Putin and Witkoff meet in Moscow, discuss Trump's Friday deadline

President Putin and President Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff meeting in Moscow today.

On July 14, speaking at the White House alongside NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, President Trump expressed his mounting frustration with President Putin, despite their several phone conversations: "I always hang up and say, 'Well, that was a nice phone call.' And then missiles are launched into Kyiv or some other city. And after that happens three or four times, you say, Talk doesn't mean anything." Trump said that if Russia didn't agree to a ceasefire within "about 50 days," i.e., by September, he would impose "very severe tariffs," including 100 percent secondary tariffs on countries that purchase Russian oil.

Speaking alongside British Prime Minister Keir Starmer in Scotland on July 28, Trump reiterated his disappointment with Putin and said he was going to reduce the amount of time he would give him to agree to a ceasefire and avoid the tariffs: "I'm disappointed in President Putin. I spoke to President Putin a lot. Got along with him very well. We thought we had that settled numerous times, and then President Putin goes out and starts launching rockets into some city like Kyiv and kills a lot of people in a nursing home or whatever. You have bodies lying all over the street, and I say that's not the way to do it. So we'll see what happens with that." He said he would probably formally announce a revision of his 50-day deadline "tonight or tomorrow." In response to a question, he said, "Yeah, I'm going to reduce that 50 days that I gave him to a lesser number. I'm going to make a new deadline of about 10 or 12 days from today. There's no reason to wait. I want to be generous, but we just don't see any progress being made…. You would think, based on common sense, you would think he'd want to make a deal. I guess we'll find out."

The next day, speaking with reporters on Air Force One as he returned from Scotland, Trump said Putin had 10 days to agree to a ceasefire with Ukraine or face severe tariffs from the U.S.: “Ten days from today. And then, you know, we’re going to put on tariffs and stuff. I don’t know if it’s going to affect Russia, because he [Putin} wants to, obviously, probably keep the war going. But we’re going to put on tariffs and the various things that you put on [e.g., sanctions]. It may or may not affect them, but it could.” The new deadline for Russia to agree to a ceasefire with Ukraine is this Friday, August 8.

With the clock ticking toward the Friday deadline, last night Steve Witkoff, President Trump’s envoy, flew to Moscow and today he met for three hours with Putin. Witkoff has met with Putin several times and by all accounts they have a good and mutually respectful relationship. They met for the first time in February and discussed the possible release of Marc Fogel, an American teaching at the Anglo-American School in Moscow who had been arrested and subsequently imprisoned for entering Russia in 2021 with 17 grams of medical cannabis. Fogel was released and left Russia with Witkoff. On April 11, Witkoff and Putin met again at the Presidential Library in St. Petersburg and, in a conversation that lasted for five hours, discussed Russia’s conditions for a ceasefire in the war in Ukraine. They also met in Moscow two weeks later, on April 25, and discussed for three hours Russia’s conditions for agreeing to a possible ceasefire.

Neither Putin nor Trump has released a summary of today’s meeting. But Yuri Ushakov, Putin’s foreign policy adviser, did say that “a very useful and constructive conversation took place.” He said Putin and Witkoff had discussed the war and the prospects for the development of strategic cooperation between the two governments. Russia said it would not release a detailed summary of the conversation until Witkoff is able to report back to Trump.

Yesterday, while Witkoff was preparing to fly to Moscow, Trump told a reporter he would raise the tariff on goods coming from India “very substantially over the next 24 hours, because they’re buying Russian oil, they’re fueling the war machine.” And notwithstanding Witkoff’s meeting with Putin, today Trump issued an executive order imposing an additional 25 percent tariff on top of the existing 25 percent tariff on goods imported from India. In today’s Executive Order, he said, “I find that the Government of India is currently directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil.” India, not surprisingly, objected strenuously to the decision; an official spokesperson for India’s Ministry of External Affairs said, “We have already made clear our position on these issues, including the fact that our imports are based on market factors and done with the overall objective of ensuring the energy security of 1.4 billion people of India. We reiterate that these actions are unfair, unjustified and unreasonable.” In the Executive Order, Trump also directs members of his administration “to determine whether any other country is directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil” and, if so, determine “whether and to what extent I should take action as to that country.”

David R. Cameron
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