

**Talks in Riyadh produce important agreement.
But then Russia attaches unacceptable conditions.**



Russian negotiators leaving after 12 hours of talks with U.S. negotiators in Riyadh on Monday.

Following last Tuesday's phone conversation between Presidents Trump and Putin, the White House issued a statement that said, "Today, President Trump and President Putin spoke about the need for peace and a ceasefire in the Ukraine war. Both leaders agreed this conflict needs to end with a lasting peace. They also stressed the need for improved bilateral relations between the U.S. and Russia. The blood and treasure that both Ukraine and Russia have been spending would be better spent on the needs of their people. This conflict should never have started and should have been ended long ago with sincere and good faith peace efforts. The leaders agreed that the movement to peace will begin with an energy and infrastructure ceasefire, as well as technical negotiations on implementation of a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea, full ceasefire and permanent peace. These negotiations will begin immediately in the Middle East."

After the phone conversation, Yuri Ushakov, Putin's chief foreign policy adviser, confirmed he had spoken by phone with U.S. National Security Adviser Mike Waltz regarding "the implementation of a well-known initiative concerning the safety of navigation in the Black Sea" and that Russian and American officials would meet on Monday in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in talks focused on shipping in the Black Sea. (The initiative was the Black Sea Grain Initiative brokered by the U.N. and Türkiye in 2022 that allowed Ukraine to export agricultural goods via the Black Sea despite the war, which began in February 2022. It was terminated by Russia in 2023.) Ushakov said the Russian officials would include Grigory Karasin, a former deputy foreign minister and chair of the Federation Council's committee on international affairs, and Sergei Beseda, an adviser to the director of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the domestic

component of the former KGB. Karasin, it might be noted, was involved in the negotiation of the ceasefire agreements at Minsk in September 2014 and February 2015 pertaining to the conflict between Russian and Ukrainian forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine after Russia's annexation of Crimea and the formation of pro-Russian "People's Republics" in those regions. Beseda is a specialist on Ukraine.

Also last Tuesday, Steve Witkoff, Trump's Middle East Envoy who had traveled to Moscow and had met with Putin for more than three hours to arrange the Trump-Putin phone call, told Fox News the U.S.-Russia talks would resume in Riyadh and that he and National Security Adviser Mike Waltz would participate in the talks. When asked about the cessation of strikes on energy infrastructure and targets in the Black Sea, Witkoff said, "I think you're going to see in Saudi Arabia on Monday some real progress, particularly as it affects a Black Sea ceasefire on ships between both countries. And from that you'll naturally gravitate to a full-on shooting ceasefire. I am certainly hopeful that the Ukrainians will agree to it. We have some details to work out, of course, but that will begin on Sunday."

Last Wednesday, Trump and President Zelenskyy spoke by phone and Trump briefed him on his conversation with Putin, after which the White House issued a statement from Secretary of State Rubio and National Security Adviser Waltz which said they had "a fantastic phone conversation." The statement said Zelenskyy had thanked Trump for the "productive start for the work of the Ukrainian and American teams in Jeddah on March 11" and had thanked him for the support, especially the Javelin missiles that Trump was the first to provide. Importantly, the statement said, "the two leaders also agreed on a partial ceasefire against energy" and that "technical teams will meet in Saudi Arabia in the coming days to discuss broadening the ceasefire to the Black Sea on the way to a full ceasefire. They agreed this could be the first step toward the full end of the war and ensuring security. President Zelenskyy was grateful for the President's leadership in this effort and reiterated the willingness to adopt a full ceasefire." In the conversation, Trump also "discussed Ukraine's electrical supply and nuclear power plants. He said that the U.S. could be very helpful in running those plants with its electricity and utility expertise." And he said, "American ownership of those plants would be the best protection for that infrastructure and support for Ukrainian energy infrastructure." Zelenskyy also thanked the President for continuing to push humanitarian concerns, including the exchange of POWs. He noted they had just had a successful exchange and thanked the President for his leadership. Trump also asked Zelenskyy about the children who had gone missing from Ukraine during the war, including the ones that had been abducted and promised to work closely with both parties to help make sure those children were returned home. They agreed all parties must continue the effort to make a ceasefire work. The presidents noted the positive work of their advisors and representatives, especially Secretary Rubio, National Security Advisor Waltz, Special Envoy Kellogg, and others, and instructed their teams

to move ahead with the technical issues related to implementing and broadening the partial ceasefire.

Last Thursday, Zelenskyy said Ukrainian officials would meet with U.S. officials in Saudi Arabia while the latter were there for the U.S.-Russia talks. He said, “Our technical teams will be there. As I understand it, the structure will be either a meeting between Ukraine and America, then America and Russia. Or there will be some shuttle diplomacy as our American colleagues would say.” Later Thursday, Zelenskyy said Ukrainian and U.S. officials would meet separately in Saudi Arabia and hopefully make progress on a proposed pause in Russian and Ukrainian strikes on energy facilities.

On Tuesday following the U.S.-Ukraine and U.S.-Russia talks, the White House released two nearly identical statements, one on the outcomes of the U.S. and Ukraine Expert Groups on the Black Sea, the other on the outcomes of the U.S. and Russia Expert Groups on the Black Sea that met in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on March 23-25, 2025. (The “expert groups” were the government officials of each country who met with those of the other country.) Both statements began with, “In line with presidential-level discussions between President Donald J. Trump and President Vladimir Putin [or President Volodymyr Zelenskyy], the United States facilitated bilateral technical-level talks with the Russian [or Ukrainian] delegation March 23-25 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.”

Following the introductions, both statements listed five identical agreements between the U.S. and Russia expert groups and between the U.S. and Ukraine expert groups. The U.S. and Russia and U.S. and Ukraine expert groups reached identical conclusions on four of five issues. Both pairs of expert groups 1) “agreed to ensure safe navigation, eliminate the use of force, and prevent the use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea; 2) “agreed to develop measures for implementing President Trump’s and President Putin’s[Zelenskyy’s] agreement to ban strikes against energy facilities of Russia and Ukraine;” 3) said they “welcome the good offices of third countries with a view toward supporting the implementation of the energy and maritime agreements;” and 4) said they “will continue working toward achieving a durable and lasting peace.” The U.S. and Russia expert groups also agreed “the U.S. will help restore Russia’s access to the world market for agricultural and fertilizer exports, lower maritime insurance costs, and enhance access to ports and payment systems for such transactions.” The U.S.-Ukraine expert groups also agreed “the U.S. remains committed to helping achieve the exchange of prisoners of war, the release of civilian detainees, and the return of forcibly transferred Ukrainian children.”

It should be noted, however, that some qualifications in regard to the U.S.-Russia expert groups’ agreement appeared Tuesday on Putin’s presidential site in regard to implementation of the Black Sea Initiative. Putin’s site states the agreed clauses pertaining to the implementation of the Black Sea Initiative, which includes ensuring safe navigation, eliminating the use of force, and preventing the use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea while adopting appropriate control

measures by inspecting such vessels, “will come into force following: the removal of sanctions imposed on Rosselkhozbank (Russian Agricultural Bank) and other financial institutions involved in ensuring international food and fertilizer trade (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers, their reconnection to SWIFT [Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication], and opening of relevant correspondent accounts; the removal of restrictions imposed on trade finance operations; the removal of sanctions imposed on companies producing and exporting food (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers, as well as restrictions banning insurance companies from working with food cargoes (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers; the removal of restrictions on servicing ships in ports and sanctions against ships flying the flag of Russia, if they are involved in food trade (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers; the removal of restrictions on supplies to the Russian Federation of agricultural machinery and other goods used in the production of food (including fish and fish products) and fertilizers.” Putin’s site also noted that the Russia-U.S. agreement to develop measures for implementing the agreement to ban strikes against energy facilities of Russia and Ukraine applies for 30 days starting on March 18, 2025 with an option to extend the agreement or to withdraw from it in the event of non-compliance by either party. Yesterday, a spokesperson for the European Commission made it clear the EU will lift its sanctions on Russia, including those of its financial institutions such as the Russian Agricultural Bank, only if and when Russia withdraws all of its troops from Ukraine. The spokesperson said, “The end of the Russian unprovoked and unjustified aggression in Ukraine and unconditional withdrawal of all Russian military forces from the entire territory of Ukraine would be one of the main preconditions to amend or lift sanctions. Russia must now demonstrate genuine political will to end its illegal and unprovoked war of aggression.”

But notwithstanding the caveats, exceptions, and unacceptable quid pro quos, the summary on Putin’s site does conclude with some hopeful words: “Russia and the U.S. will continue working toward achieving a durable and lasting peace.” The Riyadh talks obviously didn’t end the war. But the agreements between Russia, Ukraine, and the U.S. to ensure safe navigation, eliminate the use of force and use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea; and continue working toward a durable and lasting peace are important. And perhaps equally important, the process by which the U.S., Russia, and Ukraine reached these agreements suggests a procedure by which Russia and Ukraine, with American assistance, may someday actually achieve a durable and lasting peace.

David R. Cameron
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