

Patrick Lawrence

## **Two hours that probably will not shake the world.**

The telephone call, the telephone call: Paying-attention people have been abuzz since Monday evening European time about the two-hour conversation President Trump had with President Putin concerning, let's say to keep it brief, outstanding matters. Whither now the West's proxy war in Ukraine? Will Donald Trump, the 47<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, earn many pages in the history books for a world-altering renovation of the West's relations with the Russian Federation?

Very good questions. Let us see about them such as we can amid the highly kinetic state of relations among the U.S., the European powers, the Kiev regime, and the Russians. And amid incessant mis- and disinformation in the mainstream Western press, I have to add.

Here is Trump on Truth Social, his digital media site, at 7:33 p.m. Monday in Washington, shortly after he and the Russian president put their telephones down:

*[indent.]*

Just completed my two hour call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia. I believe it went very well. Russia and Ukraine will immediately start negotiations toward a Ceasefire and, more importantly, an END to the WAR. The conditions for that will be negotiated between the two parties, as it can only be, because they know details of a negotiation that nobody else would be aware of.

*[end indent.]*

And here is *The New York Times*, in [a report on the Trump–Putin exchange](#) in its Tuesday editions:

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For months, President Trump has been threatening to simply walk away from the frustrating negotiations for a cease-fire between Russia and Ukraine. After a phone call on Monday between Mr. Trump and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, that appears to be exactly what the American president is doing.

*[end indent.]*

If you are having a hard time finding your way from Trump’s brief summary of his conversation with Putin and *The Times*’s summary of Trump’s summary, this is a useful thing: You have just seen an exhibition of mainstream Western media’s gross perfidy as they report on President Trump and all things related to his views of Ukraine and Russia.

To judge by the readouts of the Trump–Putin telephone call, as issued by both sides, the exchange appears to have gone, if not “very well,” well enough. Russia remains agreeable to continuing negotiations Ukraine and Moscow resumed, their first in three years, in Istanbul last week. As could have been a surprise to no one, Putin again insisted that an enduring settlement of the Ukraine crisis must rest on resolving the conflict’s “root causes”—this the favored phrase in Moscow these days. And the door remains open—a shared enthusiasm, indeed—to repairing the destructive breach in bilateral ties that began with the U.S.–cultivated coup in Kiev 11 years ago.

If you can find any sign in these readouts that Trump is “walking away” from the Ukraine crisis you have a more supple mind than I. No, the Monday telephone call made various things clear at last, a retreat on Trumps’ part not among them.

One, Trump remains committed to a negotiation to end the bloodshed in Ukraine. It is a question—ever-changing according to evolving circumstances—how this is to be achieved. Two, reaching a successful settlement depends on Trump and Putin overseeing it. They are the ultimate determinants. Three, a corollary to No. 2, the Europeans have been marginalized—a point to which I will shortly return.

Four, urging Ukraine into talks with the Russians is merely an embrace of reality. While the Kiev regime has no ground to set the terms of talks, having lost on the battlefield, Volodymyr Zelensky must be at the mahogany table if only, as a practical matter, to get him to shut up. “Nothing on Ukraine without Ukraine” was the Biden regime’s constant refrain; Zelensky has insisted on this principle these past three years—even as the thought has been sheer fiction. It remains a fiction now, but it is nonetheless nonsensical to argue that pushing Kiev into talks is somehow an abandonment on Washington’s part. Read Trump’s Truth Social message again; note this time the autonomy he encourages Kiev to assume.

The mis- and disinformation we find in the Western press since the Trump–Putin telephone exchange—and I have given but a taste of it—reflects other preposterous realities. One, the Western powers do not want the war in Ukraine to end so long as Russia emerges from it undamaged and with territorial gains. Two, yet more vigorously do these powers oppose a restoration of ties between Washington and Moscow. These constituencies will count success in either case a failure.

Trump is the outsider in both these respects. So you read complaints that he is abandoning Zelensky by forcing him to negotiate, and then you read complaints

that Trump is preparing to make an agreement with Moscow above Zelensky's head. Always the theme is abandonment, or he is giving in as he hands the Kremlin a victory. Trump is pulling the U.S. out of the conflict except that he continues U.S. supplies of weapons and intelligence; he has dropped the idea of a 30-day ceasefire except that he continues to urge one as a start toward more comprehensive agreements.

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It is always well to remember not to take what Donald Trump says immediately at face value. What he says one day may not be what he says the next day. In this case it is true that Trump has at various times indicated his impatience with the lack of progress toward a negotiated settlement of the Ukraine conflict, leading him at times to imply that he is inclined to wash his hands of it. J.D. Vance, his vice-president, has suggested as much on numerous occasions.

But neither Trump nor any of his diplomatic adjutants has ever shown any sign of abandoning the Ukraine crisis. As everyone knows well, and I include the *Times* reporters quoted above, Trump is given to stating maximal positions in policy matters with a view to negotiating acceptable compromises. "I am walking away" is a New York property developer's leverage in negotiations to which he remains committed.

There was another case of Trump's ... what shall I call it? ... improvisational statecraft last week. He initially stood behind a British-French-German threat to impose another layer of sanctions—Europe's 17<sup>th</sup> if you will—if Moscow did not accept a 30-day ceasefire within the following two days. In a late-night response hours later, President Putin made no mention of this ultimatum—it was obvious to all that he would never act on it—and wrongfooted the Europeans by calling for

the talks that took place in Istanbul last Friday. In response to Putin's proposal Trump took to Truth Social and insisted, in all caps as is his wont, that Zelensky, as Ukraine's president, should forget the ceasefire for the time being and open negotiations "IMMEDIATELY!"

In net terms, ceasefire talks appear to be in the offing and—I especially appreciate this—the British, French, and Germans are now marginalized after making fools of themselves with their cardboard threats of dire action 10 days ago. This is exactly where one wants the Europeans, given their insistence that the war must go on in the name of peace.

On Tuesday, a day after the Trump–Putin conversation, Britain and the European Union announced a new set of sanctions against Russia, these covering shipping companies and banks that have enabled Russia to continue exporting petroleum. At writing neither Trump nor the Kremlin appears to have taken any notice.

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I like the clarity we have since Trump and Putin spoke. Negotiations with the ultimate objective of ending the war are under way, providing things proceed to plan. Zelensky will take orders from Trump, just as he did from the Biden regime, as he sits across from Russian officials at a negotiating table probably located in Istanbul, site of the March 2022 talks until Boris Johnson, then the British PM, flew in to disrupt them.

Not least—and in my judgment most of all—a Ukraine settlement will at last be understood as a subset of relations between Russia and the U.S., and by extension the rest of the Atlantic alliance. This is the larger geopolitical issue by a long way. We return, then, to the second of the questions posed earlier. Can Trump and Putin rewrite bilateral relations such that an historically significant new chapter opens?

This matter is rarely mentioned in the Western press. To read mainstream media, Putin's concerns come to keeping territory the Russian military has taken in the course of the war, strict limits on the size of the Ukraine Armed Forces, and an insistence on a neutral Ukraine that will not incorporate into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. These are described as "onerous conditions" and "demands Putin knows Zelensky will never accept." There are others in this line. One of Moscow's stated aims at the outset of the war was to a de-Nazification program—a project much in need of address. But Western correspondents cannot mention this for the simple reason there are not supposed to be any neo-Nazis in Ukraine.

Read mainstream Western media with caution, I will once again urge.

Moscow has been perfectly clear on countless occasions as to the "root causes" of the conflict. These extend back three and some decades at this point, when the post-Cold War order took shape. The expansion of NATO and the European Union, the color revolutions among former Soviet satellites and republics, the constant military exercises and ballistic missile batteries along Russia's western flanks, the abandonment of all but one arms-control treaty: The root cause is a security framework that breaches that cardinal rule of sound international relations. No nation or nations can successfully secure themselves at the cost of another nation's insecurity.

Moscow attempted to open negotiations on a new security architecture addressing these problems by way of the two draft treaties it sent to Washington and NATO headquarters in Brussels in December 2021. The response was to provoke the Russians by arming Kiev so heavily that they would have no choice but to intervene two months later.

This is what Moscow means now by the root causes of the Ukraine war.

Understood in this way, the issues the West likes to pretend are uppermost in Moscow's minds are mere subsets. There is nothing onerous about the Russian position, it immediately follows. Guaranteeing Ukrainian neutrality is simply one dimension of a geopolitical structure that would be of mutual benefit to all sides concerned.

Can Donald Trump wade into these waters and address issues of world-historical magnitude—fashioning a settlement along the lines Moscow proposes? This is our question as of this week.

I simply do not see how one can look at this positively.

Whatever one may think of President Putin, he is an exceptional statesman. I would say the same of FM Lavrov and Yri Ushakov, Putin's foreign policy adviser. When I put Trump, or V-P Vance, or Secretary of State Rubio, or anyone else available to the White House next to these figures, the reality of our moment seems plain: There is no depth, no grasp of history, no deep understanding of what is at issue. In short, there is insufficient practice in statecraft to accomplish this very worthy project.

And above all, this: Americans long ago lost their reservoirs of empathy, their capacity to see things from the perspectives of others. This I rank among the imperatives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for any nation that is to do well in it.

It is already emerging that Trump will prove out of his depth as his conversations with Moscow proceed—if they do, indeed—beyond the two hours of generalities of which last Monday's telephone exchange consisted. Interim progress toward a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine, some kind of 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel arrangement as in Korea, an East–West division such as in postwar Germany: These kinds of

arrangements are spoken of and appear possible. But so does an indefinite continuation of the fighting.

And less possible by a long way, in my view, is a remake of Russia's relations with the West. Even if Trump and his people were up to this undertaking, would the Deep State—the intelligence agencies, the military-industrial complex, and all others invested in dangerously hostile relations—permit Trump to proceed?

These constituencies blocked Trump at the merest suggestion he would attempt a new détente with Moscow during his first term. Therein lies my answer this time around. The West and the East are equally in need of productive relations. Those purporting to lead the former, Donald Trump the exception who threatens them, simply do not appear to be ready for such a turn in history.

Bazenheid, 21 May 2025



