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Ukraine Diplomacy Reveals How Un-American Trump Is

Aug. 19, 2025

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I am really trying to be fair in analyzing the Trump-Putin-Zelensky-Europe drama that has been playing out the past few weeks. I am trying to balance President Trump's commendable desire to end the murderous war in Ukraine with the utterly personalized, seat-of-the-pants, often farcical way he is going about it — including the energy that everyone involved has to expend feeding his ego and avoiding his wrath, before they even get to the hellish compromises needed to make peace.

For now, the whole thing leaves me deeply uncomfortable.

I have covered a lot of diplomatic negotiations since becoming a journalist in 1978, but I have never seen one when where one of the leaders — in this case Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky — felt the need to thank our president about 15 times in the roughly four and a half minutes he addressed him with the press in the room. Not to mention the flattery that our other European allies felt they needed to heap on him as well.

When our allies have to devote this much energy just to keep the peace with our president, before they even begin to figure out how to make peace with Vladimir Putin; when they have to constantly look over their shoulder to make sure that Trump is not shooting them in the back with a social media post, before Putin shoots them in the front with a missile; and when our president doesn't understand that when Putin says to Ukraine, in effect "Marry me or I'll kill you," that Zelensky needs more than just an American marriage counselor, it all leads me to ask: How is this ever going to work?

Especially when every bone in my body tells me that Trump does not get what this Ukraine war is truly about. Trump is unlike any American president in the past 80 years. He feels no gut solidarity with the trans-Atlantic alliance and its shared commitment to

democracy, free markets, human rights and the rule of law — an alliance that has produced the greatest period of prosperity and stability for the most people in the history of the world.

I am convinced that Trump looks at NATO as if it's a U.S.-owned shopping center whose tenants are never paying enough rent. And he looks at the European Union as a shopping center competing with the United States that he'd like to shut down by hammering it with tariffs.

The notion that NATO is the spear that protects Western values and that the European Union is possibly the West's best modern political creation — a vast center of free people and free markets, stabilizing a continent that was known for tribal and religious wars for millennia — is alien to Trump.

Indeed, I agree with Bill Blain, a British-based bond trader and economic analyst, who wrote on Monday: "However much European leaders pile on their flattery of Trump, it's clear the fundamental bond of trust that underlay the 80-year success of the trans-Atlantic economy, that served the U.S. so favorably for decades, is now ruptured. The end of the trans-Atlantic economy will change the global economy utterly — favoring Asia and new trade relationships."

So, it is also no wonder to me that Trump doesn't feel any gut need to bring Ukraine into the West or understand that Putin's invasion was just his latest march to break up the West as revenge for its breaking up the Soviet Union.

How do I know that Trump is deaf to all that? Just listen to the interview that his special envoy to Putin, Steve Witkoff, gave to Tucker Carlson in March, after Witkoff's second meeting with Putin in the Kremlin. Here is just an excerpt:

Carlson: "What did you think of him?"

Witkoff: "I liked him. I thought he was straight up with me By the way, how would we settle a conflict with someone who is the head of a major nuclear power unless we establish trust and good feelings with one another?"

"In the second visit that I had, it got personal. President Putin had commissioned a beautiful portrait of President Trump from the leading Russian artist and actually gave it to me and asked me to take it home to President Trump, which I brought home and delivered to him. It's been reported in the paper, but it was such a gracious moment. And [Putin] told me a story, Tucker, about how when the president was shot, he went to his local church and met with his priest and prayed for the president, not because he was the president of the United States or could become the president of the United States, but because he had a friendship with him and he was praying for his friend. I mean, can you imagine sitting there and listening to these kinds of conversations?"

“And I came home and delivered that message to our president and delivered the painting, and he was clearly touched by it. So this is the kind of connection that we’ve been able to re-establish through, by the way, a simple word called communication, which many people would say, you know, I shouldn’t have had, because Putin is a bad guy. I don’t regard Putin as a bad guy. That is a complicated situation, that war and all the ingredients that led up to it. You know, it’s never just one person, right?”

It gets worse. Trump is so deluded as to Putin’s nature that during his summit with European leaders on Monday he was overheard on an open microphone telling President Emmanuel Macron of France about Putin: “I think he wants to make a deal for me. Do you understand that? As crazy as it sounds.”

Can anyone identify a single U.S. diplomat in Moscow or C.I.A. analyst who is advising Witkoff and Trump today? My bet is there are none, because no serious analyst or expert on Russia would tell them: “We have concluded that you are right and all of us have been wrong: Putin is not a bad guy, he just wants a just peace with Ukraine — and when he tells you he went to church and prayed for President Trump, you should believe him.”

Sorry, if Putin really prayed for Trump’s life, it is because he knows that no other American president could possibly be manipulated as easily as Trump has been. Putin is not and never has been looking for “peace” with Ukraine. He is, as I have written before, looking for a *piece of Ukraine* — in fact the whole piece if he can get it.

That is both the “root cause” of the war in Ukraine, to borrow one of Putin’s favorite phrases, and the “root cause of Trump’s meandering and floundering efforts to arrange peace in Ukraine — his inability to understand that Putin wants not peace but victory,” Leon Aron, a Russia scholar and the author of “Riding the Tiger: Vladimir Putin’s Russia and the Uses of War,” said to me. “Putin must have Ukraine for all sorts of ideological and domestic political reasons. And he will not stop seeking it and sacrificing for it — unless the West makes the cost of the war prohibitive, militarily and economically.”

So, I end where I began: Trump and Witkoff are not wrong to want to stop the war and all the killing. And it is not wrong to be in regular communication with Putin to do that. I am all for both. But to stop this war in a sustainable way, you have to understand who Putin is and what he is up to. *Putin is a bad guy*, a coldblooded murderer. He is not the friend of the president. That is a fantasy that Trump chooses to believe is real.

Once you understand those things, they lead you to only one conclusion: The only sustainable way to stop this war and prevent it from coming back is a massive, consistent, Western commitment to give Ukraine the military resources that will persuade Putin that his army will be chewed apart. The United States also must provide the security guarantees that would deter Russia from ever trying this again and encourage our European allies to promise that Ukraine will one day be in the E.U. — forever anchored in the West.

Putin's punishment for this war should be that he and his people have to forever look to the West and see a Ukraine, even if it is a smaller Ukraine, that is a thriving Slavic, free-market democracy, compared with Putin's declining Slavic, authoritarian kleptocracy.

But how will Trump ever learn that truth when he basically gutted the National Security Council staff and shrank and neutered the State Department, when he fired the head of the National Security Agency and his deputy on the advice of a conspiracy buffoon, Laura Loomer, and when he appointed a Putin fan girl, Tulsi Gabbard, to be his director of national intelligence?

Who will tell him the truth? No one.

No one but the wild earth of Ukraine. In the trenches in the Donbas, there is truth. In the 20,000 Ukrainian children that Kyiv says Putin has abducted, there is truth. In the roughly 1.4 million Russian and Ukrainian soldiers killed and wounded as a result of Putin's fevered dreams of restoring Ukraine to Mother Russia, there is truth. In the Ukrainian civilians killed by Russian drones at the same time that Trump was laying out the red carpet for Putin in Alaska, there is truth.

And the longer Trump ignores those truths, the more he builds his peace strategy — not on expertise but on his hugely inflated self-regard and his un-American anti-Westernism — the more this will become his war. And if Putin wins it and Ukraine loses it, Trump and his reputation will suffer irreparable damage — now and forever.

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