

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

Ukraine has no choice but to engage with US peace plan

The American proposal is biased in favour of Russia. But it is not the final word

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Woodrow Wilson had 14 points. Steve Witkoff has 28. But while President Wilson's peace plan was met with euphoria in Europe in 1918, the Witkoff plan to end the war in Ukraine has been greeted with dismay.

Ever since Donald Trump returned to the Oval Office, Ukraine and its European supporters have feared that the US would negotiate a peace deal directly with Russia — and then try to force it down Kyiv's throat. That process began to unfold last week. Trump has given the Zelenskyy government until Thursday to make up its mind about a plan that involves ceding territory to Russia and major restrictions on Ukrainian sovereignty.

There are now three broad possibilities. The first is that Ukraine clearly rejects [the plan](#), and Trump follows through on an implied [threat](#) to cut off aid to the country.

A second is that the proposal worked out between Witkoff and Kirill Dmitriev, the American and Russian negotiators, becomes the basis for talks. The Ukrainians, with assistance from friends in Europe and Washington, get a chance to change it substantially.

The third scenario is that the many inconsistencies and [loose ends](#) in the Witkoff-Dmitriev proposal ensure that the deal unravels completely. As a result, the war continues.

A complete cut-off in US aid would leave Ukraine in a bleak and dangerous situation. Even though the Trump administration has already severely curtailed support for Kyiv, there are still some crucial American capabilities that Ukraine relies on.

The first is intelligence that has helped Ukraine to defend its sites from Russian missiles and to conduct deep strikes into Russia. Ukraine also still needs American munitions. The US is no longer giving the country military aid as it did during the Biden years. But Trump has agreed to sell military equipment to Ukraine — paid for by Kyiv's European allies.

Ukraine is already struggling to stem Russia's advances. Daniel Driscoll, the US army secretary who presented the plan to Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv, said that "it is the honest US military assessment that Ukraine is in a very bad position." Senior American soldiers have been saying similar things in private for many months, arguing that the Ukrainian army is suffering from a critical lack of manpower and pointing to rising levels of desertions.

The Zelenskyy government's European allies dispute this characterisation of the war, saying that Russia is still only making incremental progress and that increased pressure on the faltering Russian economy could force the Kremlin to accept a deal that is much less favourable to its interests.

Whatever the true situation on the frontline, a cut-off in US support for Ukraine would clearly increase the chances of a Russian military breakthrough.

Given the dangers it faces, Ukraine has reluctantly accepted the Witkoff-Dmitriev proposal as a basis for negotiations — hoping that, with the support of its friends in Europe and Washington, it can blur or erase its worst aspects. Similar tactics have worked in the past. After the disastrous [Zelenskyy-Trump meeting in Washington](#) in February, European diplomacy was crucial in pulling America back from a full-scale betrayal of Ukraine.

Driscoll, who is close to vice-president JD Vance, set his face against “negotiating details” on his visit to Kyiv. But Trump himself has begun to [sound](#) more flexible, indicating that the Witkoff plan is “not my final offer”. There is also unusual pushback from within Trump's own Republican party and suggestions that Marco Rubio, the secretary of state, distanced himself from the proposals.

Zelenskyy and his team will still find it very hard to engage with a plan that suggests ceding territory that Ukraine still occupies — and which it has lost thousands of lives defending. But it is in the Ukrainians' interest to play it long, agreeing to negotiations in the belief that the Thursday deadline will not stick and that the Witkoff proposal will be modified as its flaws and inconsistencies become evident.

Despite Vladimir Putin's cautious welcome of the plan, it is likely that the Russians have their own objections and reservations. Moscow wants even more stringent limits on the Ukrainian military — and will be hostile to the plan's apparent floating of a Nato-like security guarantee for Ukraine.

Entering into talks could allow the Ukrainians to flush out Putin's objections. That, in turn, would underline that Ukraine is not the only obstacle to peace, making it harder for Trump to justify cutting off aid.

But Ukraine should not engage with the plan with the sole aim of sinking it. Amid the alarm in Kyiv and the outrage in Europe, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that Ukraine itself needs the war to end. A bad peace settlement could put the country's survival as a genuinely independent nation at risk. But the continuation of the war is also deeply damaging to Ukraine.

Over nearly four years, the country has sustained hundreds of thousands of casualties. Millions of refugees have fled Ukraine and its population has fallen by about 10mn, or roughly a quarter, since Russia's full-scale invasion. The economy is on life support and the birth rate is plummeting.

The American plan entails huge risks for Ukraine. But — if it is taken as a starting point, not the finished product — it could yet be a route to end the war on terms that Ukraine can accept.

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