Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Oleksandr Levchenko

No breakthrough in Ukraine until Moscow reconsiders its maximalist demands

The visits of US presidential envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner to Moscow on 5 September and Kyiv on 6 September 2026, did not produce an agreement to end the war.

However, they did demonstrate a renewed effort by Washington to bring Russia's and Ukraine's positions closer together and to lay the groundwork for the resumption of a trilateral negotiating process.

In Moscow, Witkoff and Kushner held talks with Vladimir Putin that lasted more than three hours.

The US received new ideas from the Kremlin regarding a possible settlement, but Moscow did not abandon its fundamental demands.

Putin again emphasised the need to address what he calls the "root causes of the conflict" and reaffirmed Russia's intention to pursue its stated objectives.

This is an important signal. The Kremlin is demonstrating a willingness to continue negotiations but has so far shown no readiness to accept a compromise that would require it to abandon its key political and territorial demands.

The Moscow meeting can therefore be described as negotiating progress without a political breakthrough.

Washington has restored a direct channel of communication with the Kremlin and gained an opportunity to assess Russia's position firsthand.

But the restoration of dialogue does not indicate that Russia is prepared to end the war.

European allies

The Kyiv leg of the mission had a different significance. In the Ukrainian capital, the US representatives not only conveyed the results of their talks with Putin but also discussed practical issues related to continued support for Ukraine.

Representatives of the United Kingdom, France, and Germany joined the consultations.

Washington has thus demonstrated its intention to coordinate any potential negotiating process not only with Kyiv but also with its key European allies.

> Security guarantees remain one of the main points of disagreement

This is critically important. If Moscow views negotiations primarily as a means of achieving its strategic objectives, for Ukraine the diplomatic process is inseparable from security considerations.

Any peace agreement must therefore address not only the cessation of hostilities but also establish mechanisms to prevent Russia from using any pause to prepare for renewed aggression.

Security guarantees remain one of the main points of disagreement.

The territorial issue

Another central issue is territory, particularly the parts of Donbas that remain under Ukrainian control.

For the Kremlin, the territorial question is part of a broader effort to reshape Europe's post-war security architecture. For Kyiv, accepting territorial concessions without reliable security guarantees would risk turning a ceasefire into merely a pause before another conflict.

It is therefore premature to expect the war to end quickly, especially before winter.

Jared Kushner himself acknowledged the complexity of the task, stressing that the

Donald Trump administration is seeking to create a “package of peace agreements.” Steve Witkoff, for his part, called on both sides to make compromises.

> For Kyiv, the essential condition is a peace settlement that does not jeopardise Ukraine’s statehood and security

The problem, however, is not simply the distance between Moscow and Kyiv’s positions. It lies in their fundamentally different visions of what the outcome of negotiations should be.

For Washington, the priority is to end the war and establish a long-term framework that would allow the parties to move from confrontation towards coexistence.

For Kyiv, the essential condition is a peace settlement that does not jeopardise Ukraine’s statehood and security.

Moscow, meanwhile, seeks to use the end of the war to consolidate the political, territorial and security gains it has tried to achieve through force.

The winter factor

The winter factor is also becoming increasingly important. During the talks in Kyiv, the sides discussed additional air-defence systems, including Patriot systems, the protection of energy infrastructure, and the supply of equipment for the energy sector.

This indicates that Washington does not regard diplomacy as an alternative to supporting Ukraine.

On the contrary, the diplomatic process is being accompanied by preparations to strengthen Ukraine’s resilience to a possible intensification of Russian strikes on critical infrastructure.

The United States is therefore pursuing two tracks simultaneously: creating conditions for a diplomatic settlement while strengthening Ukraine’s negotiating position.

> Is the Kremlin prepared to accept a compromise that does not amount to the de facto fulfilment of its maximalist demands?

The most tangible outcome of the visits was the establishment of a basis for the next stage of negotiations.

This could involve the restoration of a Russia–Ukraine–U.S. format, alongside parallel consultations between Ukraine, the United States, and its European allies.

For now, however, this remains a diplomatic prospect rather than an agreement.

There is also a fundamental question that will determine the prospects for the entire process: is the Kremlin prepared to accept a compromise that does not amount to the de facto fulfilment of its maximalist demands? If the answer is no, US diplomacy will face the same obstacle that has repeatedly blocked previous negotiating initiatives.

Mechanism for the next round of negotiations

Significantly, in response to Russia’s claim that the “root causes” of the war must be addressed, EU Commissioner for Defence and Space Andrius Kubilius stated: “The root cause of the war in Ukraine is Vladimir Putin himself.”

The root cause of the war in Ukraine is Vladimir Putin himself - Andrius Kubilius

This contradiction lies at the heart of much of the current diplomatic challenge. Washington is seeking a formula for compromise between the parties, while Moscow and Kyiv continue to differ fundamentally over the nature of the conflict, its causes, and what would constitute an acceptable outcome.

The Witkoff–Kushner mission should therefore be judged not by whether it produced a peace agreement, but by whether it created a mechanism for the next round of negotiations.

At this stage, the answer is positive. The diplomatic process has been reactivated, Washington's direct contacts with Moscow and Kyiv have been maintained, European allies have been drawn into the consultations, and the possibility of a new trilateral format remains open.

But there has been no political breakthrough. Until Moscow shows a willingness to reconsider at least some of its maximalist demands, the main outcome of US diplomatic efforts will remain not a peace agreement, but an attempt to create the conditions under which such an agreement could eventually be reached.

Oleksandr Levchenko, a former Ukrainian diplomat, is a professor at the State University (Kyiv) and a member of the Academy of Geopolitics and Geostrategy (Kyiv).