

Playing for Time: What the Kremlin Wants in New Talks with the U.S. on Ukraine

As U.S.-Russia talks resume in Saudi Arabia, Moscow will work to delay peace and secure more territory — betting that Washington will not be concerned with where the border ultimately falls.

By [Pyotr Kozlov](#)

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As high-level delegations from the U.S. and Russia arrive in Saudi Arabia for the second round of bilateral talks aimed at ending the war in Ukraine, Moscow's envoys will have one goal on their mind: buying time.

For the Kremlin, dragging out peace negotiations for as long as possible is imperative for seizing as much Ukrainian territory as it can and getting an upper hand over Kyiv in relations

with the U.S., as Moscow isn't capable of making these battlefield advances quickly, four sources familiar with the Kremlin's thinking told The Moscow Times.

All of these sources spoke on condition of anonymity in order to share details about sensitive diplomatic matters.

"Time is currently on our side, and we'll try to make the most of it," a Russian diplomat told The Moscow Times.

While President Vladimir Putin said that he agreed in principle to Trump's proposed 30-day ceasefire, he stressed that "nuances" are important for Moscow — a signal that Russia will insist on its maximalist demands before it agrees to lay down arms.

It is those nuances that Putin's envoys have been tasked with starting to address in detail at the talks in Riyadh on Monday.

Ideally, the Kremlin hopes that Washington will either tacitly allow Russia to keep advancing on the battlefield while diplomats negotiate — or even pressure Kyiv to fully withdraw its troops from Russian-occupied regions, including Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, said a current Russian official.

Moscow claims that the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions are Russian territory despite not fully controlling any of them.

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Moscow is bent on solidifying control over these regions at any cost, as Putin cannot politically afford to abandon them after enshrining their status in the Constitution, a Kremlin-linked official said.

"There is no constitutional mechanism for regions to secede. We need all of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. Either Trump influences them to leave, or we're told: 'Enter into long negotiations and simply use military force to establish control.' That's the worst option for us, because river crossings are always painful operations," the official said.

Alternately, Russia could try to seize parts of another Ukrainian region such as Dnipropetrovsk or Sumy and then offer a trade for Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, the official continued.

"We hope to find an option that doesn't involve forcing the Dnipro and storming Kherson [the city is on the right bank; Russian forces control the left]. I really hope it doesn't come to that. That would mean for us thousands of casualties," he said.

In terms of military logistics, Russian forces in their current state cannot realistically aim for anything beyond the Sloviansk-Dnipropetrovsk area, he added.

"Physically, this force can't go anywhere further or do anything more," he said. "Reaching

Odesa is, of course, impossible. And we don't even need that.”

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Kremlin envoys

Moscow is sending seasoned negotiators for its second meeting with the U.S. in Saudi Arabia.

Among them is Senator Grigory Karasin, a former deputy foreign minister who spent 47 years in the Foreign Ministry and for many years handled the “Ukrainian dossier,” including participation in drafting both Minsk agreements, which the Kremlin considered a major success.

Sergei Beseda, another Ukraine expert who serves as an advisor to FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov, will also be present at the talks.

For years, Beseda headed the FSB’s Fifth Service, which was responsible for intelligence gathering, source recruitment and subversive activities in Ukraine.

He played a key role in planning the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. After the invasion failed in its initial goals of capturing Kyiv and decapitating the Ukrainian leadership, Beseda was reportedly placed under house arrest, [according](#) to journalists Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan.

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Sunday’s talks mark the first time that Beseda will appear at a public official event since then, albeit in a lower-ranking capacity — suggesting that he was indeed dismissed from the FSB’s Fifth Service after the botched invasion.

“These guys know the Ukraine talks inside and out. They’ve been tasked with nitpicking every comma,” a Moscow Times source said.

Territorial goals

When determining which lands will go to which side, Moscow believes that the exact location of the dividing line is not of critical importance to Washington, two Russian officials told The Moscow Times.

“As I understand it, Trump wants a modern, well-armed, pro-Western Ukraine. He can’t just give Ukraine up entirely. But where exactly the border is drawn is not that crucial to him,” a Moscow Times source said.

As The Moscow Times has previously reported, Russia will try to paint Ukraine as the obstacle to peace in hopes of nabbing concessions from Washington.

Although the Kremlin has not agreed to Trump’s proposal of a full ceasefire and a partial ceasefire halting strikes on energy infrastructure has not yet been signed, Russia’s Foreign

Ministry has already started to accuse Kyiv of violations.

Both Ukrainian and Russian forces have launched heavy strikes in recent days.

“We believe the ceasefire proposed by the U.S. president has already been violated by the Kyiv regime. How the American side will now deal with this deranged terrorist scum, excuse my language — that’s a big question,” Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on the state-run Channel One broadcaster on Thursday night.

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Moscow wants these negotiations to be worked out in as much detail as the second Minsk Agreements. Doing so could take a significant amount of time — as much as several weeks.

“Things are unfolding more according to Russia’s scenario. Whether this moratorium [on strikes on energy infrastructure and ships in the Black Sea] will happen is still unclear,” [said](#) Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the Kremlin-friendly journal Russia in Global Affairs. “But even if it’s implemented, it won’t directly change the situation on the battlefield, where the initiative currently belongs to Russia.”

Yet Israeli military expert David Sharp cast doubt on the idea that Russia could realistically capture as much land as it wants without external help before a peace deal is reached.

"The Russian army is incapable of quickly and fully occupying the territories of the four annexed Ukrainian regions. For Russians, capturing even a couple of villages is seen as a huge success," Sharp told The Moscow Times.

"In order to cross the Dnipro and seize Kherson — or even take the city of Zaporizhzhia without having to cross the river, as Zaporizhzhia lies on both banks — something extraordinary would have to happen. This is an extremely difficult task. Either the Russian army would have to be dramatically strengthened, which cannot happen suddenly or out of nowhere, or there would need to be a complete collapse of Ukraine’s defense. Russia is betting on wearing down the enemy over time," Sharp said.

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