations with the US shifting from deeply antagonistic under President Joe Biden to being friendly under President Trump.

Since his return, President Trump has demonstrated that he is ill-disposed to Ukraine and is ready to negotiate directly with Russia, excluding both Ukraine and its European partners, and, if necessary, force President Zelenskyy into accepting the US' demands.

Following the Oval Office meeting, Ukraine has taken steps to mend relations with the US administration by accepting a US proposal for a 30-day ceasefire and most recently, a ceasefire on energy infrastructure.

Trump has also continued to demonstrate that he attaches little importance to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth stated clearly that the US does not support NATO membership for Ukraine, a commitment from the Trump administration on a major Russian red line.

The waning of US support to Ukraine has created an opportunity for Putin to impose conditions that will weaken Ukraine's ability to resist over the long term—including limits on the size of the Ukrainian Army and preventing the deployment of European forces on Ukrainian territory.

The US no longer considers the Russian regime an outright adversary and has refused to identify Russia as the aggressor and openly discusses 'Enormous economic opportunities and the prospect of normalisation, something that until now was unthinkable.

Putin also recognizes that Trump faces little domestic opposition as the Democrats are currently unable to respond to Trump's assault on the Federal government and change in the US hard and soft power positions built up over decades.

The net result is that the Russian President is in a position where he sees the opportunity to impose a Russian-designed peace settlement on Ukraine. Putin holds strong cards and Moscow's position is that it seeks a comprehensive agreement rather than interim measures.

However, two key obstacles remain. The determination of Ukraine to reject a peace deal and keep fighting; and the readiness of a 'Coalition of the willing' led by France and the United Kingdom to continue to provide economic and military support to Ukraine.

Russia's Approach to Negotiations

Though President Trump in his address to Congress said that Russia has sent "Strong signals that they are ready for peace". But Russia's fundamental objectives remain unchanged—no NATO membership for Ukraine; recognition of Russia's annexation of four provinces; Ukraine's demilitarization and denazification; and the lifting of sanctions.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov has said that Russia cannot accept US' proposals to end the war in Ukraine in their current form because they do not address problems that Moscow regards as having caused the conflict. He suggested that Moscow and Washington have so far been unable to bridge differences which Russian President Vladimir Putin raised when he said that the US' ceasefire proposals needed reworking.

In the Kremlin's statement, issued after the call, Putin underlined the need to stop military assistance and intelligence sharing to Ukraine. This was justified as a means to prevent an 'Escalation of the conflict and work towards resolving it by political-diplomatic means'.¹

Trump is clearly not yet ready to make this concession, even though he stopped and then restored both military aid and intelligence provision to persuade Kyiv to accept a ceasefire. Nevertheless, Putin has set the expectation that a halt in the US military support for Ukraine is a prerequisite for an agreement.

Later, while visiting Russia's newest nuclear submarine—the Arkhangelsk—on 27 Mar, President Putin said a temporary administration should be installed in Ukraine to lead the country to elections.

Feeling relatively secure in its current position and ready to exploit the US administration's stated commitment to ending the war through diplomacy, Russia has two options—either continue hostilities or attempt to gain an advantage through diplomatic means. For Ukraine, the fear is if a comprehensive ceasefire takes place, Russia will treat it as an operational or strategic pause to strengthen its position before launching a decisive strike.

Agriculture Exports

Washington commits to “Help restore Russia's access to the world market for agricultural and fertiliser exports”. The problem is that there are no formal sanctions against Russian food producers and exporters. Moscow obtained exemptions from the sanctions regime for food and fertilisers back in 2022.²

Despite the official exemptions from the restrictions, western Companies avoid doing business with Russians because of compliance costs and the risk of sanctions. This has pushed up transaction costs, as not all ports want to accept Russian cargo and it is difficult to find cargo ships and insurers.

Moscow needs to get restrictions lifted on access to western financial infrastructure—insurance, logistics, and payment systems. And the key is the lifting of restrictions against Rosselkhozbank, which would, therefore, significantly simplify Russia's foreign trade operations.

It was reported on 28 Mar that Russia is demanding that the European Union (EU) reconnect the Rosselkhozbank to the SWIFT international banking system as a precondition to implementing a Black Sea ceasefire.³

However, SWIFT falls under the jurisdiction of Belgium, and it must comply with the EU laws. For Russia to re-enter SWIFT and re-establish corresponding banking relationships, the EU will need to be involved. The Trump administration would have to put pressure on Europe.

The US has a long history of leveraging economic power and restrictive economic measures to advance its national security objectives. It also has a history

of offering sanctions relief as a bargaining tool in negotiations to achieve its desired end states. Sanctions and the economic pain they inflict can effectively bring an adversary to the negotiating table, and sanctions relief can often get the adversary to agree to a deal.

Conclusion

Presently, there seem to be far too many 'Moving Parts' in the ceasefire talks, the pace of which seems to be slowing down. The US-brokered moratorium is also not working due to multiple reports of violation.

But the positive fact is that talks have commenced, and diplomacy is now back at the guiding principle, which is evident from the appointment of the Russian Ambassador Alexander Darchiev to Washington.⁴

In addition, Kirill Dmitriev, Putin's investment envoy, stated that he saw a 'Positive Dynamic' in relations between Moscow and Washington after holding two days of meetings in the US, but said more meetings were needed to sort out differences.

The other green shoots in the relationship are President Putin agreeing to mediate a new nuclear agreement between the US and Iran after reportedly being asked to by President Trump in a phone call in Feb. In a meeting hosted by Saudi Arabia, the US Secretary of State Marco Rubio allegedly followed up on the Trump's request with his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

President Putin now seems to be in a position where he sees the opportunity of imposing a Russian-designed peace plan, as Trump's administration has shown itself to be comfortable with a global order where great powers dictate terms to smaller countries and seek to expand into others' territory—with the US openly questioning the sovereignty and borders of allies and neighbours like Greenland, Panama, and Canada.

By giving little ground, Russia seems ready to prolong negotiations while its Army continues its battlefield advances using negotiations as a tool to accelerate victory, setting conditions that will later become part of a final agreement.

For Ukraine, which is suffering from violence of conflict, peace remains its greatest aspiration. They are also eager to see a deal that would protect Black Sea

shipping, particularly ‘The cessation of shelling of Ukrainian ports Odesa, Kherson and Mykolaiv’. However, the credibility and reliability of any peace arrangements are critical. But a ceasefire is important as that is a scorecard of generational consequence.

Endnotes

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<https://tass.com/politics/1941039>

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