

This Is What Moscow Really Thinks About The Trump Plan | Prof. Nicolai Petro

Russia's position on the battlefield is getting better and better, but the US still insists on Moscow forfeiting its advantage to negotiate an end to the entire conflict. Why does Trump think this approach could work and what are the Russian calculations to not flatly reject this idea? To discuss these points, I'm talking again to Dr. Nicolai Petro, a Professor of Political Science at the University of Rhode Island and the author of the magnificent book „The Tragedy of Ukraine: What Classical Greek Tragedy can teach us about conflict resolution“.

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Not just the last few years, all of the Putin presidency has been an effort to slowly, with fits and starts, wean itself off of dependency on the West. And one of the reasons that the Russian economy did so well under the current sanctions regime was that those past policies had largely prepared the groundwork for it.

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Hello, everybody. This is Pascal from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm talking again to Dr. Nicolai Petro, who's a professor of political science at the University of Rhode Island and the author of the magnificent book, The Tragedy of Ukraine: What Classical Greek Tragedy Can Teach Us About Conflict Resolution. Nicolai studies and writes much about the internal political processes of Russia and Ukraine, but it has been a while since he was last on this channel. Therefore, I'm very happy he agreed to give us all an update. Nikolai, welcome back. Nice to talk to you again, Pascal. Nikolai, I really wanted to get your insights. Maybe in the second part, we'll talk a bit about what happened recently in Russia and Ukraine, you know, and how these political parties are moving, but we have to start with what happened just less than 48 hours ago, which is these negotiations in Riyadh and the outcome of it that the United States and Ukraine agreed on pushing for a ceasefire.

And the agreement says that the Ukrainian side accepts going for a 30-day ceasefire in return for resuming military aid and intelligence sharing. And now, with this information, apparently at the moment as we speak, the Americans are approaching Russia to tell them that they want a 30-day ceasefire. All while Russia, so far, at least as of the recording of this discussion, hasn't said whether they would accept or reject it. They are so far waiting for direct information coming from the Americans. And I think Marco Rubio wants to talk to Moscow. Apparently, for either Friday or the weekend, it seems that a phone call between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump is scheduled. What are your thoughts on this?

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Well, I think everyone would agree that the devil is in the details here. And from Russia's perspective, there's no need to rush. Events are going as anticipated militarily. Russia is, by all accounts, likely to retake all the territory that Ukraine invaded in Russia last year, perhaps even as soon as next week. That, of course, deprives President Zelensky of one of his major negotiating points, one that he's reiterated several times. But Russia has always argued that the negotiations for peace must proceed from the situation on the ground, and that is no doubt exactly the way that they will go forward.

I was struck by the sequence with which these negotiations began. In other words, the United States, now the Trump administration, believes that Russia has the upper hand, both in the short and the long term in this conflict. Therefore, their first initiative was to reach out to Russia, to Moscow, to see what the conditions were for a ceasefire that Putin would accept, and then secondarily to go and see what the Ukrainians would accept, having put them under a certain pressure to reveal to especially Zelensky and his closest supporters exactly how dependent Ukraine was on U.S. intelligence, military, and other financial assistance.

Having, I suspect, made that point, the U.S. negotiators have done their best to explain to the Ukrainians what the limits of their options are and will now go back to Russia to see if Russia is willing to budge a little bit on its terms. But again, that's the trick in the negotiations. Nothing, of course, will be sealed or done until the Ukrainian and Russian sides actually sit across from each other and negotiate face-to-face. The United States, the Europeans, the Chinese, the Brazilians—everyone can only sit in the middle and be either an intermediary bringing the sides together or, as I fear in the case of Europe, stand in the way, pushing the sides further apart.

So we shall see in the long run whether the United States has the ability to promote at least the first step in this process. And I would remind people that the ceasefire is only the first step. You go from a ceasefire to, secondarily, a longer-term armistice, and then perhaps, if you're lucky, into prolonged negotiations that will establish a new settlement between Ukraine and Russia. But I expect Russia will insist, and Ukraine should insist, that it should include all of their neighbors as well, all of Europe as well. And that final negotiation may be years in the making.

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The issue, of course, is that at the moment, Russia is on the advance, right? I mean, Russia is winning the war, as in the battlefield war in Kursk, I mean, within its own borders, but also in the four oblasts, of which, to my knowledge so far, Russia doesn't control any one of the four yet completely, right? The Ukrainians still have strongholds there. But the idea now of proposing a ceasefire is to basically freeze these front lines, right? And if Russia agrees to this, it will basically agree not to move anymore. Because if you don't shoot, you freeze the conflict where it is. So do you... Because the Russians, Mr. Lavrov and others, and Mr. Putin have said repeatedly, we are

willing to do diplomacy, but we are not willing to have a ceasefire. I mean, we will continue shooting while we negotiate. Do you think there is a realistic chance that they might reconsider this stance?

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I think the likelihood of Russia reconsidering its minimal proposal for a ceasefire, which was made, I will remind listeners, last June, June 2023, by President Putin, is low. He stated only three requirements. I don't mean to suggest that they're simple, but these are the three requirements after which Russia would immediately declare a ceasefire. They are neutrality on the part of Ukraine, introduced into the Constitution; secondarily, no NATO membership, of course, and no NATO troops within Ukraine; and lastly, the acknowledgment of these four territories, four oblasts plus Crimea, as legitimate parts of the Russian Federation, as they currently are in the Russian Constitution.

So that's a technical procedure, removing them from Ukraine and acknowledging that they are now part of Russia in their current administrative borders. I must say that the issue of the administrative borders of the region has not historically been a sticking point in the negotiations that were taking place under the Minsk II Accords. Even within that framework, the governments of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics had, within the framework of the Minsk II Accords, acknowledged that there would be different administrative rights and civic rights also, essentially, for the regions within those territories that were under their control as opposed to under the control of Kiev. So, the Minsk II Accords did not apply to the entire Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts, but only to the territories that were then under the control of the rebel forces.

So, maybe one could envision something similar eventually being agreed to in the case of the present situation. I think the neutrality and non-NATO membership are probably the greatest sticking points. Another key point, which was discussed in the Istanbul Accords, was limitations on the size of the Ukrainian armed forces and some limitation on the armaments that they could get. I think those probably, if one side were willing to, if Russia were willing to not push its military advantage to the administrative borders within Ukraine, which it could probably reach eventually, of the four oblasts that it doesn't currently fully occupy, then perhaps Ukraine, for its part, could return to the limitations that it had agreed to and was willing in principle to negotiate with Russia about, which it had reached in the Istanbul Accords in April of '22.

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So basically, like what other commentators also on YouTube call "Istanbul Plus."

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Not Minsk 3, but a reiteration of Istanbul. And when you think about it in those terms, you know, the sides are maybe not so far apart. But again, we're only talking about how far apart they are in terms of a ceasefire, not even the next stage of a real armistice, much less a full peace settlement.

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And this is, of course, very critical, because if these are the conditions for just a ceasefire, we are far away from where the Trump administration currently thinks it is reasonable to try to push the Russians into agreeing to stop using weapons. Because to them, to the Trump administration, it seems reasonable to say that if the Ukrainians stop firing, then you should stop firing too. All while we actually officially say that we are going to resume arming Ukraine, which at this point seems like a very, very bad deal for Russia. However...

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Yeah. So, as you've put it, yes, it would be a bad deal. But let's imagine the deal embellished in the context of Istanbul Plus, which is that this rearmament of Ukraine must not exceed the limits established in the armistice agreement that would have to be negotiated. If there were limits established on the kind of offensive weaponry that Ukraine could use, then I think Russia would probably be willing to live with that as long as those limits could be effectively verified and maintained.

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And it's, of course, important here that the United States actually controls these limits because all of the critical information that Ukraine needs—getting the weapons, the Starlink, and the intelligence sharing needed in order to use these weapons—are actually in the control of the United States. So you could imagine a scenario in which Mr. Rubio would negotiate with Russia, saying, like, look, we are hereby agreeing to only supply so and so much, but not more for the period of the agreement. Therefore, why don't you agree, and we try to get to the next stage?

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Which probably is a bridging tactic in negotiations, because, again, the ceasefire doesn't need to be extended, right? In other words, if the ceasefire broke down or either side considered that it was being violated, then the armistice negotiations would simply never take place. One thing I'd like to draw our listeners' attention to is that when the press reports that arms deliveries have resumed, or that intelligence sharing has resumed, that doesn't tell us what and how much. For example, on intelligence sharing, there are two key components that have been mentioned by a number of Ukrainian bloggers as essential to Ukraine. One is intelligence on incoming missiles and drone attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure.

And the second is the information that is being shared by the United States and the Europeans on sites that the Ukrainians would like to attack inside Russia, and they are providing the guidance for. So it's entirely possible—I have no idea whether this is true or not—but on the intelligence sharing, the United States might be, in fact, sharing the defensive part of that, say, sharing the information

that would allow the Ukrainians to more effectively shoot down Russian missiles. They might still not be sharing the offensive capability and might use that as a playing card, to use a Trumpian expression, in the negotiations to encourage Russia to persist in the negotiations.

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The question then for the Russian side is, of course, can they verify that? Can they trust it? Because, I mean, would you agree that judging by the last 20 years of experiences that both Mr. Putin and Mr. Lavrov have with the United States, the Russians would be suspicious toward any negotiations or agreements that cannot necessarily be verified?

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Yes, but here Russia and the United States are in a very different and exclusive position from the other participants. And here I include the Europeans as well as the Ukrainians. They have their own satellite verification capabilities. They don't depend on someone else's verification capabilities. So I'm quite confident that Russia feels it can verify what is going on, in a way that, for example, Ukraine cannot, independently of what the United States and other allies provide.

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Right. So, in a sense, if Russia wanted to experiment with the new Trump administration, they could do so knowing that they are able to see what's going on.

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What do you mean by "experiment"?

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So, you know, saying yes to a ceasefire agreement would, in my view, be a leap of faith from the Russian side, because if they say no and just continue pushing the way that they did militarily, they have reasonable grounds to expect that the current push will continue and that there is no reasonable way to believe that within the next one or two months, the alliance is able to stop them in their tracks. Right. So, in a sense, trying a ceasefire would be the experiment, not continuing militarily.

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Well, that's an interesting point. Yeah. Um, one could do that. I think there would be a strong backlash within Russia. There'd be a lot of criticism about stopping short of the declared goals. Here's one thing I think we have to remember with respect to the Russian negotiating stance: it has

always been very clear what Russia is aiming at, certainly in terms of territory. Since the Istanbul Accords broke down and they annexed two additional regions, they have stipulated that all the territories of those four oblasts plus Crimea are now part of Russia, and that the fighting will not stop, the territorial conquest will not stop until those borders are reached, but implicitly that there are no further demands territorially upon Ukraine.

However, now there is, of course, the precedent that was set in the aftermath of the failure of the Istanbul Accords, which is the warning that Russia has made through the Istanbul Accords: we are making this offer. If you refuse this offer, then our own self-limitation on the territories that we might want to annex is lifted. So this, you know, make a deal while you can, because the next deal is only going to be worse for you. And that has, in fact, been a consistent theme in the Russian negotiating process, which, as you very correctly point out, is Clausewitzian. In other words, it does not separate war from negotiations. It sees the war as an extension, the military activities as an extension of the negotiations and intertwined with each other.

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which is why the question to Russia really is, is there reasonable ground to believe that through diplomacy they can gain what they could otherwise also gain militarily, right? And if the answer is yes, then the incentive would be, yes, let's go the diplomatic route.

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The problem is, as always, and I think all negotiators and statesmen understand this, is at what cost? Yes, you can pretty much always accomplish what you want in politics. But the question is, will this be a Pyrrhic victory, a victory that costs you more than what you obtained? Which is why I think there is one component to this negotiating process that is really emerging. And one has to remember that there will be future phases of this negotiating process after the ceasefire and during the prolonged armistice negotiation. And those are the role of sanctions.

So if the United States actually promises and begins to dismantle its sanctions regime on Russia, of course, all other countries will follow suit. There's simply no point in having this leaky system of sanctions that we are currently experiencing, with great difficulty trying to hold together against Russia, and which has been, in many respects, ineffective, with its major proponent withdrawing and saying, no, that's not the relationship we want to have with Russia anymore. We actually want a mutually beneficial commercial relationship.

And if that goes, of course, the entire EU sanctions regime, no matter what the politicians say and try to do, will collapse as well. On that point, I would say it's very interesting that Trump can deliver. Trump can't deliver on the Ukrainians. He can't assure Russia that the Ukrainians will abide by the ceasefire, just as he can't assure the Ukrainians that Russia will abide by the ceasefire. But one thing he can deliver, as an incentive to peace, is to end the sanctions regime and really reverse course on

the relationship with Russia, which will inevitably, like an enormous gravitational pull, draw Europe into its wake as well.

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That would be highly interesting if Trump played that "Trump card."

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Well, he doesn't need to talk about it now. I can't see how it would be. It's been mentioned already so many times as part of the package, especially by Russia. It's been mentioned explicitly by Russia. So I'm sure it's one of the major carrots rather than sticks in this negotiating process.

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But is Russia, in your view, seriously very interested in a lifting of the sanctions? Because one of the things that the Russian economy proved over the last three years is that it not only didn't collapse, but it also expanded by 4%, at least in the last year. The Russian economy surprised everybody, I think, by its resilience to what happened. So do you think that even though the Russian economy can survive and do well under these sanctions, there are still structural incentives for them wanting them to be lifted?

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There is an emotional philosophical argument against it, and it's made most articulately by people like Sergey Karaganov, who argues that Russians, like everyone else, are weak. They want to make a buck. They want instant gratification. Knowing that commercial enterprises, bankers, and oligarchs will indeed pursue self-gratification, the sanctions that have been weathered have proven, as you say, Russia's resilience. Let's keep doing that. The counter-argument is that, yes, we have succeeded and we have shown our resilience, but it is still better for Russia to have the flexibility regarding what types of enterprises and commercial transactions to engage in and which to avoid.

So, if that ability were returned to Russia, we would do a better job overall managing that, and we could police ourselves. I think Karaganov's argument is slightly insulting to Russians because it's saying, well, you know, we couldn't possibly refrain from indulging in all the things that the West has to offer, and we'll get into the same sort of dependency with them that we had before. But all, not just the last few years, all of the Putin presidency has been an effort to slowly, with fits and starts, wean itself off of dependency on the West. And one of the reasons that the Russian economy did so well under the current sanctions regime was that those past policies had largely prepared the groundwork for it.

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Step by step, basically preparing Russia for what was to come.

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One of the things that I think is if there are Western analysts, and you see them writing sometimes, who suggest that Russia can be weaned away from China or can be made to revert or return to having a primary geopolitical interest in Europe, I think that is a false hope. Russia has its own strategic course. The decision to pursue multipolarity, to weaken not only its economic but also geopolitical and cultural dependence and attachment to Europe, is a long-term commitment that I think Russia is devoted to, regardless of what happens in Ukraine.