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Trump's Flip-Floppery on the Ukraine-Russia War

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

The Trump 2.0 Administration's betrayal of Ukraine and apparent alignment with Russia now seem to be subject to a reappraisal. The general implications of this pattern of behaviour, in which the only consistency is inconsistency, are not propitious for US policy or global security stability.

COMMENTARY

It has been atypically difficult for those outside the Trump 2.0 Administration to understand what has been going on inside of it, and the reason is simple: Those inside, at the highest and other levels, don't know what's going on either. Like the first Trump Administration in the months after its inception, the second coming of Donald Trump has acquired a much-deserved reputation for flip-flopping, whose obvious source is President Trump himself.

A major example of Trumpian flip-floppery, and the most consequential, is the Ukraine-Russia War: First, Trump dramatically flipped the Biden policy, but now he seems to be flopping his own flip. What will happen next, no one can say.

A Ukraine Re-Reversal?

Trump's Ukraine policy has been emblematic of the incoherent mess of impulsive bluster and amateurish zigzagging that the Administration evinces. First, Trump vowed during his 2024 electoral campaign that he would drive a deal to end the war in a single day. Given Trump's sycophantic admiration for Vladimir Putin and his grudge against Volodymyr Zelensky over Trump's Ukraine-related 2020 impeachment, his boast was widely interpreted as a prologue to his forcing Ukraine into a settlement that met Russian demands.

A cluster of events in mid-to-late February deepened this expectation. Public remarks by Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth in Brussels, by Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference, and a phone call with Putin initiated by President Trump – followed by US-Russia meetings in Qatar from which Ukraine was excluded – strongly suggested a major flip in US foreign policy at the expense of NATO. US officials refused to affirm NATO's Article V pledge not just as related to Ukraine defence scenarios but in general, conditionalising its applicability on levels of European defence spending the White House knew would not be met, that at 5 per cent of GDP.

To entice Russian accession to US ceasefire proposals, US officials soon dropped out of the Ukraine defence contact group, and the President ordered government agencies to stop tracking the Russian kidnapping of nearly 20,000 Ukrainian children and to eliminate all offensive cyber operations planning *viz* Russia. More broadly telling of the Administration's deeper political orientation, US officials pleased Moscow by publicly identifying with the *Alternativ fur Deutschland* (AFD) Party in Germany, Nigel Farage's Reform Party in the UK, and other right-wing anti-immigrant parties throughout Europe.

Trump soon curtailed the ambit of his ceasefire talks envoy, General Keith Kellogg, when the Russians complained of him being too pro-Kyiv. This left Trump's New York City real estate developer associate Steve Witkoff – a man without diplomatic experience but rich with business ties to at least two major Russian oligarchs – as his sole envoy to Russia. The experienced Russians have handled Witkoff astutely, stringing him along on a road to nowhere with ease. Specifically with respect to the ceasefire negotiations, the initial US position aligned sharply with Russian desiderata: no NATO membership for Ukraine, and Ukraine would formally cede land Russian forces occupied militarily, including Crimea, both in return for zero concessions from the Russian side. Trump further demanded that Ukraine repay the United States for military aid previously provided. This would come under an arrangement in which the United States would control and benefit from Ukraine's rare-earth mineral mining – that, in return for no explicit US pledge of support for Ukrainian security and sovereignty.

Then, on February 24, the United States voted against a UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian invasion, calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops, and demanding that Russia be held accountable for war crimes. It then abstained from its own weak resolution when language was added identifying Russia as the war's aggressor.

February ended in stunning fashion when Trump and Vance essentially mugged Zelensky in a broadcast Oval Office meeting staged with a Russian audience in mind. Vice-President Vance demanded that Zelensky express gratitude to the United States even as Trump asserted that Ukraine started the war, that Russians were the war's chief victims, and that Zelensky, not Putin, was a dictator.

After Zelensky abruptly left the White House without signing the minerals agreement, the Trump Administration suspended both delivery of weapons shipments and intelligence data-sharing via Starlink. Instead of leading to Russian endorsement of US-proffered ceasefire terms, as expected, the histrionic display of February 28 led to

the Russians almost immediately rocketing newly defenceless civilian targets and, in due course, to Ukraine losing most of its foothold in Russia's Kursk region.

Even before the month's end, European leaders had concluded that NATO was dead in all but name, and that the United States had aligned itself with Russia for both commercial reasons and in conformance with its extreme realist, amoral great power spheres-of-influence conception of international politics. Meanwhile, the Trump Administration worked to shed every "soft power" appendage the US had earned during the foregoing seventy years, all but destroying USAID, the US Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the US Agency for Global Media.

A perturbed reality drove the Europeans to new conclusions and determinations based on the singular premise that their security now depended exclusively on their own coordinated efforts. Meanwhile, President Zelensky, having few options and needing to buy time for European efforts to mature, sought to smooth things over in Washington even as Trump continued to spout nonsense about Ukraine starting the war and Zelensky being an unelected dictator.

Nonetheless, hints of frustration entered the President's vocabulary over Putin's escalated bombings of Ukrainian cities and his raising ever-new, seemingly artificial conditions for Russia's agreement to US truce terms. National Security Advisor Mike Waltz urged Trump to apply greater pressure on the Russians. On March 11, in a sign of ambivalence, if not wholehearted reconsideration, Ukraine's Starlink connection was restored, and its owner, Elon Musk, promised Ukraine more satellites and equipment for use.

For whatever reason, it seemed finally to dawn on Trump that Putin lacked interest in peace, or even in a truce. After a private April 26 chat with Zelensky at the Vatican, the President responded to Russia's latest missile attack on Ukrainian civilians with an acerbic Truth Social comment, concluding of Putin:

"It makes me think that maybe he doesn't want to stop the war, he's just tapping me along, and has to be dealt with differently, through 'Banking' or 'Secondary Sanctions'? Too many people are dying!!!"

Soon thereafter, the Administration joined Ukraine in calling for an unconditional 30-day ceasefire to begin May 12, and demanded an answer within 48 hours: the Ukrainians, of course, agreed, but the Russians said *nyet*.

On April 30, Zelensky finally signed a thrice-proposed but now much softened rare-minerals deal with the United States. The deal still lacks explicit US security guarantees for Ukraine but implicitly commits Trump to Ukraine's future as a sovereign state. It also provides for continued US military assistance to Ukraine so long as the arrangements are described as business rather than aid; modest new weapons shipments were approved only hours after the ink dried.

That led to the Russians offering direct peace talks with Ukraine on May 15 in Istanbul. Everyone saw this offer for what it was: diplomatic pantomime designed to soften the Russian *nyet* and distract the gullible international press. Zelensky called Putin's bluff, making his way to Ankara, but Putin never showed up.

This illuminating non-event may be all Trump needs to wash his hands of the whole thing, with the result being a vaguely pro-Russian but non-active policy: no significant new US sanctions against Russia are likely, and the White House is now blocking Zelensky's attendance at the June NATO Summit in the Netherlands. Thus, does the war that Russia isn't winning but that Ukraine can't lose goes on.

What Does It All Mean?

A clutch of intriguing but presently unanswerable questions begs attention.

Is US policy pivoting back toward Ukraine, just as Trump had persuaded nearly everyone that it never would?

Is NATO, with its Article V core, not dead after all? Might it even revive in some new twisted form if anti-liberal, democracy-attenuated regimes eventually establish themselves in Germany, France, the UK, Italy, Romania, and elsewhere?

Has Putin miscalculated, thinking erroneously that Trump's fawning lacked any bottom? If so, might Trump's wounded ego put Ukraine in an even better spot than it enjoyed as the Biden Administration ended?

No one knows, or, under the circumstances, can know the answers, because Trump doesn't know them as his own stream-of-semi-consciousness dominates US policy.

Donald Trump's flip-floppery is likely to remain alive and well going forward, and his reality-TV performance "ratings" focus, recently featuring an Arabian Gulf episode, will overshadow whatever policy substance emerges from the Administration's surrealist imagination. One consequence is that no foreign leadership can reasonably predict or vouchsafe trust in anything the President says, for it can change in a trice. This is not normal, and it is probably not good.

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