



Trump plays right into Putin's hands

● Serial aggressor Russia rewarded as Ukraine punished in latest show of US alliance with dictator



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Analysis

Donald Trump's leaked Ukrainian "peace framework" reads more like the capitulation terms for a defeated army than a peace plan. Indeed, within hours of it being leaked, Ukraine's most ardent supporter within the US administration, special envoy to Ukraine, Lieutenant General Keith Kellogg, announced his imminent retirement.

According to the leaked version of the plan, Ukraine would be obliged to surrender the entire Donbass region to Russia, including areas the Russians have been unable to

capture since the war began. The size of the Ukrainian army would be severely limited; the possession of long-range missiles prohibited and Western military aid rolled back. In addition, Russian would become an official language of Ukraine. In return for these extreme concessions, Ukraine would receive some, as yet undefined, US defence guarantee.

Under the terms of this topsy-turvy proposal, Russia, the serial aggressor, is to be rewarded, while Ukraine, the victim of its aggression is being punished. Simply put, Ukraine is being asked to acquiesce in its own dismemberment. How did we get here?

Since he came to office, Trump has adopted an unusual, many would say perverse, stance with respect to the war in Ukraine. He has been extremely tolerant of Vladimir Putin's truculent attitude towards efforts at ceasefire negotiations. The Russian dictator has consistently reiterated that for the war to end, Russia's maximalist demands regarding Ukraine must be met in full.

Only on rare occasions, such as in October, has Trump's increasing

frustration with Putin led him to publicly penalise his intransigence. In that instance, Trump imposed significant sanctions on third-party importers of Russian oil and gas. This created difficulties for Putin as it undermined his ability to finance his war of aggression against Ukraine.

There is a pattern here. Although Trump has vacillated regularly with respect to Putin, he always seems to revert to a position that is essentially Putin-positive. So here we are again, just two months after the imposition of the most severe sanctions on Russia, and we end up with the most pro-Putin document ever produced by a US administration.

Many commentators, including myself, have attributed Trump's vacillations to a failure to understand how deeply Putin is wedded to the destruction of Ukrainian. In the light of this so-called peace framework document, that assessment is in need of reappraisal. It is not that Trump doesn't understand Putin's endgame; it's worse — he doesn't care.

Lacking a strategic understand-

ing of the fundamental dynamics at play, Trump has repeatedly tried a "carrot and stick" approach which is unanchored in any overall plan. For Trump, the political, and especially the geopolitical, is always personal.

Convinced of his own deal-making genius and driven by the hubris to which he is fatally addicted, Trump revealed his Ukrainian negotiating position at an early stage.

Trump claimed he would end the war in Ukraine within "24 hours" of being elected president. In doing so, Trump showed his hand — he



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wanted a deal no matter the cost. The upshot of this is Putin is effectively in control of the process.

At any stage, if the Russian dictator showed even the slightest inclination to "compromise", Trump runs salivating to Putin. While these may well be the hallmarks of a classic abusive relationship, Trump seems not to care.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, Ukraine is of little or no strategic interest to America. With the transatlantic alliance on its last legs, as both Trump and other senior administration officials have said repeatedly, Ukraine is now Europe's problem to solve.

Second, Trump sees a ceasefire as an important step on the road to his personal goal of a Nobel Peace Prize.

For a narcissist with a mega ego, the importance of this should not be underestimated. This is especially true as the costs of achieving a ceasefire in Ukraine will not be borne either by Trump or the US. Under the leaked deal, the primary costs will be borne by Ukraine, with Europe left to pick up the substantial financial tab.

There is a third factor which comes from a particular America First view. It is a belief that Russia can be dissuaded from its fealty to China and join with the West in the upcoming confrontation with the totalitarian People's Republic of China. Although all available evidence points to this being the stuff of fantasy, it is an article of faith for the MAGA movement.

A confluence of events has put Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukraine in a difficult position. The war of attrition on the front line is putting pressure on Ukraine's military. In a calculus difficult for many in the West to understand, Putin is trading the lives of his soldiers for marginal territorial advances and will continue to do so.

There is a corruption scandal rocking the foundations of Ukraine's political system with some principal suspects part of Zelensky's inner circle. Europe is a house divided within itself on how best to finance the Ukrainian war effort. And we have a US president seemingly hell-bent on ending the conflict no matter what the cost to Ukraine or Europe.

If you are still in doubt as to what is happening, note Putin welcomed the plan, saying it can "form the basis of a final peace settlement". While Zelensky said: "Today is one of the most difficult moments in our history." Ukraine, he explained, faced a "very difficult choice: either losing [its] dignity, or risk losing a key partner".

Although Zelensky has pledged to work with Trump, it is difficult to see how its current trajectory will not end in disaster for Ukraine with severe consequences for the rest of Europe — including a further mass outflow of desperate Ukrainian refugees.