

Second round of Russia-Ukraine talks yesterday in Istanbul



Russian and Ukrainian negotiators at yesterday's meeting in Istanbul.

In their meeting in Istanbul on May 16, the Russian and Ukrainian delegations agreed that each side would return to the other side 1,000 prisoners of war over three days on May 23-25. Despite the fact that the war continued both on the ground in eastern Ukraine and the Russian region of Kursk and in the air in the form of missiles and drones, the exchange took place as scheduled. Attention immediately turned to the preparation of a memorandum pertaining to a possible future peace agreement that President Putin had mentioned after his two-hour phone conversation with President Trump on May 19.

In speaking with reporters after the conversation, Putin said he had agreed that “Russia would propose and is ready to engage with the Ukrainian side on drafting a memorandum regarding a potential future peace agreement. This would include outlining a range of provisions, such as the principles for settlement, the timeframe for a possible peace deal, and other matters, including a potential temporary ceasefire, should the necessary agreements be reached. Contacts among participants of the Istanbul meeting and talks have resumed, which gives reason to believe that we are on the right track overall.”

On May 23, speaking after four days in which he said Ukraine had launched almost 800 combat drones against civilian targets, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was asked if Russia remained committed to a peaceful settlement. He said, “Yes, we remain committed to a peaceful resolution....To reiterate, we are committed to the agreements recently reached by the Russian and Ukrainian delegations in Istanbul.... We are also working hard on the second part of the agreement, which involves each party preparing a draft document outlining the

terms for achieving a durable, lasting, and comprehensive resolution. Once the prisoner exchange is completed, we will be ready to present our draft to the Ukrainian side. The Russian side is in the process of finalizing this document...I am not sure about the other party. But our work is at an advanced stage. In any case, we are going to give the memorandum to the Ukrainians, as agreed. We expect them to do the same. At present, the paramount task is to prepare a robust peace treaty that ensures a long-term, stable, and equitable peace – one that creates no security threats to any party.”

Last Wednesday, Lavrov announced that Russia had drafted a memorandum setting out its views in regard to a potential peace agreement and would present it to the Ukrainian representatives in talks that would resume in Istanbul yesterday. And yesterday, the two teams of negotiators – the Russian team headed, as on May 16, by presidential aide Vladimir Medinsky, the Ukrainian team headed, as on May 16, by Defense Minister Rustem Umerov – met at the Çırağan Palace Kempinski, a five-star hotel in Istanbul.

The full text of both memorandums became known soon after the meeting – the Ukrainian memorandum released yesterday by Suspilne, the National Public Broadcasting Company of Ukraine; the Russian memorandum in photos published by TASS after yesterday’s meeting. The Ukrainian memorandum had four main provisions: 1) A complete and unconditional ceasefire in the air, on land, and at sea; 2) Several confidence-building measures, including the return of all Ukrainian children, all civilians, and the exchange of all prisoners of war; 3) A permanent peace agreement in which Ukraine receives reliable security guarantees and maintains its territorial integrity and its ability to join any security alliance, including NATO; and 4) Continued negotiations after June 2, continued work on confidence-building measures, and preparation for a future Zelenskyy-Putin meeting.

The Russian memorandum had three sections. The first section defined its demands for a final long-term peace agreement, the second section proposed two sets of pre-conditions Russia would accept as part of a ceasefire, and the third section outlined Russia’s preferred timeline for negotiations. The first section called for international recognition of Russia’s occupation of all of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions as well as its annexation of Crimea, and the complete withdrawal of Ukrainian forces from those regions. It also calls for an indefinite Ukrainian commitment to neutrality, no membership in any military alliance and no future foreign military deployments or infrastructure, termination of all of Ukraine’s existing security agreements, a permanent ban on Ukraine having nuclear weapons, and protection of the rights, freedoms, and interests of Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine. The second section of the Russian memorandum demands that Ukraine and Russia pursue one of two paths to a ceasefire – either by a complete withdrawal of Ukraine from the unoccupied areas of the four regions up to some distance beyond the regional boundaries or by

Ukraine agreeing to ban redeployment of all its units except as part of withdrawals from the four regions; end all Ukrainian efforts to rebuild its military, begin demobilization, end martial law, organize presidential elections within 100 days of ending martial law, elect a new government, terminate all foreign military assistance, including all intelligence, and ban all foreign military deployments in Ukraine. The third section calls for Russia and Ukraine to sign a longer-term ceasefire agreement after exchanging the bodies of dead service members and a two-to-three-day general ceasefire to retrieve bodies from the battlefield. The memorandum demands that Ukraine completely withdraw from Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions within 30 days after the ceasefire takes effect and that Ukraine elect a new government before Russia and Ukraine sign a formal peace agreement.

Yesterday's meeting lasted only a little more than an hour and neither side agreed to any of the provisions put forward in the other side's memorandum. But as Ukrainian Defense Minister Umerov noted after the meeting, building on their success in the three-day exchange of 1,000 prisoners of war, the two sides did agree to exchange on an all-for-all basis prisoners of war who are seriously wounded or seriously sick. And they also agreed to an all-for-all exchange of prisoners of war who are 18 to 25. President Zelenskyy later said Ukraine had asked Russia to also return 400 children taken by the Russian forces but the Russian side refused and said it would consider returning 10.

No date has yet been set for the next meeting of the negotiating teams and the first order of business for both sides will be to study the memorandum put forward by the other side and decide which provisions, if any, might be worth discussing in the next meeting of the negotiating teams in mid-to-late June. In the meantime, the war will continue with no end in sight.

David R. Cameron
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