

# **This is the fatal flaw of Trump's Ukraine 'strategy'**

**By Fyodor Lukyanov**

Donald Trump's recent comments on Ukraine were highly anticipated, especially given his habit of surprising even those who consider themselves seasoned observers. His remarks on 14 July, delivered alongside NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, were characteristically loud but ultimately underwhelming. That in itself should not be surprising. Over the past six months, Trump's style on major international issues has followed a familiar pattern. Ukraine is no exception.

At the heart of Trump's approach lies a calculated strategy of noise. He generates maximum bluster to create the impression of strength and decisiveness. What follows is not action, but an endless repetition of simple slogans. Clarification is deliberately avoided, the aim being to appear both consistent and unpredictable. Behind this theater lies a reluctance to become truly entangled in any foreign conflict. Trump wants short, manageable involvement with low costs and quick exit ramps. Above all, he is not willing to challenge the mainstream consensus in Washington as deeply as he claims. For all the bluster, Trump remains tethered to the very 'Deep State' he rails against.

The Israel-Iran confrontation earlier this year offers a textbook example. One dramatic strike on Iranian nuclear sites gave the impression of a bold move. It satisfied different parts of Trump's base, pleased Israel, and sent a message to Tehran – without triggering a regional war. Trump got to claim a geopolitical 'win' and was once again floated as a Nobel Peace Prize candidate. But for all the headlines, little actually changed. Iran's nuclear program continues, and the political dynamics of the region remain largely intact. Still, Trump presented it as a major American contribution to world peace.

The problem is, Ukraine is not the Middle East. It is far more complex, and Trump appears to know it. His instinct is to avoid the problem altogether. But he can't. The conflict is now a central issue in US-European relations, and Trump's own supporters are split between isolationists and hawks. He knows he cannot ignore Ukraine outright. Nor can he allow Biden's war to become his. This explains the repeated emphasis in his 'It's Not My War' speech. He said it three times.

So, what did Trump actually propose? Not much. He suggested that America's European allies should send Ukraine their old weapons systems – especially Patriot batteries – and then buy new ones from the United States, paying "100 percent." That, for Trump, is the core of the plan: turn war into business. The logic is simple and familiar. Europe gets rid of its aging stock, Ukraine gets support, and America gets orders. But the practicalities remain vague: what systems, what timeline, what delivery mechanisms? These were left unclear.

Then there's the question of exerting economic pressure on Russia. Trump approved a plan to impose 100 percent tariffs on Russian exports to third countries. This is a more moderate version of Senator Lindsey Graham's 500 percent threat. The idea is to squeeze Russia economically without enforcing a full embargo. But here, too, the scheme is light on details. The White House will issue the duties and can cancel them at will. Implementation will be delayed by 50 days – standard Trump trade deal tactics. Nothing is final. Everything is leverage.

The real message is that Trump is still negotiating. He can't reach a deal with Putin, but he wants to pressure Moscow without entering into an open confrontation. He still refuses to personally attack Putin, saying only that he is "*very dissatisfied*" and "*disappointed*." That signals he is keeping his options open. He wants credit for any peace that might emerge but is unwilling to own the risks of deeper engagement.

Trump also repeated his claim to being the world's premier peacemaker, listing off a string of supposed triumphs – India-Pakistan, Israel-Iran, Serbia-Kosovo, Gaza ("*well, almost*"), the DRC and Rwanda, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Egypt and a "*neighboring country*" (apparently forgetting the name of Ethiopia). These boasts reflect the core Trump method: declare success, repeat it often, and rely on public attention spans being short.

Despite the showmanship, the risk of American entanglement in Ukraine remains high. The measures Trump has announced will not meaningfully shift the military-political balance, but they may prolong the war, at increased cost. Meanwhile, the channel of negotiation opened by Trump's call to Putin in February appears to be closing. Trump is reportedly irritated with Moscow, but Russia has not moved an inch. Nor does it plan to. Putin sees no reason to adapt his position simply to accommodate Trump's political timetable.

There are rumors that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov delivered some new proposals to Senator Marco Rubio in Malaysia. But based on past experience, these are almost certainly familiar Russian talking points in new packaging. Moscow's approach to resolving the Ukrainian crisis has remained unchanged for over three years. Trump's rhetoric won't alter that.

From the Kremlin's perspective, Washington no longer has the capacity to engage at the same level as it did in 2023–2024. The political will, financial resources, and strategic bandwidth simply aren't there. Half-measures from the US won't deliver results, though they may prolong the conflict. That is unfortunate, but not sufficient cause for Moscow to adjust its course.

Trump, for his part, doesn't want to stay on the Ukraine file. He wants to move on – and fast. Many in the Pentagon share that view. But the war will not end just because Washington wants to focus elsewhere. Neither side has a clear long-term strategy. What remains is inertia – and inertia, for now, is stronger than intent.