INTERVIEWS 16.07.2025

'Trump seems visibly overwhelmed'

Reinhard Krumm, from the US, on Trump's Russia ultimatum, his supposed closeness to Putin, and the response from the Republican camp

An ultimatum of 50 days and massive arms deliveries to Ukraine: How do you assess US President Donald Trump's recent change of course towards Russia?

I'm not sure if this is a change of course at all. Isn't Trump still trying to end Russia's war of aggression while remaining in dialogue with Moscow? On the one hand, it remains to be seen which weapons – apart from the Patriot air defence system – will actually be included in the package that the Americans are planning to put together. As far as I understand, the European NATO countries will initially supply weapons to Ukraine, which they can then purchase from the US at a later date.

Defence Minister Boris Pistorius is also likely to have discussed this with his American counterpart Pete Hegseth during his inaugural visit to Washington. But one thing is also clear: the response from Washington could have been much harsher. The BBC, for example, reports that Moscow was apparently surprised — and that the restrained US response led to rising stock prices in Russia. This is also due to the 50-day deadline that the US is now giving Russia to agree to a peace agreement.

It remains to be seen whether the team around Trump's advisor Steve Witkoff, who has not been in Moscow since April, is preparing new initiatives. The same applies to the actual Ukraine envoy, four-star General Keith Kellogg. He regularly travels to Ukraine and is increasingly working on concrete solutions to end the war.

So, this is not a strategic turning point, but rather a tactical calculation?

Yes, so far, President Trump's statements in his conversation with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte suggest a tactical calculation. His goal still seems to be peaceful coexistence with China and Russia

– but on the US' terms, including the use of tariffs. However, the basis of this foreign policy is no longer a global, rules-based security order based on the norms and principles of the United Nations. Instead, Trump is relying on ad hoc cooperation and transactional relationships.

This is not an entirely new element in American foreign policy, but under Trump this approach is being given new priority. Despite all his criticism, he regularly expresses a certain appreciation for Russia and President Putin. He describes Russia as a 'potentially great country' and says that talks with Putin are 'good'. Trump believes in opportunities for economic cooperation with Moscow – an idea that is currently unthinkable in Europe. His guiding principle is: 'It's a good thing to get along with Russia.'

Many people have indeed noted Trump's apparent closeness to Putin.

President Trump is clearly fascinated by Russia's chutzpah – its ability to project power in its own neighbourhood despite limited resources. He has praised his Russian counterpart for his intelligence and even called him a 'genius.' Perhaps he also admires Putin because the man in the Kremlin, like himself in the White House, no longer insists on maintaining the status quo in security policy.

While Trump primarily uses the economic power of the United States for his own interests, Putin uses military power. What they have in common is their annoyance with the EU, which they view as arrogant, with little military clout but global influence through trade rules. In their worldview, the stronger should be entitled to more respect and influence. Trump once said of Putin, half critically, half admiringly: 'I'm not saying he's an assassin, but he's a tough guy.'

The current frustration with Putin may also stem from personal resentment over Moscow's lack of reciprocity. With his fundamentally positive attitude toward Russia and Putin, Trump stands pretty much alone – both among Democrats and in parts of the Republican Party. Respect – or lack thereof – plays an important role in the White House's foreign and domestic policy. Putin should know this, because he too attaches great importance to the world's largest country being shown the respect it deserves.

Trump took office with the bold promise to end Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine within 24 hours. One day has now turned into almost six months of his term in office — without result. In front of the camera, he spoke of allegedly 'four deals,' but these did not lead to an end to the war because Russia ultimately did not agree to them. Trump seems visibly overwhelmed by the Kremlin's stubbornness. The 50-day deadline given to Russia to agree to a peace deal also

speaks volumes. The hand remains outstretched — in the hope of not alienating Russia and at the same time not losing Ukraine. And then there is the big goal: the Nobel Peace Prize. If peace in the Middle East does not hold.

How will Trump's announcement be received in the Republican camp — especially by Trump-aligned forces in Congress, who have so far tended to block military support for Ukraine?

Trump is, figuratively speaking, caught between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand, his foreign policy is geared towards keeping the US out of international conflicts. On the other hand, he has to convey to his camp that the US may have to get involved after all in order to maintain its global influence. His vice president, JD Vance, is a vehement advocate of American withdrawal from the world stage. It is therefore not surprising that Trump emphasises to those around him that no US citizens are dying in Ukraine. At the same time, he justifies his current policy with the humanitarian situation — too many people are being killed in this 'terrible war'.

In doing so, he is representing classic American foreign policy. The Senate is doing the same, with Republican Lindsey Graham and his Democratic colleague Richard Blumenthal preparing a bill for new and tough sanctions against Russia and its supporters, supported by over 80 of the 100 senators. According to one of the initiators, this 'sledgehammer' is intended to bring Russia to its senses. But the hard core of the 'Make America Great Again' movement remains sceptical. They did not vote for Trump to increase military spending in foreign countries.

The US wants to impose 100 per cent punitive tariffs on all of Russia's trading partners if the war does not end within 50 days. Isn't that the 'game changer' that could end the war?

No, I don't think so at this point. Good sources and Putin's public statements indicate that he continues to believe in the victory of his troops — at least he considers negotiations premature at this stage. It is likely that these were not yet advanced enough for the Kremlin to seriously consider a longer-term ceasefire.

Furthermore, the EU and the US continue to underestimate the Russian leadership's desire not only to exert influence in Ukraine, but also to help shape the European security architecture. The Kremlin is counting on the EU countries running out of economic and political steam before Russia does. Moscow has already invested too much: people, money, relationships – and ultimately the future of its own country.

But of course, the further course of events does not depend solely on Russia. The reaction of the EU, its member states and the US will also be decisive. It cannot be ruled out that the Trump administration will actually carry out its threats — and impose sanctions on countries that indirectly support Russia's war. And it is equally impossible to rule out that it will be Russia, not Europe, that runs out of steam first.

What does Trump's change of course mean for Europe?

Perhaps we should speak of a course correction instead. Trump's announcement that he will sell American military equipment to European countries is good news for now. Otherwise, it would be impossible to deliver replacements to the Ukrainian front so quickly. At the same time, this is likely to increase pressure on the European arms industry to rapidly expand its own capacities.

The meeting with NATO Secretary General Rutte at the White House also shows that Trump now sees Europe in a slightly different light. He said openly: 'A strong Europe is a good thing.' Perhaps that was just a snapshot, but perhaps it was more than that. One thing is certain: it is up to the Europeans, especially Germany, to clearly represent their interests in Washington — with regard to Ukraine as well as Russia. The 50-day deadline should be used to actively bring the EU's position to the table in possible peace talks. So far, this has not been done to a sufficient extent.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



Reinhard Krumm
Washington

Dr Reinhard Krumm heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Washington. His previous positions include Head of the Baltic States Office in Riga, the Regional Office for Co-operation and Peace in Europe based in Vienna, the Moscow Office and the Central and Eastern Europe Department in Berlin.