Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 12.11.2026 www.osw.waw.pl

Ukraine–US–Russia talks in Abu Dhabi: European security takes centre stage

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On 10–11 November, the United States, Russia and Ukraine held another round of trilateral talks in Abu Dhabi aimed at ending the Russia-Ukraine war, following a nine-month hiatus (see the Appendix for the composition of the delegations). The round also included bilateral meetings. Ahead of the trilateral talks on 10 November, the US and Ukrainian delegations met with representatives of Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom, as well as officials from the European Commission, the European Council and NATO.

Vladimir Medinsky, head of the Russian delegation and an adviser to Vladimir Putin, stated that European security was the central issue in the talks and that it was essential to establish a 'new, comprehensive and fair' European security system based on Russia's proposals from December 2021. He also declared that Russia had no intention of scaling back its claims to Ukrainian territory and indicated that he saw no point in involving Europeans in the negotiations. According to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, the talks had made progress and laid 'the groundwork for further work'. While the talks were still under way, several senior Russian diplomats put forward the idea of concluding bilateral agreements with individual NATO member states on mutual security guarantees or non-aggression pacts. In Russia's interpretation, such agreements would give Moscow the right to intervene militarily if it determined that a threat to its security originated from the territory of the state concerned.

President Volodymyr Zelensky described the talks as 'constructive and fairly substantive' and noted that the parties had discussed the substance of security guarantees for Ukraine and the broader framework for further negotiations involving European representatives. However, the Ukrainian delegation stressed that differences between the parties remained wide. On 12 November, US negotiators Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner travelled to Moscow for talks with Vladimir Putin, before heading to Dublin to meet Zelensky and European leaders on the sidelines of the European Political Community summit and an informal meeting of the European Council.

Moscow has succeeded in introducing the issue of a new European security architecture into the negotiations, with the US agreeing for the first time to discuss it. The talks have revealed that the Kremlin remains unwilling to abandon its maximalist demands concerning Ukraine and NATO. Russia has no intention of halting its invasion of Ukraine unless NATO recognises Moscow's right to have a say in shaping security arrangements in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, Russia is demanding that NATO withdraw or substantially

reduce its military presence on the eastern flank. The only outcome of the Abu Dhabi talks was a preliminary agreement on a prisoner-of-war exchange, although its precise terms were not announced. The Kremlin's demands are unacceptable to Ukraine, as they would effectively deprive it of its sovereignty. In this situation, Kyiv has no choice but to continue defending itself and working to mobilise greater Western support.

Commentary

- **Russia continues to pursue a maximalist negotiating strategy, as evidenced by the shift in the focus of the talks from Russia-Ukraine issues to the need for a fundamental overhaul of the European security system.** Moscow's objective is to turn Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Sweden and Finland, into a buffer zone deprived of credible security guarantees from Western Europe and the United States (NATO).
- **Russia is using the negotiations to cultivate US President Donald Trump's belief that he can act as an effective mediator in the peace process.** Moscow intends to turn him into a de facto ally of the Kremlin in pressuring Europe to accept arrangements that would undermine European security. It expects that under favourable circumstances – such as a collapse of Ukraine's will to resist, a complete withdrawal of US support or a substantial reduction in European assistance – the current negotiating format could become a means of dictating peace terms to Ukraine and Europe. Moscow calculates that Trump and his negotiators (Witkoff and Kushner) may accept its key demands for establishing 'indivisible, equal security' and providing 'mutual security guarantees', given their inadequate preparation and eagerness to secure a swift diplomatic success.
- **However, under the current political circumstances, Europe would not accept arrangements that weaken NATO's deterrence and defence posture on its north-eastern flank.** By excluding Europeans from the talks, the Kremlin seeks to deepen mistrust between the US and Europe, make it easier to secure concessions from Washington at the expense of European security and pressure NATO's European members into making far-reaching concessions to Moscow as a precondition for their inclusion in the negotiations.
- **Kyiv seeks to end the war but does not expect a settlement, as Russia remains unwilling to compromise.** Nevertheless, Ukraine continues to participate in the talks to avoid giving the Trump administration a pretext to blame it for the breakdown of the negotiations, reduce US support and pursue further rapprochement with Russia. At the same time, Kyiv hopes to use the talks to secure limited de-escalation measures: a mutual halt to attacks on energy infrastructure and commercial vessels with a view to restoring shipping in the Black Sea. Ukraine refuses to make any *de jure* territorial concessions or accept restrictions on its sovereignty and has no intention of withdrawing from the parts of the Donbas it controls, which Russia claims as its own. Kyiv also points to the disconnect between the Kremlin's demands and the situation on the battlefield, which is now more favourable to Ukraine than at any time since 2023.
- **Kyiv views the shift in the focus of the talks from ending the war to establishing a new security order in Europe as an unfavourable development.** This raises concerns that Ukraine could become a mere bargaining chip in US–Russia negotiations and face

growing pressure to accept any agreements reached between Washington and Moscow. Kyiv stresses that decisions on Europe's security architecture can only be made once the war has ended and Ukraine's security has been guaranteed. To this end, it is pushing for the inclusion of European representatives in the talks and seeking credible security guarantees, primarily from the US.

- **Most European countries are unwilling to discuss the European security order before the war ends.** On the one hand, European allies in NATO and the EU are concerned that the Ukraine–US–Russia peace talks could address issues directly affecting their security without taking their interests into account. This has prompted an ongoing debate about the merits of establishing direct contacts with the Kremlin, sending a European delegation to Abu Dhabi and urging the United States to press Russia for the inclusion of European representatives in the next round of talks. On the other hand, the prevailing view in major European capitals is that Russia has no intention of halting hostilities at this stage and that the Trump administration, weakened by its defeat in the congressional midterm elections, will be unable to secure an agreement. This has led to a strategy of playing for time, designed to minimise the risk of Ukraine and Europe being confronted with adverse *faits accomplis* by the end of 2026 and create an opening to negotiate another package of European assistance for Kyiv. The ability to allocate another round of funding will serve as a litmus test of whether Europe's approach, aimed at sustaining Ukraine's resistance and weakening Russia as much as possible, is realistic.
- **The US assumes that conditions are becoming favourable for ending or at least freezing the conflict.** The Trump administration mistakenly believes that Russia is now more inclined to consider a peace proposal because it recognises the damage inflicted on its economy by Ukrainian attacks and sees the prospect of securing post-war benefits, supposedly signalled by an agreement on Russian diesel fuel reached several weeks ago. The US president's inner circle also hopes that a stabilisation of the situation and a new agreement with Russia will open up business opportunities.
- **Washington has agreed to discuss the future European security architecture with Russia but has most likely rejected the scenario outlined in Russia's 2021 ultimatum**: recognising Moscow's right to have a say in NATO policy, particularly by accommodating its demands for the withdrawal or substantial reduction of the Alliance's military presence on the eastern flank. This reflects the Trump administration's previously adopted strategy of exploring different paths towards an agreement and partially accepting Russian demands (such as selectively easing the enforcement of certain economic sanctions) to convince Moscow of the sincerity of Washington's intentions. According to Axios, US negotiators asked the Russian side to put forward a proposal for a new European security agreement that would include steps Russia itself would take to reduce tensions. The US delegation also opened discussions with representatives of European countries on this matter.

APPENDIX

Composition of the delegations at the Abu Dhabi talks

Russian delegation:

- Vladimir Medinsky, adviser to Vladimir Putin
- Admiral Igor Kostyukov, head of the Main Directorate of the General Staff (military intelligence)
- Alexei Komkov, head of the FSB's Operational Information and International Relations Service
- Mikhail Galuzin, Deputy Foreign Minister responsible for policy towards post-Soviet states
- Sergei Ryabkov, Deputy Foreign Minister responsible for relations with North America and arms control
- experts, including two generals from the General Staff (Yuri Zhigarlovsky and Alexander Zorin) and FSB First Deputy Director Dmitry Minayev (counterintelligence)

Ukrainian delegation:

- Rustem Umerov, head of the Foreign Intelligence Service
- Kyrylo Budanov, head of the Office of the President of Ukraine
- Serhiy Kyslytsya, First Deputy Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine
- Davyd Arakhamia, head of the parliamentary faction of President Zelensky's Servant of the People party
- Vadym Skibitskyi, Deputy Head of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence

US delegation:

- Steve Witkoff, Special Envoy of the US President
- Jared Kushner, Donald Trump's son-in-law
- General Alexus Grynkewich, Commander of US European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe