


**UKRAINE-RUSSIA**

**5 Recommendations for Trump  
Regarding War in Ukraine**

**By Lena Surzhko-Harned  
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On Jan. 20, Donald Trump took the oath of office to become the 47th president of the United States. His return to office marks just the second time in U.S. history when a president has served non-consecutive terms (Grover Cleveland served as the 22nd president from 1885 to 1889 and the 24th from 1893 to 1897).

Already, there has been a flurry of activity coming from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. What does Trump's return to the White House mean for the war in Ukraine – something he promised to end swiftly during his time on the campaign trail?

Many proposals and speculations about possible details of the deal come from appeals to “realism” and “pragmatism.” In some ways, realism has already set in: Trump has not ended the war in 24 to 48 hours following inauguration as he touted during the run up to the election. Yet, some other recommendations that are based in appeals to “realism” and “pragmatism” are highly problematic.

These perspectives come from a specific theoretical approach to international relations – realism. Realists propose that strength and power are key to peace. The practitioners of this approach pride themselves on looking at world affairs in terms of pure national self-interest and power without falling prey to value judgments. In the history of U.S. foreign policy, Henry Kissinger comes to mind as one of the greatest examples of realistic pragmatism.

Don't get me wrong: realism and pragmatism are both necessary in foreign affairs. However, as a scholar of international relations and comparative politics, I am also convinced that these terms, as used in connection to Ukraine and Russia, are insufficient and lack context and considerations about larger historical implications. Without context and understanding, pragmatism lacks realism and exists in the imaginary space of abstraction. In recognizing the future reality of Ukraine-Russia relations, President Trump and his advisers will be well served by a dose of reality, which could save them from costly mistakes. One such dose of reality is that Russian President Vladimir Putin is responsible for this war. Russia attacked Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022. Thus any "deal" has to take this reality into account.

Here are five recommendations regarding the Russian-Ukrainian relationship in which I seek to warn of the shortfalls of abstract solutions from "realistic pragmatists," and provide much-needed context when it comes to reality and pragmatism.

### **1. Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine**

One practical solution was put forth by [Anatol Lieven, a member of Valdai Group](#) and professor at King's College in London. Lieven proposed that the key to peace for Trump's administration is to deal with Russia and leave Ukraine out of negotiations, at least in the early stages. This is explained by the lack of trust between the two warring sides and by Russia's insistence of the war as a proxy war against the collective West in order to reorganize the world security system. As a result, keeping Ukraine out of the initial negotiation is necessary to keep Ukraine's unrealistic ultimatums from muddying the water on larger issues that the U.S. and Russia should discuss. Lieven's plan has some supporters, including [Hungarian officials](#).

This "pragmatic" logic, however, is flawed for at least two related reasons.

The first flaw is the assumption that Russia is a great world power. The great power status in realist tradition dictates that Russian concerns and demands are most legitimate and should be considered first and foremost. In words of Thucydides, "Strong will do as they will, and weak shall suffer as they must." However, Russian greatness has been challenged since 2022 time and again militarily, economically, politically, etc. Russia's inability to conquer Ukraine in three days, as originally touted, Ukraine's successful counteroffensive in 2022 and continued innovative resistance, and Ukraine's offensive in Kursk all challenge Russia's all-powerful notion.

Leaving Ukraine out of negotiations, or the European Union or European allies of the U.S., means excluding necessary perspectives and context that Ukrainians and Europeans have to offer — in their vision of peace on their continent and their

knowledge and experience of Russia. Recognizing the value and power of Ukraine's successes in countering Russia's war, including maintenance of civilian infrastructures, offers invaluable insight and paints a more realistic picture.

## **2. Arming Ukraine is key to U.S. strength**

Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, one of Trmp's security advisers, proposes arming Ukraine as an incentive to force both sides to the negotiation table. In [Kellogg's own words](#), "We tell the Ukrainians, 'You've got to come to the table, and if you don't come to the table, support from the United States will dry up.' ... And you tell Putin, 'He's got to come to the table, and if you don't come to the table, then we'll give Ukrainians everything they need to kill you in the field.'"

Kellogg's statement is shortsighted. Support for Ukraine should not be conditional. Ukraine provides an invaluable service to European security by resisting and containing Russian aggression. Over the three years of fighting so far, Ukrainians have shown that with support, they can resist a much larger and stronger opponent. If the goals of the U.S. are to project strength, then it should recognize that Ukraine is an essential tool, exemplifying strength in Europe.

The "realist" notion that Russia is a great military power that never loses or cannot lose is highly problematic and ahistorical. Russia has lost numerous wars and armed conflicts to much smaller adversaries, including Japan, Finland, Afghanistan, and Chechnya (to name a few). Putin must recognize that he is in a position to lose this war as well and be forced to end it. Ukraine did not start this war but has successfully resisted Russia with U.S. assistance. Putin can end it and should be pressured to end it, in my view.

## **3. Prioritizing peace following a ceasefire**

A ceasefire is not synonymous with peace. A ceasefire is a temporary pause in what might be a much longer and larger war. A pause in the turbulent phase of war without long-term solutions can be catastrophic. Equally important is not recognizing Russia's false claims to Ukraine's territory.

While a ceasefire might be pragmatic at the moment, it will not satisfy Putin's goals to destroy Ukraine. The aims will not be stopped by freezing the conflict. If not immediately, then in four or more years, Putin will seek to complete his goals of destroying Ukraine. That is the reality based on his past actions.

## **4. Continued economic pressure of Russia**

Putin has shown that loss of life is not a good enough argument to end his attempts at conquest. There is also not much evidence to suppose that well-being of Russians is his top priority vis-a-vis attaining the goals of his special military operations. So far, the Russian administration does not show any inclination in

recognizing the negative impact of sanctions. As long as Putin and his advisers feel they have the resources to continue, the war will persist. Lifting sanctions would be a political win for Putin domestically and would be perceived as U.S. weakness internationally. It would also allow Russia to regroup and attack again. Sanctions on Russia must stay in place and should not be offered as a carrot in negotiations.

## **5. Give Ukraine real security guarantees**

NATO membership would be the most logical step. The idea that Ukraine's neutrality would satisfy Putin is neither realistic nor pragmatic. It is also ahistorical and shortsighted. When Putin first invaded Ukraine in 2014, Ukraine was a neutral state without NATO ambitions. When in 2022 and 2023 Sweden and Finland, respectively, joined NATO – breaking decades-long neutrality considering Russian aggression in Ukraine – Russia did not react. The assumption in 2025 that after three years of horrific war, Russia would be satisfied by Ukraine's neutrality is false. Ukraine's neutrality will only leave Ukraine open to future attacks and possible conquest by Russia. This would be a defeat of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

However, NATO membership will only work if the U.S. remains in NATO. During the first Trump term, there was a push for allies to spend more on security, and it produced a much-needed shift in spending. Europe must play a more prominent role in European security; however, transatlantic union is a cornerstone of world peace that would collapse without U.S. support.

On the pragmatic side of making Europe and NATO stronger is the battle-tested Ukrainian army, which is among the strongest armies in Europe. Ukraine provides an invaluable asset for NATO, not a detriment.

Russia has time and again signaled that it perceives the U.S. as an adversary. But beyond that, supported by China, Iran, and North Korea, Russia poses a threat to U.S. interests, as well as those of other democracies worldwide. Putin is expecting the U.S. to capitulate in Ukraine by Russia playing up its great power status and making nuclear threats. The U.S. has an opportunity to recognize Russia's weaknesses and Ukraine's strengths in advancing its interests.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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