The Trump-Putin Axis and Its Impact on Global Politics

written by Peter Hudis | March 1, 2025

Donald Trump's forging of a political alliance with Russia's Vladimir Putin at the expense of Ukraine's struggle for self-determination may not be totally unexpected, but its speed and extent represent a dramatic transformation of world politics.

Nothing more sharply—and crudely—signals this transformation than Trump and J.D. Vance's public browbeating of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on February 28 at what was supposed to be a brief session to take questions from the press prior to a private meeting to discuss conditions for ending the war. In a breathtaking display of imperial arrogance, Trump and Vance turned the session into a shouting match as they insulted and threatened Zelensky for stating the obvious—that Putin cannot be trusted, and that any peace deal requires security guarantees for Ukraine. Trump then cancelled further talks with Zelensky and ordered him to immediately leave the country. This brazen take-down and humiliation of a democratically elected head of state for not totally submitting to U.S. dictates is unprecedented. It is as ominous as Trump's inauguration five weeks earlier. Ukraine will be left to feel the full wrath of Putin's murderous war machine just as Palestine is being left to face Netanyahu's fascistic effort to annihilate its very existence.

This is hardly the first time a major imperialist power has suddenly forged an alliance with a longstanding adversary. One can recall war criminal Richard Nixon's sudden opening to China in the early 1970s, which led to a rapprochement that ended up extending the Vietnam War by several years (Mao reduced aid to North Vietnam to curry favor with the U.S. and Nixon used his entente with him to demand greater concessions from Hanoi). But an even more striking antecedent is the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. This may sound like an exaggeration—after all, the alliance between fascist Germany and Stalinist Russia gave the green light to World War II, and no one is suggesting a third world war is imminent-—although the risks of it are ever-present. Nonetheless, the 1939 Pact is worth recalling since it produced a shift in world politics that had crucial *ideological* ramifications, as many leftists supported it in the name of opposing Western imperialism while others denounced it as a betrayal of the principles of socialism. Today's U.S.-Putin alliance likewise has profound ideological ramifications, as seen in how leftists opposed to Ukraine's struggle for self-determination now find their position being shared by MAGA Republicans, while others on the Left are searching for revolutionary new beginnings opposed to *all* forms of occupation and colonialism, from Gaza to Ukraine.

The Betrayal of Ukraine

The Trump-Putin alliance was forged with the convening of direct talks on February 18 between

representatives of U.S. and Russian imperialism in Saudi Arabia, a meeting that excluded both the Ukrainians and the U.S.'s European allies, some of whom were not even informed of it beforehand. These were not negotiations: Trump simply adopted virtually all of the Kremlin's talking points without so much as suggesting a single concession from Putin. The Russian delegates could hardly conceal their shock and glee at what Trump gave away at zero cost to themselves.

On February 24, following the talks in Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration voted against a Resolution of the UN General Assembly condemning Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine—the first time it did so, joining Russia, China, Belarus, North Korea, and Israel, as well as 12 other Moscow-friendly countries (93 other countries voted yes, 65 abstained). Brandishing the lie that Ukraine, not Russia, started the war, Trump clearly allied the U.S. with Putin.

Not a peep of opposition to this was heard from a single Republican member of Congress—even though many of them spent years bashing Russia and voting aid to Ukraine. Many Democrats expressed outrage but seem lost as to what to do next. So much for the claim that the U.S. ruling class has a vested interest in helping Ukraine!

Trump insists that Ukraine cannot recover twenty percent of the country that Russia occupied since 2014 and 2022, and that no U.S. troops will be used to patrol a ceasefire which is to be imposed largely on Russian terms. Nor can it join NATO, until now the inter-imperialist alliance of the U.S. and Western Europe.

Most revealing, Trump demanded that the Ukrainian government repay $500 billion to the U.S. (at least four times as much as the value of all the military and economic aid it received under Biden) by surrendering 50% of the proceeds from its sale of national resources, such as minerals, oil and gas, and port fees. Ukraine was moreover expected to repay the U.S. twice the value of any future U.S. aid (it does not indicate whether this would include any military assistance). This amounts to paying $100 percent interest on top of the total principle of a "loan." Taken as a whole, this would entail that a higher percentage of Ukraine's GDP become turned over to the U.S. than the allies demanded in the form of reparations from defeated Germany after World War I.

That would clearly amount to turning what is left of Ukraine (Putin is demanding annexation of parts of it he does not now control) into an outright economic colony of U.S. imperialism. If this mis-named "peace plan" were to go forward, the U.S. would reap profits at Ukraine's expense and Russia could secure the conquest of parts of its territory while building up its diminished military apparatus (Russian forces are nearing exhaustion due to heavy losses, especially in soldiers and heavy weapons like tanks and artillery) in order to ready itself to launch a renewed assault in a few years.

Not surprisingly, Zelensky initially balked at Trump's demands, insisting that any concessions to the U.S. contain security guarantees that could prevent the overthrow of the government or a renewal of the war. It remains to be seen if the Europeans will provide them. They too were taken aback by the recent turn of events and are unsure how to respond: most of the leaders of the European states have lived so long under the protective umbrella of the U.S. that they cannot imagine how to exist otherwise.

Zelensky has been under tremendous pressure to capitulate to U.S. demands. On February 26 a tentative agreement between Trump and Zelensky was announced that placed slightly less onerous conditions on the amount the U.S. would get from the sale of Ukraine's natural resources. Zelensky reluctantly agreed, even though the proposal provided no security guarantees for Ukraine. Trump ruled out sending any U.S. peacekeeping forces and says the burden for providing them would fall to the Europeans—which Russia insists it will never accept. On February 26, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov referred to any deployment of such peacekeepers as "empty talk."

Trump claimed that the presence of U.S. companies on the ground in Ukraine to extract its mineral resources would "provide automatic security" (Ukraine does not currently have the ability to extract more than a small amount of its mineral wealth). But as many in Ukraine have pointed out, the presence of U.S. companies in eastern Ukraine did nothing to stop Putin from invading and occupying those areas. Moreover, over half of Ukraine's mineral resources are located in the eastern part of the country which is currently occupied by Russia. Trump is surely eyeing those resources as well—which Putin would be glad to provide him with so long as Ukraine is severely weakened and demilitarized.

Meanwhile, discussions among European members of NATO about increasing military aid to Ukraine are hardly reassuring. It could take years for them to make up for Ukraine's loss of U.S. military assistance. For example, the entire British army currently has fewer artillery pieces than one brigade possessed in the 1990s. Russia could rest and rebuild for a few years (or less) and then renew its longstanding aim to take over all of Ukraine.

Setting the Record Straight

The ideological fallout from the Trump-Putin alliance is already evident from the way Putin's false claims about Ukraine are being normalized—and not alone by Trump.

Foremost among these is the claim that Ukraine started the war by provoking Russia through its repression of Russian-language speakers in eastern Ukraine and its desire to join NATO. This overlooks the fact that the war actually began in 2014, when Russia invaded eastern Ukraine and Crimea in response to a mass democratic movement on the streets of Kiev which ousted its pro-Moscow leader, Viktor Yanukovych. As he had done earlier in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and elsewhere, Putin sent in troops (often in the guise of residents) to stoke separatist sentiment. The response of the U.S. and NATO at the time was meek: it slapped limited sanctions on Russia but did little else. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022, the U.S. initially told Zelensky to flee the country on the grounds that there was no chance of holding off the Russian military. The Ukrainians then succeeded in doing so to the shock and surprise of both the U.S. and Putin. Only then did the pipeline of military and economic aid begin to flow from the U.S./NATO to Ukraine.

As I stated at the time of Russia's 2022 invasion, the claim that the U.S./NATO were itching for a fight with Russia and jumped at the chance when Putin invaded gets it all wrong. Intra-imperialist conflicts are often driven by economic factors, such as the drive to accumulate capital on an ever-expanding scale at the expense of rivals. But this does not apply to the conflict between the U.S. and Russia, since the latter's economy is too weak to pose a threat to U.S. economic dominance. As Russian sociologist Ilya Matveev puts it, "Post-Soviet Russia's economic clout has always been far too limited to threaten the centers of capital accumulation in the Global North… In fact, the Kremlin's decisions in 2014 and 2022 were the product of a specific ideological vision that overemphasizes Russia's vulnerabilities and calls for preventive military action under the slogan of 'offense is the best defense.' Russia's conflict with the West, unlike the U.S.-China rivalry, is rooted less in structural, particularly economic, causes and more in ideological (mis)perceptions."

This explains why the U.S. and NATO provided enough support for Ukraine to hold off Russia but not enough to enable it to inflict a major victory. I wrote in July 2024, "That the U.S.'s conflict with Russia is not structurally rooted in the dynamics of global capital accumulation does not make it less dangerous. But it does suggest that a change of government in the U.S. in the coming months can easily lead to a rapprochement between Western imperialism and Putin's Russia." That has now occurred, capped off by Trump's claim that Ukraine is responsible for starting the war.

Putin also claimed that Zelensky is an illegitimate leader of a regime stocked with "Nazis." In fact, he was voted in through a democratic election with over 70% of the votes while the neo-fascist far-Right (which surely exists in Ukraine, as it does in virtually every European country as well as the U.S.) got 2%. Trump responded to Zelensky's objection to being excluded from the discussions over the future of Ukraine by denouncing him as a "dictator" who has the support of only 4% of the populace. In fact, as of the end of 2024 his support was 52%, but following Trump's reversal of U.S. policy in favor of Russia, it shot up to 63%. Many of his most prominent critics, such as Valery Zaluzhny, former Commander-in-Chief of the Army who was dismissed by Zelensky one year ago, now say they intend to vote for him once the war is over (Ukraine's Constitution prohibits an election from being held during wartime).

Meanwhile, Putin's effort to break apart the Western alliance, which has long been his goal, is being codified by Trump as he treats his NATO allies as an after-thought—except when it comes to prodding them to ramp up military spending so as to free the U.S. from being responsible for Europe's security. The U.S.'s European allies are completely flummoxed by Trump's threat to cut off military aid to Ukraine and lift sanctions on Russia: they have been thrown into a new world that their neoliberal mindset never prepared them for.

Redrawing the Political Map

What we are witnessing today is a redrawing of the political map, as the U.S. is now transitioning from its decades-long pursuit of single world dominance under the illusory claim of supporting democracy to forging a united front of reactionary and neo-fascist powers intent on pursuing national and regional interests.

This is not isolationism—neither Trump, Putin, nor Xi Jinping fit into that category. It is rather an effort to respond to the U.S.'s failure to secure single world domination (as seen from its defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan) by reverting to a twenty-first-century form of annexationist territorial imperialism. This was initiated by Putin's imperialist invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, and it is now embraced by Trump as he threatens to annex Greenland, Panama, Canada, and even Gaza as he promotes Israel's effort to expel its entire Palestinian populace. This is why Trump finds so much in common with Putin—they share a similar view of the world, in which even the pretense of international law and norms must be cast aside. This should not be written off as a mere quirk of his personality or reduced solely to his business interests (though they both play a big part): they are a reflection of a world gradually being divided up into regional power blocs based on naked national self-interest. As Peter McLaren put it, "Trump and Putin do not seek peace—they seek a pact. A deal that cements Russia's aggression as legitimate and Ukraine's sovereignty as expendable. A deal that undermines not only Ukraine but the very idea that nations have the right to exist beyond the will of imperial masters."

Of course, it is not alone foreign affairs that binds Trump to Putin—at least for now (one thing about neo-fascists is that they rarely have an easy time getting along with their co-conspirators). What most of all connects them is their disdain for the advances made by women, workers, national minorities, and LGBTQ people over the past decades. The far Right sees in Putin the exemplar of the white-racist attack on democracy that they adore. As Putin stated a few years ago, "The U.S. continues to receive more and more immigrants, and, as far as I understand, the white, Christian population is already outnumbered.… We have to preserve [white Christians] to remain a significant center in the world."

This is why those who concede even the slightest ground to Trump's narrative on Ukraine make a big mistake when they presume it can be somehow separated from his attacks on immigrants, women, workers, and people of color in the U.S.—or separated from his unwavering support for

Israel's genocide against the Palestinians. One example is Medea Benjamin of Code Pink, who in a recent article entitled "Trump Gives Peace a Chance in Ukraine," wrote: "On both sides of the Atlantic, Trump's initiative [on Ukraine] is a game changer. Those of us anxious to see peace in Ukraine should applaud Trump's initiative…. If Trump can reject the political arguments that have fueled three years of war in Ukraine and apply compassion and common sense to end that war, then he can surely do the same in the Middle East." But the last thing that motivates Trump is compassion and common sense when it comes to Ukraine (or anywhere else)—which is why to expect him to "do the same in the Middle East" is an invitation for ethnic cleansing and genocide. He cares not a whit about the Ukrainians, and even less about "peace." He is concerned with extracting as many resources from as many places as he can while forging a united front with like-minded authoritarians to crush what is left of democratic norms and institutions.

This is why Ukraine remains a touchstone of global politics. If Trump and Putin can succeed in curtailing its fight for self-determination, it will make it all the harder to advance freedom struggles elsewhere. Stating that fact does not entail supporting Zelensky or the current Ukrainian government, which clearly governs under a neoliberal agenda, any more than it entails supporting NATO (whose very existence we have long opposed). But as Trotsky noted in his writings on fascism, the truth is concrete: and the concrete truth is that to remain neutral in the face of occupation and colonial domination is to become its accomplice.

Oleg Shein argues, "While Putin is President—and he will be a president as long as he lives—this war will continue. The reason lies within Russia: Putin does not have a positive program, for the country. External conflict is the basis of his power. It is a way to consolidate the elite and govern the people. Perhaps the war against Ukraine will enter a phase of smoldering. But as long as Putin rules in Russia, the history of external conflict will continue."

Solidarizing with Ukraine – and the Larger Struggle

Ukraine is facing a difficult situation. The ground war has not been going well for it over the last year, and a cut-off of U.S. aid is sure to make the problem worse. So far, it has received half of its armaments and aid from the EU, and a number of states (such as France and Poland) promise to contribute more. It is unclear how much of a difference that will make. But what cannot be denied is the tenacity of the Ukrainians: despite some Russian advances over the past six months, they have taken far less territory than what most analysts anticipated. Zelensky will be under continuous pressure to agree to some kind of rotten compromise, but while the Ukrainian people desperately want peace, the vast majority do not want what they call "a peace of the grave," that would deny their right to exist as a nation and a culture. It is thus likely the struggle will go on, perhaps in the form of guerilla warfare, even if a dishonorable "peace" is imposed by the great powers behind their backs.

This too carries risks: it is possible that the far Right will grow in power in Ukraine the more desperate the situation becomes. The Ukrainian Marxist writer Hanna Perekhoda addresses this as follows: "The argument that the presence of the far right in Ukraine justifies a refusal to send arms is based on a rather blatant error of logic…. There are far-right movements in France and Germany that are infinitely more influential than in Ukraine, yet no one would dispute their right to self-defense in the event of aggression…. This argument is all the more hypocritical given that many of these same voices on the left do not hesitate to support resistance movements that include actors who are more than problematic. Why demand a purity from Ukraine that no other society is required to show when it has to defend itself? What is undeniable is that the war, which has lasted for more than ten years, has already helped to strengthen and trivialize nationalist symbols and discourse that were previously marginal. Wars do not make any society better. However, the relationship between the delivery of arms and the strengthening of the far right in Ukraine is inversely proportional. The

weapons sent to Ukraine are used first and foremost to defend society as a whole against an invading army. Ukraine's victory guarantees the very existence of a state in which citizens can freely and democratically choose their future. Conversely, nothing strengthens extreme right-wing movements or terrorist organizations more than military occupation and the systematic oppression that goes with it."

This is not the time to refrain from solidarizing with Ukraine—it is more important than ever. It is vital not just for their sake but for ours, as we become increasingly subjected to fascistic repression inside the U.S., the extent of which has only just begun to be seen.