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Kremlin Fears Trump-Zelensky Clash Could Harm Its Shot at a Grand Bargain

By Pyotr Kozlov

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Presidents Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky meet at the White House. **The White House**

The Kremlin is increasingly worried that the emerging rift between the U.S. and Ukraine could derail a potential agreement between Washington and Moscow, The Moscow Times' sources say.

As U.S. President Donald Trump pushes for a swift end to Russia's three-year war on Ukraine, Moscow and Washington have embarked on parallel talks aimed at seeking an agreement on rapprochement.

Russian officials have been maneuvering to embed a wide range of demands into the deal — not just securing Russia's dominance over Ukraine, but also resolving key bilateral issues such as the restoration of diplomatic ties, lifting sanctions and launching joint resource development projects in the Arctic and Russia. Such an agreement could provide the Kremlin with much-needed long-term investments and access to technologies it currently lacks.

Tensions between Trump and Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky, who insists that Kyiv needs concrete security guarantees before there can be peace, boiled over on Friday in a heated clash in the Oval Office.

Following the stunning episode, for which Zelensky appeared to apologize on Tuesday, the Kremlin now worries that its chances at securing its favored outcome in a deal with Washington may be at risk, two Russian government officials, two diplomats and a source close to the Kremlin told The Moscow Times.

"We [Russia] are valuable to Trump primarily in the context of solving a problem: the war in Ukraine. If that issue falls off the agenda, then the entire agenda is thrown into question — what else is there to talk about?" a Russian diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter.

"The main turn-on for Trump is the ability to portray himself as a man who can solve a very difficult problem. If Ukraine does not agree to his terms, the entire formula loses its meaning," another Russian diplomat added.

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According to one Russian government official, Moscow's portfolio of interests in the high-intensity consultations with Washington that began in February far exceeds what would normally be considered U.S. priorities.

"Given Trump's mood, arms control doesn't particularly interest him. Regional problems? He can handle many of them without us. That's why some of our people are celebrating right now — but it might be premature," the official told The Moscow Times.

While U.S.-Russia relations are not solely dependent on Ukraine, they hold a certain strategic importance for Washington, another Russian diplomat noted. The Kremlin sees potential leverage in areas like the Arctic and Moscow's ability to facilitate U.S. talks with Iran.

But none of these issues are as compelling to Trump without the Ukraine factor, the diplomat admitted.

Trump's decision on Monday to pause military aid to Ukraine sparked a surprised, yet enthusiastic response from the Kremlin. Russian officials welcomed the move, seen as handing Moscow a major advantage both militarily and in terms of morale.

"If the United States stops [military supplies], this would probably be the best step toward peace," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday, calling it "a solution that could really push the Kyiv regime toward a peace process."

Nevertheless, Peskov said that Russia would continue to monitor developments on the ground, noting that the U.S. has remained Kyiv's top military supplier since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The end of Western military aid to Ukraine has been one of the Kremlin's key demands since the invasion, along with banning Kyiv from joining NATO, installing a Russia-friendly

regime, changing Ukraine's language policy and significantly reducing the size of its army.

Until now, Washington and Ukraine's other allies had steadfastly rejected its military supplies halt as absolutely unacceptable. However, following Trump's election victory, the U.S. has shifted its position to the opposite extreme.

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Despite the uncertainty surrounding Trump's leadership in brokering an end to the war, the Kremlin remains hopeful that a combination of U.S. political pressure and Russian military force will eventually coerce Kyiv into negotiations.

But Moscow assumes that any future deal will impose even harsher terms on Ukraine than before the Oval Office confrontation, a Kremlin-linked source and a Russian diplomat told The Moscow Times.

"Our dialogue with the Trump administration continues. We will keep pushing proposals to end the conflict, hoping that Zelensky will sooner or later return to the White House — at which point we can tighten the screws even further," a Russian diplomat said.

President Vladimir Putin appeared to voice Moscow's anxieties about the U.S.-Russia deal, telling a meeting of FSB officials on Feb. 27: "We realize that not everyone is happy to see Russia-U.S. contacts resume. A portion of Western elites are still committed to maintaining instability in the world, and these forces will try to disrupt or to compromise the newly resumed dialogue. You and I see this. We need to keep this in mind and leverage every possibility offered by diplomacy and special services to thwart such attempts."

Amid the constantly shifting dynamics, Putin is likely to double down on two strategies, a Kremlin insider told The Moscow Times.

The first strategy will see Moscow attempt to shift international blame for prolonging the war onto Zelensky and portray itself as the party seeking peace. Secondly, Moscow will strive to advance as far as possible on the battlefield before any potential deal is struck.

"If Ukraine has taken this stance, we must do everything to ensure that Kyiv bears the blame for prolonging the conflict," a Kremlin-linked source said. "We need to actively declare our desire for peace — 'They [the Ukrainians] refuse, but we are ready!'"

"As long as we hold the strategic initiative, stopping would be irrational. We will keep up the pressure on the front lines," another source added.

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