



## Time to End a Hopeless Policy

By

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“Hopefully, he’ll become reasonable,” President Donald Trump recently said of Vladimir Putin. There is a fundamental problem with that idea: it is not prudent to base US foreign policy and national security on hope.

Trump’s insistence on deferring to Putin and hoping that Putin—after one more round of diplomacy, one more summit, one more phone call, one more tweet, one more attempt to rationalize unjust aggression—will become reasonable, is a fruitless exercise. After 10 months of placing his hopes in Putin, and allowing Putin to sway America’s Ukraine policy, it is time for the president to stop giving the Russian dictator the benefit of the doubt and start giving the Ukrainians what they need to ensure their independence and security.

Trump’s Ukraine policy includes a [withholding](#) of critical aid to Ukraine, a failed summit with the Russian strongman, an inspiring counter-summit with Ukraine’s European backers, and a return by Trump to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) consensus on Ukraine. Indeed, by mid-summer, President Trump was [offering](#) American airpower to a European-led peacekeeping force for postwar Ukraine and signaling his [support](#) for a [security guarantee](#) for Ukraine. Trump said, “European nations are going to take a lot of the burden,” before adding, “We’re going to help them.... [W]e’ll be involved” in any peacekeeping mission.

By the end of September, Trump was [declaring](#) that Ukraine could win back all of its territory. In October, he slapped [sanctions](#) on Russian oil producers and expressed a willingness to supply Ukraine with [Tomahawk missiles](#), which would allow Ukraine to launch precision strikes deep inside Russian territory and hamstring Putin’s war machine. But then, after another phone call with Putin, Trump, during a [meeting](#) with Zelensky late last month, took the Tomahawks off the table, urged Ukraine to consider territorial concessions, and spoke of security guarantees for Kyiv and Moscow.

Trump also recently addressed Israel’s Knesset and noted parenthetically, “We have to get Russia done.” That begins with recognizing he cannot keep putting hope in Putin and expect a different outcome. Instead, Trump must understand that ending the war in Ukraine requires being consistent, focusing on realities, and speaking the only language the Russian dictator understands—force.

Indeed, America’s security (and Ukraine’s future) would be better served if the president took the clear-eyed, hard-headed approach that has borne fruit in the Middle East; this includes steady [material support](#) for a democracy under assault, rejection of moral equivalence, recognition that the aggressor and its cause are not reasonable, and a [commitment](#) to tilting the battlefield and the postwar environment in favor of the democracy that was attacked rather than the aggressor that started the war.

There can be no end to the unjust war in Ukraine until the aggressor realizes that the costs are simply too high. Putin will not stop this war until he is stopped and understands he cannot achieve his aims. If the president continues to vacillate and maintain a hope-based perspective on Putin, Russia’s war on Ukraine will continue.

Putin has escalated his war on Ukraine (and NATO) in the months since Trump’s return to the White House. There are more [terror bombings](#) against civilian targets and infrastructure, more [waves](#) of murderous drones, more civilian deaths, more [hybrid attacks](#) elsewhere in Europe, and more [testing](#) of NATO’s unity.



The Atlantic Council's Daniel Fried, former US Ambassador to Poland, [compares](#) Trump's approach to Putin with President Franklin Roosevelt's approach to another Kremlin dictator, Joseph Stalin, during World War II. Roosevelt said, "I think if I give him everything I possibly can and ask nothing in return," with sincere hopes for the best, "he won't try to annex anything and will work with me for a world of democracy and peace." History proved otherwise. Roosevelt was naïve and Trump seems to be taking that same path.

With its recent history of multiple violations of international treaties and agreements, such as the [Minsk Agreements](#), [Budapest Memorandum](#), [Chemical Weapons Convention](#), [European Convention](#), [Helsinki Final Act](#), and United Nations Charter, Putin's Russia has shown itself to be a serial aggressor. That pattern has not been deterred by the words of those treaties or by diplomatic communiqués or angry tweets.

The only thing that prevented Putin from taking all of Ukraine is a Ukraine armed with Western weapons, willing to fight for its independence. And the only thing that prevented Putin from expanding his war beyond Ukraine is a rearmed and revived NATO alliance. If Trump thinks Putin is difficult and unreasonable today, with the NATO alliance intact, wait until NATO fractures and falls.

What is needed is a just application of coercive force, embodied by a sustained flow of arms to Ukraine, a firm commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty, and a renewed recognition of the shared interests and values that bond America and Europe. This will lay the groundwork for peace.

In practical terms, European nations must get serious about implementing a plan for Ukraine's support with \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets. They must stay the course in rebuilding their defenses and must commit to firmer restrictions on the purchase of Russian oil and gas. The sanctions Trump placed on Russian energy giants Rosneft and Lukoil underscore his willingness to apply economic force against Putin's war machine; he should commit America's arsenal of democracy to that same goal.

Does the president simply want to mediate a "deal" that kicks the can and the problem down the road, or does he want to save lives, secure a durable peace, and end the injustice of Putin's war? If his aim is the latter, there is only one course of action, and that is to make the costs unbearable for the Russian dictator.

The president needs to stop putting hope in Vladimir Putin and start focusing on realities, actions, and results in Ukraine. Only then will this war come to an end. Only then will Putin "become reasonable."

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