

Trump's Call with Putin Raises Great Concerns, Few Hopes

by Riccardo Alcaro

US President Donald Trump's phone call with Russia's leader Vladimir Putin, especially when read in combination with Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth's re-definition of US Europe policy, casts a long shadow. There are good reasons to be more concerned than hopeful about the peace deal that seems to be taking shape in the minds of the US Administration. At the same time, there are elements suggesting a less pessimistic assessment of the looming negotiations. Trump's call with Putin has made a big splash but has not yet pierced Ukraine's armour.

The US pivot away from Ukraine

In his Truth Social post announcing the call, Trump expressed the hope that the United States and Russia – of which he celebrated the great history and shared sacrifice during World War II – could go back to cordial relations.¹ Critically,

¹ @TrumpDailyPosts, "I just had a lengthy and highly productive phone call with President

he vowed to end the war in Ukraine via negotiations and announced that talks with Russia would start soon.

Trump's post came out shortly after Secretary Hegseth, speaking before a bewildered audience of NATO defence ministers, had publicly highlighted key points of the Trump Administration's position on the war and European security.² Hegseth acknowledged that returning Ukraine to its 1991 borders (when it still included Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014) would be unrealistic. He added that the United States does not support further enlargement of NATO. He then went on to clarify that any peace deal would

Vladimir Putin of Russia", X post, 12 February 2025, <https://x.com/TrumpDailyPosts/status/1889720462151917756>.

² US Department of Defense, *Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered)*, Brussels, 12 February 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact>.

Riccardo Alcaro is Research Coordinator and Head of the Global Actors Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

have to be guaranteed by European and non-European forces, with no US participation and acting outside Article 5, the Alliance's mutual defence clause. While insisting that the United States remains committed to NATO, Hegseth emphasised that America's priorities are in the Indo-Pacific.

Trump and Hegseth's words are in line with what the US president has been saying about the Ukraine war for months: that he wants peace rather than victory for Ukraine³ and that the Europeans should take on a greater burden for their defence and that of Ukraine than the Americans (he never mentions that, while US military aid dwarfs European weapons transfers, Europe's overall assistance to Ukraine far exceeds the US's). While not surprising, these views are still quite concerning.

Reasons to despair

A major cause for concern is that Ukraine seems to have been deliberately kept on the sidelines in kickstarting the negotiations.⁴ The fact that Trump spoke to Putin before consulting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky points to the US president's apparent reticence to coordinate with the Ukrainian government in advance, which is going to reduce Kyiv's room for manoeuvre significantly. Equally worrying is the complete absence of any preliminary involvement of the European allies despite the fact

that they should carry the burden of ensuring Ukraine's postwar security,⁵ according to Hegseth.

Another source of concern is that the United States has made significant concessions to Russia before even sitting at the negotiating table. Hegseth has withdrawn support for NATO's open-door policy, unburdened the United States of any commitment to guaranteeing a peace deal, and cast doubt on the United States' willingness to act as the ultimate guarantor of Europe's security. These are all points that have long featured in Russia's *cahier de doléances* vis-à-vis NATO, and Moscow is getting them without being asked to give anything in return.

Arguably more disturbing is Hegseth's public acknowledgment of Ukraine's territorial losses (while he has referred to Crimea, it may well be that he also implied the four other regions totally or partly occupied and annexed by Russia: Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson). It could be the case that there is no realistic path towards helping Ukraine reclaim those (though this is debatable), but this should be held against Russia at the negotiating table. Additionally, the apparent readiness of the US government to accept the *fait accompli* of Russia's land grabs in Ukraine further undermines the norm of the sacrality of territorial integrity (which Trump's claim to the Panama Canal, Greenland, Gaza and even

³ Andrew Roth, "Trump Refuses to Say Whether He Wants Ukraine to Win War against Russia", in *The Guardian*, 11 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xveepy>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Siobhán O'Grady and Ellen Francis, "Trump's Call with Putin Alarms Europe and Shocks Ukraine", in *The Washington Post*, 13 February 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/02/13/trump-putin-call-europe-ukraine-reaction>.

Canada has already weakened) and may encourage emulation on the part of other countries.

Finally, the logic through which the new US Administration is framing its continued support to Ukraine is baffling. The main assurance of a continuation of military aid seems to be linked to the geoeconomic interest of the US government to take possession of Ukraine's mineral resources⁶ rather than strategic and normative considerations.

In short, the risk that Kyiv will find itself more isolated and vulnerable to Russian imperialist expansionism has never been higher since February 2022. Yet, 'higher' does not mean 'high': there are several factors that indicate that Ukraine may not, after all, be destined to suffer an unfavourable agreement passively.

Silver lining

The US Administration is likely to find out soon that negotiating anything worthy of the name of a peace deal without the active participation of actors with an existential stake and vital interest in it, such as Ukraine and Europe, is nearly impossible. There is no doubt that Ukraine is massively dependent on US military aid and that the Europeans would not be able to replace American weapons transfers. But neither party lacks agency; even

⁶ "What Are Ukraine's Critical Minerals and Why Does Trump Want Them?", in *Reuters*, 12 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/what-are-ukraines-critical-minerals-why-does-trump-want-them-2025-02-12>.

refusing to abide by a deal negotiated over their heads⁷ would make Russia think twice before agreeing to it. The Trump Administration would be left with the option of either involving Ukraine and the Europeans or having no deal at all. The general outcry coming from European countries⁸ indicates that they are determined to get a seat at the table, and the US president himself has given some belated reassurances in that regard.⁹

In addition, and most importantly, Trump is likely to find Putin's maximalist demands indigestible. Russia has made it clear that it sees the prospective talks as a way to continue pursuing its original objectives – what it construes as the "root causes" of the conflict¹⁰ with Ukraine: a post-Cold War NATO-centred European security system that it wants to dismantle; the United States, NATO and EU's engagement with the countries along its borders, which it wants to reduce; and the guarantee that Ukraine is not integrated into Euro-Atlantic frameworks, which Putin believes it can achieve only by way of Ukraine's territorial mutilation,

⁷ @kajakallas, "We shouldn't take anything off the table before the negotiations have even started", *X post*, 13 February 2025, <https://x.com/kajakallas/status/1890050522331128136>.

⁸ "How Europe Responded to Donald Trump's Talks with Vladimir Putin", in *Financial Times*, 13 February 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/a3a12a7d-faa6-44a9-a263-7505b9236bc5>.

⁹ "Trump Says Ukraine Would Be Involved in Peace Talks with Russia", in *Reuters*, 13 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-says-ukraine-would-be-involved-peace-talks-with-russia-2025-02-13>.

¹⁰ Russia Presidency, *Telephone Conversation with US President Donald Trump*, 12 February 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76259>.

permanent neutrality, demilitarisation (that is, reducing its armed forces to a level incompatible with its defence) and, why not, "de-Nazification" (that is, replacing Zelensky's government with pro-Russia forces).

Secretary Hegseth may have preliminarily conceded Ukraine's territorial losses and neutrality and even anticipated a drawdown of the US presence in Europe. But he has not said that the United States will leave NATO or that it is fine with giving up on its and NATO's ties with Russia's neighbours. Nor has he or Trump said that they favour a change in government in Kyiv or Ukraine's demilitarisation.

True, Putin could drag out negotiations in the hope that in the end Trump accepts most of his demands, and the US president could still force the Ukrainians and Europeans to accept a deal they do not like. But if that agreement results in a Ukraine exposed to the risk of further aggression by Russia and an Atlantic Alliance weakened by internal divisions and resentment, the president could face a severe political backlash. Trump would be associated with a defeat the same way his predecessor Joe Biden was with Afghanistan, but on a higher scale because losing to Russia in Europe is strategically more significant than losing to the Taliban in South Asia.

In the ultimate analysis, the US president may be left with no choice other than continuing Biden's line – and actually increasing the pressure on a battered Russian economy – or providing much stronger security guarantees to Ukraine, which would

involve some form of US military participation as backstop to the peace deal.

Europe at a crossroads

These considerations remain entirely preliminary. The details that will emerge in the coming weeks will confirm or defuse the concerns outlined above. Whatever the outcome, Trump and Hegseth's words do point to a trend on which there is much less uncertainty: the United States is serious about decreasing its commitment to Europe. Faced with this reality, the best response for the Europeans is neither uncritical alignment with Washington nor appeasement of Russia. It is what French President Emmanuel Macron, who is as bad at politics as he is good at articulating grand visions of reform, has once again urged his fellow EU leaders to do: strengthening their military, financial and diplomatic capabilities in order to bring about a gradual, coordinated handover of the responsibility for continental security from the United States to Europe itself.¹¹

14 February 2025

¹¹ Roula Khalaf, Leila Abboud and Ben Hall, "Europe Must Respond to Trump 'Electroshock', Says Macron", in *Financial Times*, 13 February 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/1ee43b51-9d3a-47d2-adf6-3315c38e1c38>.

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Editor: Leo Goretti (l.goretti@iai.it)

- 25 | 08 Riccardo Alcaro, *Trump's Call with Putin Raises Great Concerns, Few Hopes*
- 25 | 07 Emanuele Ballestracci, *The European Screening Mechanism and Its Implications for Chinese FDI*
- 25 | 06 Filippo Simonelli, *The Mattei Plan One Year On*
- 25 | 05 Amjed Rasheed, *The New Syria and the Regional Balance of Power*
- 25 | 04 Milica Pejanović-Đurišić, *How Technology Can Empower Women Peace Mediators*
- 25 | 03 Matteo Bursi, *A Tough Opponent for Trump: Inflation*
- 25 | 02 Riccardo Alcaro, *Trump First, America Second*
- 25 | 01 Aurelio Insisa, *The US TikTok Ban, the RedNote Moment and China*
- 24 | 79 Gaia Ravazzolo and Alessandro Marrone, *EU Defence Industrial Initiatives: A Quantum Leap Is Needed*
- 24 | 78 Margherita Bianchi, *Making or Breaking the Green Deal: Consensus, Strategic Inter-dependence, Investment*