As the war continues, Witkoff & Kushner going to Moscow & Kyiv

UK Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine.

Since mid-June, the map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine that has been periodically prepared and released by the British Defence Intelligence service has remained entirely unchanged. As a result, the most recent map of the battlefield situation, issued August 28, is identical in every respect to the maps issued by the service since mid-June. The fact that nothing has changed in the Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine since then suggests the extent to which – and notwithstanding the fact that troops on both sides are being killed and wounded every day – the war on the ground in eastern Ukraine has to a very large extent become a stalemate in which, at most, very small pieces of territory are being taken or lost from day to day and week to week.

As has been the case over the past two-to-three months, the Russian forces continue to attack toward the city of Sumy in northeastern Ukraine and at a number of points along the contact line between the forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine, from the area south of Kupiansk to the area west of Kostyantynivka which includes the cities of Sloviansk, Kramatorsk and Druzhkivka, toward the area along the eastern boundary of Dnipropetrovsk region between Pokrovsk and Dobropillia, and in the area near the junction of Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions in southeastern Ukraine. And as the green arrow indicates, the Ukrainian forces continue to attack the Russian forces at the southeastern corner of Dnipropetrovsk region. But the attacks also continue at many other points along the long contact line. And the Russian drone and missile attacks against Kyiv and other cities, which kill men, women, and children every night, continue as well.

In his televised address on August 11, President Zelenskyy said Ukraine's negotiating team had reported back to him and "We have conveyed our proposals to the American side. And the U.S. can help strengthen our defense, first and foremost

with air defense and put pressure on Russia so that its plans are different – to prepare for an end to the war rather than prolonging it." Undoubtedly the two most difficult issues remain the territorial issue and the security issue. The former involves, of course, the Ukrainian territory now held by the Russian forces – in particular, much of the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, all of which Russia formally annexed in September 2022. The proposed framework reportedly would halt fighting along the existing front lines and establish demilitarized buffer zones from which troops would be withdrawn. Kyiv is also seeking increased U.S. and international pressure on Moscow. President Zelenskyy didn't provide any details about the proposals conveyed by Ukraine's negotiators to the U.S. and President Trump didn't say anything publicly about them. But it appeared quite likely that the American presidential envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, who were in Moscow earlier this year, would at some point in the near future make their first trip of the year to Kyiv and then another trip to Moscow.

On Thursday, President Putin, speaking at an economic forum in the Far East, said a number of countries, including the U.S. and China, were ready to support a peace settlement and there is a chance of reaching an agreement to end the war. "Ultimately, however, the problem must be resolved by the countries involved in the conflict – Russia and Ukraine." But, he added, "We are grateful to everyone attempting to contribute. Is there a chance? In my view, yes, there is." Ukrainian Foreign Minister Sybiha, speaking subsequently in Kyiv, said that while a number of countries support a peace settlement, "ultimately, however, the problem must be resolved by the countries involved in the conflict — Russia and Ukraine." But, he added, "We are grateful to everyone attempting to contribute to a settlement. Is there a chance? In my view, yes, there is. I believe that we will now have a new dynamic in the peace efforts, with the return of this active phase of political and diplomatic engagement in many capitals around the world."

Today the news came out that Witkoff and Kushner are indeed on their way to Moscow and then Kyiv for talks on ending the war. It will be their first visit to Kyiv since President Trump returned to office in January 2025. They will reportedly meet with President Putin in Moscow tomorrow and then with President Zelenskyy in Kyiv on Sunday. There was considerable speculation last week about the meetings of CIA Director John Ratcliffe in Moscow with the top officials of Russia's intelligence and security services organizations. In retrospect, it appears quite likely the meetings were designed to set the stage for the meetings that will take place tomorrow and Sunday in Moscow and Kyiv.

Once the news of their trip came out, Ukrainian and U.S. officials said they've been discussing a trip to Kyiv trip for some time. The negotiations between Russia and Ukraine mediated by the U.S. were paused in mid-February after the Iran war started. Since then, Witkoff and Kushner have held separate talks with Russian and Ukrainian officials but little progress has been made. President Zelenskyy's chief of staff Kyrylo Budanov told local news last week that the U.S.-mediated talks with Russia could resume in September. But Ukrainian officials reportedly remain highly skeptical about them, especially in view of the two major mobilizations Russia is reportedly planning, the first after the Russian elections on Sept. 18-20 and the

second in early 2027. Putin subsequently denied the reports of the pending mobilizations; “It’s complete nonsense. It’s an information attack on Russia.”

In the meantime, Witkoff and Kushner are on their way to Moscow and then Kyiv.

David R. Cameron
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