Trump's Path to an Imperfect Peace in Ukraine

By

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"You can always count on Americans to do the right thing," Churchill is credited with saying, "after they've tried everything else." It seems that wry observation may now apply to President Donald Trump's Ukraine policy. Though nothing is certain with the mercurial Trump, there are indications that he is finally ready to do something close to the right thing vis-à-vis Ukraine.

Consider his transformation since February's Oval Office meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Trump and Vice President JD Vance chastised Zelensky for being "disrespectful," admonished Zelensky's efforts to rally international support as "propaganda," suggested it was Zelensky's responsibility "to end the destruction of your country," and described Zelensky as "buried." Six months later, Trump is praising Ukraine's "unbreakable spirit," supports its "future as an independent nation," and appears to realize that Zelensky is not to blame for Vladimir Putin's war. It is clear that Putin is not entranced by "the art of the deal," and that America must play a role in securing any postwar peace. The outlines of that peace are starting to come into focus.

Lurching

In early 2025, French military commanders floated the possibility of forming a "coalition of the willing" to send troops to Ukraine. Other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members expressed support for the idea. By summer, 10 European nations offered to contribute troops to a 30,000-man "reassurance force" in postwar Ukraine. However, the Europeans emphasized they would need the US to provide "backstop" capabilities.

That was a nonstarter for Trump—at least until the hastily-arranged summit that brought the leaders of Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Finland, Ukraine, NATO, and the EU to the White House on August 18. Whether they came out of panic over the unsettling Trump-Putin Alaska meeting or in solidarity with Zelensky, or both, the result of the White House summit was positive.

For example, while Trump emphasized that he would not deploy American ground forces and explained that "European nations are going to take a lot of the burden," he added, "We're going to help them...we'll be involved" in any peacekeeping mission.

Toward that end, he ordered Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine to work with allied militaries on the specifics of a European-led peacekeeping force. Perhaps with the US shouldering command-and-control responsibilities; offering American airpower and other enabling capabilities; and signaling support for a security guarantee for postwar Ukraine, peace may prevail. Predictably, administration officials then hedged on Trump's promise to support the postwar peacekeeping mission in Ukraine—prompting a NATO diplomat to conclude, "The US is not fully committed to anything."

What Trump's transatlantic counterparts and those of us who are critical of Trump's policies need to keep in mind is that this lurching, two-steps-forward-one-step-back approach to Ukraine's security is better than what Ukraine endured between January and July. There was the Oval Office meeting, the suspension of military aid and intelligence-sharing, the mineral deal,

the moral relativism, outright moral inversion, and the inexplicable deference to Putin. Trump now appears to be moving in the right direction.

Lessons

Zelensky made clear that Ukraine cannot sign a peace deal without concrete security guarantees—given Putin's brazen violation of the Budapest Memorandum in 2014 and 2022. Eleven years of occupation and war have taught Ukrainians that words are not enough to ensure their security. A genuine security guarantee, bolstered by multinational peacekeepers and sustained military aid, is what Ukraine needs going forward—not to roll back Putin's army to pre-2014 borders, but to deter it from another landgrab. The rest of Europe needs this too. A strong, stable, secure Ukraine will only enhance NATO's ability to deter Moscow.

Such a guarantee will not be embodied by Ukraine's accession to NATO—at least not anytime soon—but instead will be a thatch of bilateral commitments from individual NATO members and partners. "A group of now 30 countries, including Japan and Australia, are working on this concept of security guarantees," NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte recently revealed. To be sure, an American contingent on the ground in postwar Ukraine—working alongside partners that collaborated in other warzones under acronyms such as MFO, IFOR, SFOR, KFOR, and ISAF—would be preferable to what Trump is offering.

After all, American boots on the ground send an unmistakable message to aggressor nations. However, given where Trump was in February, it is important to look at the bright side; rather than taking an ambivalent or even antagonistic position towards Ukraine, Trump appears willing to support America's closest allies as they secure a postwar peace. The Ukrainian people can then harden their territory against another Russian invasion. There are also two important historical realities.

First, American airpower has a proven track record of making a positive impact on the ground—whether in humanitarian, peacekeeping, deterrent, or combat-support missions. Consider the Berlin Airlift, which sustained a besieged city for 15 months and dealt Stalin a humbling blow. Operations Northern Watch and Southern Watch, which protected Iraqi civilians from Saddam Hussein's vengeance for 12 years and allowed Iraq's Kurds to build an all-but-sovereign state is another. Operations Deliberate Force and Allied Force, which, in coordination with partners on the ground, brought Serb paramilitaries to heel in Bosnia, pushed Serb regulars out of Kosovo, and hastened the end of Slobodan Milosevic's genocidal rule. The toppling of the Taliban after 9/11, which saw the US use airpower as a force-multiplier for indigenous fighters on the ground is but one more example. Finally, Operation Inherent Resolve leveraged airpower to assist ground units in rolling back ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

Of course, no one wants American warplanes directly engaging the Russian military. But it pays to recall that it is already happening on a routine basis—near Alaskan airspace, over the Baltic Sea, across Pacific Ocean, and in the Middle East. Moreover, given recent encounters between American and Russian forces—and American and Russian hardware—it seems unlikely Putin's high command will want to challenge American airpower along or above a future Ukraine-Russia DMZ.

That brings to light a second set of historical lessons. Neither lingering territorial disputes nor simmering hostilities are dealbreakers when it comes to providing security guarantees to allies and partners in the crosshairs. Consider post–World War II Germany. After a period of disarmament and occupation, the country's western half was rearmed and invited into NATO as a full member, despite massive Soviet bloc armies ringing West Berlin and despite West Germany facing an overwhelming military disadvantage across a heavily armed border.

In fact, the US did not formally recognize the post–World War II territorial-political settlement in Germany or across Europe until 1975. The people of West Germany never abandoned their hopes for German reunification. Those hopes were not realized until 1990.

Next, consider post–World War II Japan. The Red Army seized Japanese islands at the end of the war. To this day, Tokyo does not recognize Russian control over those islands. Despite this territorial dispute, the United States guaranteed Japan's security in 1951 and entered into a full-fledged mutual-defense treaty in 1960. That treaty is still in force today.

Last, consider the Korean Peninsula. Despite territorial disagreements; despite the absence of a peace treaty; and despite, or perhaps because of, the threat posed by a massive hostile army north of the 38th Parallel, the US provided open-ended security guarantees to South Korea in the autumn of 1953. Those security guarantees are still in force. The people of South Korea still look forward to unification of the two Koreas under the banner of freedom. South Korea even has a cabinet-level government ministry focused on unification.

Predator

In none of these examples did the US or its allies agree to the permanent ceding of territory. Rather, they recognized the difficulty of liberating occupied territory and they envisioned the future prospect of the return of that territory. That is how Ukraine and its partners should view the imperfect peace that will emerge in the coming months—a peace that will leave some of Ukraine's territory under Putin's control.

It is also worth emphasizing that a European-led, US-supported peacekeeping force in Ukraine is necessary given Putin's policies and plans: Moscow occupies swaths of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine; threatens Poland; is conducting a campaign of sabotage operations across NATO's footprint; has moved nuclear weapons into Belarus; is firing off intermediate-range missiles; and is diverting 35 percent of government spending into its war machine. As French President Emmanuel Macron concluded, Putin is "a predator…at our doorstep." Putin will not stop until he is stopped. Securing Ukraine—while continuing the build-up of deterrent forces on NATO's eastern flank—is key to stopping Putin.

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