

The War in Ukraine Can't End Until Washington Stops Interfering in Talks

Blinken says it takes two to tango

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In an [interview](#) with ABC This Week on September 10, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was asked about the possibility of negotiations with Russia. "You spent quite a bit of time with President Zelenskyy," ABC's Jonathan Karl said. "What is your sense? How does he see this ending? Does he see himself coming to a negotiating table with the Russians at some point? How does this end?"

Blinken responded, as the US consistently has, by implying that the Ukraine-US side has always been willing to take the diplomatic route and that it is Russia who has been unwilling to negotiate.

"And as to negotiations, Jon, it takes two to tango," Blinken said. "And thus far, we see no indication that Vladimir Putin has any interest in meaningful diplomacy." Blinken then added that "If he does, I think the Ukrainians will be the first to engage, and we'll be right behind them."

That answer took more than a little historical revisionism and more than a lot of nerve. Russia has three times engaged in meaningful diplomacy. All three took place in the early days of the war, and all three could have ended the war before the escalation and devastation. Russia first engaged in meaningful diplomacy with Ukraine in Belarus just three days after the war began. They then, once again, engaged in diplomacy mediated by then Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. Most promisingly, Russia [signed](#) a [tentative agreement](#) with Ukraine during the negotiations in Istanbul.

The Istanbul agreement would have ended the war with Russia withdrawing to the positions it occupied before the war and Ukraine promising not to seek NATO membership and to make permanent neutrality a feature of its constitution.

Russia claims to be willing to return to meaningful diplomacy and pick up the strands of the Istanbul negotiations where they were shorn by the US. Referring to “what was agreed upon in Istanbul,” Putin recently [reiterated](#) that “If they want to get back to it, we are ready to talk to them.” Russia’s territorial terms may be more difficult for the US and Ukraine to accept than they were in Istanbul over a year ago, but that is the price of poor statecraft. The Pentagon identified an inflection point as early as November 2022 at which Ukraine may have attained its most beneficial point on the battlefield to be in the strongest position at the negotiating table: [Biden’s identified goal](#). Pushing beyond that point would likely only weaken Ukraine. The Biden administration did not listen. “There is a tide in the affairs of men, Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,” Shakespeare counsels. Washington missed the tide.

Though Russia claims to still be willing to negotiate, Ukraine no longer is. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has issued a decree [banning negotiations](#) with Putin, and his [10-Point Peace Plan](#) insists upon a settlement that precludes negotiations by demanding the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from all Ukrainian territory, including the Donbas and Crimea.

But earlier in the war, Ukraine was willing to talk as the Belarus, Bennett and Istanbul talks testify. But despite Blinken’s insistence that if the Ukrainians are willing to “engage,” then the US will “be right behind them,” the US was not. It has been the US that is not willing to tango: not Russia, not Ukraine. Ukraine was ready to bring the brief war to an end on terms that satisfied their goals. But the US was not because the terms did not satisfy their goals.

The US said no to the Belarus talks, [proclaiming](#) the conditions unsuited “for real diplomacy.” [According to no less an informed source than Naftali Bennet](#), the US “blocked” the Bennett brokered talks that had “a good chance of reaching a ceasefire.” And according to well placed Turkish officials, [including Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu](#) and [deputy chairman of Erdogan’s ruling party Numan Kurtulmus](#), the US put an end to those most promising talks too because they “want[ed] the war to continue.”

If it takes two to tango, the dance has not been delayed on account of Russia or Ukraine. The dance has been delayed because, as Putin [responded](#) to Blinken’s accusation, “the Americans . . . don’t know how to do this tango themselves. The music is remarkable and the steps are beautiful, but the US seeks to deal with everything from a position of power.” The diplomatic dance has been delayed because the US won’t engage in “meaningful diplomacy” and called it off: repeatedly.

And in perhaps the biggest betrayal of a dance step of all – and perhaps a sign of America’s face-saving exit strategy – the State Department placed the blame on Ukraine. On September 7, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [said](#) that Russia was willing to negotiate not invading Ukraine in exchange for NATO signing a promise not to enlarge into Ukraine. NATO, he said, “rejected that.” “Of course we didn’t sign.” In a stunning admission, the NATO Secretary General then concludes,

“So [Putin] went to war to prevent NATO, more NATO, close to his borders.”

Asked about Stoltenberg’s comment and the US-NATO refusal to negotiate, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller [responded](#) that

“We always made clear in the run-up to that war that we were willing to engage in

diplomacy with Russia.” Then he said, “The Ukrainians made clear that they were willing to engage in diplomacy with Russia about legitimate regional security concerns.”

That is true as the three sets of talks make clear. But then Miller added, confusingly,

“I certainly don’t believe NATO was – or that Ukraine – or I won’t speak for them – NATO – Ukraine did not want to seem to want to compromise their own right to determine their future as a country.”

Miller placed the blame on Ukraine for not being willing to negotiate NATO membership.

That’s untrue. By day two of the war, Zelensky had already [signaled](#) that he was prepared to abandon Ukraine’s pursuit of NATO membership, declaring that he wasn’t afraid to negotiate neutrality and security guarantees with Moscow. By day two, Zelensky had already [said](#),

“We are not afraid to talk to Russia. We are not afraid to say everything about security guarantees for our state. We are not afraid to talk about neutral status. We are not in NATO now ... We need to talk about the end of this invasion. We need to talk about a ceasefire.”

Zelensky advisor Mykhailo Podolyak also [said](#) that “Ukraine wants peace and is ready for talks with Russia, including on neutral status regarding NATO.” In all three sets of talks – Belarus, Bennett, Istanbul – [Ukraine promised not to join NATO](#).

It was the US, not Ukraine, that was unwilling to negotiate Ukraine’s NATO membership, as Miller admitted in the same response: “I will reiterate what we said at the time, which was NATO has an “Open Door” policy and we are not – we were not willing to compromise NATO’s “Open Door” policy.” Derek Chollet, counselor to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, has [admitted](#) that the US explicitly told Moscow that negotiating NATO expansion into Ukraine was never even on the table.

The State Department rewrote history and shifted the blame for the refusal to negotiate NATO membership and the possible prevention of the war to Ukraine.

When it comes to diplomacy, Blinken is right, it does take two to tango. But he is wrong about which partner refuses to dance. Russia and Ukraine have shown an “interest in meaningful diplomacy.” It is the US that has consistently “blocked” it and cancelled the dance.

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