

# Nato's days are numbered – and that's bad news for Ukraine

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What a difference a fortnight makes in Trump world. From histrionics in the White House with Trump, Vance and Zelensky to a potential 30-day ceasefire less than two weeks later.

US secretary of state Marco Rubio said that if Russia does not agree to a deal, “we will know who is the impediment to peace”. But we already know who that is. The man who started the war in February 2022, Vladimir Putin.

We also know something else important — the attitude of the Trump administration to Ukraine.

During the election campaign last July, JD Vance gave a brutally frank interview. “I gotta be honest with you, I don't really care what happens to

Ukraine one way or another,” he said. His critical interventions during the Oval Office debacle a fortnight ago shows his attitude to Ukraine hasn't changed much since.

At the very end of those heated exchanges, Trump said things that help to explain his sympathy, even empathy, for the Russian dictator.

“Putin went through a hell of a lot with me. He went through a phony witch hunt where they used him and Russia... It was a Democrat scam... And he had to go through that... He was accused of all that stuff; he had nothing to do with it.”

In that bizarre sequence, Trump cast the Russian war criminal as a victim who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him during the “Russiagate” controversy that marred Trump's first presidential term — a Democrat-inspired conspiracy that was later shown to have no basis in reality.

It's an important indication of the extent to which Trump feels beholden to Putin. As the endgame negotiations on the Ukrainian war begin, it's a factor that may shape the final outcome.

Nevertheless, it would be a grave

error on Putin's part to assume that Trump's benevolence towards him extends to tolerating behaviour that might jeopardise the US president's goal of securing a peace deal and a possible Nobel Peace Prize.

Trump is a transactional dealmaker but he is also one for whom, classically, the end justifies the means.

**Putin is already prevaricating and attaching extra conditions to the US-Ukrainian ceasefire deal thus undermining the self-professed master dealmaker's efforts to secure a lasting peace in Ukraine. If Putin persists with this, he might easily find himself being summarily dismissed with a contemptuous, “You're fired”.**

To assess if this is likely, we need to understand where Putin is coming from. For most people, the war in Ukraine began in February 2022; for others, it started in 2014 with Putin's invasion of Crimea. For Putin, however, the origins of this war go back to 1783, when Crimea was first conquered by Catherine the Great.

Putin's obsession with Russian history is well-known. In July 2021,

just seven months before he invaded Ukraine, he published a 5,000-word historical essay, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. An account that sets out his imperialist ambitions with respect to Ukraine.

It argues that modern-day Ukraine occupies territory that belonged to Russia centuries ago. Few in the West, including in Ukraine, took the document seriously at the time.

Commentators never tire of quoting Putin's 2005 state-of-the-nation

address where he said “the demise of the Soviet Empire was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”. From this, they conclude, wrongly, that his overarching ambition is to re-establish the Soviet Union in some form.

This is because they rarely quote the next sentence of that address in which Putin explained what he meant: “As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine tragedy. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and countrymen found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory... what had been built up over 1,000 years was largely lost.”

In other words, his ambition is not to recreate the Soviet Union but to re-establish Imperial Russia.

Putin's expansionary focus remains on the states of Eastern Europe, especially those with Russian-speaking minorities. It's what Nato was originally designed to counter. For many decades, the strategic doctrine of the US was defined as an ability to fight two major wars in two major theatres simultaneously. What Trump is effectively doing is redefining that into a

US ability to fight one major war in one major theatre.

The US has decided that its current commitments to handle three theatres simultaneously; Ukraine/Europe, the Middle East and China/Taiwan exceed its capabilities so Ukraine and Europe are being sacrificed.

Since the Oval Office debacle, the penny has finally dropped that Nato's days are numbered — at least in its present form. Western Europe's leading states are scrambling to fill the enormous security hole that has resulted from the imminent withdrawal of the American security umbrella.

With the EU institutionally incapable of providing any framework for a military response, it has fallen to Britain and France to assemble a “coalition of the willing”.

Whether its role will be one of monitoring or enforcing any ceasefire is a critical decision yet to be taken.

However, there is no escaping the sad but inevitable reality that boots on the ground in Ukraine will lead inexorably to bodies under the ground. A prospect that Europe hasn't had to contend with for over eight decades.

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