

Patrick Lawrence

Why Trump Is Failing to ‘Make a Deal’ with Putin

It is always important to withhold one’s judgments when Donald Trump takes on consequential affairs of state. One must allow the American president enough time to fail, to fall well short of stated intentions, as sooner or later he consistently does.

We have seen this many times, between Trump’s first four years in the White House and his current term. There was his first attempt to reconstruct America’s relations with Russia, which went spectacularly nowhere. There were his daring negotiations with Kim Jong-un, North Korea’s leader, which ended abruptly at a hotel in Hanoi in the spring of 2019. There was his determination to “make a deal” with Xi Jinping—an historic accord intended to put the Sino–U.S. relationship on a wholly new footing. That failed, too, to state the obvious.

And now we have Trump’s plan to end the war in Ukraine—this as part of another attempt to rebuild ties between Washington and Moscow. It looks to me as if the pattern is repeating itself as we speak.

It would be hard to overstate the magnitude of Trump’s objectives when, in mid–August, he met Vladimir Putin for a summit in Alaska. At some point during his three hours with the Russian president, Trump cast aside all thought of negotiating a ceasefire agreement to stop the fighting in Ukraine in favor of a radically more ambitious plan. [As he declared the next day on Truth Social](#), his digital platform:

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It was determined by all that the best way to end the horrific war between Russia and Ukraine is to go directly to a Peace Agreement, which would end the war, and not a mere Ceasefire Agreement, which often times do not hold up.

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As Trump would put it, this was “huge.” Previously distant questions such as security guarantees and territorial exchanges—“land swaps,” as Trump calls them—were suddenly under discussion, Trump’s people reported. During his post-summit meetings with Volodymyr Zelesnsky and a contingent of European leaders, Trump theatrically interrupted the discussions to telephone the Kremlin “to begin the arrangements for a meeting, at a location to be determined, between President Putin and President Zelensky,” as Trump put it on Truth Social.

President Trump, in that “can do” spirit for which Americans are famous, was again on the move, he wanted the world to know.

It has not taken long, a little more than a week, for the air to drain from this latest of Donald Trump’s balloons. The Kremlin has made it piquantly clear territorial arrangements remain a remote objective and that any security guarantees involving troops from the U.S. or any other member of NATO are simply out of the question. On one of the Sunday morning news shows last weekend, Sergei Lavrov stated there was no plan whatsoever for a Putin–Zelensky summit. “There needs to be an agenda first,” the Russian foreign minister said on “Meet the Press,” a long-running NBC News program. “This agenda is not ready at all.”

J.D. Vance, Trump’s point man in these sorts of circumstances, followed the Russian FM on “Meet the Press” and insisted Trump’s negotiations with Putin were proceeding entirely to plan. “We’re going to eventually be successful, or

we'll hit a brick wall," the American v.-p. said, "and if we hit a brick wall we're going to continue this process of negotiation. This is the energetic diplomacy that is going to bring this war to a close."

It is well and wise that Vance allowed for the prospect of brick walls ahead. In my view it is merely a question of when Trump and his people will collide with one—if, indeed, they have not done so already. There was a frisson of excitement among Americans as Trump reported his progress with "Vladimir," as he referred to the Russian president in Anchorage. "He's doing it! He's getting it done!" as one of my editors declared excitedly after the summit. Actually, he is not and he is not.

It is by now clear that all the talk from Trump and those around him of a new turn in U.S.–Russian relations and an advance toward peace in Ukraine crisis was, but precisely, all talk and little more. The Russians, courteous as they are in matters of state, have been around this bush before. The Kremlin has remained silent—more or less silent, in any case—while Trump, Vance, *et al.* bluster on about their diplomatic advances that the two sides are nowhere near achieving.

It is early days yet, and this latest of Trump's diplomatic *démarches* may eventually come good. Russia will never sign a ceasefire that would allow the Europeans to rearm the Kiev regime in preparation for renewed hostilities. Trump was right to drop that idea. But if one scrapes away all the disinformation and Russophobic propaganda, President Putin seems genuinely open to an agreement to end the war in Ukraine and restore relations with Washington (and eventually the Europeans). Trump is right in this judgment, too.

But the weight of evidence and Donald Trump's record in these sorts of affairs suggest, initially high expectations notwithstanding, this new endeavor with the

Russians is likely to take its place on the shelf where Trump's other diplomatic failures sit all in a line.

I admire Trump's ambition, honestly. Recasting East–West relations, ending one of Washington's pointless wars, his first-term attempt to defuse decades of equally pointless tension on the Korean Peninsula: With no experience in statecraft or international relations, he travels from New York to Washington, looks at these questions, and asks why they cannot be resolved. It is a good question.

Why does Trump come up with one diplomatic flop after another? Time and again he fails. Why? This is another good question.

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I have two answers to this question.

One begins with that just-mentioned journey from New York to Washington Trump made after he was first elected in November 2016. While his political inexperience prompted excellent questions as he arrived in America's capital, he brought too much of New York with him. If one studies Trump's method even briefly, it is obvious he proposes to conduct America's foreign, security, economic, and trade policies as he would a long series of real estate transactions.

It would be hard to overstate the hard-nosed ferocity common to those who survive in the New York property market. You transact from a position of unassailable strength while brandishing an ever-present threat to use your superior power to crush the other side. You make extravagant demands, well beyond your expectations, so requiring your opponent to negotiate down from them. This enables you to achieve the “deal” you want without making any genuine concessions.

This is New York. This is the world that gave the larger world Donald Trump. Square footage, property lines, construction costs, completion dates—these are the sorts of things that matter in this world. Nothing else does. One is a winner or one is a loser. It is classic zero-sum bargaining. And it is wholly unsuited to sound diplomacy, which requires a nuanced understanding of histories, cultures, domestic constituencies and domestic politics, civilian populations, militaries, and a hundred other factors pertinent to an enduring agreement.

Have you noticed? The Western press now takes to writing not of agreements or accords or pacts, but of “deals.” Donald Trump is after deals, as he is the first to tell us. And it is the difference between a deal and an agreement or an accord or a pact that goes a good way to explaining why Donald Trump, whatever else he may be, is a failed statesman.

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Everything is personal with Donald Trump. This is the other fatal flaw in his foreign policy method, closely related to the first. At home, Trump thinks nothing of abusing government institutions because they are mere hindrances to his pursuit of his personal ambitions. Abroad, he takes no interest in other nations or how they work. He is not interested in the Russian president or the Chinese president or in how either government functions. No, he is interested in “Vladimir,” or in giving Xi Jinping “the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake you’ve ever seen.”

Personal relations can make an immense difference in diplomacy. The case of Churchill and Roosevelt is but one historic example. But they do not serve as the substance of state-to-state relations. Foreign leaders encountering Trump appear pleased enough to humor him. Trump is always the only one in the room to assume this has anything to do with statecraft.

It was a very revealing moment when, during his post-summit meetings with Zelensky and the Europeans at the White House, Trump picked up the telephone to call the Kremlin. This was meant to demonstrate that his relations with Vladimir Putin were very personal and it was by way of these personal relations that he, Trump, would get things done. It demonstrated just the opposite. It is now clear—Lavrov could not have been plainer on American television last Sunday—that Trump’s call was a foolishly flamboyant gesture by way of which nothing will get done.

It is hard to say where matters stand after Trump and Putin gathered in Alaska for their monumentally eventful summit that looks, two weeks on, like a nonevent. The war looks set to continue unabated, Zelensky continues to insist the Kiev regime wants peace but Moscow does not—two lies in a single sentence—and Trump has assigned Marco Rubio, his in-too-deep secretary of state, the task of developing security guarantees Russia has already made clear it will never accept. *Plus ça change*. This is what comes of an American president given to narcissism and fantasy in equal measure, who presumes the world awaits only another “deal.”

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