

## The Trump administration and the Russia-Ukraine war: in search of an agreement with Moscow

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Recent weeks have been dominated by negotiations involving the United States, Ukraine, and Europe aimed at ending the Russia-Ukraine war, including efforts to draft post-conflict security guarantees for Ukraine and debates surrounding the new US National Security Strategy, which envisages 'strategic stabilisation' in Europe based on an agreement with Russia. Reports have also emerged of intense US-Russia talks concerning future economic cooperation between the two countries. Since October 2025, following a period of limited involvement in efforts to end the ongoing war, the Trump administration has clearly intensified its engagement; however, the outcome of these initiatives remains uncertain. The US president's assumption that peace could be achieved swiftly by reversing Joe Biden's policy has proven to be mistaken. Attempts to pressure Ukraine while simultaneously seeking an understanding with Russia have so far failed to produce a breakthrough.

In the coming weeks and months, Trump's readiness to escalate sanctions against Russia in response to its refusal to compromise will play a critical role, along with the United States' response to any apparent (tactical) concessions offered by the Kremlin. At the same time, it is conceivable that the US could once again suspend the sharing of intelligence with Ukraine and halt the sale of certain types of weapons and ammunition, including via its European allies. Another plausible scenario is that, in the absence of any tangible progress, Washington could significantly scale back its involvement in efforts to bring about peace.

### The sources of Trump's policy on the Russia-Ukraine war

During the election campaign, the current US president claimed that he could end the war in Ukraine within 24 hours, projecting confidence in his own effectiveness. His actions on this issue to date have been based on several core assumptions. He believes in the power of direct influence and the importance of leader-to-leader engagement. In his view, the misguided policy of his predecessor, who pledged indefinite support for Ukraine and refused to engage in dialogue with Russia, was one of the reasons the conflict dragged on. Trump therefore assumed that reversing this approach could lead to a major shift, paving the way for the initiation of peace negotiations.

Moreover, the US leader does not perceive the two warring sides as equals. From his perspective, global powers – a category that, in his view, includes Russia – should play a central role in shaping the international order. For this reason, from the outset, Russia has been his principal partner in negotiations; this approach remains unchanged regardless of the state of his relationship with Vladimir Putin.<sup>1</sup> Trump sees Ukraine as a country dependent on US assistance, and therefore believes it should accept the terms dictated by Washington. He also assumed that, faced with the mounting costs of a protracted conflict, Russia would be willing to reach an agreement focused primarily on territorial issues. As a result, he overlooked the Kremlin's core objective: the complete subjugation of its neighbour. Russia has sought to achieve this by demilitarising Ukraine, leaving it without any external security guarantees, replacing its government with a regime fully subordinate to Moscow, and restructuring Europe's security architecture on its own terms.

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in Europe. A peace deal would reduce the risk of a larger-scale conflict that could draw in the United States, help to accelerate the reduction of the US military presence in Europe, and open the door to business cooperation with Russia. From a global perspective, the overarching objective is to free up resources to focus on the pivotal rivalry with China and, in an ideal scenario, to weaken ties between Russia and China.

Trump's contribution to efforts to end the Russia-Ukraine war also stems from his personal ambitions, fears, and personality. He has long made no secret of his desire to win the Nobel Peace Prize; brokering a peace deal in Ukraine would bring him closer to this goal. The president is also seriously concerned about the risk of nuclear conflict, which could be triggered by an escalation of the conventional war in Ukraine. Finally, his actions on this issue have been, and continue to be, shaped by the distinctive traits of his personality: unwavering optimism about his own effectiveness ('peace within 24 hours'), impulsiveness, and a reluctance or inability to focus on a single issue for any extended period.

## Inconsistency and volatility

Trump's involvement in efforts to end the war has been marked by significant volatility: periods of intense activity, pressure on Ukraine and active dialogue with Russia have alternated with phases of disillusionment, during which he turned his attention away from the ongoing conflict. These fluctuations reflected the president's temperament and debates within his administration over how to deal with the Kremlin. As a result of these disagreements, the negotiation process was chaotic from the outset, heavily influenced by personal factors and characterised by US inconsistency in exerting pressure on Russia, as evidenced by a series of ultimatums that were never followed through.

The first weeks of Trump's presidency gradually tested the assumptions behind his approach to the conflict. Washington reopened channels of communication with Moscow (the president held a phone call with Putin and a US delegation met with their Russian counterparts in Riyadh) and made a number of goodwill gestures towards Russia, including a February statement by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth declaring that it would be impossible for Ukraine to recover all of its territory. At the same

<sup>1</sup> A. Kohut, 'The world according to Trump: the new US administration's foreign policy vision', OSW, 20 January 2025, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>2</sup> J. Gotkowska, A. Kohut, 'The new US National Security Strategy: a manifesto for a sovereign America in a multipolar world', OSW, 8 December 2025, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

time, the administration tested its ability to exert pressure on Kyiv, as demonstrated by its handling of an agreement on mineral resources,<sup>3</sup> President Volodymyr Zelensky's disastrous visit to the Oval Office in late February, and the brief suspension of US intelligence support for Ukraine in early March. Despite a flurry of activity in February and early March, the Trump administration failed to achieve its desired outcome: the establishment of a temporary ceasefire.

The US administration's heightened activity on the Ukraine war lasted roughly until mid-August, culminating in a meeting between Trump and Putin in Alaska. During this period, Washington became increasingly frustrated with Moscow's intransigence. Despite repeated talks between US officials and both Russian and Ukrainian delegations, as well as visits to Russia by Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff in March, April, and early August, negotiations made no progress, as the Kremlin showed no willingness to compromise. The summit in Anchorage, marking the first meeting between a US president and the Russian leader since the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion, also failed to produce a breakthrough. Trump not only failed to persuade Putin to agree to a ceasefire, but went so far as to adopt the Russian narrative as his own, arguing that the sides should negotiate a comprehensive resolution to the conflict that addresses territorial issues, the future of the Ukrainian armed forces, Ukraine's prospects for joining the EU and NATO, and the question of presidential elections.

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Until mid-October, Washington refrained from taking any new initiatives regarding Ukraine and Russia. The president re-engaged in peace talks after achieving a success in the Gaza Strip by brokering a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas that incorporated elements of a peace plan developed by his team. A new phase of activity began on 22 October with the imposition of sanctions on Russia's two largest oil companies, Rosneft and Lukoil, accompanied by suggestions that more far-reaching measures could follow. However, the stick was soon replaced by the carrot: in coordination with the Russian side, the administration drafted a 28-point peace plan that incorporated a number of Moscow's demands, including the recognition of Crimea and the Donbas as Russian territory, a cap on the size of the Ukrainian armed forces, and Ukraine's renunciation of any future NATO membership. According to reports, a proposal submitted by Putin's envoy Kirill Dmitriev formed the basis for this document; Witkoff and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, played a central role in drafting it. The fate of the plan so far reflects the broader pattern of the peace process: intense pressure from the president on Kyiv, followed by European efforts to revise the plan in Ukraine's favour – notably by outlining post-war security guarantees – subsequent attempts to reach an understanding with Russia, and repeated failures to meet self-imposed deadlines.

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## Domestic and external actors

Washington's policy on the ongoing armed conflict has been heavily influenced by the president's immediate circle. One particularly notable figure is Steve Witkoff, Trump's special envoy for peace missions, who has been his close associate for several decades. Witkoff's favourable attitude towards Russia, limited familiarity with the country, and lack of diplomatic experience have played a significant role in shaping the administration's engagement with the Kremlin. The US approach to Russia has also been influenced by Vice President J.D. Vance, who is sceptical of providing support to Ukraine, and his protégé, Secretary of the Army Dan Driscoll, who at one stage represented the United States in negotiations with Ukraine. Following the success in the Gaza Strip, Kushner also joined the group of

<sup>3</sup> M. Jędrysiak, S. Matuszak, 'The Ukraine–US agreement on minerals', OSW, 6 May 2025, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).

individuals directly involved in the negotiations. The presence of both Witkoff and Kushner, a wealthy property developer and influential investor, has elevated the business dimension of US-Russia talks.

The president's inner circle also includes figures who advocate a more assertive stance towards the Kremlin, such as Secretary of State and acting National Security Advisor Marco Rubio and retired General Keith Kellogg, who was initially expected to serve as special envoy to Russia and Ukraine. However, he was rejected by the Russian side and subsequently marginalised as others gained closer access to the president. He is expected to formally resign from this role in January. During periods when Trump grew frustrated with Russia's position, proponents of a tougher line, including further sanctions, gained greater sway. However, after nearly a year of talks, it is evident that those seeking an understanding with Russia have exerted greater influence over the Trump administration's approach.

The prospect of future economic relations with Russia may indicate that Washington's policy is increasingly shaped by business interests

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and lobbyists – including energy companies that stand to profit from future investments in Russia (for example, ExxonMobil is reportedly considering a return to this market) and individual investors such as Stephen Lynch, a Trump campaign donor who has explored the possibility of acquiring Nord Stream 2 and profiting as an intermediary in the sale of Russian gas. Bilateral discussions may also involve potential US investments in Russia and the possible use of Russia's frozen assets by American companies to support Ukraine's reconstruction.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, in the face of Russia's intransigent stance and the absence of any tangible progress in the peace process, Republican voters – long the most sceptical group when it comes to supporting Ukraine – may be re-evaluating their assumptions. The results of a December Harvard/CAPS/Harris poll<sup>5</sup> suggest a shift in sentiment: 86% of Republican voters expressed support for new sanctions against Russia if they help bring the war closer to an end, while 73% backed continued arms deliveries to Ukraine and additional sanctions should Russia refuse to negotiate and stop the bloodshed.

The conduct of the warring parties has also shaped Trump's policy. After early setbacks, Ukraine adjusted its approach to the US president and frequently succeeded in convincing him of its willingness to compromise. Russia finds itself in a different position: it has faced less pressure from the US administration, but it has also been less inclined to make concessions. Instead, it has focused on prolonging the talks and shifting the responsibility for their failure onto its adversary.

European leaders have also played a role in the negotiations. This group notably includes the E3 (Germany, the United Kingdom, and France), as well as leaders who have managed to establish a personal rapport with Trump, such as Finnish President Alexander Stubb. They have sought to moderate Trump's stance by urging him to support peace terms more favourable to Ukraine, particularly by providing security guarantees as a precondition for any Ukrainian territorial concessions. However, from the outset, the United States has limited the role of its allies in the peace process. European officials have not been involved in the negotiations; indeed, prior to the release of the 28-point peace plan, they had not been consulted even on those provisions of the document that directly affected them.

<sup>4</sup> D. Hinshaw et al., 'Make Money Not War: Trump's Real Plan for Peace in Ukraine', The Wall Street Journal, 28 November 2025, [wsj.com](https://www.wsj.com).

<sup>5</sup> Harvard CAPS Harris Poll, conducted on 2–4 December 2025, available at: [harvardharrispoll.com](https://harvardharrispoll.com).

## Possible scenarios

Forecasting Washington's policy on the war in Ukraine is difficult for several reasons. **In the most optimistic scenario**, the United States steps up pressure on Russia in an effort to force it to accept a revised peace plan that includes security guarantees for Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> Russia refuses to make any concessions, prompting the president to adopt a more decisive course of action. Within his inner circle, so-called 'hawkish' voices gain the upper hand, pushing for additional restrictions, including secondary sanctions outlined in legislation sponsored by Senator Lindsey Graham. The US continues to provide Ukraine with intelligence support and facilitates further European purchases of US-made weapons. Moreover, Trump exploits his reputation as an unpredictable leader to sow uncertainty in Moscow regarding his next moves. The war in Ukraine drags on, but the economic and military costs for Russia continue to mount.

**In the relatively neutral scenario**, the US president gradually loses interest in pursuing a peace settlement. On the one hand, this could stem from a lack of progress: the plan negotiated in recent weeks collapses as the Russian side refuses to make concessions. On the other, Trump's disengagement could reflect domestic factors, including declining support for Republicans and poor approval ratings for the president on economic policy, as attention shifts to the midterm election campaign ahead of the November 2026 vote. In this scenario, Ukraine would likely continue to receive intelligence support from the United States and secure its approval to purchase additional weapons and military equipment. Washington would maintain most of the existing sanctions; it could lift some partially, but any escalation of pressure would be off the table. The unity of Ukraine's European partners and their continued willingness to provide support would become critical to the country's future.

**In the negative scenario**, Russia offers tactical concessions, such as agreeing to a temporary ceasefire, while Ukraine is forced to make significant compromises, including the transfer of previously unoccupied parts of the Donbas. The agreement represents a public relations coup for Trump, but enforcing its terms proves difficult, giving both sides ample opportunity to shift blame onto one another. This, in turn, complicates the activation of any prospective security guarantees. The United States gradually lifts sanctions on Russia and begins to engage in economic cooperation with it. This causes fractures among European countries, which may also come under US pressure to re-establish economic ties with Russia. The US-Russia peace talks may be accompanied by a wider debate on European security, as part of which Washington could initiate Europe-Russia talks on regional security, covering issues such as arms control and limitations on allied military presence along NATO's eastern flank. A halt to hostilities could also accelerate the reduction of US military presence in Europe, particularly along NATO's eastern flank. Should Russia decide to resume the war on a limited scale, the response from Washington and European capitals may be muted.

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<sup>6</sup> W. Konończuk, K. Nieczydor, W. Rodkiewicz, 'Dispute over peace: Ukraine between US pressure and Russian demands', OSW, 12 December 2025, [osw.waw.pl](https://osw.waw.pl).