

# The Trump-Putin Negotiations

by George Friedman - April 22, 2025

I normally avoid personalizing geopolitical events, since I regard nations, not leaders, to be the agents of history. But there are moments when the focus must be on leaders, especially in the course of international conflicts in which neither side can claim a decisive victory. The negotiations to end the war in Ukraine are one such moment.

In some ways, the talks are similar to the Paris Peace Accords, which ended the war in Vietnam. The U.S. had not been defeated militarily, but in not winning the war, it effectively lost. The Viet Cong won by not being defeated. A war in which no one is victorious is the most difficult type of conflict to end. Dealing with Japan and Germany after World War II was simple in that both were soundly defeated. The Paris peace talks were much more complicated. But the outcome was inevitable: Each side would maneuver for internal political reasons to preserve its national reputation. The U.S. position was that it was prepared to continue the war if a reasonable settlement was not reached. The Viet Cong position was the same. The difference was that the Viet Cong were much more interested in the outcome than Washington was. They had fought to conquer their own nation. The U.S. had fought as a show of will and demonstration of national power. North Vietnam would be shattered by making great concessions. The U.S. would not. Yet each side was weary and wary of the other, so the inevitable conclusion of the talks pivoted not on results but on appearances: pride and international standing.

In the conflict in Eastern Europe, Russia has strategic interests at stake – that is, preventing a potentially hostile power from having its forces 136 miles (219 kilometers) from its border. It needs to show that its military is a force to be reckoned with. But Ukraine has everything at stake. Only for Ukraine is this an existential issue. It had allies only insofar as they, too, feared a Russian victory, and what might follow.

Under President Donald Trump, the U.S. tried to place itself as merely the intermediary between Russia and Ukraine in negotiating an end to the war. This was designed to convince Russia that so long as it refrained from advancing on Poland's border, the United States was not a steadfast ally of Ukraine. Russia remained unconvinced, but the stunt gave Moscow the ability to test the United States by agreeing to negotiate an end to the war while delaying a ceasefire and pressing on with the fight. If Washington is only a mediator, then it would not be directly threatened by continued

operations. Washington sensed either an attempt to embarrass the U.S. or an intent to resume full-scale war. Thus the United States has responded with an announcement that either the Russians should resume serious negotiations within days or Washington will recuse itself as the putative intermediary. Left unsaid but obvious is that the U.S. is now more actively supported by NATO, which is engaged in significant exercises in the east. There are reports that U.S. forces are preparing to deploy, but they are not confirmed, and even if true, it wouldn't necessarily mean troops will be deployed. Even if these reports are intentional leaks by the government, they are intended to intimidate the Russians to some degree.

Russia may well be intimidated by the fact that its initial performance in the war was unsuccessful. But the bigger issue is that though Russia has shaken up its general staff and reinforced the rank and file, its strategic command was ultimately responsible for the military's failures, so there's no guarantee that a renewed offensive would fare better than its predecessors. The U.S. has a different dilemma: Inserting U.S. or even NATO forces would have serious political consequences for the U.S. and Europe. In the U.S., the dramatic reengineering of tariffs was predicated on the geopolitics of the Cold War being over. Renewed confrontation with Russian forces would compel the U.S. to bolster the alliance system, which tariffs have destabilized.

But Trump has one advantage: a reputation for radical unpredictability. If President Vladimir Putin takes advantage of the negotiations to rest and reflect, or if he even indicates a willingness to commit more forces to a new offensive, he does not know what Trump will do. Or more likely, he suspects a very unpleasant response. The objective reality is that Russian forces are still much weaker than America's, and given the reality of NATO, Europe may be forced to intervene as well. Putin's intelligence service must be desperately searching for clues as to the West's intent, but in all likelihood, the intent depends on Russian actions and is probably unclear on the Western side too. Trump's unpredictability creates more risks than certainties. But the longer Putin delays talks, the more uncertain the West will be about his intentions, and the more likely it will be to persuade itself that another offensive is on the way. That would undermine the security of the West, as well as Trump's domestic political position. He has based his presidency on taking stunning and sometimes imprudent actions. Putin's actions are based on carefully planned failures, followed by unrest, repression and reconstruction.

These conclusions would suggest that talks are progressing. The geopolitics of the situation points to a settlement whereby Russia keeps what it occupies and Ukraine accepts Western economic support. The political issue is uncertain. Trump's freedom of action politically at home depends on intimidating and overcoming his opposition. Putin's depends on demonstrating that the war was not for nothing. My bet is that Trump is seen as more powerful and unpredictable than Putin, and that

therefore there will be a settlement. Putin can take fewer risks, and Trump can't take a failed initiative. The problem we have is that the same pattern will be followed whether negotiations are falling apart or on the verge of success. Such is the nature of everyday bargaining, whether buying a house or conducting diplomacy.

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