

Is this the Time for Peace?

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For months, the US refused to hold any diplomatic talks with Russia. Then, suddenly, on November 6, it was [revealed](#) that National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan "has been in contact with Yuri Ushakov, a foreign-policy adviser to Mr. Putin" and with Russia's Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev.

Sullivan then [went to Kiev](#) for talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. At those [talks](#), Sullivan "raised the need for a diplomatic resolution to the war" and privately [pushed Zelensky](#) to "signal an openness to negotiate with Russia and drop their public refusal to engage in peace talks unless President Vladimir Putin is removed from power."

On November 8, in a sudden reversal of his decree [banning negotiating with Putin](#), Zelensky announced that he is open to peace talks with Putin. Zelensky [urged](#) the international community to "force Russia into real peace talks." Zelensky insisted that his [preconditions for talks](#) are "restoration of (Ukraine's) territorial integrity ... compensation for all war damage, punishment for every war criminal and guarantees that it will not happen again."

Those preconditions are near impossible. But in another sudden change of tone, Washington has begun [signaling](#) that "they believe that Zelensky would probably endorse negotiations and eventually accept concessions, as he suggested he would early in the war. They believe that Kyiv is attempting to lock in as many military gains as it can before winter sets in, when there might be a window for diplomacy."

Then on November 7, what those "military gains" might be began to leak out. According to [reporting](#) in *La Repubblica*, "The US and NATO think that launching peace talks on Ukraine would be possible if Kiev takes back Kherson." Washington believes that retaking Kherson could be strategically and diplomatically significant enough "to hold negotiations from the position of force."

That this may be the "window for diplomacy" is also suggested by an [NBC report](#) that "U.S. and Western officials" have said that "If Ukraine wins in Kherson, it could put the Zelensky

government in a better position to negotiate.” According to *La Repubblica*, the US has not only discussed this possibility with NATO and its allies, but is “instilling this idea into the mind of the Kiev regime.”

Then, on November 9, reports broke that Russia seemed to be [withdrawing from Kherson City](#).

All of these events happened within a few days. Could this sequence of events be the result of secret talks? If the US was holding talks with Russia, they would want them – like during the Cuban missile crisis – to be secret. Neither side would want to be seen as abandoning their promised goals, and neither side would want concessions to be seen as weakness. US and Ukrainian officials have also [said](#) that “The US and its allies do not want to be seen as pushing Ukraine into diplomacy, especially if that involves a formal arrangement that Russian-occupied areas in eastern Ukraine become Russian territory.”

Though Russia seems to have been preparing for a strategic withdrawal from Kherson for weeks, they could have taken advantage of the situation to fit the diplomatic situation.

Putin’s sudden announcement that he will [not attend the upcoming G-20 summit](#) in Indonesia, taking pressure and attention off a potential meeting with Biden, and the sudden simultaneous [announcement](#) that Biden will meet Russia’s strategic partner, Chinese President Xi Jinping, on the sidelines of the summit could also suggest secret backchannel discussions.

Could Zelensky be agreeing to talk if he gets a victory in Kherson, and is Russia agreeing to withdraw from Kherson to get talks?

Some [military analysts say](#) that Ukraine will face tougher ground and greater logistical challenges as they move further east and that Kherson is likely the last Russian held ground that Ukraine will be able to retake in the foreseeable future.

Is this the moment at which the war stalls into a stalemate or Russia decides to escalate? Could the US be pushing for diplomacy at the strongest moment and at the moment before a huge Russian push comes?

Could Putin be looking for a way to return Kherson without going back on his post-referendum promise that he wouldn’t return the annexed territories and settle for negotiating for the Donbas as he wanted to in the first place?

That this intriguing chain of events suggest backchannel diplomacy is pure speculation. Though all of the events are factual, they are likely not connected. I am told that there is no hint of it in the Russian media.

But for the first time since the war began, everyone seems to be willing to talk. At the start of the war, Ukraine and Russia were willing to talk, but the US and UK prevented it. The US closed all channels of communication with Russia, and Zelensky prohibited negotiations with Russia until there was a new president in the Kremlin.

There is mounting pressure to start negotiations. There are now many in the Biden administration who want negotiations for a ceasefire. That [Sullivan](#) is “known within the administration as pushing for a line of communication with Russia, even as other top policy

makers feel that talks in the current diplomatic and military environment wouldn't be fruitful" may explain why he, and not Secretary of State Antony Blinken as would be expected, went to Moscow and Kiev.

The Pentagon seems to be pushing for talks. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley [said](#) on November 10 that the Russian withdrawal from Kherson coupled with the current stalemate "could provide both countries an opportunity to negotiate peace." "When there's an opportunity to negotiate, when peace can be achieved," Milley [said](#), "seize it."

Even the UK has recently [stated](#) that it "stands ready to assist" if "Ukraine and Russia seek a resolution to the war." Germany and France have also been pushing Ukraine to be more flexible, and Zelensky has repealed his ban on talking to Putin and is willing to have "real peace talks." On November 14, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [confirmed](#) that talks between Russia and the US took place that day.

Putin's BRICS partners are supportive of talks. Xi has recently [called](#) on Europe to facilitate peace talks. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi [said](#) that India is prepared to mediate in peace efforts. Brazil's newly elected president, Lula da Silva, has [indicated a willingness](#) to play a role in negotiations.

Pressure and momentum is building for those negotiations. The solidity of the Western coalition is eroding. A harsh winter is coming to Europe. The war is seemingly grinding to a stalemate. The Pentagon's concern about a decisive, game changing Russian advance on Odessa has, at least for now, disintegrated with the loss of Kherson.

The next move is either a protracted stalemate or a devastating Russian escalation. Ukraine may be in the strongest position on the battlefield it will be able to achieve going into negotiations. The US had signaled that the retaking of Kherson could be the moment. Russia could be willing to give up Kherson without breaking its promise and negotiate an end to the war with Ukraine out of NATO and the Donbas and Crimea in Russia.

If secret talks are not already underway, hopefully, they will be soon.

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Featured image: A Ukrainian soldier holding a Javelin missile system. (Image via the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine)

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