

Was Qatar Secretly Mediating a Partial Russian-Ukrainian Ceasefire Before Kursk?

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Russia could have advanced its long-term diplomatic interests without curtailing its campaign in Donbass if they succeeded, while Ukraine could have kept Russia's guard down during this process for facilitating its unprecedentedly risky gamble in Kursk aimed at staving off seemingly inevitable defeat.

The [Washington Post](#) (WaPo) reported on Saturday that Qatar was secretly mediating a partial Russian-Ukrainian ceasefire before [Kiev's sneak attack against Kursk](#), which would have seen both sides agree not to target each other's energy infrastructure. The Kremlin hadn't commented by the time of that article's publication nor this present one so it's unclear how truthful it is. In any case, it's worthwhile taking a look at what WaPo's sources said, which might help discern whether or not this is believable.

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Ukrainian attack ruined 'secret' peace talks – WaPo

Moscow and Kiev were negotiating a moratorium on striking energy infrastructure before the Kursk incursion, the paper has reported



FILE PHOTO: Russian servicemen involved in the Ukraine conflict at an undisclosed location. © Sputnik / Sergey Bobylev

The Ukrainian incursion into Russia's Kursk Region has derailed secretive Qatar-mediated talks between Moscow and Kiev that could have paved the way for a "partial ceasefire," the Washington Post reported on Saturday, citing sources.

An unnamed diplomat told the paper that both sides intended to send delegations to Doha to negotiate a landmark deal that would halt mutually devastating strikes on energy infrastructure. However, when Ukrainian troops launched a large-scale attack on Russian territory last week, the rare engagement was thrown into doubt, the article said.

The first tidbit is that “Some involved in the negotiations hoped they could lead to a more comprehensive agreement to end the war, according to the officials”.

This was followed by the claim that “Russia ‘didn’t call off the talks (after Kursk), they said give us time,’ the diplomat said.” The Ukrainian “presidential office” then alleged that talks in Doha were indeed scheduled but were postponed until 22 August “due to the situation in the Middle East” and will now “take place in a video conference format”.

WaPo went on to cite “senior officials in Kyiv” who “had mixed expectations about whether the negotiations could succeed, with some putting the odds at 20 percent and others anticipating even worse prospects” even before Kursk. They still explored the reportedly Qatari-mediated partial ceasefire with Russia though because “‘We have one chance to get through this winter, and that’s if the Russians won’t launch any new attacks on the grid,’ a Ukrainian official who was briefed on the talks said.”

“‘Everything has to be weighed — our potential and the possible damage to our economy versus how much more damage could we cause them and their economy,’ the Ukrainian official briefed on the planned Qatar summit said. ‘But energy is definitely critical for us. We sometimes forget about the economy here, but we’re facing free fall if there’s no light and heat in the winter.’” According to them, the partial ceasefire would be modeled off of the now-defunct grain deal, but Kursk changed all of that.

It’s at this point that two interconnected questions come to mind: 1) why would Russia consider agreeing not to target the energy infrastructure upon which Ukraine’s entire war effort depends, thus preventing its foes’ complete collapse and possibly perpetuating the conflict into another year?; and 2) why would Ukraine launch its sneak attack knowing that it ended any chance, at least for the time being, that Russia might give them such a reprieve that could then allow them to keep fighting into next year?

As regards the first question, if there’s any truth to WaPo’s report (the veracity of which will be assessed later), then Russia might have thought that this could soften its image ahead of the possible resumption of peace talks and create the conditions for Ukraine to comply with more of its terms. Trump’s potential return to power and his promise to swiftly end the conflict could have hung heavy over policymakers’ heads and influenced them to consider abiding by this moratorium until after the elections at least.

If such negotiations were indeed being mediated by Qatar, then that could also explain why Russia left its border with Ukraine largely undefended and might have even shrugged off reports of a buildup there since policymakers could have considered it “irrational” for Kiev to carry out any such sneak attack. RT’s Sergey Poletaev also [speculated](#) that a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ was in place between Russia and the US over the defense of the former’s border from the latter’s Ukrainian proxy this entire time.

Taken together and assuming for the sake of this thought exercise that WaPo’s report is accurate, then it might have been that Russia was lured by the aforesaid speculative ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ with the US and the then-ongoing Qatari-mediated partial ceasefire talks with Ukraine into keeping its guard down. The purpose all along could have been for them to get Russia to leave large swathes of its border undefended in order to facilitate a Ukrainian sneak attack as part of an unprecedentedly risky gamble.

This hypothesis segues into answering the second question about why Ukraine would throw

away any chance, at least for now, of Russia giving them a reprieve from attacks against their energy infrastructure that could then allow them to keep fighting into next year if they make it through the upcoming winter. Kiev and its US patron might have concluded that the pace of Russia's on-the-ground gains in Donbass will inevitably lead to their defeat unless something drastic is done to change [the conflict's dynamics](#).

Freezing attacks on one another's energy infrastructure wouldn't halt Russia's advance, not to mention if Moscow pulls out of the deal after the elections. Despite the odds of success being low, one possible way to prevent Russia's seemingly inevitable victory would be to seize, hold, and then swap some of its pre-2014 land in exchange for Russia withdrawing from some Ukrainian-claimed land. This plan's obvious flaw is that Russia might achieve a breakthrough in Donbass that leads to Ukraine's collapse before then.

It can't be ruled out though that [NATO might conventionally intervene](#) in Ukraine if that happens in order to force a Cuban-like brinkmanship crisis aimed at saving its proxy from full-blown defeat. This could take the form of creating a NATO-Russian DMZ inside the disputed territories, but it's unclear whether members have the political will to risk World War III over this. Ukraine knows that its sneak attack against Kursk leaves Donbass vulnerable so it might be hoping that this will happen if need be.

If that's their leadership's thought process, then the endgame might be to seize and hold some of Russia's pre-2014 land through the winter, possibly aided by a conventional NATO intervention in its defensive support if Russia breaks through in Donbass, in order to swap it back next year. This plan assumes that Ukraine could survive until then even if its electricity sector is destroyed, which is dubious but could still happen if the abovementioned sequence of events leads to a NATO-Russian DMZ.

It also takes for granted that World War III wouldn't break out if NATO conventionally intervenes in Ukraine to force the creation of that DMZ and then the threat thereof would remain manageable even if Russian-Ukrainian hostilities continue raging in Kursk. Another related assumption is that Russia would either allow NATO to also set up a DMZ on its pre-2014 border with Ukraine or NATO would willingly leave that frontier open and thus risk Russia launching offensives against those Ukrainian border regions.

The preceding calculations are "irrational", but they might have still influenced the Ukrainian leadership's thought process when deciding to launch their sneak attack against Kursk in spite of knowing that it would end any chance of a Qatari-mediated partial ceasefire with Russia, at least for now. From Russia's perspective, such a deal wouldn't have adversely affected the pace of its on-the-ground gains in Donbass, might have given it diplomatic leverage in new peace talks, and could always be abandoned.

It therefore appears that there might be some truth to WaPo's report about Qatar secretly mediating a partial Russian-Ukrainian ceasefire before Kursk since both sides would have gained from those talks. Russia could have advanced its long-term diplomatic interests without curtailing its campaign in Donbass if they succeeded, while Ukraine could have kept Russia's guard down during this process for facilitating its unprecedentedly risky gamble in Kursk aimed at staving off seemingly inevitable defeat.

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