Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 3.03.2025 www.osw.waw.pl

Russia is tempting Trump: friendly offers and tough negotiations

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Faced with the shifting rhetoric and actions of the Donald Trump administration, Moscow is focusing on the elements it perceives as advantageous to its interests. In response, the Kremlin is pursuing a dual-track tactic. On the one hand, it is sending positive signals and proposing (economic) cooperation with the US, while on the other, it is engaging in tough negotiations, reiterating its demands, and continuing its offensive operations in Ukraine.

Moscow's hopes and fears

Statements from Russian officials, propaganda narratives, and specific actions all indicate that the Kremlin had high expectations following Trump's return to power in the US. Moscow expected that:

1. In his pursuit of a major personal, institutional, and ideological transformation in the US, **Trump would focus on domestic issues, limiting Washington's involvement in areas crucial to the Kremlin**. Mass purges would partially paralyse the functioning of the US administration, while other decisions would deepen political polarisation and trigger protests. This could lead to a deep political crisis, significantly weakening the United States.
2. The radical rhetoric and actions of the new US administration in trade relations (protectionism and new tariffs) and security (the withdrawal of US forces, especially from Europe), along with its departure from climate policies and its embrace of anti-liberal slogans and support for ultraconservative movements, **would contribute to a crisis in Washington's relations with its allies** (primarily the European Union and its key member states). Ideally, this would lead to the fragmentation of the West as a community and the paralysis of its key institutions (particularly NATO), creating a window of opportunity for Russia and other anti-Western states.
3. Trump's transactional approach, combined with his lack of strong interest in Kyiv and reluctance to continue supporting it, as well as his desire for a quick public relations victory through a negotiated peace in Ukraine, **would encourage significant US concessions to Moscow in defining the terms of ending the war**. Ideally, from the Kremlin's perspective, this – along with ongoing Russian military pressure on the Ukrainian front – could lead to Moscow effectively dictating the terms of freezing the conflict, largely based on its previous demands. In practice, this would equate to legitimising the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, restricting its sovereignty, and its

demilitarisation. It would also likely include the lifting of Western sanctions on Russia and a significant reduction in US and NATO military activity in the broader vicinity of the Russian Federation.

However, Moscow also had certain **concerns**, primarily due to Trump's personality traits: his unpredictability, volatility, and tendency to make swift and radical decisions. It seems that its greatest fear was a scenario in which:

1. Trump, following his slogan of 'peace through strength', might **attempt to impose terms for ending the war in Ukraine that only partially accommodate Russia's demands** (freezing the conflict along the current front line, postponing Ukraine's NATO membership, and merely easing – rather than fully lifting – anti-Russian sanctions). If Moscow resists, Trump could apply military and economic pressure. Military pressure would involve temporarily increasing military aid to Ukraine and lifting restrictions on its use of Western weapons. Economic pressure would entail expanding US sanctions against Russia, particularly in the energy sector, which is Moscow's most vulnerable area, and broadening the application of secondary sanctions to target Russia's trade with non-Western countries.
2. **The US would exert effective pressure on its allies,** particularly European countries, to increase defence spending and enhance energy and military cooperation with Washington, strengthening their military capabilities and economic resilience against Russia.
3. **Trump could take radical actions against countries that are *de facto* allies of Russia.** First, against Iran – in the worst-case scenario through a joint military operation with Israel aimed at blocking Tehran's military nuclear programme and/or attempting to overthrow the regime. Second, against China – primarily through intensified trade war measures, which, in the worst-case scenario, could significantly weaken China and/or force it into an economic agreement favourable to the US. This would, in turn, weaken the global anti-American front involving Russia and reduce the ability of its *de facto* allies to support Moscow.

Russia's stance on the approach taken by the Trump administration

Trump's actions and rhetoric, along with statements from his administration, contain elements that suggest the potential fulfilment of both Russia's hopes and, to a much lesser extent, its concerns. However, for Moscow, the most crucial aspects were the signs from Washington that it perceived as beneficial:

1. **Washington's decision to initiate an official dialogue with Vladimir Putin and normalise diplomatic relations.** This ended Russia's isolation from the US and encouraged other Western leaders to establish contact (partly out of fear of a US-Russia agreement made without the allies' involvement). Additionally, lifting restrictions on the operation of diplomatic missions would provide Russia with greater access to American elites, facilitating intelligence and propaganda activities.
2. **Signs of Trump's urgency to settle the conflict in Ukraine** (such as statements about reaching an agreement within 100 days, suggestions of a possible rapid Trump-Putin

summit, and media leaks about a US proposal for an 'Easter' ceasefire starting on 20 April). This placed Russia in a favourable negotiating position, increasing its chances of pushing through its demands, especially given US declarations to halt financial and military support for Kyiv and the refusal to deploy US forces for post-conflict stabilisation. These factors have weakened Ukraine's position and provoked tensions in transatlantic relations.

3. **Trump's administration has expressed interest in cooperating with Russia in several areas:** economic (extraction of critical raw materials and energy projects), regional (such as addressing Iran's nuclear programme), and global (an attempt to weaken the Russia-China alliance). This suggests Washington's potential readiness to lift sanctions (which has been explicitly announced), leading to a deeper normalisation of relations, akin to a new version of the US-Russia reset. From Moscow's perspective, such an approach would make it more difficult for Washington to take actions detrimental to Russian interests (see above). Easing or lifting sanctions would allow Russia to overcome economic difficulties and accelerate its military preparations for a future phase of its aggression. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's attempt to "pull Russia away from China", as explicitly stated by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, would not actually disrupt the Russian-Chinese alliance. Instead, it would strengthen Moscow's position within it, giving Russia leverage to obtain greater economic benefits from Beijing, increase financial support, and improve cooperation terms to its advantage, including in the energy sector.

Moscow's tactic: friendly offers…

With the resumption of formal US-Russia dialogue, Moscow adopted a dual-track strategy. The first element was demonstratively friendly rhetoric, including offers of cooperation. The second was the deliberate disregard of certain US demands while presenting its own conditions and demands.

The positive messaging towards Trump primarily comes from Putin himself, who consistently praises the US president and speaks favourably about the ongoing talks and their prospects. The Russian side is focusing on economic cooperation, pushing for the third track of dialogue mentioned by Secretary of State Rubio. This effort is spearheaded by Kirill Dmitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, who has expressed strong optimism about achieving significant progress in talks focusing on these issues within a few months. Russia has specifically highlighted potential joint projects in the Arctic (most likely referring to oil and gas extraction on the Russian continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean, as these projects are currently restricted by US sanctions). Another area of proposed cooperation involves space exploration.

Russia also raised the prospect of cooperation in the extraction of its rare earth metals and critical raw materials (on the same day that President Trump expressed interest in such collaboration, a meeting chaired by Putin was held at the Kremlin to discuss the implementation of Russia's plans in this area). In direct response to the US-Ukraine agreement on the joint exploitation of critical resource deposits in Ukraine, the Kremlin proposed similar cooperation, including in territories currently occupied by Russian forces. This proposal is intended to support Russia's efforts to legitimise the annexation of these areas as part of a future peace settlement.

The choice of the economic sector as the basis for **Moscow's positive offer** to Washington is based on several reasons.

First, it facilitates the decision to lift sanctions against Russia, which remains one of Moscow's priorities. Such a move would not only provide a significant boost to the Russian economy and military but would also serve as a symbolic victory for the country's elite in its confrontation with Ukraine and the West. Additionally, it would accelerate the rebuilding of Russia's military capabilities in preparation for the next phase of aggression.

Second, it effectively compensates for Moscow's lack of a positive offer in the political and security spheres. Despite the alleged offer to mediate between Washington and Tehran, Russia is not ready, for example, to scale back its cooperation with Iran (an important ally in its confrontation with the West, a supplier of weapons to Russia, and a potential transport corridor). At most, Moscow may offer to refrain from deepening this cooperation, for example, by not transferring nuclear or missile technology. What is even more important, Russia has no intention of weakening its strategic alliance with China, on which it has become economically dependent and with which it is expanding political and military cooperation. However, Moscow likely believes that, as Secretary Rubio publicly suggested, Washington only intends to give Russia more room to balance its relations with these partners – something the Kremlin would readily take advantage of.

Another element of Moscow's tactic involves **handpicking interlocutors from Trump's inner circle and effectively 'investing' in them**. This applies particularly to Steven Witkoff, the US President's Special Envoy for the Middle East and a participant in the Riyadh negotiations. Witkoff revealed that during his visit to Moscow in February 2025, which was primarily focused on negotiations for the release of an American prisoner in Russia, he had a three-and-a-half-hour conversation with Putin. Following this meeting, he spoke very positively about the prospects for US-Russia cooperation and repeated several narratives aligned with Russian propaganda regarding the war in Ukraine.

…and tough negotiations

Moscow's representatives have publicly suggested that organising a Trump-Putin summit requires time and proper preparation, while maintaining their invitation for the US president to attend the 9 May Victory Day celebrations in Moscow. At the same time, Russia is closely monitoring the rhetoric of the Trump administration and swiftly reacting to any emerging critical statements. This was evident when Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov expressed concern over remarks by Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth, who initially hinted at a possible tougher US stance on Russia but later withdrew those comments.

Russian rhetoric suggests that **Moscow is negotiating hard with the US and intends to test how far Washington is willing to accommodate its maximalist demands**. On the Kremlin's side, the strongest negative signals have come from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his deputy, Sergei Ryabkov, who is responsible for Russia's relations with the West.

While speaking positively about the atmosphere of talks with the US representatives, Moscow repeatedly emphasises the need to address the 'root causes of the conflict'. This is a reference to Russia's long-standing demands regarding European security, framed as a response to what it perceives as the 'anti-Russian' policies of the US and NATO.

Kremlin representatives (primarily Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Ryabkov) have also expressed strong opposition to the possible deployment of Western forces ("in any form") in Ukraine as guarantors of a ceasefire, despite President Trump's claims that Putin had no objections to such a move. Additionally, they have stated that any ceasefire demarcation line cannot simply follow the current front line, as it needs to reflect Russia's annexation of four Ukrainian regions within their full administrative borders. This implies the required withdrawal of some Ukrainian forces from these areas. Russian officials have also insisted that in the "remaining areas of Ukraine", 'anti-Russian' legislation cannot be enforced, a reference to Moscow's long-standing rhetoric about the 'denazification' of Ukraine.

Most importantly, however, the intensity of Russian military activity in Ukraine has not diminished, as both ground and air forces continue their offensive operations, causing significant destruction and numerous casualties. At the same time, Moscow has made it clear that a ceasefire will only be possible as part of a broader political settlement, rather than as a preliminary step towards one. This stance serves as a key factor in strengthening Russia's negotiating position.

The most recent tensions between the US and Ukraine, which have significantly weakened Kyiv's position, are likely to further toughen Russia's stance in negotiations. At the same time, the Kremlin is counting on escalating disputes between the US and Europe to unfold simultaneously.