With trilateral talks on hold, U.S. & Ukraine officials talk again

Tuesday's UK Defence Intelligence update on the battlefield situation in Ukraine.

As Tuesday's British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine indicates, the Russian forces continue to attack in the area south of Sudzha and just east of Sumy and at a number of points along the contact line between the Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine, from the area south of Kupiansk to the area south of Siversk toward the cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk in the northern portion of Donetsk region, toward the area around Pokrovsk in the western portion of that region, and at a number of other locations along the contact line between the forces, including the area near the junction of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions of southeastern Ukraine. And as they do, the Ukrainian forces continue to attack at the southeastern corner of the region of Dnipropetrovsk adjacent to the northeastern corner of the region of Zaporizhzhia.

While the Russian forces continue to attack the Ukrainian forces defending the cities and towns of northeastern and eastern Ukraine, Russia also continues its air war against the people of Ukraine. On Sunday night, President Zelenskyy announced that in the week of March 22-29, Russia fired 3,000 drones, 1,450 guided aerial bombs and 40 missiles at Ukraine. In the evening of March 23 and early morning of March 24, for example, Russia fired 392 drones and 34 missiles, including 12 Iskander ballistic missiles and 22 cruise missiles, at targets in Kyiv, Lviv, and other cities, in the process hitting many apartment buildings and killing or injuring a number of civilians. The attack continued throughout the day on Mar. 24 with another 556 drones fired from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. in what was the largest drone and missile attack thus far in the war. The drone and missile attacks have continued every day since then.

In January and February, talks took place in Abu Dhabi between delegations of American, Ukrainian, and Russian officials, and in late February a delegation of Ukrainian officials headed by Rustem Umerov, the Secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, met in Geneva with an American delegation headed by presidential envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner and discussed the details of a possible postwar recovery plan for Ukraine as well as preparations for another trilateral meeting of the American, Ukrainian, and Russian negotiating teams. Another trilateral meeting was planned for Abu Dhabi but was subsequently postponed because of the ongoing war in the Middle East.

Following a conversation with President Trump two weeks ago, President Zelenskyy said there was some reason to believe that Russia would like to resume the trilateral format of negotiations in the near future and considers the current pause in the talks temporary, and said he was sending part of the Ukrainian negotiating team to the U.S. for discussions in Florida. Those discussions took place in Miami on March 21 and 22. The American delegation included, as in previous meetings, Witkoff and Kushner, as well as White House Senior Advisor Josh Gruenbaum and State Department Senior Policy Advisor Chris Curren. As in previous meetings, Umerov headed the Ukrainian delegation.

Following the meeting on March 21, Witkoff said in a post on X that "Today in Florida, U.S. and Ukrainian delegations held constructive meetings as part of ongoing mediation efforts, with discussions focused on narrowing and resolving remaining items to move closer to a comprehensive peace agreement. We welcome the continued engagement toward resolving the outstanding issues, recognizing its importance in broader global stability." The meeting continued for a second day on March 22, after which Umerov said in a post on Telegram, "Another stage of talks with the American side has concluded in Florida as part of the process aimed at achieving sustainable peace. During the meetings, the main focus was on reliable security guarantees and the humanitarian track, in particular the exchange and return of our citizens. We have made progress in aligning positions and further narrowing the circle of unresolved issues." In his evening address that day, President Zelenskyy said he had received a report on the discussions and added, "There are signals that a continuation of prisoner-of-war exchanges is possible, and this would be really very good news and confirmation that diplomacy is working."

On Tuesday President Zelenskyy announced that Ukrainian and American officials would talk again yesterday in a video format and that he would join the conversation along with NATO Secretary General Rutte. He said Umerov would take part from the Ukrainian side and that Witkoff and Kushner would participate on the American side. The conversation would focus, he said, on "where we are now" and preparations for a possible trilateral meeting that would include Russian officials. He added that he would ask the U.S. officials to assist in conveying a proposed "Easter energy truce" as well as a further exchange of prisoners-of-war to the Russian officials. He said, "There have

been no signals from the Russian side to us. At least, we have not received any." But, he said, "I will definitely pass this on to the U.S… I will ask them to convey this proposal to the Russian side."

Yesterday, following the meeting, President Zelenskyy provided an update on his site: "Today, we had a detailed discussion with Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, joined by Lindsey Graham and Mark Rutte. We focused on how to strengthen diplomacy, what steps are possible, and also on security guarantees and the involvement of Europeans. It was a positive conversation. I want to thank you, Steve, Jared, Lindsey, and Mark. We agreed to strengthen security guarantees, and I have already instructed our team to promptly update the documents so that the security guarantees for Ukraine are strong, the prospects for post-war reconstruction are real, and everything is doable. Everything must be kept current. We see how the world is changing – how much can shift in a single moment. This concerns both alliances and security challenges alike. Ukraine must receive reliable security: this is the main task. I am grateful that the U.S. President's envoys hear us and are ready to work together to find the right compromises, the right steps, and the right solutions. The key lies in how and what all of us discuss with Russia, and in how the documents are prepared, particularly those on security guarantees. So that Ukrainians clearly understand how partners will respond in the event of renewed Russian aggression, and what will actually deter Russia from aggression. We need strong, shared positions, and Ukraine's contribution to this strength is unquestionable. We continue working with America. I thank everyone who is helping us. I expect that the teams will work substantively in the coming days so that we can all feel progress. A trilateral format is important – a leaders' format – all of this is necessary."

Today the war continues and no doubt will continue until Russia and Ukraine reach an agreement on what is clearly the most difficult issue between the two sides – the territorial issue: How much of the Ukrainian territory that Russia now holds will be returned to Ukraine? Russia, of course, wants to keep most if not all of what it has taken, especially the two regions of the Donbas. Ukraine, of course, wants all of its territory returned. Nevertheless, there is at least some reason to think that, despite their continuing disagreement over the territorial issue, the trilateral talks will resume in the near future. An "Easter energy truce" would be a good start in moving toward a resumption of those talks.

David R. Cameron
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