TA Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: The Editorial Board

Trump bought Putin more time

On 4 September, Donald Trump announced that Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner were heading to Moscow and Kyiv with a new American “idea for peace”, without explaining its contents. Nothing in the talks so far suggests that Vladimir Putin is ready to end the war or abandon his demands.

A day earlier, House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Republican from Louisiana, effectively withdrew from a schedule a bill that could have turned Trump’s threats to Russia into real economic pressure.

This indicates that the White House wants to maintain the rhetoric of sanctions while avoiding the political and economic cost of enforcing them.

On 7 August, the Senate passed the bill by a vote of 86 to 11, but Johnson did not include it on the House agenda. He then cancelled the sessions planned for the last two weeks of September, so the House will be in session for only four more days before the 3 November election.

By keeping the bill off the agenda and manipulating the legislative calendar, Johnson has made a pre-election vote virtually impossible.

The White House officially endorsed the bill on 10 July, and on 2 September, Secretary of State Marco Rubio called on the House to pass it. However, Trump did not ask Johnson to put it on the agenda or urge Republican lawmakers to support it.

In a party he dominates, such a request would be unlikely to go ignored, so his lack of involvement shows that the White House publicly backs the measure but does not want to accept the political and economic risks of its passage.

Twenty months of negotiations without concessions from Moscow

Trump entered his second term after a campaign in which he boasted that, thanks to his personal relationship with Putin, he would end the war in a single day.

After almost twenty months, there is still no ceasefire, no peace agreement, no Russian withdrawal, no agreed-upon security guarantees for Ukraine, and no softening of the Kremlin’s territorial demands.

Moscow continues to demand that Kyiv cede the areas the Russian military failed to capture and abandon its right to choose its own security alliances.

Talks in March 2025 on Black Sea maritime security and halting strikes on energy infrastructure failed to bring a lasting end to the attacks, while the Alaska summit in August ended without an agreement.

Trump had threatened “severe consequences” before the meeting, but afterwards accepted the Russian position that a final peace should be negotiated without a prior ceasefire, although Putin did not offer any comparable concession in return.

> The new mission of Witkoff and Kushner begins without any real reason for optimism

Later deadlines for Moscow passed without the promised consequences, and new proposals stalled on the same issues.

Occasional prisoner-of-war exchanges remained the only tangible humanitarian outcome, while Ukraine accepted a US demand for an unconditional ceasefire that Putin rejected, as he continues to rely on time working in his favour.

The new mission of Witkoff and Kushner therefore begins without any real reason for optimism, as the American envoys bring yet another proposal to a government that has not paid a high price for rejecting previous ones.

Until the negotiations are accompanied by serious economic pressure on Moscow, Putin has no incentive to soften his demands, and Washington is increasingly focused on managing the conflict rather than creating the conditions to end it.

A bill that would change the cost of war

The Senate-passed bill is named after the late Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who worked on it for more than a year. The legislation provides for asset freezes and entry bans on Putin, senior Russian state and military officials, oligarchs, military suppliers, and people associated with energy projects that finance the war.

The proposal introduces sanctions against the Central Bank of Russia, the banks Sberbank, VTB Bank and Gazprombank, as well as foreign financial institutions that carry out transactions with them that the US administration deems significant.

It also calls for sanctions on ships used by Russia to circumvent international sanctions or the price cap on Russian oil, as well as on their owners, operators, managers and insurers.

Sanctions could also apply to owners or operators of foreign ports that allow vessels already sanctioned for supporting Russia to dock or use port services.

Russia's shadow fleet allows Moscow to continue delivering oil to customers using ships whose true owners are hidden behind intermediary companies, unreliable insurance and ports that accept them despite sanctions.

Sanctioning this entire chain would raise the costs and risks of Russian exports, make it more difficult to deliver oil and reduce the revenues that finance the Kremlin's war.

> The White House supported the proposal because it grants Trump broad powers

The most controversial element gives the president the authority to impose tariffs of up to 500 per cent on goods from Russia and up to 100 per cent on goods from countries that are among the largest buyers of Russian oil and gas, or that play a key role in helping Russia evade sanctions.

Since direct US imports from Russia are already heavily restricted, the proposal's real leverage lies in the pressure it would exert on third countries, primarily China and India. The president would set the rates and have the ability to grant exemptions in the name of US national interest.

The White House supported the proposal because it grants Trump broad powers, not because it commits him to a tougher policy towards Russia. He would determine tariff levels, grant exemptions, and lift the measures after a peace agreement, meaning he could pressure China and India but also spare them when it suited him.

Such authorisation is particularly important to him following the Supreme Court's February ruling, which rejected his interpretation that he could impose tariffs independently under emergency economic powers laws. This proposal would give him what he lacked in that dispute: the express consent of Congress.

The political and economic cost of sanctions ahead of the election

The Democrats' objections to the tariff provisions have some merit, because Congress would entrust Trump with the power to hit hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of US imports with tariffs, without a prescribed minimum rate and under a broadly defined concept of the national interest.

House Minority leader Hakeem Jeffries and Gregory Meeks, the top Democrat on the Foreign Affairs Committee, fear that Russia's war could become a legal basis for trade measures with entirely different objectives.

Some Republicans and business groups warn that putting pressure on the largest buyers of Russian oil would disrupt the market and increase costs for American companies and consumers.

The political risk is all the greater given that Brent crude is already trading at more than $90, the price of diesel in the US has reached a record $5.85 per gallon, and the war with Iran threatens further disruptions to supplies from the Middle East.

> Johnson cut the legislative calendar short, making it impossible to determine whether a majority existed for either version of the bill before the election

If China and India were to reduce their purchases of Russian oil because of US tariffs, they would have to look for alternatives on the global market, which would further drive up prices.

Russia could then offset part of the loss from lower sales with a higher price for its remaining barrels, while Trump would have to defend a bill ahead of the election that voters would associate with more expensive fuel, new tariffs and rising living costs.

Fears of higher energy prices and Democratic opposition to Trump's broad tariff authority could have been addressed through negotiations, but they do not justify removing the legislation from the schedule.

Johnson could have asked the Republican majority to pass the Senate text or negotiated with Democrats to limit tariffs and allow a separate vote on sanctions against Russian banks and the shadow fleet.

He did neither; instead, he cut the legislative calendar short, making it impossible to determine whether a majority existed for either version of the bill before the election.

Johnson's calendar is Trump's policy

Johnson claims he did not schedule the vote because there is insufficient agreement among lawmakers, but in today's Republican Party, the outcome of important votes primarily depends on whether Trump is willing to enforce party discipline.

Johnson's position as Speaker of the House depends on Trump's support, which makes it difficult to argue that the bill was stalled against the president's will.

> Despite the White House's public support, there was no real intention to pass the bill

If Trump had made sanctions against Russia a priority, the Republican leadership would have secured the necessary votes and allowed enough time for debate and a final vote.

Instead, Johnson cut the session short, revealing that despite the White House's public support, there was no real intention to pass the bill.

Putin gets more time

After the campaign ends and the election takes place on 3 November, lawmakers will return from their districts to Washington on 9 November, where the current session of Congress will continue until early January.

During the five scheduled legislative weeks, the House will have to deal with government funding and other measures that expire at the end of the year.

It is highly likely that Mike Johnson will not schedule a vote, or will only open negotiations on a scaled-back version after the election

If the House amends the text passed by the Senate, the revised bill must go back to the Senate for another vote. If both chambers fail to pass identical legislation by 3 January 2027, the proposal will fail and the legislative process will have to start again from the beginning.

It is highly likely that Johnson will not schedule a vote, or will only open negotiations on a scaled-back version after the election, which will not allow enough time for its passage.

Provisions on extending sanctions against Iran can be separated and attached to another bill, while the measures against Russia would have to be reintroduced in the next session of Congress.

If Democrats win the House, they are likely to try to keep sanctions on Russian banks and the shadow fleet, but remove Trump's broad authority to impose tariffs.

If Republicans retain their majority, a new attempt will depend on whether Trump demands passage after the election. In either case, the current version is almost certain not to become law.

Such a schedule suits Putin because he does not have to face new American sanctions until early next year. He can receive the American envoys, continue the talks and wait to see the composition of the new Congress without changing his demands.

That is why the most likely outcome of Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner's new mission is yet another agreement to resume negotiations, rather than a ceasefire or peace deal.

If Washington does not reintroduce the bill in early 2027 in a narrower form that can be quickly passed and implemented, the September delay will effectively amount to a retreat, and Moscow will receive confirmation that American pressure can be resisted simply by waiting.