

Why Peace Talks, but No Peace?

The U.S. has prevented earnest negotiations and prolonged the war in Ukraine.

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Rarely mentioned in current commentaries on the war in Ukraine, in the early weeks that followed the February 24, 2022, Russian invasion, Russia and Ukraine engaged in three separate and significant attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement. Those negotiations had several important things in common. All three could have ended the war before the devastation of Ukraine's infrastructure, the massive Ukrainian loss of lives, and the increased risk of unchecked escalation. All three featured an offer by Ukraine not to join NATO. And all three were stopped by the United States.

The First Talks: Belarus

On February 25, the day after the invasion began, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had already [signaled](#) that he was prepared to abandon Ukraine's pursuit of NATO membership. Zelensky announced that he wasn't afraid to negotiate neutrality and security guarantees with Moscow. That concession was the first sign that both Ukraine's and Russia's goals might be met and that the war could end with a diplomatic settlement.

Zelensky's concession likely had many motivations. The first was the force of the invasion itself. The second was his acceptance that NATO was not likely to grant Ukraine's request to join. On February 26, the second day of the war, [Zelensky responded](#) to the invasion by saying, "We are not afraid to talk to Russia. We are not afraid to say everything about security guarantees for our state. We are not afraid to talk about neutral status. We are not in NATO now ... We need to talk about the end of this invasion. We need to talk about a ceasefire."

Ukrainian presidential advisor Mykhailo Podolyak also said that "Ukraine wants peace and is ready for talks with Russia, including on neutral status regarding NATO." [He told Reuters](#) on February 25 that, "If talks are possible, they should be held. If in Moscow they say they want

to hold talks, including on neutral status, we are not afraid of this. We can talk about that as well,” he said.

But Zelensky was also [frustrated with NATO](#):

“I asked them – are you with us?” Zelensky said on February 25. “They answered that they are with us, but they don’t want to take us into the alliance. I’ve asked 27 leaders of Europe, if Ukraine will be in NATO, I’ve asked them directly – all are afraid and did not respond.”

On February 27, just three days into the war, Russia and Ukraine [announced](#) that they would hold talks in Belarus. The Ukrainian delegation was going in with a willingness to negotiate neutrality. Zelensky said, “We agreed that the Ukrainian delegation would meet with the Russian delegation without preconditions.” After the first round of talks, the two delegations returned home for consultations, having identified priority topics. Encouragingly, there was an [agreement for a second round of talks](#). Those talks took place in Belarus, on the Belarus-Ukraine border, on March 3.

However, though Ukraine was willing to discuss neutrality and “the end of this invasion,” the U.S. was not. On February 25, the same day Zelensky said he was “not afraid to talk to Russia” and that he was “not afraid to talk about neutral status,” State Department spokesman Ned Price was asked at a [press conference](#), “What’s the U.S. – what’s your thinking about the efficacy of such a – of such talks?”

The reporter was asking specifically about the Belarus talks, calling them the “talks between Russia and Ukraine happening in Minsk,” the capital of Belarus. Price responded, “Now we see Moscow suggesting that diplomacy take place at the barrel of a gun or as Moscow’s rockets, mortars, artillery target the Ukrainian people. This is not real diplomacy. Those are not the conditions for real diplomacy.” The U.S. said no to the Belarus talks.

On December 17, 2021, just two months before the invasion of Ukraine, Russia [delivered](#) proposals on security guarantees to both the U.S. and NATO.

The key demands included no NATO expansion to Ukraine and no deployment of weapons or troops to Ukraine. On January 26, the U.S. and NATO rejected Russia’s essential demand for a written guarantee that Ukraine would not join NATO. Derek Chollet, counselor to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, has [disclosed](#) that the U.S. told Moscow that negotiating NATO expansion into Ukraine was never even on the table. Putin [simply remarked](#) “that fundamental Russian concerns were ignored.”

The official Russian response came on February 17, 2022. It [said](#) that the U.S. and NATO offered “no constructive response” to Russia’s key demands. It then added that if the U.S. and NATO continued to refuse to provide Russia with “legally binding guarantees” regarding its security concerns, Russia would respond with “military-technical means.”

The invasion one week later was Russia’s promised military-technical response to the U.S. refusal to provide a guarantee that Ukraine would not join NATO. If the invasion was intended as a quick strike with the objective of compelling from Kiev the promise not to join NATO that Russia was unable to get from Washington, then that intention could have been accomplished in Belarus in the first week of the war. But the U.S. stopped it.

The Second Talks: Bennet

The second set of negotiations revealed a pattern. There was, once again, a chance to end the war and a Ukrainian offer of neutrality. The U.S. roadblock was not an isolated event that emerged out of the circumstances of the first set of negotiations in Belarus, but rather policy.

On March 6, just days after the second talks concluded in Belarus, the Israeli media [reported](#) that then-Prime Minister Naftali Bennett had made a surprise visit to Moscow to meet with Putin in an attempt at mediation. After meeting Putin, Bennet twice spoke with Zelensky. He also spoke with French President Emmanuel Macron and flew to Germany for talks with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Details of the meetings were scarce at the time. But in an [interview](#) on February 2, 2023, Bennet revealed details on what was agreed, how close talks came to success, and what happened.

According to Bennett, “Zelensky initiated the request to contact Putin.” Bennett said that “Zelensky called me and asked me to contact Putin.” Bennett then told the U.S. that he “had the trust of both sides” and that “I have Putin’s ear. I can be a pipeline.”

Turn on English subtitle

These conversations set in motion a series of back-and-forth phone calls between Bennett and Putin and Bennett and Zelensky. Bennett then flew to Moscow for meetings with Putin and then to Germany for meetings with Scholz. A “negotiation marathon of drafts” followed.

“Everything I did,” Bennett says, “was fully coordinated with Biden, Macron, Johnson, with Scholz and, obviously, Zelensky.”

According to Bennet, though the U.S. told him that “there was no chance of success,” Putin told him that “we can reach a ceasefire.” In order to reach that ceasefire, Bennet says Putin made “huge concessions.” When Bennett asked Putin if he was going to kill Zelensky, Putin answered, “I won’t kill Zelensky.” Putin also “renounced” Russia’s demanded “disarmament of Ukraine.”

Zelensky, too, made a “huge concession.” According to Bennet, Putin complained of the West’s broken promise regarding NATO expansion and told Bennet to pass the message on to Zelensky, “Tell me you’re not joining NATO, I won’t invade.” Bennett says that “Zelensky relinquished joining NATO.”

Having given the promise not to join NATO, Zelensky wanted security guarantees. Putin saw security agreements with major powers as being the same as joining NATO. Bennett suggested abandoning NATO-like guarantees in favor of Ukraine adopting “the Israeli model” and creating a strong, independent army that can defend itself. That solution was accepted by both Putin and Zelensky.

Having won those promises, Bennett flew to Germany and updated Scholz, the Americans, Macron, and Johnson. “Boris Johnson adopted the aggressive line. Macron and Scholz were more pragmatic. Biden was both.” Bennett said that “there was a good chance of reaching a

ceasefire.” But the pattern of U.S. obstruction first evident in Belarus continued. Bennett says the West made the decision “to keep striking Putin.”

“So, they blocked it?” his interviewer asked. “They blocked it,” Bennett replied. His account of what was said in private conversations contradicts accounts at the time by a senior Ukrainian official who [complained](#) that “Bennett has proposed that we surrender,” suggesting that the Ukrainian statement was more for public consumption. Sources “privy to details about the meeting” [said](#) at the time that Zelensky deemed the proposal “difficult” but not “impossible” and that “the gaps between the sides are not great.”

Journalist Barak Ravid [reported](#) in “Axios” that Russian concessions included that demilitarization could be confined to the Donbas, that there would be no regime change in Kiev, and that Ukraine could keep its sovereignty. Zelensky said that he had “cooled down” about joining NATO and that he had found Putin’s proposal “not as extreme as they anticipated.”

As in Belarus, a chance for a concession not to join NATO and for peace were “blocked” by the U.S.

The Third Talks: Istanbul

Next, in March and early April of 2022, efforts at negotiations moved to Istanbul. Turkey was a promising candidate for mediation. Turkey has a relationship with Russia and refused to break off that relationship once the war began. Turkey also has a relationship with Ukraine, and the drones the Ukrainian forces were armed with as they massed on the eastern border with Donbas prior to the war were supplied by Turkey.

The Turkish talks were the most fruitful talks of all, actually producing a “[tentatively agreed](#)” upon settlement.

By March 20, Zelensky had seemingly accepted that NATO’s open door to Ukraine was a sleight of hand. He [told](#) a CNN interviewer that he personally requested the leaders of NATO members “to say directly that we are going to accept you into NATO in a year or two or five, just say it directly and clearly, or just say no. And the response was very clear, you’re not going to be a NATO member, but publicly, the doors will remain open.”

At the Istanbul talks at the end of March, Zelensky acted on that realization and offered a promise not to join NATO. On March 29, Ukrainian negotiators said Kiev was [ready to accept neutrality](#) if, under an international accord, western states like the United States, France, and Britain provided binding security guarantees.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Fiona Hill and Angela Stent [reported](#) that,

According to multiple former senior U.S. officials we spoke with, in April 2022, Russian and Ukrainian negotiators appeared to have tentatively agreed on the outlines of a negotiated interim settlement: Russia would withdraw to its position on February 23, when it controlled part of the Donbas region and all of Crimea, and in exchange, Ukraine would promise not to seek NATO membership and instead receive security guarantees from a number of countries.

Putin has recently revealed more details about the agreement. On June 13, 2023, taking questions from war correspondents at the Kremlin, Putin [confirmed](#) that “we reached an

agreement in Istanbul.”

Putin then revealed the previously unannounced detail that the tentative agreement was not merely verbal. It had gone so far as to produce a signed document: “I don’t remember his name and may be mistaken, but I think Mr Arakhamia headed Ukraine’s negotiating team in Istanbul. He even initialed this document.” Russia, too, signed the document: “during the talks in Istanbul, we initialed this document. We argued for a long time, butted heads there and so on, but the document was very thick and it was initialed by Medinsky on our side and by the head of their negotiating team.”

Mr President, I have several questions. Considering that you said you are not going to reveal all your plans, I still have a question on a peace settlement. Everyone – besides Russia and Ukraine – has their own view of how to settle this conflict.

Vladimir Putin: Why? You are wrong here. Why did you say “besides Russia and Ukraine”? We also have one. Moreover, we reached an agreement in Istanbul. I don’t remember his name and may be mistaken, but I think Mr Arakhamia headed Ukraine’s negotiating team in Istanbul. He even initialed this document.

Murad Gazdiyev: But I am saying that besides Russia and Ukraine, other countries also have their own view of how to settle this conflict.

Vladimir Putin: Oh, pardon me, I apologise. Yes.

Screenshot from en.kremlin.ru

Two days later, on June 17, Putin went further still. In a meeting with a delegation of leaders of African countries who were, once again, attempting to mediate peace talks, Putin presented the initialed draft agreement. Holding the document up, Putin [said](#),

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that with [Turkish] President [Tayyip] Erdogan’s assistance, as you know, a string of talks between Russia and Ukraine took place in Turkey so as to work out both the confidence-building measures you mentioned, and to draw up the text of the agreement. We did not discuss with the Ukrainian side that this treaty would be classified, but we have never presented it, nor commented on it. This draft agreement was initialed by the head of the Kiev negotiation team. He put his signature there. Here it is.

The agreement, which bore the title “the Treaty on the Permanent Neutrality and Security Guarantees for Ukraine,” said that Ukraine would make “permanent neutrality” a feature of its constitution. According to [reporting](#) from RT, admittedly a Russian state-funded media network, “Russia, the US, Britain, China, and France are listed as guarantors,” which, if accurate, seems to be a softening of Putin’s reply to Bennet that security agreements with major powers was the same as joining NATO.

As with the Bennett negotiations, Russia reportedly renounced the demand for the full demilitarization of Ukraine, though there was still a gap between Russia’s and Ukraine’s proposals on caps on the size of Ukraine’s armed forces and on the number of tanks, aircraft, and rocket launchers.

But then the U.S. obstruction happened again. “We actually did this,” Putin [told war correspondents](#) at the Kremlin, “but they simply threw it away later and that’s it.”

Talking to the African delegation, Putin [said](#), “After we pulled our troops away from Kiev – as we had promised to do – the Kiev authorities ... tossed [their commitments] into the dustbin of history. They abandoned everything.” Putin implicitly blamed the U.S., saying that when Ukraine’s interests “are not in sync” with U.S. interests, “ultimately it is about the United States’s interests. We know that they hold the key to solving issues.”

As Putin’s account of the tentative agreement and Ukraine’s promise not to join NATO was confirmed in the *Foreign Affairs* article, so too is his claim that the US stopped the negotiated settlement confirmed. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu [said](#) that, because of the talks,

“Turkey did not think that the Russia-Ukraine war would continue much longer.” But, he [said](#), “There are countries within NATO who want the war to continue.” “Following the NATO foreign ministers’ meeting,” he explained, “it was the impression that...there are those within the NATO member states that want the war to continue, let the war continue and Russia get weaker.”

Cavusoglu’s account does not stand alone. Numan Kurtulmus, the deputy chairman of Erdogan’s ruling party, has hinted at the same obstruction and at the same pursuit of larger goals. He [told CNN TURK](#) that “We know that our President is talking to the leaders of both countries. In certain matters, progress was made, reaching the final point, then suddenly we see that the war is accelerating... Someone is trying not to end the war. The United States sees the prolongation of the war as its interest... There are those who want this war to continue... Putin-Zelensky was going to sign, but someone didn’t want to.”

The U.S. was joined by the U.K. as a “NATO member states that want[s] the war to continue.” On April 9, then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson rush to Kiev to rein in Zelensky, [insisting](#) that Russian President Vladimir Putin “should be pressured, not negotiated with” and that, even if Ukraine was ready to sign some agreements with Russia, “the West was not.”

Why No Peace?

Why did the U.S. and U.K. not want Zelensky to sign?

When State Department spokesman Ned Price was asked about Zelensky being “open to a...diplomatic solution” at a March 21, 2022, press briefing, he [rejected a negotiated end to the war](#), even if the negotiated settlement met Ukraine’s goals. “This is a war,” Price answered, “that is in many ways bigger than Russia, it’s bigger than Ukraine.” The U.S. rejected Ukraine negotiating an agreement with Russia that met Kiev’s goals in favor of pressuring Ukraine to continue fighting in pursuit of larger U.S. goals and “core principles.”

Three separate times in the early weeks of the war, negotiations produced the real possibility of peace. The third even yielded a tentative agreement that was, according to Putin, signed. Both sides made “huge concessions,” including Ukraine promising each time not to join NATO. But each time, the U.S. put a stop to the promise of a diplomatic solution and peace, allowing the war to go on and to escalate, seemingly in the pursuit of U.S., not Ukrainian, interests.

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