

The Dubai Talks on the Ukraine War

by George Friedman - January 26, 2026

Representatives from the United States, Russia and Ukraine held talks over the weekend in Dubai on ending the war in Ukraine. There's evidence to suggest the meeting was considered important. Among the American representatives was Jared Kushner, U.S. President Donald Trump's son-in-law, who tends to be invited to negotiations of significance. Much more important, this was the first time since the war began that representatives from all three nations had convened for an official visit.

Yet, in the past, any optimism over the war's conclusion had been quickly dispelled, so optimism this time around should be tempered, maybe even banished. The primary obstacle to a settlement has been Russia's unwillingness to end the war based on the reality on the ground – that is, to accept peace based on the (small) amount of territory it has captured. A settlement based on that reality would necessarily mean that all of Russia's sacrifices – financial, economic and human – would be for very little. Making peace on that basis would undermine Russian President Vladimir Putin's credibility.

Ukraine has refused to end the war for similar reasons; it doesn't want to lose any territory to Russia, no matter how small. Likewise, from the perspective of Europe, which has steadfastly supported Ukraine throughout the conflict, a settlement based on Russia having even minimal success would be seen as a reward for its aggression, one that could encourage more forays into Europe in the future.

Washington considers both stances irrational based on two fundamental realities. One is that the Russian army has failed to and likely cannot defeat the Ukrainian army and take the whole of its territory. There is no indication that Russia can bolster its ranks much more than it already has, let alone occupy all that it set out to take. The other reason is that Ukraine cannot defeat Russia and take back what Moscow has gained. Nor would Ukraine be able to achieve victory without the assistance of U.S. and European forces. Given that it was in the national interests of neither Europe nor the U.S. to commit troops to the war effort, the only solution is a peace agreement based on the reality on the ground. This means that in some ways the war has already ended, even if the dying hasn't.

There is a possibility that Russia has changed its stance, based on both the price it must pay to continue the war and the strategic reality that has emerged since the war began. Russia is no longer the power it once was, especially in territorial terms. Since the Soviet era, the five countries of Central Asia have become independent nations, and Moscow's influence over them has steadily waned. The countries in the South Caucasus have also become independent nations in which the U.S. has asserted a great deal of influence of its own. (Russia still has a presence in Georgia.) Russia's other borders, meanwhile, have contracted and are in some places hostile. Putin's first step to rectify this situation was to invade Ukraine. That plan is no longer viable.

Another area in which Russian weakness is evident is Chechnya, a territory located in the North Caucasus that fought two bitter wars for independence from Russia before being defeated in 2009. Chechnya is a symbol of Putin's power – the role he played in crushing the rebellion there was a huge factor in his becoming president. There are, however, now signs of instability again in Chechnya. The leader of the territory, Ramzan Kadyrov, has long helped suppress Chechnya's independence, but his health is failing. Kadyrov meant for his third son to replace him, but there are elements in Russia that oppose the idea of a dynasty within Russian territory. Apparently, this opposition was especially pronounced in the intelligence community. It is not known whether Putin, who was close to Kadyrov, holds the same view. Either way, the son in question was badly injured in a car crash earlier this month.

The point here is not just that Russia has failed in Ukraine. It's that over the course of the war, it has lost power throughout its supposed sphere of influence, even as the U.S. makes inroads into regions that used to be part of the Soviet Union. And now even Chechnya is becoming a source of contention. Given all this – and the fact that Russia is now drafting 50-year-olds for military service and recruiting mercenaries from Africa and Asia, indicating it has a significant shortage of troops – Russia is facing serious problems, made worse by the sad state of the economy.

It could be that Putin is now willing to reconsider his position. The U.S. has floated the idea that Donbas, the region Russia holds, could be neutralized, with no military presence but fully free to engage either side economically. And to be sure, the U.S. wants the war to end, and its sense of urgency could commend one toward optimism, or at least realism, in the recent talks.

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