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Trump's Herculean task

Ending the Russia-Ukraine war won't be that easy for the US president, but there are three reasons why he'd like to try anyway

Contrary to the widespread expectations that accompanied Donald Trump's victory in November's elections, it quickly became clear that ending the Russo-Ukrainian War would not be easy for the new president, as there are at least three factors playing in favour of its continuation. That said, Trump has at least three grounds for trying to bring the war to an end anyway: those being conceptual, strategic and practical.

It's not just about Trump, however. The United States needs to fundamentally rethink its big strategy. The peace resulting from the Cold War no longer exists. The long process of the relative decline in American power – which we can call a crisis of leadership, the fall of the hegemon or even the realignment of the world – has created a completely different balance of power in world politics.

Over the past 25 years, the G7 countries' share of the global economy has fallen from 40 to 30 per cent, China has become the world's largest economy, and the centre of gravity of global political processes has shifted closer to the Pacific. Under these new conditions, the implementation of an old strategy, designed to strengthen American dominance after the Second World War and refined after the Cold War, could have catastrophic consequences. And this is something that not only Trump but a large part of the American establishment, the academic community and society at large are well aware of. A new strategy would also require a change in approach to the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Running out of time

At the strategic level, America's current focus is on containing China — the first competitor in a century to come so dangerously close to the US in terms of power, in some areas even surpassing it. The challenge posed by China is fatal for US influence and security, and given the

development of China's capabilities, Washington may be running out of time. Trump seems to regard the prolongation of the Russo-Ukrainian war as a risk for the US but an opportunity for China — meaning it is in his interests to put an end to it.

From a more practical perspective, for Washington, the Russo-Ukrainian war is a problem of cost optimisation and risk management. The way in which the Biden administration sought to address this issue appears too contentious, so Trump will try a different approach. But this task is much harder than it seems. The US no longer has the influence it enjoyed 10 to 15 years ago, and it now faces the same challenges as all the other potential intermediaries.

In the modern world, territorial conflicts are extremely difficult to resolve.

The biggest of these is the absence of a zone of possible compromise between Ukraine and Russia. The demands that Moscow brings to the negotiating table will be fatal for any Ukrainian leader. Even if we leave the most complex element – the issue of territory – out of the equation, there is still no room for agreement. The restrictions that Moscow wants to impose on Ukrainian foreign and security policy are simply unacceptable. And the West, especially the US, is clearly unwilling or unable to compensate for Kyiv's vulnerability by providing security guarantees. This is a dead-end that we are unlikely to get out of by either threatening to stop or even doubling the military aid being sent to Kyiv.

Territory is of the essence. Unlike in, say, the 18th century, in the modern world, territorial conflicts are extremely difficult to resolve. The territory of a state is inextricably linked with its security, status, national identity, history and mythology — and is therefore sacred. For a state to surrender part of its territory is political suicide. This is why territorial conflicts last for decades, even if there are no large-scale hostilities. These conflicts often remain latent, ready to erupt again at any moment. Even if we find ways of avoiding Ukraine having to formally agree to the loss of the occupied territories, who will foot the bill to ensure that the latent conflict does not turn into a war again?

This is another important question for the Trump administration. Not only will it have to somehow freeze the conflict, but it will also have to offer a security architecture in Europe that balances high risks and increased costs — while taking some of both off Washington's shoulders.

To achieve this, Trump needs the active involvement of Europeans themselves — for sharing the costs, as well as reducing the risks due to partial compliance with Moscow's demands. And there are serious doubts on both fronts.

There is a textbook example of how US diplomacy, under the leadership of the recently deceased President Carter, was able to promote the conclusion of a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel in 1979 and then carve out the space for mutually beneficial solutions. That war was also about security and territory, but the global context and balance of power were fundamentally different. Moreover, both Egypt and Israel were willing to work together to find compromises whenever possible and advisable — this was a key requirement for conducting what were referred to as integrative negotiations. Clearly there is no such option in the Russo-Ukrainian war.

In the realities of a new bipolar world, it is increasingly unlikely that the fate of the Russo-Ukrainian war will be decided by unilateral efforts.

Another obstacle Trump faces in fulfilling his promise to bring the war to an end is what the theory of conflict maturity refers to, oddly enough, as immaturity. According to this theory, mediation can only be effective in those conflicts where the parties themselves want to find a solution, in the knowledge that continuing the war will only make their situation worse. It is highly doubtful that the Russian leadership views the situation in this way. Trump believes that Putin wants to end the war because it is not going as the Russian president would wish. But this assessment may be inaccurate: there are no signs of deep crisis in Russia, and for the Kremlin regime, a continuation of the war may be the best-case scenario, even at the cost of Russia's long-term national interests. Putin will probably agree to Ukraine's surrender on Moscow's terms, but he may very well reject everything else.

Over the past three years, a number of countries have signalled their willingness to act as mediators. And each time, the war showed that its logic was stronger. The continuation of hostilities increases the price, but both sides have shown that they are willing to pay. The US has a somewhat higher chance of providing effective mediation than, say, China, Saudi Arabia or Turkey. After all, the US is Ukraine's main donor, and it has the potential to exert a lot of pressure on Kyiv's policy. Washington could – albeit to a much lesser extent – influence Moscow as

well, or initiate broader formats involving China.

But Washington is no longer omnipotent. In the realities of a new bipolar world, it is increasingly unlikely that the fate of the Russo-Ukrainian war will be decided by unilateral efforts.



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.