Jeddah. Kremlin. Trump. The big picture

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

When analysing US diplomatic efforts surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war, it is essential not to overlook the broader geopolitical landscape, of which these efforts are a significant part.

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The recent week has brought a fresh wave of headlines surrounding the ongoing attempts by the Donald Trump administration to halt the fighting between Russia and Ukraine. Initially, high-ranking delegations from Washington and Kyiv held a meeting in Saudi Arabia, marking the first encounter since the controversial exchange between the heads of state in the White House Oval Office. Following that, the US special envoy travelled to Moscow, where he discussed the preliminary agreements reached with the Ukrainians at the Kremlin.

This series of diplomatic moves was accompanied by numerous official statements and an endless stream of comments from unnamed sources across various capitals. Most comments and “insider” reports focus on the current events, raising questions about who has put whom in a more uncomfortable negotiating position and what steps the involved parties might take next. However, as often happens, the broader geopolitical context in which this process is unfolding tends to fade into the background. Perhaps, with the current overwhelming flow of information (and disinformation), there simply isn’t time to reflect on more issues or to think beyond the immediate moment.

Everyone is focused on their own agenda, yet all are speaking about the same thing

Especially since the current flow of information can so dramatically shift its direction and pace. It has been less than two weeks since the scandalous exchange in the White House, and already the US administration has first suspended military aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine, only to later restore them. This was announced following talks between delegations from both countries in Saudi Arabia's Jeddah.

According to US officials, later confirmed by Ukrainian representatives, Kyiv agreed to Washington's demand to declare a 30-day ceasefire if Russia also agrees to similar terms. However, shortly after committing to this obligation, Ukraine's leadership expressed confidence that Moscow would not agree to such a step, and thus called on the US to ramp up sanctions and pressure on Russia. Many Ukrainian commentators thus interpreted the negotiations with the Americans in Saudi Arabia as a form of political technology success, one that allowed Ukraine to shift the focus of US pressure from Kyiv to Moscow.

In their view, Ukraine is no longer seen by the Trump administration as the primary obstacle to peace agreements, as it was just two weeks ago. At the moment, it may have seemed that way. Similar statements were made by US officials, including President Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who stated that Russia is expected to react. Moscow, for its part, clearly also sought to provide a political technology response to Washington's proposal for a 30-day ceasefire as the first step toward a lasting peace agreement.

President Putin emphasized that he supports the idea proposed by his American counterpart but pointed out that "there are nuances." These nuances revolve around Moscow's refusal to accept any ceasefire that could be used to further strengthen the positions of Ukraine's armed forces on the battlefield.

> In other words, the Russian president said exactly what was expected of him, and what, according to Kyiv, amounts to a rejection of an immediate halt to hostilities. However, he did so in a manner that seemingly accepts the American framework for the negotiations.

At the same time, the focus on the political manoeuvring by both sides and the widespread analysis of the negotiation timeline in global media and diplomatic circles seems to narrow the analytical framework of the ongoing situation. These discussions

concentrate solely on the current actions and mutual jabs, overlooking numerous contextual factors that will ultimately play a decisive role in the final outcome of these events.

For some reason, the bigger picture is being forgotten

For example, this narrow perspective on the situation obscures the real capabilities and interests of the US in the process. Washington begins to be seen merely as a strong, active, and largely impartial mediator, ready to apply its full geostrategic power in search of long-term solutions, to secure the necessary concessions for peace from both sides of the conflict. It is clear that this is exactly the positioning the Trump administration aims for. It is no coincidence that the meeting with the Ukrainian delegation took place in a third country rather than in Washington.

However, this positioning does not fully reflect the role and ambitions of the US. It's not about what many Russian commentators are saying, accusing the American authorities of trying to deceive and outmanoeuvre their Russian counterparts to continue undermining Moscow's strategic interests. Rather, the issue is that this narrow view of the situation fails to grasp the true causal relationships and, consequently, the potential outcomes they may lead to.

First, it is crucial to more accurately assess the weight and capabilities of Washington in the process of finding solutions to end the war. As we've pointed out multiple times, the US remains the number one power in the world, but the world itself has changed significantly. It is no longer unipolar.

> Therefore, being number one in an increasingly multipolar world is not equivalent to holding the top position in the power rankings of 20-30 years ago, when Washington's word on the most significant international issues was seen as final and non-negotiable.

This is especially important in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian negotiations.

Under the Biden administration, the words and actions of the US were insufficient to steer developments on the Russian-Ukrainian fronts in the direction desired by America. Today, under Trump, they are also inadequate to quickly impose the parameters for ending the conflict. However, it's important to note that insufficiency does not equate to a lack of significant levers of influence. This is also crucial for the ongoing diplomatic efforts.

Second, it is important to remember the full spectrum of US interests in this process. These interests are by no means limited to the confines of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, something that many, both in the West and in Ukraine and Russia, seem to forget or are unwilling to consider. A parallel can be drawn to how, during the first two years of the war, Western capitals overlooked the broader geopolitical situation when attempting to convince countries of the so-called "Global South" to take their side in the conflict with Russia.

> For some reason, many politicians in the West and Ukraine genuinely believed that rhetoric about a "rules-based world order" and the narrative of an uncompromising battle between democracies and autocracies would persuade these countries to ignore their own interests and simply align with Western policy.

It is particularly amusing to reflect on such reasoning and diplomatic activity in relation to China. One recalls how European leaders and high-ranking Americans were making trips to Beijing, one after another, attempting to dissuade Xi Jinping from cooperating with Moscow or even pressuring him to influence the Kremlin to halt the fighting. As if, apart from the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, nothing else was happening in the world. As if China had no other interests or concerns anywhere else. As if, at the same time, the Americans and many Europeans weren't intensifying preparations for a systemic confrontation with China, even directing NATO towards this goal.

A similar dynamic can now be observed in the expectations of many Europeans and Americans regarding the Trump administration's efforts to end the armed conflict between Moscow and Kyiv. These efforts are mostly perceived and analysed as though there are no other factors influencing Washington's interests.

Relations between major powers are intrinsically valuable

But such factors do exist, and they are quite obvious. The main one can be described by the formula "relations between major powers are intrinsically valuable", especially in times of global turbulence. This may not sound pleasant or align with the spirit of the 21st century, but it is a constant in international relations that is unaffected by time. In other words, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, it's not just important for the US how the war itself ends, in what condition, and with what territorial boundaries Ukraine is left. While that is undoubtedly important, what's equally crucial is the future of Washington's relationship with Russia after the war. This is all the more significant for the US as its systemic competition with China continues to evolve.

For this reason, Washington is likely not interested in closely coordinating with the Europeans, is not involving them in negotiations with the Russians, and even deeming it unnecessary to fully inform them about the details. The Trump administration justifies this attitude towards European allies by arguing that they have nothing to offer, either in terms of military potential or new ideas.

However, an even more important explanation is that for Washington, relations with Moscow are intrinsically valuable as relations with a major global actor, whose policies will have a significant (though not defining) impact on the future of US-China competition.

> If this larger geopolitical situation were absent from the Trump administration's analysis, if they were to view the Russia-Ukraine war only in terms of the military conflict itself, then Washington would be working differently with its European allies.

It would need to coordinate actions and negotiation positions with them to exert more effective pressure on Moscow. Similarly, bilateral relations with the US hold special significance for Russia—perhaps even more so than for Washington. For this reason, considering the larger geopolitical situation, there is indeed a real chance that Trump's efforts to halt the fighting could be more successful than they would be without such a broader perspective. However, this is only true if any future agreements can be made resilient to the political unpredictability within the US itself.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations