

Former U.S. Official Shares Details of Secret ‘Track 1.5’ Diplomacy With Moscow

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View of the Kremlin from the bridge in Zaryadye Park in the center of Moscow. **Alexander Nemenov / AFP**

Secret diplomatic talks are ongoing between former senior U.S. national security officials and high-ranking members of the Kremlin, a former U.S. official directly involved in the talks has confirmed to The Moscow Times.

Earlier this month, NBC first [reported](#) the existence of these back-channel discussions, which involve former U.S. officials engaging in discreet exchanges with the Kremlin, as well as a meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in an effort to lay the groundwork for negotiations to end the war in Ukraine.

Known as track 1.5 diplomacy, these covert discussions enable both sides to understand each

other's red lines and mitigate potential conflicts, serving as a crucial link between official government negotiations (track 1 diplomacy) and unofficial expert dialogues (track 2).

The Moscow Times has since spoken to one of the individuals directly involved in these talks. The former U.S. official agreed to speak on condition of anonymity given the confidential nature of the discussions.

“There is an eminent need for track 1.5 diplomacy when the world gets closed off as it has now,” the former official said.

Meetings between the U.S. and officials in the Kremlin have been taking place at least twice a month, often through an online format.

“I have been visiting Moscow at least every three months,” the former official said.

Following The Moscow Times' report, the White House National Security Council said that the U.S. has not asked current or former officials to open a back-channel of communication with what it implied was Moscow.

“The United States has not requested official or former officials to open a back channel, and is not seeking such a channel. Nor are we passing any messages through others,” acting National Security Council spokesperson Adam Hodge [tweeted](#) Thursday. “When we say nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine, we mean it.”

During the talks described by the former official, when it came to the Kremlin's willingness to lay its cards on the table, “we were given some access to the Kremlin's thinking, though not as much as we would have liked.”

From his vantage point, sitting across from senior Kremlin officials and advisers, it was apparent that the greatest issue was that the Russians were unable to articulate what exactly they wanted and needed.

“They don't know how to define victory or defeat. In fact, some of the elites to whom we spoke had never wanted the war in the first place, even saying it had been a complete mistake,” he said.

“But now they're at war — suffering a humiliating defeat is not an option for these guys.”

“It was here that we made clear that the U.S. was prepared to work constructively with Russian national security concerns,” the former official added, breaking from the official U.S. line of squeezing Russia financially and isolating it internationally so as to prevent it from continuing its war against Ukraine.

“An attempt to isolate and cripple Russia to the point of humiliation or collapse would make negotiating almost impossible — we are already seeing this in the reticence from Moscow officials,” he said.

“In fact, we emphasized that the U.S. needs, and will continue to need, a strong enough Russia to create stability along its periphery. The U.S. wants a Russia with strategic autonomy in order for the U.S. to advance diplomatic opportunities in Central Asia. We in the U.S. have to

recognize that total victory in Europe could harm our interests in other areas of the world.

“Russian power,” he concluded, “is not necessarily a bad thing.”

On the subject of Russia's deepening relationship with China, the former official acknowledged that completely severing ties between Moscow and Beijing was unrealistic. However, efforts should be made to limit the extent of this relationship, he argued. Washington's goal is to strike a balance that prevents an overwhelming consolidation of Russian power while fostering diplomatic opportunities in Asia, where Moscow plays a significant role.

“This does not mean we are abandoning Ukraine or Europe,” the former official was quick to note. “Rather, we want to find ways of guaranteeing Ukraine's independence while bringing Russia back as a more creative player in European security.”

Both the U.S. and Russia should have used greater strategic imagination in the decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the official argued further. In recent years, Moscow has become especially resentful after the Biden administration did not prioritize efforts to rebuild strained U.S.-Russia ties.

The Biden administration thus realized — albeit too late — that Russia sought to be taken seriously, with its military build-up at Ukraine's borders in 2021 a tactic to gain attention.

“There has been a severe lack of sustained U.S.-Russia dialogue on European security,” the former official said, “and our negotiations in early 2022, prior to the full-scale invasion should have remained confidential, but the Russians proceeded to leak the details. This made the negotiation process far more difficult.”

He admitted, however, that no matter how much work the U.S. might now undertake, sooner or later Russia and Ukraine would have to sit down together at the negotiating table.

“We suggested setting up a number of diplomatic channels in order to satisfy the desires of all the parties involved,” he said. “There firstly needs to be a serious U.S.-Russia channel, as these are the only two countries powerful enough to negotiate security in Europe. There must of course be a channel between Ukraine and Russia, another between Russia and the EU; and one between Russia and the Global South.”

During the discussions, it became evident that Ukraine's chances of regaining its occupied territories were extremely slim. Crimea remains a particularly contentious issue, as Ukraine asserts its intent to reclaim the region which Russia annexed in 2014.

“If Russia thought it might lose Crimea,” the ex-official said, “it would almost certainly resort to [using] tactical nuclear weapons.”

He noted that Washington had also offered to help conduct fair referendums in the Russian-occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, in which residents would vote on whether they wished to be part of Ukraine or Russia.

Russia apparently declined this offer and claimed to have annexed the territories in September 2022 following referendums widely viewed as a sham.

But the former official expressed a sense of impasse in the ongoing secret talks. “In Russian diplomacy, everything is now linked, all built around the locus of the war making it impossible to do any productive forms of diplomacy.”

The problem was less with the Russian elite as a whole than it was with Putin specifically, he explained.

“Putin is the major block to all progress,” he said. “The U.S. administration has made at least one attempt to speak with the Kremlin but Putin himself refused.”

For this reason, he argued, Washington “should begin reaching out to the anti-war Russian elite and begin making progress with them.”

If there was support among the elite for another leader, he said, “ousting Putin would not be impossible.”

This article has been updated to clarify that the source is a former official, and to add the White House National Security Council's statement.

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