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Trump and Putin’s Hockey Puck Diplomacy Puts Europe on Thin Ice

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Russian President Vladimir Putin plays ice hockey on Moscow's Red Square. **Alexei Nikolsky / POOL / TASS**

According to the Kremlin's summary of last week’s phone call between the presidents of the United States and Russia, Donald Trump supports Vladimir Putin's idea to organize ice hockey matches between U.S. and Russian players from their respective professional leagues.

Moscow's eagerness to include ice hockey in the same breath as its demands for Ukraine lends the episode a disturbing showmanship, an uncomely “Ukraine should be carved up and demilitarized, and we'll play some hockey while we're at it” air.

Even the White House seems slightly chagrined by these undertones, as press secretary Karoline Leavitt acknowledged hockey was raised on the call but pushed back that “we're more interested in securing a peace deal than scheduling hockey games right now.” Too bad that was not the impression Trump gave Putin.

There is the trifling logistical issue that Russia, alongside ally Belarus, has been frozen out of international ice hockey competitions since its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The International Ice Hockey Federation recently extended this ban to include the 2025-26 season, citing an inability to guarantee "the safety of all."

Competing against banned teams could even jeopardize the eligibility of U.S. players to compete in international tournaments. Although, considering U.S. domestic politics, the thrill of a potential legal battle seems to be what gets Trump out of bed in the morning.

The recent Four Nations tournament is probably a bitter reminder to Russia of what it is missing. The tournament, which was "pared down and pushed back" because of questions over Russian participation, appears to have replaced a previously planned World Cup scuppered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

A series of U.S.-Russia ice hockey games would be a highly symbolic end to Russia's diplomatic isolation. Theories about sport as a proxy for conflict abound. Ice hockey — fast, physical, often involving literal fist-fights — is perhaps especially suited.

The Four Nations tournament is a ready example of the potent role sports can play in political theatre. Set against the tense backdrop of an escalating trade war and Trump's inflammatory rhetoric about Canada becoming the 51st state, the U.S.-Canada matches were explosive. Fans booed the U.S. national anthem, then cheered wildly as three punch-ups erupted in the opening nine seconds.

Despite claims the games were "not a political forum," when Canada scooped gold then-Prime Minister Trudeau gloated on X: "You can't take our country — and you can't take our game."

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There is no shortage of history between the US and Russian teams either. When Russia hosted the Sochi Olympics in 2014, the U.S. won in a dramatic shootout that catapulted T.J. Oshie to stardom while Putin stared on from the stands.

The Russians came back to win gold in 2018. But their triumph was diminished by the absence of National Hockey League (NHL) players and the need to compete under a neutral flag in the wake of state-sponsored doping violations.

Teams from the United States and the Soviet Union also faced off against each other throughout the Cold War, with the Soviets dominating until a U.S. team of underdogs triumphed 4-3 at the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics.

This "Miracle on Ice" is perhaps one of the most mythologized games in hockey history, even spawning its own feature film. It carried intense symbolic weight in the wider context of the Cold War and became a microcosm of the ideological contest between the U.S. and Soviet ways of life.

Another U.S.-Russia game may not be on the cards, as it is unclear from the Kremlin's

statement what form these games would take. They could just be a series between various teams from the American-Canadian NHL and Russia's Kontinental Hockey League (KHL), with reduced potential for national symbolism.

Either way, Trump's support for the proposal is striking testimony to the fundamental shift in Washington's foreign policy. Stronger Russo-American relations were at the heart of Tuesday's phone call, with both the Kremlin and the White House emphasizing the benefits of improving and perhaps even normalizing relations.

Trump's turn towards Russia has thrown up cries about the end of an era and sent European leaders running to find alternative security guarantees, but there remains a camp of diehard optimists who hold that this is all high diplomacy.

Trump is a hard-nosed businessman, winning office twice off the back of his reputation as a maestro of negotiations and the "art of the deal." No doubt, he has craftily offered Putin rehabilitation on the world stage while toeing a hard line behind closed doors. So it goes.

In this picture, Putin's passion for hockey is merely another tool The Donald can leverage — much like Britain is trying to deploy its royal family to soften Trump up — and Tuesday's puck diplomacy is an echo of the Ping-pong diplomacy credited with paving the way to improved U.S.-China relations in the 1970s.

Putin's fondness for ice hockey is also well-established. It gave us that 2019 video where he scored eight goals (or 10, according to the Kremlin) against some decidedly half-hearted defense, and then face-planted after skating into the red carpet during his victory lap. Very cool, Mr. President.

Embed:

The problem with this Master of the Deal narrative is the marked absence of concessions elicited from Russia. The Kremlin's statement insisted Ukraine should be cut off from foreign military aid and intelligence sharing and the 30-day pause for strikes on energy infrastructure is a far cry from the more comprehensive ceasefire Ukraine's President Zelensky had already agreed to. Skeptics might wonder whether the disgracefully reduced scope of the ceasefire has anything to do with Ukraine's campaign of targeted drone attacks against Russian oil refineries.

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Even the puck diplomacy is driven by Putin, making it into the Kremlin's statement but not the recap issued by the White House. It is incidentally not the first time Putin has called on the persuasive power of ice hockey as a backdoor into U.S. politics.

Russian national Alexander Ovechkin, who plays for the Washington Capitals and is currently well on his way to overtaking Canadian legend Wayne Gretzky in all-time NHL goals, founded PutinTeam in 2017, a "social movement" in support of Putin's 2018 re-election campaign that

may have been the brainchild of a Kremlin-linked PR firm.

There is a scramble for an appropriate label to explain Trump's foreign policy, from transactionalism to neo-imperialism. All of them try to capture how blatant the White House's approach to hard power politics has become. The gloves are off and Trump has no need for niceties.

But if Trump is really looking to flex Washington's power, he is going about it like a schoolyard bully. Shouting over Zelensky in the Oval Office, threatening to annex Canada and Greenland — really taking on the big, mean adversaries.

Trump's failure to push Russia for any concessions on Ukraine, even in the face of Putin's effective rejection of the ceasefire deal in its initial form, is damning evidence.

As James Nixey, Director of the Chatham House Russia and Eurasia program, remarked on CNN: "If Trump puts Putin under any kind of pressure that will be something of a first."

Where is the man who tweets ultimatums in all caps? Perhaps Trump is saving the concessions for Russia's cooperation in the Middle East. One thing seems clear: he is either unable to or uninterested in outmaneuvering Putin on Ukraine.

Much of European security since World War II has depended on the norm of U.S. solidarity, the expectation that America would come to Europe's defense. This norm was institutionalized in NATO's Article 5 and the bold idea that an attack on one is an attack on all.

But when you take the gloves off and look past the careful messaging, NATO signatories are only bound to respond with whatever action they think is necessary. The strength of the alliance and the deterrence it provides rest largely on fragile norms and expectations.

Trump, his rhetoric, and his puck diplomacy — insisting Putin has all the cards, calling openly for Ukraine to be flexible in response to Russian land grabs, and breaking down attempts to isolate Russia — have taken a mallet to these norms and severely undermined NATO's deterrent potential.

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