Despite Riyadh agreements, Russia's war against Ukraine continues

British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation as of Friday.

After the talks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia between Russian, Ukrainian, and American officials on March 23-25, there was some reason to think there might soon be a ceasefire in the war in Ukraine. But President Putin rejected some of the conditions accompanying the proposed ceasefire and so the war continued last week. Over the seven days from last Sunday through Saturday, the Russian forces conducted a total of 1,258 attacks against the Ukrainian forces defending the cities and towns in eastern Ukraine and holding part of Russia's Kursk region. As in previous weeks, the greatest number of Russian attacks last week – 468 over the seven days – were conducted against the Ukrainian forces defending Pokrovsk, a transit hub that, if taken, would open a pathway for the Russian forces northward toward Kostyantynivka, Kramatorsk, and Sloviansk, and indeed all of the territory of Donetsk region still held by Ukraine.

While the war continued last week, talks were underway in an effort to persuade Russia to accept the terms agreed at Riyadh. But as the week ended, there was no evidence that Putin would withdraw the conditions he subsequently attached to the terms agreed at Riyadh. The talks produced four identical agreements between Ukrainian and American officials and between Russian and American officials. Both pairs of officials "agreed to ensure safe navigation, eliminate the use of force, and prevent the use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea"; "agreed to develop measures for implementing the Presidents' agreement to ban strikes against energy facilities of Russia and Ukraine"; said they "welcome the good offices of third countries with a view toward supporting the implementation of the energy and maritime agreements;" and said they "will continue working toward achieving a durable and lasting peace." The American and Russian officials 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 American and Ukrainian officials 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."

But on March 25, a statement on Putin's presidential site said the agreed clauses pertaining to the implementation of the Black Sea Initiative and to U.S. assistance in restoring Russia's access to the world market for agricultural and fertilizer exports and enhancing its access to ports and payment systems for such transactions "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 said that "Russia and the U.S. agreed to develop measures for implementing the agreement between the two countries' presidents to ban strikes against energy facilities of Russia and Ukraine 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."

The next day, the EU said it will lift its sanctions on Russia, including those on its financial institutions including the Russian Agricultural Bank, only if and when Russia withdraws all of its troops from Ukraine. Anitta Hipper, the lead spokesperson for EU Foreign & Security Policy, 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." To further complicate the issue, on March 28 Putin said Russia could discuss with the U.S., Europe, and others "under the auspices of the UN, the possibility of establishing a transitional administration in Ukraine. What for? To organize a democratic presidential election that would result in the coming to power of a competent government that would have the confidence of the people and then begin negotiations with these authorities on a peace agreement and sign legitimate documents."

Last Sunday, Trump said he was “very angry” at Putin about the conditions he attached to the ceasefire and his call for elections in Ukraine to replace Zelenskyy. Trump said he would speak to Putin about that but was subsequently advised not to do so since Putin undoubtedly would have insisted that Trump agree to at least some, and perhaps all, of the conditions he had specified as necessary for Russia’s acceptance of the ceasefire. Meanwhile, in an interview with the Russian Foreign Ministry’s journal *International Affairs* published last Tuesday, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said, “We have not heard a signal from Trump to Kyiv to end the war. All that exists today is an attempt to find some kind of a scheme that would first allow us to achieve a ceasefire, as the Americans think of it….We take the models and solutions proposed by the Americans very seriously, but we also cannot accept them as they are now... As far as we can see, there is no place in them today for our main demand today, namely to solve the problems related to the root causes of this conflict. It is completely absent, and that must be overcome. We certainly have a deeply and carefully thought-out set of our own priorities and approaches to this topic, which is being worked out, including by our negotiating team at the recent talks with the Americans in Riyadh." For Russia, the “root causes” are clearly Ukraine’s continuing ambition to become a member of NATO and its insistence that all of the territory taken by Russia in its regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson be returned to Ukraine. All four have been annexed and formally integrated into the Russian Federation.

Ryabkov is an important figure in Russia’s Foreign Ministry given his responsibility for Russia-U.S. relations. He’s especially well-known for a comment he made after an eight-hour meeting with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in Geneva on Jan. 10, 2022. In that meeting, Sherman and Ryabkov discussed two documents he had given to Dr. Karen Donfried, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, in Moscow on Dec. 15, 2021, a week after a two-hour phone conversation between Presidents Biden and Putin on Dec. 7, 2021. One of the documents was a proposed U.S.-Russia treaty on security guarantees and the other was a proposed Russia-NATO agreement on security. After meeting with Sherman, Ryabkov said in a press conference, “The negotiations around Russia’s security proposal were very difficult, long, very professional, deep and concrete, without any attempts to gloss over or avoid any difficult points. We were left with the impression that the American side was taking Russia’s proposal very seriously.” But he also said that Russia’s demands remained unchanged: “Unfortunately, we have a great disparity in our principled approaches to this. The U.S. and Russia in some ways have opposite views on what needs to be done. For us, it's absolutely mandatory to make sure that Ukraine never – never ever – becomes a member of NATO. We do not trust the other side.…We need iron-clad, waterproof, bulletproof, legally binding guarantees – not assurances, not safeguards, guarantees – of never ever becoming a member of NATO, with all the words ‘never ever becoming member of NATO’. It’s a matter of Russian national security.” Sherman responded, “We

will not allow anyone to slam closed NATO's open-door policy." Soon thereafter, the U.S. rejected the proposed treaty and NATO rejected the proposed agreement.

On Wednesday, Keith Kellogg, since last November President Trump's Special Envoy for Russia and Ukraine, said, "Trump is frustrated with both Zelenskyy and Putin as well, but we're going to get there, and I think what we need to do is stay focused and stay on point to get where we want to go with ceasefire. Because what we want to have is a comprehensive 30-day ceasefire. Once you get there, it will be very hard to restart the war again. I really believe we are on the precipice of getting to a ceasefire, but both sides will have to come to some type of accommodation." But Russia still demands, as Ryabkov put it four years ago in Geneva, "iron-clad, waterproof, bulletproof, legally binding guarantees – not assurances, not safeguards, guarantees" – that Ukraine will "never ever" become a member of NATO. Russia hasn't received those guarantees and there's no reason to think it will receive them. And so Russia's war against Ukraine continues, with no end in sight.

On Friday, following a meeting of the foreign ministers of the NATO member states in Brussels, Secretary of State Rubio was asked about "the American assessment of the conditions that Russia put forward regarding the Black Sea ceasefire talks" and also about what the British and French foreign ministers had said that morning - that Putin was "dragging his feet." In response to the latter question, Rubio said, "Maybe – I mean he might be. We don't know yet. We're going to find out fairly soon. I mean, look, we are – here's what the President wanted to do. He wants to end this war…. Is it possible to end this war on terms that are acceptable, obviously, to both sides? Because you can't end a war unless both sides agree. And that's what we're in the process of finding out. We will know soon enough – in a matter of weeks, not months – whether Russia is serious about peace or not. I hope they are."

Then, referring to a visit to Washington last week by Kirill Dmitriev, the head of Russia's sovereign wealth fund and a Kremlin envoy, Rubio said, "I had a chance to sit down with him. He met with others [most notably, Steve Witkoff, who had met with Putin for four hours in Moscow last month and had invited Dmitriev to Washington]. He'll take some messages back. And the message is: The U.S. needs to know whether you're serious or not about peace. Ultimately, Putin will have to make that decision; the Russian Federation will have to make that decision. I think the Ukrainians have shown a willingness to enter, for example, into a complete ceasefire to create space for negotiation. At some point here fairly soon – not six months from now – the Russians and Putin will have to make a decision about whether they're serious for peace or not, and I hope they are serious.…The Russians know our position in terms of wanting to end the war, and we will know from their answers very soon whether they are serious about proceeding with real peace or whether it's a delay tactic. If it's a delay tactic, the President's not interested in that. If this is dragging things out, President Trump's not going to fall into the trap of endless negotiations about negotiations. We will know soon

enough whether or not Russia is serious about peace. If they are, that will be great. Then we can move towards peace. If they're not, then we'll have to re-evaluate where we stand and what we do moving forward about it….At some point here fairly soon – not six months from now – the Russians and Putin will have to make a decision about whether they're serious for peace or not, and I hope they are serious….The Russians know our position in terms of wanting to end the war, and we will know from their answers very soon whether they are serious about proceeding with real peace or whether it's a delay tactic. If it's a delay tactic, the President's not interested in that. If this is dragging things out, President Trump's not going to fall into the trap of endless negotiations about negotiations. We will know soon enough whether or not Russia is serious about peace. If they are, that will be great. Then we can move towards peace. If they're not, then we'll have to re-evaluate where we stand and what we do moving forward about it… Their actions – not their words, their actions – will determine whether they're serious or not, and we intend to find that out sooner rather than later… If peace is real, we will know soon enough. If they're not interested in peace, we will know soon enough, and we'll make decisions on the basis – I hope they are real. There are some promising signs; there are some troubling signs. It's not going to be easy. No one ever said this would be easy, but we're going to find out sooner rather than later. And let's just say I'm hopeful, I remain hopeful, I need to be hopeful that peace is possible and that the Russians are serious about peace. We want them to be serious about peace, and hopefully they are, but we'll know sooner rather than later."

Meanwhile, anticipating that sooner or later there will be a ceasefire, President Macron and Prime Minister Starmer, the co-leaders of the "coalition of the willing," following up on the March 27 meeting of the leaders of the 31 governments participating in the coalition and the continuing planning meetings of the governments' senior military officers, arranged for their military chiefs – Gen. Thierry Burkhard, Chief of the General Staff of the French Armed Forces, and Adm. Sir Tony Radkin, Chief of the Staff of the British Armed Forces – to meet in Kyiv last Friday with the top leadership of the Ukraine Armed Forces to discuss the future deployment of a "deterrent force" to assist the Ukrainian military in protecting the country and preventing a resumption of Russian military operations if and when a ceasefire is agreed.

In the meantime, the war continues with no end in sight.

David R. Cameron
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