

# Russia's Negotiating Strategy

by George Friedman - May 22, 2025

It has been about three months since U.S. President Donald Trump began the negotiation process with Russian President Vladimir Putin for peace in Ukraine. Many discussions have ensued, but no real progress has been made. Trump is constantly optimistic, Putin is constantly saying he wants peace (despite the fact that the situation makes a rapid settlement impossible), and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is helplessly caught in between.

I do not normally personalize geopolitics, but these talks are not about geopolitics, the reality of which is clear: Russia has failed to defeat Ukraine. The phase of the peace process we are in, such as it is, is what I call engineering. It is the process by which leaders of countries try to construct an edifice that is necessarily based in reality but is compatible with each side's political needs – in terms of international relations and internal politics alike. The process of engineering is essential and extraordinarily difficult. The most difficult parts of this particular feat of engineering are Putin's political needs.

I compare this phase of engineering to the negotiations that ended the Vietnam War. The U.S. went to war to block North Vietnam, a communist state, from conquering South Vietnam and extending Chinese and Russian power in Southeast Asia. The assumption was that U.S. military power would readily defeat the Viet Cong, and that doing so was a geopolitical necessity. The U.S. failed because it underestimated the power of the Viet Cong, supported as it was by the Soviet Union, and because it couldn't craft an appropriate military strategy to defeat the enemy before it. The Viet Cong was fighting for fundamental national imperatives – including reunifying Vietnam under Hanoi's control – while the U.S. was fighting for a marginal geopolitical imperative. In short, the U.S. lost the war by not winning it, and its defeat had domestic political consequences all around the world, particularly in the U.S. The negotiations to end the war took place from 1969 to 1973. Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon were negotiating an end to the conflict, of course, but they also had the political imperative to show the world U.S. power had not been diminished.

The Russians invaded Ukraine in 2022 to regain the buffer they had lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Moscow greatly overestimated its military capability and underestimated Ukraine's will and the power of U.S. military aid. But where Vietnam was a marginal geopolitical issue for the U.S., Ukraine is a fundamental geopolitical one for Russia because it increases its strategic depth.

Similarly, Ukraine, like Vietnam, is not an existential issue for the U.S., which obviously was never in any danger of being occupied by the enemy. A settlement that preserves the Russian nation is clearly possible geopolitically, but political considerations muddy the waters. Like the U.S., Russia has to protect its status as a great power while managing its internal political tensions. (Tensions were much more visible in the U.S. during the Vietnam War than they are now in Russia, but they are present nonetheless.) The negotiations to end the war in Ukraine are a matter of engineering, and unlike geopolitics, engineering is diplomacy, and thus, it is personal and political.

Russia invaded Ukraine but failed to achieve its goal of regaining a substantial buffer. Putin's political imperative is to end the war, but without appearing to have capitulated or failed. He must therefore emerge from the talks by appearing not to have been forced into a settlement – ideally by gaining significant concessions. Thus, he is demanding substantial territorial concessions from Ukraine, territories that Russia has not conquered or had to retreat from.

Having repelled Russia from its initial attack on Kyiv and other crucial areas, Ukraine can accept the loss of the territories that Russia now holds but cannot voluntarily turn over territories Russia hasn't taken, or ones it has failed to hold. More than a matter of pride, Ukraine cannot afford to surrender these lands for fear of later Russian reprisals at more favorable geographic positions.

For its part, the U.S. wants to unburden itself of the global security obligations it assumed after World War II. It sees the situation in Ukraine, then, as a good opportunity to reduce its commitment to and vulnerability in Europe. The U.S. wants to end the war in a way that confirms Russia's limits. Washington has no inherent interest in Ukraine, but it sees Ukraine's successful defense of itself as validation that the U.S. no longer needs to defend Europe.

Trump's role is to engineer this outcome. A settlement is something that Russia can't readily accept because it would confirm Russian weakness and, in this case, Putin's failures. He will be held responsible for launching a war that he did not win, that cost many lives, and that severely damaged the Russian economy. At the same time, Zelenskyy cannot simply make concessions for a rapid settlement because he led a successful resistance (also at the cost of many lives). And Trump cannot allow Russia to emerge as victorious; his decision to disengage from Europe is predicated on the assumption that Russia is no longer a threat to Europe, at least not one that Europe can't handle on its own.

Russia's negotiation tactic will be to show that it has not been defeated, and that it is prepared to continue the war, even as it uses the war's protraction as a means of extracting territorial concessions. He will try to let the pressure fall on Trump, who is under political stress at home and

abroad to deliver the peace he promised. Having also claimed an understanding with Putin on ending the war, and also publicly made clear his leverage over Zelenskyy, Trump cannot appear to have been taken in by Putin.

The question now is what Putin would concede, openly or tacitly, that would allow him to seem to have won in the negotiations, and whether Trump would trust anything he promises. Trump has the option, as Putin knows, to declare the talks a failure and temporarily reengage in European defense by ordering more weapons and technology to be sent to Ukraine to block Russia. And all of this will hinge to some degree on whether the Russian political system – the public, the oligarchs and so on – will tolerate the loss of more soldiers and money.

Every course of action carries political risk. Zelenskyy will find it difficult to make territorial concessions after having spent so much blood in the war. Putin will have a hard time justifying three years of fighting with little to show for it. Trump will have a hard time being unable to execute a deal.

In my mind – and this is not a prediction because engineering is not predictable – this ends when Trump makes a credible threat to intervene militarily in some massive way, perhaps with troops, if Putin continues his aggressive stance. European military intervention is not only unlikely but also not politically and militarily possible. Therefore, the question is when will Trump make a threat of massive intervention so credible that Putin would have to accept failure.

**Author: George Friedman**

[Read more from this author on geopoliticalfutures.com](https://geopoliticalfutures.com)