Commentary
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Trump’s Phone Diplomacy: Ukraine in words, China in mind

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Summary

The United States’ diplomatic efforts to halt hostilities between Russia and Ukraine continue within the broader framework of Washington’s strategic interests and priorities.

Contents

1 Call me, call me
2 A “fantastic phone conversation” with Zelenskyy
3 Once again, the bigger picture

Washington is actively pursuing diplomatic initiatives to bring an end to the fighting between Russia and Ukraine. Following meetings in Jeddah and Moscow, the high-level negotiation marathon has continued in the format of telephone conversations. Over the past week, U.S. President Donald Trump first spoke with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, and later with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. These calls, for obvious reasons, became top stories in global media.

Call me, call me

Trump’s phone conversation with Putin was eagerly anticipated, partly due to the PR tactics of the U.S. administration, which, through the president and other officials, consistently maintains high (and sometimes inflated) public expectations regarding the ongoing diplomatic process. Ahead of and following nearly all interactions with Russian and Ukrainian counterparts, there are frequent announcements that some major breakthrough is imminent or that groundbreaking agreements will soon be reached. This time was no exception—before the call even took place, reports began circulating that the White House press service was preparing a special press conference with Trump immediately after his conversation with the Russian president.

However, following the nearly two-hour conversation on 18 March, the idea of holding a press conference was abandoned. Instead, the White House limited itself to a brief statement from Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt.

In the context of exploring ways to halt hostilities between Moscow and Kyiv, she stated that the U.S. and Russian leaders had agreed that "the movement to peace will begin with an energy and infrastructure ceasefire, as well as technical negotiations on implementation of a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea, full ceasefire and permanent peace." According to the statement, these technical negotiations are set to begin immediately in the Middle East.

It is hard to overlook the differences in wording between the White House statement and the Kremlin's official press release on the conversation. The Russian version specifies that the agreement on halting strikes applies exclusively to energy infrastructure. In subsequent comments to the media, Russian officials emphasized that no other infrastructure targets would be subject to these restrictions. Additionally, Moscow confirmed its "constructive" response to the proposal to revisit the Black Sea shipping security initiative, with negotiations set to begin soon to refine the details.

Moreover, the Russian side reiterated its fundamental stance on a principled commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but only under the condition that the settlement be "comprehensive, sustainable, and long-term." In other words, as expected, Russia is not deviating from its demand to address the "unconditional necessity of eliminating the root causes of the crisis." In this context, Moscow insists that Washington's proposed 30-day full ceasefire will only be accepted if Ukraine's mobilization efforts cease and its military rearmament through Western supplies is halted.

> It is clear that the phone conversation between the Russian and U.S. presidents marked a step forward in the diplomatic process. However, it is equally evident that the road ahead remains highly complex and likely long and arduous.

It is difficult to determine whether Washington genuinely expected a breakthrough from the talks and if Trump's decision to cancel the press conference stemmed from unmet expectations. Nevertheless, the U.S. president and key figures involved in diplomacy with Russia continue to offer optimistic and emotionally charged assessments of their engagement with Moscow.

For instance, U.S. presidential envoy Steven Witkoff described the call as "epic and transformational," marking significant progress. In several interviews with American journalists, he also shared some details of the ongoing negotiations and his personal interpretations of their significance. He confirmed that the negotiators are already working on specifics regarding future territorial separation, the status of Ukrainian nuclear power plants, and NATO-related issues.

A "fantastic phone conversation" with Zelenskyy

The very next day, on 19 March, Trump spoke with Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The U.S. president gave an emphatically positive assessment of the conversation, posting a brief remark about it on his social media platform, *Truth Social*. A more detailed statement on the call was later released by the White House on behalf of Secretary of State Marco Rubio and National Security Advisor Michael Waltz.

The conversation was described as "fantastic" in the statement. This enthusiastic tone stands in stark contrast to the critical language directed at the Ukrainian president just three weeks earlier, following his controversial visit to Washington. The statement repeatedly emphasized Zelenskyy's deep gratitude toward Trump for his efforts in seeking a peaceful resolution and for the support provided to Ukraine. In this context, the Ukrainian leader requested additional air defence systems, to which Trump responded by pledging to locate available reserves, particularly in Europe. Both leaders also agreed to implement a ceasefire regarding strikes on energy infrastructure.

This is what has been publicly revealed about the two phone calls. Naturally, it remains difficult to form a complete picture of the negotiation process or the level of mutual understanding reached based on brief press releases and fragmented media comments. Moreover, one of the purposes of such statements is to serve as a kind of "diplomatic fog."

> Therefore, it is more important to focus on understanding the core interests and needs of the parties involved in this negotiation marathon, as these will ultimately define the framework of any potential agreements.

This is particularly true for the United States, whose position under Donald Trump appears to have shifted so dramatically that the world is left dizzy, struggling to grasp what exactly is driving Washington's actions.

Once again, the bigger picture

Donald Trump's phone conversations with the presidents of Russia and Ukraine took place precisely within the paradigm we discussed previously. Given that many media outlets and even expert discussions continue to analyse Washington's diplomatic initiatives in isolation from broader global developments, let us once again lay out the argument for the bigger picture in the logic of U.S. strategy—this time in greater detail.

It is evident that at the forefront of Washington's long-term outlook is the overarching theme of "confrontation with China." Whether the Trump administration has a fully developed strategy toward Beijing or how much immediate attention it devotes to this front is secondary. What truly matters is that in analysing any global issue—whether conflicts or cooperative initiatives—the spectre of China looms over every American strategic calculation. This is simply the reality of an intensifying great-power rivalry for global dominance. It has always been so in history, and it remains the case today.

Thus, when Trump or any other U.S. official utters the word "Ukraine," they inevitably have "China" in mind. This means that when Washington engages in negotiations to end hostilities between Kyiv and Moscow, beyond the technical details and the various minor concessions and advantageous deals it may extract from both sides, there are two critically important components embedded in its broader strategic vision.

The first component is the future of U.S.-Russia relations and the possibility of steering them out of a crisis. As we noted previously, these relations hold intrinsic value for both the U.S. and Russia, regardless of the specifics of the battlefield in Ukraine. Beyond immediate concerns, they have the potential to become one of the defining variables in the future geopolitical order. While Moscow's stance and decisions in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry will not dictate everything, they could still make a significant difference.

> There is a vast difference between Moscow and Beijing continuing their trajectory of deep, limitless coordination across all spheres and Russia adopting a more nuanced and balanced approach between the U.S. and China.

The same applies from the Kremlin's perspective: the role of a junior partner to Beijing is starkly different from that of a more independent player, capable of strategic manoeuvring and, as a result, wielding greater influence in global affairs.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that the official statements following Trump and Putin's phone call contained as much emphasis on U.S.-Russia relations as on the specifics of the negotiations concerning the war. This is also directly confirmed by the key participants in the talks. Speaking about progress in dialogue with Moscow, Steven Witkoff articulated the core message: "Russia is a critical relationship for us" in the context of global affairs. Trump himself has essentially conveyed the same sentiment in plain terms.

The second critical component in Washington's grand strategy is even more apparent. Even if the U.S. were not considering the possibility of pulling Moscow slightly away from Beijing, it would still be counterproductive—if not outright dangerous—for Washington to become further entangled in the Russia-Ukraine war, which holds no decisive strategic value for the U.S. The calculations voiced by some figures in the Biden administration—that weakening Russia through a prolonged, exhausting war with Ukraine would somehow also weaken China—have simply not been empirically validated. In fact, the effect has been quite the opposite.

The longer the war continues with the U.S. as the primary supplier of weapons and financial aid to Ukraine, the greater the risk that Washington will become increasingly entangled, committing more resources and obligations to a conflict of secondary strategic importance. This is precisely the kind of danger that America's Founding Fathers warned against—overextending national resources in conflicts that do not directly serve U.S. interests.

For this reason, growing, albeit not yet mainstream, discussions in American expert circles draw parallels between Washington's role in this war and its ill-fated involvement in Vietnam. Thus, even if Trump had lost the election last November to Kamala Harris, a Democratic administration would have likely begun shifting Washington's approach to the Russia-Ukraine war—just in a more gradual manner and with different rhetorical framing.

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