After talks in Davos, Witkoff & Kushner meet again with Putin and American, Ukrainian & Russian officials meet in Abu Dhabi.

President Putin & U.S. Presidential Envoy Witkoff in Moscow.

As government leaders gathered last week in Davos for the annual World Economic Forum, the Swiss town became the site of several meetings of American, European, Ukrainian, and Russian officials aimed at ending Russia's continuing war against Ukraine. The talks between American, Ukrainian, and Russian officials continued last Friday and Saturday in Abu Dhabi and will resume there next Sunday. As in Davos and Abu Dhabi, the two most difficult issues were and remain territory and security guarantees – specifically, how much, if any, of the Ukrainian territory now held by Russian forces will be returned to Ukraine and which countries, and with what forces, will guarantee the security of Ukraine.

At Davos, Ukrainian officials met last Tuesday with the national security advisers of the UK, France and Germany, after which Rustem Umerov, the Secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, said, "We synchronized our approaches to security guarantees and further diplomatic efforts. Ahead are further meetings with partners on security guarantees, economic development, and the recovery of Ukraine." He noted that Kyrylo Budanov, the head of President Zelenskyy's office, and Davyd Arakhamia, the leader of the members of the Rada representing Servant of the People, President Zelenskyy's party, participated in the meeting. Also last Tuesday, Steve Witkoff, President Trump's envoy, and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, met with Kirill Dmitriev, Russia's Special Presidential Representative of Investment and Economic Cooperation with Foreign Countries and CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund and adviser to Putin, for two hours in a meeting that Dmitriev

subsequently said was “constructive” and Witkoff said was “very positive.” Following that meeting, last Wednesday Putin announced he would be meeting with Witkoff and Kushner.in Moscow on Thursday and would be discussing with them a settlement in the war.

Last Thursday, President Trump spoke with President Zelenskyy and subsequently said, “I think the meeting with President Zelenskyy was good. It’s an ongoing process.” When asked what his message to Putin would be, he said, “The war has to end.” Witkoff, meanwhile, met with the Ukrainian officials in Davos and subsequently said, “If both sides want to solve this, we’re going to get it solved. I think we’ve made a lot of progress.” He said he and Kushner would be going to Moscow that evening for talks with Putin and then would go to Abu Dhabi for military-to-military talks and discussion of an economic package for Ukraine. President Zelenskyy likewise said representatives of the U.S., Russia and Ukraine would be meeting in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates.

On Thursday night, Witkoff, accompanied by Kushner and U.S. Presidential advisor Josh Gruenbaum, met with Putin at the Kremlin for approximately four hours. Putin was accompanied in the meeting by his foreign policy aide Yury Ushakov and Dmitriev. Early Friday morning, Ushakov issued a commentary on the meeting between Putin and Witkoff that was posted on Putin’s presidential site. In it, he said: “The talks went on for approximately four hours and they were exceptionally in-depth, constructive, and, I should say, constituted an extremely frank and heart-to-heart conversation. As you know, our counterparts arrived from Davos after taking part in a series of events together with President Donald Trump, including those concerning the Ukraine settlement. These meetings literally lasted until it was time for them to leave for Moscow.”

Continuing, Ushakov said, “They offered what can be called their first-hand accounts of these events and shared their impressions, as well as their latest thoughts and assessments regarding the meeting between the President of the United States and Zelensky in Davos. Both Mr Witkoff and Mr Kushner were present at that meeting. They also offered their perspective on other contacts they had in December and January in Mar-a-Lago, Florida, and in several European capitals. Overall, I can say that the focus of the meeting between the President of Russia and US representatives was to obtain information resulting from the contacts the United States had with the Ukrainians and Europeans in order to define further steps between our two countries.”

“In fact, an agreement on the next step in this direction has been reached. There was an agreement to hold the first meeting of a trilateral working group on security matters as soon as today, this Friday, January 23, in Abu Dhabi, with Russia, the United States, and Ukraine. At the same time, Abu Dhabi will also serve as a venue for a meeting of the heads of a bilateral working group on economic matters. This is a bilateral group formed by Russia and the United States, and their respective heads are Kirill Dmitriev and Steve Witkoff.’

“We have already formed our negotiating team on security matters, and it will be on its way to the Emirates in a matter of hours. The group includes senior officials from the Defence Ministry, led by Chief of the Main Directorate of the General Staff Admiral Kostyukov. I will also tell you that the President of Russia has just given our delegation specific instructions taking into consideration all aspects of today’s conversation with the United States. Importantly, the participants in the conversation between the President of Russia and the Americans reaffirmed the fact that bringing about a lasting settlement would be unlikely without addressing the territorial issue based on the formula as agreed in Anchorage. Vladimir Putin has emphasized Russia’s sincere commitment to settling the Ukraine crisis by political and diplomatic means. But as long as this is not the case, Russia will persist in its consistent effort to achieve the special military operation’s goals on the battlefield, where Russia’s Armed Forces hold the strategic initiative.”

Ushakov also noted that, while exchanging views on President Trump’s idea of a Board of Peace, “we emphasized our readiness to transfer $1 billion to its budget from Russia’s assets frozen under the previous US administration. The remaining part of the Russian assets frozen in the US can be used for rebuilding the territories damaged during the hostilities after a peace agreement is signed between Russia and Ukraine.”

Ushakov’s summary concluded with these words: “Returning to today’s meeting of the working group on security, I should note that the Americans have done a great deal to prepare it, and they hope that it will be a success and will open new opportunities for progress on the entire range of issues related to putting an end to the conflict and reaching an agreement on a peaceful settlement. Overall, as I have said, the meeting that has just ended in the Kremlin was useful in every sense both for us and for the American side. It was decided at the meeting that the Russian and American sides will maintain close contacts with each other both on Ukraine and on other issues.”

On Friday and Saturday, U.S., Russian, and Ukrainian officials met in Abu Dhabi for a new round of peace talks. The meeting was the first time representatives of all three countries had met together for talks which focused on the conditions for a ceasefire; possible security guarantees for Ukraine after a ceasefire; control of and share of the electricity produced by the Zaporizhzhia nuclear facility, which has six reactors and is the largest nuclear plant in Europe; and, in particular, the territorial issue. – meaning Russia’s insistence that it retain most if not all of the territory it now holds in the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson and Ukraine’s insistence that the Russian forces withdraw from all of the territory it now holds in Ukraine and return it to Ukraine. The problem, of course, is that Russia not only holds portions of those regions but has formally annexed them and made them part of the Russian Federation. The talks will continue next Sunday. And in the meantime, the war goes on, with no end in sight.

David R. Cameron
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