

Negotiations With Trump Are a Win-Win for the Kremlin

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Both Washington and Moscow have announced that they want a meeting between Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, to discuss ending the war in Ukraine, to take place as soon as possible.

Opinions vary, but nobody knows what Trump's plan is. Putin's requests are also unknown. What he says publicly does not qualify as a negotiating position. Instead, it is intended for an internal audience.

It seems to me that Putin is not expecting these negotiations to result in anything. He is convinced that he will get a result that is good for Russia whatever happens. Things are going well on the frontlines, the enemy is slowly but surely retreating and his personal position in the Kremlin is strong. The Russian economy, despite sanctions and incredible military spending, is growing.

Furthermore, the population is not only not taking to the streets with anti-war slogans, but on the contrary. For those who will not go to war in the name of patriotism, there are persuasive financial rewards.

Why would Putin need any negotiations in such a case? What could Trump offer that Putin would agree to without ruining the whole picture of strength?

Putin cares about negotiations with Trump because they offer a route out of international isolation and demonstrate his importance on the world stage. Negotiations are evidence that Russia is still a superpower that speaks on an equal footing with the world leader, the United States.

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A lot has happened in the quarter-century Putin has led Russia. The world is no longer keen to welcome Moscow into the international community, as in the 1990s and 2000s. Putin first encountered this at the G20 summit in Brisbane in November 2014, where no world leaders wanted to sit at the same table with him at breakfast or stand next to him during a group photo.

Spotting him in the audience, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said, "I think I should shake your hand. But I can only say one thing to you: get out of Ukraine." This reaction came as a complete surprise to the Russian president. His press secretary Dmitry Peskov said in the evening of November 15, that all rumors about Putin's early departure from the G20 summit in Brisbane were untrue. On November 16, Putin did not come to breakfast with his G20 partners and left Australia, claiming he needed to get some sleep before his work week.

According to political analyst Andrei Piontkovsky, Putin flew to Brisbane with the hope of making a "grand bargain" with the West: "Just a week before the trip, all his sympathizers - from Henry Kissinger to Sergei Markov - threw in variants of the so-called 'grand bargain,' and he went to probe its parameters. It failed then. Now, there seems to be hope of discussing a grand bargain with Trump. Political commentators say Moscow's objectives for a possible deal will go something like this: you stay out of our zone of influence here and do not support our domestic enemies and we will stay out of your business. We won't sow chaos across the world over the world or attack anyone else."

Putin knows for a fact that Trump likes big deals. Trump will not cling to democratic values, he is self-centered and a pure pragmatist. Putin probably sees Trump as an easy target. He may even try to persuade Trump to bring Russia back to the G8.

Putin remembers that in June 2020, Trump had already proposed that Russia return to the G7 (making it the G8 again). At that time, the other members did not support this call. Now Putin would surely like Trump to repeat his proposal as part of negotiations over Ukraine.

No matter how hard propaganda proves otherwise, Putin does enjoy feeling like a global pariah. Then there is the International Criminal Court arrest warrant. It's not much of a ride. The largely unimportant visit to Mongolia was presented by propaganda as triumphant because he was not arrested. Furthermore, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres came to

the BRICS summit in Kazan.

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Putin is transferring his personal grievances to the whole country, infecting the population with this great resentment against the West. There are cries about the alleged Russophobia inherent in all foreign countries, about the revival of Nazism everywhere except in the great and peace-loving Russia, and about plans to destroy Russia as a state. These narratives do not meet with any resistance from the population, who believe that they do in fact live in a hostile environment where Western leaders are set on dismembering Russia and appropriating its wealth.

But let us imagine the unimaginable: the grand bargain is made. The International Criminal Court warrant for Putin's arrest is rescinded. Soldiers return home from the front and Russians return to Eurovision and the Olympics. Trump and Putin stand next to French President Emmanuel Macron watching the Victory Parade in Red Square.

Will the people be ready for another perestroika and détente with the world they were taught to hate?

I am afraid that the people will not be ready for it. And Putin, having once unleashed this genie of hatred and, let's face it, fascism, will not be able to put it back into the vessel if he wants to. Therefore, he will have no desire to do so.

Putin really wants observers to believe that he and Trump stand on an equal footing on world issues instead of being ignored and insulted. He is like a child who, to get the attention of adults, rips off a tablecloth and dashes the dishes on the floor. The only problem is that Putin did not only smash some crockery. He drenched the world in blood. By claiming that international law does not exist, but only interests, he has long ago crossed the line beyond which there can be no more conversation on equal footing.

This is where a lot depends on Trump. Is he ready to sit at the same table for years with Putin, who will do nothing to ensure that these negotiations are fruitful? Only time will tell.

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