

Patrick Lawrence

Trump, Zelensky, the reality of a Russian victory.

Presidents Trump and Zelensky are once again crossing swords. This latest eruption in the fractious feud between the ignorant American and the impotent Ukrainian began when, on Friday, 9 October, President Trump finished a long telephone call with Vladimir Putin and announced an agreement to import nearly 5 million tonnes of Russian diesel fuel. At just that moment Zelensky was walking into talks with Trump's "special envoys" about how to end the war with Russia. There is no matching Donald Trump when it comes to diplomatic finesse and delicate timing.

Trump has taken matters much further since he sealed the diesel deal. A day later he attacked Zelensky for Ukraine's repeated strikes on Russian refineries. "He wants to make problems for the world," Trump said at the White House on 10 October. "I think it is time for Ukraine to get a new president." This thought, not to be missed, puts him in line with the Kremlin's view of the Ukrainian dictator.

More recently, Trump formally suspended a Russian sanctions bill he signed into law a few weeks ago. He has also announced that he will close down the Prioritized Ukraine Requirement List, P.U.R.L., the program by way of which the Europeans buy U.S. arms and other matériel and then send these purchases on to

Ukraine. To date the Europeans have sent some \$7 billion worth of arms to Ukraine via the P.U.R.L. procurement operation.

To an extent that is not yet clear, and may never be, the United States appears also to have cut off some of the early-warning satellite intelligence Kiev needs to defend against incoming Russian missiles and drones. Starlink, Elon Musk's advanced communications technology, has imposed restrictions on Ukraine's use of Starshield, the defense-grade variant essential to the Kiev regime's military and government operations.

Volodymyr Zelensky has plainly been caught off guard. "It is certainly not how partners should treat each other," he said of the surprise diesel agreement in a much-remarked interview with the *Financial Times*. As *The Spectator* put it in its American edition last weekend, "Over just a few tumultuous days, Trump's already rocky relations with Volodymyr Zelensky have tumbled into something close to irreconcilable breakdown." This observation appeared under the headline, "Has Trump changed sides on Ukraine?"

How shall we understand this contretemps between Donald Trump and the Ukrainian president and the various events that have prompted it? What has Trump set in motion? Do we witness the beginning of the end of the Ukraine war? These are our questions.

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It should be perfectly evident to anyone watching that the U.S. president's most pressing concern, as he makes his various "deals" and arrangements with Russia, is getting down the cost of petroleum, notably but not only diesel, before America's midterm elections. The ruling Republican Party's vulnerability on the question of high and rising fuel costs cannot be overstated.

There is something pitiful about Trump's latest démarche to the Kremlin when considered as a political move, it must be said. The initial purchase of 300,000 tonnes will cover but a few days total U.S. consumption of diesel and distillate and will have no impact on the outcome of the coming elections. Five million tonnes of diesel fuel, roughly 37 million barrels, would last about two weeks in the market. So I read desperation into Trump's diesel agreement and his sanctions waiver—a little desperation and a little showmanship, a performance for those "M.A.G.A." voters who prefer Trump the decisive maker of deals to Trump the maker of global messes.

But there is no need to dwell overly on Trump's political miscalculations. His latest dealings with Moscow and his latest assault on Volodymyr Zelensky bear a much larger significance.

It is as obvious now as it has been since he returned to office not quite two years ago that Trump still wants to end the war in Ukraine. He made this perfectly plain this past Sunday on Truth Social, his social media platform. "My decision on

Russia is a very simple one,” he wrote in apparent response to the sudden controversy his diesel deal has sparked on both sides of the Atlantic. And following this:

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I am in the process of negotiating Peace in the war between Russia and Ukraine, and don’t want to do anything that will drive, foolishly, Russia away from the bargaining table.

[end indent.]

There have been times over the past two years when Trump appeared to give up on the project he loudly announced during his campaign in 2024, when he promised to end the war in 24 hours. I think we can say now with confidence that he never abandoned this aspiration even on those occasions he threw up his hands and seemed to walk away.

Consider the above list of steps Trump has taken since the 9 October telephone call with Vladimir Putin. Cutting off the U.S.–to–Europe–to–Ukraine weapons flow, removing sanctions imposed for many years on Russia: To me these decisions indicate just what Trump said of them Sunday—a revived, at this point concerted determination to bring the war in Ukraine to an end and put his name on the settlement. Setting aside the domestic politics, I see no other way to read his recent moves when taken together.

Here I come to two of the only things one can find appealing in this disastrously incompetent man. One, he understands, as few of those around him seems to do, that Russia will inevitably win the war in Ukraine and that the remaining task is to fashion terms that acknowledge Russia's victory and recognize its interests without too abjectly accepting defeat.

Two, Trump sees straight through Zelensky's ridiculous posturing and recognizes that the corrupt dictator in Kiev is the principal impediment to securing a settlement of the Ukraine crisis. Of Zelensky his Truth Social note last weekend:

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Frankly, with all the money Europe is famously giving him, and that Crooked Joe Biden gave him in the past, he doesn't want to end the war, and probably never did.

[end indent.]

It is an excellent thing to hear a world leader, even if it is Donald J. Trump, speak the truth of the Kiev regime so plainly.

I was interested to note, via a report in *The Washington Post*, what was on the table when Zelensky convened with Witkoff and Kushner in Miami. This consisted of a "four-pillar" plan to end the war and put in place an enduring peace. These were a territorial settlement, a Ukraine reconstruction plan, security guarantees for

Ukraine—but no N.A.T.O. membership—provided by the Americans and Europeans, and, last but in fact first on Moscow’s list, a new security architecture between Russia and Europe that would include the economic reintegration of the two, notably but not only via the restoration of now-disrupted energy relationships.

These four provisions are a rephrased version of [the 28–point plan](#) negotiated between Washington and Moscow a year ago next month, in which there was a great deal to admire. Zelensky and his European supporters scotched that set of proposals more or less instantly. If I read the Miami proceedings correctly, the Ukrainian president did the same again this time.

This was bound to be the outcome: One criminal who knows exactly what he is doing in the same room with two New York landlords who have no idea what they are doing did not make a promising congress. The thing to note here is that Trump’s envoys, amateur as they are, effectively held to his, Trump’s, earlier plan—another measure of the U.S. president’s determination to go to Moscow with a settlement document that bears some relationship to reality.

“I believe steps have been taken to convince Ukraine to capitulate,” Zelensky said in an interview over the weekend with Bloomberg News. And from *The Atlantic* as published Sunday:

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In the past week, the president of the United States has conclusively turned America into an ally of the Russian Federation. Donald Trump has now abandoned pretense and is openly aiding the Kremlin in its war against a friend and partner of the U.S.

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Trump understands the Russian perspective on events, Trump is “openly aiding” Moscow, Trump is attempting to force Kiev’s hand: There is a lot of this around among Americans now. All very horrible, one reads and hears.

It is exactly what needs to be done, in my view. Recognizing Russia’s interests and forcing the regime in Kiev to face the reality of its defeat to the benefit of all sides are essential if this war is ever to end with an enduring settlement.

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