FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 24.04.2025 | Nickolay Kapitonenko

No peace (just yet)

Trump's mediation attempt has failed, and the war continues. Will the West abandon Ukraine?

US President Donald Trump faced a daunting task: to quickly end a war between two sides unable to find compromise. Each side continues to believe it can win, and for both, the political cost of serious concessions is prohibitively high.

Trump's optimism was likely based on his confidence that he could successfully exert pressure on Ukraine and reach an agreement with Russia. The US president also justifiably believes that war is a very poor way to resolve conflicts. Others have believed this before him, but wars, unfortunately, happen even when they do not seem entirely rational. Plus, once it starts, violence tends to repeat itself and complicates the task of finding a peaceful solution to conflicts.

The Trump administration seems to have looked to historical examples of successful American mediation, such as the Camp David and Dayton talks. These examples show not only that superpower mediation can be effective even in very complex conflicts, but also how short-lived or fragile its results can be. The truces in the Arab-Israeli conflict, for example, have not been permanent, and a lasting resolution remains elusive. And this is despite the fact that the United States' position in the world in the 1990s was much stronger, opening up more opportunities for mediation missions.

Today, Trump has to operate under a multitude of constraints, constantly keeping China in mind and gradually realising the lack of leverage not only over Moscow but also over Kyiv. Many people believed in Ukraine's vulnerability to pressure even before Trump, as well as in the possibility of easily reaching an agreement with Russia. We can learn lessons from these beliefs from the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war up to 2022.

Nevertheless, Trump took on this mission. As a mediator, the United States managed to launch the process, understand the positions of the parties, and hold a series of shuttle diplomacy meetings, but as soon as it

came to substantive decisions, the situation returned to the impasse known since the Minsk agreements.

Spaces to manoeuvre

Ukraine did not like Trump's position: too little pressure on Russia, no determination to continue defending the 'rules-based' international order, too much willingness to accept Russian demands. But could it have been any different?

Any other negotiating strategy would have meant a return to the Biden administration's strategy, which the American president sincerely and, in many ways, justifiably considers a failure.

The outlines of a plan to end the war were sketched out at some stage. Its key elements – a freeze along the line of contact, negotiations on the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant, Ukraine remaining outside NATO – looked like a basis for dialogue that reflected the reality of the war rather than the maximalist expectations of the parties. Washington's pressure narrowed Zelensky's room for manoeuvre, and Ukraine agreed to a ceasefire and even to negotiations with Russia afterwards – something that was quite difficult to imagine just a few months ago. The prisoner exchanges and the Easter truce looked like an attempt to do everything 'by the book,' as did, for example, the large-scale exchange and long-term truce in 2019-2020. But then, as now, these preparatory steps were not followed up, as the parties' interests on fundamental issues are incompatible.

Untangling the knot of territorial claims in the modern world is an almost impossible task, even for superpowers.

Given all this, the chances of a broad agreement in London were minimal and remain so in the foreseeable future. Moscow is asking too high a price for a cessation of hostilities, while Kyiv believes that the risk of continuing the war is justified, even without US assistance.

Both sides continue to take risks and pay dearly for the war.

Russia's desire to retain the occupied territories creates a complex and perhaps insoluble problem in today's world of nationalism. Confusing signals on territorial issues give the impression that Moscow is not particularly interested in a truce. For example, Putin has long insisted on claims to the entire territory of four Ukrainian regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhya and Kherson – which, of course, completely ruled out further negotiations on this issue. The news of his alleged agreement to stop at the line of contact remained unconfirmed and

appeared when the failure of the London talks had already become quite obvious. A halting of hostilities along the current line of contact looks like a possible solution, but it can only be temporary, differing in a number of ways from its famous analogue – the armistice in the Korean War. Untangling the knot of territorial claims in the modern world is an almost impossible task, even for superpowers.

For Washington, the situation is gradually becoming unpleasant, but not tragic. Unlike Afghanistan, with which parallels can often be drawn, the US is not directly involved in the war and has no obligations. All that is at stake is reputation, but even that may be seen by Trump, not as a problem for the US, but for the Biden administration.

Stopping aid to Ukraine, shifting responsibility to Europe and engaging in dialogue with Moscow on other issues on the agenda are real options for Washington.

The American president has challenges far more important than the Russian-Ukrainian war. Trade wars are only part of the deeper problems of maintaining the US' position and power in the world. If Trump has staked his hand on unilateral action, resource savings and a more equitable distribution of security costs, then the decision to withdraw from the Russian-Ukrainian war fits perfectly into this strategy. This would not necessarily weaken American alliances, although it could well weaken the positions of American clients. Stopping aid to Ukraine, shifting responsibility to Europe and engaging in dialogue with Moscow on other issues on the agenda are real options for Washington.

Europe does not seem ready for such a development. It is already paying a high price for the war on its borders and should probably be interested in its swift conclusion. But instead, the rhetoric and actions of the American administration are pushing Berlin and Paris towards an entirely different course of action.

Ukraine has no choice but to seek support in Europe. But the question of how long-lasting and large-scale this support will be remains open.

If events continue to develop in the same direction, the most likely scenario will be a continuation of the war and its transition into another summer-autumn campaign. Ukraine will face the difficult consequences of reduced aid, while Russia will face the possible risks of mobilisation. It is quite likely that both sides will cope with these problems, albeit not easily, which means that there will still be little reason to expect a new

attempt at negotiations closer to winter.



Nickolay Kapitonenko
Kyiv

Nickolay Kapitonenko is an associate professor at the Institute of International Relations at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and director of the Centre for International Relations Studies.