

## Macron & Biden, Scholz & Putin talk about talks. But no talks yet - and the war continues



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks and troop locations as of December 6.

In mid-November, Russia withdrew its forces in Kherson city in southern Ukraine and the territory of that region west of the Dnipro River. Since then, the “contact line” between the Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine has been remarkably stable. Indeed, the daily map of Russian attacks and troop locations issued by British Defence Intelligence (see above) has been virtually unchanged over the past several weeks. This is not to say that the war has ended; it hasn’t, and in several areas in Donetsk region – most notably, in and around the city of Bakhmut – the conflict continues. Nevertheless, the largely unchanged “contact line” between the Russian and Ukrainian forces for the past several weeks, coupled with the onset of early winter conditions when the attention of both sides turns to reorganizing and resupplying their forces in preparation for resumption of the conflict in the spring, has led to renewed calls for negotiations that might end the conflict. And with the new calls for peace talks has come renewed discussion of the conditions that must be met in order for the talks to take place and, of course, the substantive terms that must be agreed if the talks are to bring an end to the conflict.

Last Thursday, President Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron met at the White House during the latter’s State Visit. In their joint statement following the meeting, Biden and Macron strongly condemned Russia’s illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, stressed that intentionally targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure constitute war crimes whose perpetrators must be held accountable, condemned and rejected Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territory, deplored its deliberate escalatory steps, notably its irresponsible nuclear rhetoric and its disinformation regarding alleged chemical attacks, and biological and nuclear weapons

programs, and reaffirmed their continued support for Ukraine's defense. But Macron also made it clear, in his remarks upon arriving at the White House, that he and Biden would be talking about establishing a "sustainable peace" in Europe, which means, he said, "full respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine but, at the same time, a new architecture to be sure that we have a sustainable peace on the long run."

In remarks at their joint press conference after their meeting, Biden said, "Today, we're reaffirmed that France and the United States, together with all our NATO Allies and European Union and the G7 stand as strong as ever against Russia's brutal war against Ukraine. We talked a lot about that in our bilateral meeting. And we'll continue the strong support for the people of Ukraine as they defend their homes and their families and their sovereignty and territorial integrity against Russian aggression, which has been incredibly brutal... Today, we reaffirm that, as I said, we're going to stand together against this brutality. And we'll continue the strong support for the Ukrainian people as they defend their homes and their families and their nurseries, their hospitals, their sovereignty, their integrity, against Russia aggression... Putin thinks that he can crush the will of all those who oppose his imperial ambitions. But... he's not going to succeed. President Macron and I have resolved that we're going to continue working together to hold Russia accountable for their actions and to mitigate the global impacts of Putin's war on the rest of the world."

In response to a question whether he would be talking to Putin anytime soon, Biden said, forcefully, "Look, there is one way for this war to end the rational way: Putin to pull out of Ukraine. Number one. But it appears he's not going to do that. He's paying a very heavy price for failing to do it, but he's inflicting incredible, incredible carnage on the civilian population of Ukraine... It's sick what he's doing. But the fact of the matter is, I have no immediate plans to contact Mr. Putin. Mr. Putin is – let me choose my words very carefully – I'm prepared to speak with Mr. Putin if in fact there is an interest in him deciding he's looking for a way to end the war. He hasn't done that yet. If that's the case, in consultation with my French and my NATO friends, I'll be happy to sit down with Putin to see what he wants – has in mind. He hasn't done that yet... I'm prepared, if he's willing to talk, to find out what he's willing to do, but I'll only do it in consultation with my NATO Allies. I'm not going to do it on my own."

Macron added, "Regarding your question and the preconditions or conditions set by the Ukrainian President, I believe that what is important for all of us to look at is that as Ukraine is resisting, suffering from war crimes, attacks on their civilian infrastructure, leading counteroffensive, President Zelenskyy presented a 10-point peace plan... And since he was elected, until May, President Zelenskyy was very much willing to talk and negotiate... So it's only legitimate that President Zelenskyy sets some conditions to talk. We need to work on what could lead to a peace agreement, but it is for him to tell us when the time comes and what the choices of the Ukrainians are. So once this has been said, indeed, I will continue to talk to President Putin. And as a matter of fact, we talked about it this morning with President Biden, because we constantly as well tried to prevent escalation and to get some very concrete results. So, I will talk to him about security and safety of nuclear plants in the areas that are being claimed, including Zaporizhzhia, in particular." Macron reportedly plans to speak with Putin and

urge him to negotiate an end to the war while making it clear that Russia must withdraw its troops from Ukraine and accept Ukrainian sovereignty over the territories it annexed.

Also last Thursday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, speaking in Moscow at a press conference on European security issues, said, “We have never asked for any talks but we have always said that if someone has any interest in a negotiated solution, we are ready to listen.” He noted that, after talks with Ukraine in the Spring, Ukraine proposed that it would be non-aligned, wouldn’t be a member of NATO, and would have its security guaranteed not by NATO but by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council [one of which, of course, is Russia] as well as Germany and Turkey. “We agreed with that,” Lavrov said. “We were ready to agree with them on those principles that they themselves put forward but they were not allowed to do that because the conflict had not yet sufficiently enriched those who oversee it and direct it and this is primarily done by the U.S. and, of course, by the British.”

When asked whether a meeting between Putin and Biden might take place, Lavrov said, “We have repeatedly said – and Putin and I have said too – that we never shun dialogue. When Scholz wanted to come, we let him. We said welcome to Macron when he sought a visit. And anyone who wishes to hold a telephone conversation has the opportunity to do so – our president communicates with everyone without any time constraints.” And referring to the proposals Russia put forward a year ago for an agreement with NATO and a treaty with the U.S., both of which would provide it with security guarantees by prohibiting Ukraine from joining NATO, Lavrov said, “If our western interlocutors realize their mistakes and express their willingness to return to discussing the documents we proposed in December, I think this will be a positive development. I doubt that they will find the strength and reason to do this. However, if this happens, we will certainly be ready to talk to them again.”

When asked Friday about Biden’s comments in regard to possibly talking with Putin, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov made it clear that Russia won’t agree to talks with the U.S. if doing so first requires it to withdraw its troops from Ukraine. “Without a doubt,” he said, “the special military operation continues.” [“Special military operation” is, of course, the term Putin used in announcing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February.] “However,” Peskov said, “President Putin has been and remains open to maintaining contact and holding talks. The use of peaceful diplomatic means is certainly the most preferred way to achieve our goals.” But, he noted, “the U.S. is still reluctant to recognize Russia’s new territories [the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson which it annexed in early October], which surely significantly complicates the search for common ground.” Nevertheless, he said, “the Russian president has been and remains open to talks in order to ensure our interests.”

On Friday, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke by telephone with Putin. According to the Kremlin’s summary of the conversation, which took place at the initiative of the German side, Putin explained in detail Russia’s reasons for its “special military operation” and criticized the West, including Germany, for supplying Ukraine with weapons, training its military, and providing Ukraine with political and financial support – all of which, he said, leads Kyiv to reject any idea of negotiations. He called on Germany to “reconsider its approaches in the context of the Ukrainian developments.” He also said the Russian armed forces “had for a long time

refrained from pinpoint missile strikes at certain targets on the territory of Ukraine, but now such measures have become an unavoidable and inevitable response to Kiev's provocative attacks against Russia's civilian infrastructure, including the Crimean bridge and energy facilities."

On Saturday, after Macron had returned from the U.S., the French television network TF1 ran an interview he had given it while in the U.S. In words certain to upset Ukraine, and perhaps the U.S., he said, "We must think about the security architecture, in which we will live tomorrow. I am talking, in particular, about Russian President Vladimir Putin's words that NATO is approaching Russia's borders and deploys weapons that could threaten it. This issue will be a part of the peace discussions, and we must prepare for what will come after [the war], and think how we could protect our allies and, at the same time, provide Russia with guarantees of its own security, once the sides return to the negotiation table."

Over the past week, with the "contact line" between Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine having remained largely unchanged for the past several weeks and winter coming on, Biden, Macron, Scholz and other leaders have discussed among themselves, and to some extent publicly as well, the possibility of talks between Russia and Ukraine that might eventually bring an end to the war, the conditions that would have to be met in order for such talks to begin, and the terms that would have to be agreed upon in order to end the conflict. Hopefully, for the sake of the Ukrainian people, those talks will begin sooner rather than later. Nevertheless, as the barrage of 70 cruise missiles launched yesterday by Russia in its continuing effort to destroy Ukraine's energy infrastructure demonstrated, the war continues. And as Ukraine's drone attack yesterday on two Russian airfields that are several hundred kilometers inside the border and serve as bases for Tu-95 and Tu-160 strategic bombers demonstrated, as long as the war continues, there is a real risk of further escalation.

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