

Talk of US missile deal for Ukraine puts a rocket under Putin

● Russia is stepping up its campaign of disruption against Europe, and Ireland could get dragged in



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For the nine months he has been in office, Donald Trump has courted Vladimir Putin assiduously, to no avail. In a major boost to the Russian president, the pair met in Alaska in August but “Vladimir”, as the US president likes to call him, didn’t budge. Will their planned meeting in Budapest be any different?

Despite his immense frustration over this long series of failures, Trump wants to try again in a couple of weeks. Ever the optimist on ending the war in Ukraine, he said last week: “I think we’re going to have this one done hopefully soon.”

Alaska offered Putin prestige and a temporary reprieve from international isolation; in Budapest the stakes for him will be higher. Whatever Trump is thinking is still unclear, but Putin will have only one thing on his mind: the long-range Tomahawk missiles that Volodymyr Zelensky wants the US to send Ukraine.

In a pointed reference to European inadequacies on the Ukrainian war, Trump claimed: “I’m doing it also to help Europe. They want to have

it ended, but they’re unable to do it. I’m able to do it. So I think we’ll be successful.”

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky wants the US to send the long-range Tomahawk missiles to his country in exchange for drones.

In what we have come to see as typical Ukrainian military innovation, their drones have taken out up to 20pc of Russia’s oil refining capacity. The increasingly long queues at Russian service stations this has caused are less of a problem for Putin than the loss of income from oil exports that it represents. The queueing is politically manageable; lost oil revenues to fund his war are virtually irreplaceable.

The last thing he wants is for highly precise Tomahawk cruise missiles to start raining down on vulnerable oil infrastructure across Russia.

It’s not just oil refineries that would be at risk. Much of Putin’s military infrastructure would also be vulnerable. The Institute for the Study of War estimates that 1,600 to 2,000 Russian military targets are within Tomahawk range.

For more than two weeks Trump has been musing in public about providing these missiles to Ukraine. It raised a frenzy of “will he? won’t he?” speculation. The prospect certainly registered in the Kremlin.

Putin said supplying Tomahawks would be “an entirely new, qualitatively different, escalation”. His spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told Russian state television Tomahawk deliveries to Ukraine would cause “extreme concern” in Moscow.

This was something Trump confirmed when he raised the issue



Volodymyr Zelensky has tried to secure missiles from Donald Trump. Photo: Reuters

during this week’s “very productive” phone conversation with the Russian president. He said Putin “really did not like the idea” of the US sending “a couple of thousand Tomahawks” to Ukraine. It was a view echoed also by Zelensky before his meeting with Trump on Friday: “We can already see Moscow is rushing to resume dialogue as soon as it hears about Tomahawks.”

How exactly this high-stakes game of bluff and counter-bluff will pan out is anybody’s guess at this stage. Nevertheless, in preparation for the Budapest meeting, Putin is most likely already planning to serenade Trump with the kind of flattery to which the vainglorious US president is incurably susceptible. However, with the threat of Tomahawks hanging over the meeting, the former KGB man is unlikely to get away with making Trump look “played” like he did in Alaska.

Meanwhile, it has become painfully obvious that Europe has been cut out of the picture — at least by Trump. This US policy of indifference

towards Europe has reinforced Putin’s conviction that the Western allies are hopelessly divided and that Nato’s Article 5 collective defence clause is purely decorative. Europe’s recent advocacy of supplying Tomahawks to Ukraine has emboldened the Kremlin to classify Europe as a “war party”.

Russia has given practical manifestation to this in recent weeks by probing European air defences with a spate of drone incursions. In September, a squadron of Russian drones was spotted and partially intercepted in Poland. Since then, its drones have flown into Romania,

Germany, Norway and Denmark, causing significant travel disruption due to the temporary closure of many civilian airports.

As a consequence, Europe has woken up to the fact its airspace is extremely vulnerable to Russian drone attacks. The penny has finally dropped with Nato that we have entered a new era of Mutually Assured Disruption. According to a leaked defence paper, the European Commission is also calling for European drone defences to be “fully functional by the end of 2027” through the creation of a so-called “drone wall”.

In this atmosphere, Irish complacency regarding our own defence vulnerabilities is extremely foolhardy. Whatever about the exposure of our pharmaceutical and high-tech industries to a Trump tantrum on tariffs, a far more consequential risk is posed by Russia cutting our undersea fibre-optic data cables.

Recently, two major internet communication cables were cut in the

Baltic Sea, causing enormous data traffic disruption across Finland, Germany, Sweden and Lithuania. Russian high-tech military vessels and submarines have been spotted repeatedly in close proximity to the transatlantic communications cables off our southern coast that link Ireland to North America. The cutting of these fibre-optic arteries would cause the data lights to go out across Ireland, with severe economic consequences.

In recent years, Michael D Higgins has changed the presidency from a constitutional ceremonial role into a de facto activist one. It is therefore more important than ever to understand the incoming commander-in-chief’s views on the threats posed by Russia to our under-sea communications infrastructure.

As the election meanders to its end, many voters might still like to know where each candidate stands on this important issue before Friday.

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