

Vasily Zharkov
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The Kremlin's wager on Trump's second term:

the shifting game of containment



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The Kremlin's wager on Trump's second term: *the shifting game of containment*

The US–Russia summit in Anchorage immediately raised the question of who had “won”. Much of the Western press suggested that Vladimir Putin had outmanoeuvred Washington.¹ However, this interpretation is less convincing when placed alongside Donald Trump's subsequent meetings in Washington with President Zelensky and with European allies, who observers regarded as having made progress.² The picture that emerges is not one of straightforward Russian advantage but of a political environment marked by opacity and unpredictability. Contrary to much conventional commentary, this uncertainty has been generated less by Putin himself than by the arrival of the 47th president of the United States, who assumed office in January 2025 and has already altered the dynamics of world politics.

To make sense of the current moment, and to offer at least tentative projections of its likely evolution, it is necessary to situate the Anchorage summit within the broader context of the US–Russia relations over the first half of 2025. This context requires attention not only to the shifts in Moscow's diplomatic posture but also to the continued strategic imperative of the Western allies, namely the containment of Russian power, especially in Europe.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on research carried out in the summer of 2025. It examines the transformation of Kremlin narratives during the first six months of Trump's presidency, from late January to July 2025, and evaluates their impact on US–Russia relations in the lead-up to the Anchorage summit. The research draws on the following primary sources: official government communications, discussions on Russian social media platforms and expert commentary in policy circles.

This research identifies three dominant themes in Russian rhetoric during this period. First, the Kremlin sought to reframe the bilateral agenda by shifting attention away from the war in Ukraine and towards a broader range of issues in US–Russia relations. Second, it floated the prospect of an economic partnership between Moscow and Washing-

ton. Third, it attempted to drive a wedge between the US and the Ukrainian president by highlighting potential divergences in their approaches to the war.

Despite these efforts, the strategy has yielded limited results. The Trump administration linked any improvement in relations with Moscow directly to progress on the Ukrainian settlement. By mid-2025, Washington had seized the initiative in shaping the framework of mutual deterrence. The Anchorage summit reflected this rebalancing: the future of US–Russia relations now depends on Trump's strategic choices: whether to withdraw from the conflict, escalate economic pressure on Moscow, or expand military assistance to Kyiv. In deploying a version of Nixon's “madman theory”, Trump has managed thus far to maintain the initiative in containing Russia, as long as he avoids being drawn into Putin's rhetorical traps.

The Kremlin's three messages to Trump

Despite the significant strains on US–Russian relations, particularly in the final months of Joe Biden's presidency, when Russia and the United States both recalled their ambassadors, Putin nonetheless sought to craft a strategy of rapprochement with the incoming Trump administration. He based this strategy on three central messages that the Russian regime sought to convey in its early contacts with the White House.

The first was an effort to subsume the war in Ukraine within a broader set of international concerns, thereby diluting its salience in bilateral discussions. Russian officials emphasised Moscow's potential role as a mediator in the Middle East, including in Syria, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and in negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme.

The second message took the form of a proposed economic partnership. The Kremlin invited Washington to revive a business partnership with Russia, portraying the Russian economy as having weathered Western sanctions and continuing to expand at a rapid pace.

Finally, Moscow sought to exploit tensions between the US and the Ukrainian president that had surfaced as early as 2020. The Kremlin remained acutely aware that Zelensky had played a pivotal role in Trump's first impeachment, and it attempted to use this memory to drive a wedge between Washington and Kyiv.

¹ *The Financial Times*, 19 August 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/7acfc7c4-cc5f-48ae-a374-21ad2298cf9f>; *The New York Times*, 15 August 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/15/us/politics/trump-putin-meeting-takeaways.html>; *The Time*, Aug 16, 2025, <https://time.com/7310132/trump-putin-summit-ukraine-alaska-2>

² Council on Foreign Relations, 18 August 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/major-takeaways-trumps-meeting-zelenskyy-and-european-leaders>; *The Conversation*, 19 August 2025, <https://theconversation.com/zelensky-leaves-washington-with-trumps-security-guarantees-but-are-they-enough-263423>; *The New York Times*, 21 August 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2025/08/18/us/trump-zelensky-ukraine-putin>

Between Iran and Israel

On 12 February, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin held their first confirmed telephone conversation. According to the Russian account, the discussion covered a broad agenda: in addition to settlement of the war in Ukraine, it included the exchange of Russian and US citizens, prospects for bilateral economic relations, the situation in the Middle East and Iran's nuclear programme.³ This narrative marked the Kremlin's initial attempt to "dissolve" the Ukrainian question into a broader spectrum of geopolitical issues and to present it as only one item on a larger agenda of US–Russia cooperation. The same technique soon became a recurring feature of official statements issued by both the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

At the same time, reports about high-level consultations in Riyadh began to circulate in émigré media. Citing a "diplomatic source", these accounts suggested that Sergei Lavrov, Yuri Ushakov and Kirill Dmitriev had been instructed directly by the President to display "maximum friendliness, and even a complimentary attitude, toward their United States counterparts and toward President Donald Trump personally".⁴ The objective was clear: to cultivate goodwill as a means of extracting concessions from Washington.

However, this tactic quickly proved unsustainable. On the US side, it was self-evident that the central purpose of renewed contacts with Moscow was not Syria, Iran or the Middle East at large, but the conclusion of the Russian–Ukrainian war. This reality was acknowledged, albeit belatedly, in Moscow's own reporting: following the second official Trump–Putin call on 18 March, the Kremlin identified "the Ukrainian settlement" for the first time as the main topic of the conversation.⁵

By June, Trump had moved decisively to foreclose Moscow's attempts to broaden the agenda. When Putin proposed Russian mediation in the escalating conflict between Israel and Iran, Trump indicated that Washington expected Moscow to address its own unresolved conflicts before seeking a role in other theatres.⁶ On 22 June, the US Air Force carried out precision strikes on Iran, pointedly demonstrating its ability to overcome Russian air-defence systems. The episode underscored that Trump neither needed nor sought Putin's assistance – whether strategic or symbolic – in managing regional or global challenges.

³ President of Russia, 12 February 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76259>

⁴ *The Moscow Times*, 19 February 2025, <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2025/02/19/rossiya-naperegovorah-sssha-prosit-razblokirovat-milliardi-dollarov-gosaktivov-ioslavit-sanktsii-a155708>

⁵ President of Russia, 18 March 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76477>

⁶ *New York Post*, 18 June 2025, <https://nypost.com/2025/06/18/us-news/trump-rejects-putin-offer-to-mediate-iran-conflict-vladimir-lets-mediate-russia-first>

Putin's Potemkin villages

Pro-Kremlin publications provide insights into how Moscow attempted to understand Donald Trump's personality to inform its negotiating strategy. In an interview with the Russian Intelligence Service-affiliated magazine *Razvedchik*, political commentator Vyacheslav Nikonov suggested that Trump's background as a real estate developer predisposed him toward pragmatism, emphasising construction and profit over destruction.⁷ On this basis, Kremlin analysts developed a portrait of Trump as a leader whose primary concern in international affairs was economic gain.

Accordingly, the Kremlin put the restoration of business partnerships at the centre of its approach to the new administration in the White House, and Russian officials echoed this perspective in their rhetoric. During a meeting with Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin in early February, Putin highlighted Russia's reported GDP growth of 4.1 per cent in 2024, contrasting it favourably with the state of the Eurozone, which he described as having slowed significantly.⁸ Soon afterwards, Kirill Dmitriev, head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), published comparative data that claimed Russia was outperforming both the European Union and the United Kingdom across several economic indicators.⁹ Throughout March, Moscow presented Washington with a range of proposals, including cooperation on rare earth metals, Arctic development, the re-entry of US companies into the Russian market and even a joint space mission to Mars, suggested for 2029.¹⁰ Through these initiatives, Moscow sought to promote its image as economically resilient despite sanctions and as a more promising partner than Europe, which it depicted as stagnant and in decline.

However, these claims carried limited significance. As H.R. McMaster, National Security Advisor to President Trump in 2017–2018, has argued, Putin frequently engages in "Potemkin tactics", emphasising Russia's strengths and concealing its vulnerabilities.¹¹ Russia's actual economic capacity, with a GDP comparable to that of a single US state, did not match the image of prosperity that the Kremlin sought to project. Political circles in the United States clearly understood this disparity. Upon returning to office, Trump himself did not appear to harbour significant illusions about Russia's strength, suggesting that the country was in "big trouble".¹² At the same time, Western media

⁷ *Razvedchik*, 2025, No. 1 (10), p. 32.

⁸ President of Russia, 7 February 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76227>

⁹ X, @kadmitriev, 3 March 2025, <https://x.com/kadmitriev/status/1896544596873953738>

¹⁰ X, @kadmitriev, 15 March 2025, <https://x.com/kadmitriev/status/1900794518519071084>

¹¹ *The Economist*, 23 June 2025, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2025/06/23/hr-mcmaster-on-how-to-play-the-inconsistencies-in-trumps-worldview>

¹² *Politico*, 21 January 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-russia-ukraine-war-destroying>

emphasised the structural weaknesses of the Russian economy, portraying Putin as sustaining it through short-term measures likened to “throwing the living room furniture into the furnace”.¹³ Against this background, the Kremlin’s attempts to present itself as a dynamic economic partner were unconvincing and carried little weight in shaping the trajectory of bilateral relations.

Cutting aid and the narrative of “external control” in Ukraine

Around the anniversary of the full-scale invasion, Russian officials began to stress Ukraine’s dependence on the United States and to portray Kyiv as ungrateful towards its principal supporter. Putin argued that both Washington and Moscow were ostensibly seeking peace, but the Ukrainian leadership was obstructing progress. Dmitry Peskov likewise suggested that disagreements were emerging between Washington and Kyiv, describing Ukraine as overly reliant on external financial support.¹⁴ Dmitry Medvedev echoed this theme on social media, asserting that senior figures in the United States shared a negative view of the Ukrainian authorities. Russian permanent representative to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya reinforced this message, claiming that the Republican administration had finally recognised Zelensky’s true character.¹⁵

In early March, one of the few direct statements from the Kremlin concerning the United States focused on the possible suspension of US military assistance to Ukraine, which Moscow presented as a potential contribution to peace.¹⁶ By the end of the month, Putin had expanded on this idea by suggesting the creation of a temporary international administration for Ukraine under UN auspices, with both US and EU participation, as a pathway to establishing what he described as a capable and representative government.¹⁷ However, this proposal provoked a sharp response from Washington, and Trump warned for the first time that the United States could impose secondary tariffs on Russia if it made no progress towards resolving the conflict.¹⁸

At the same time, the Kremlin sought to further undermine Zelensky’s legitimacy. Russian state media disseminated fabricated reports alleging that members of the Ukrainian leadership had been involved in supplying a grenade launcher used in an assassination attempt against Trump in September 2024.¹⁹ These claims were subsequently echoed in the US media, most notably when journalist Tucker

Carlson speculated publicly about possible Ukrainian involvement.²⁰ Although this temporarily aligned with Moscow’s narrative, Carlson’s influence within Trump’s circle was waning,²¹ underscoring the limited effectiveness of Russia’s attempts to exploit internal divisions in US politics.

Summer dances around Trump

After returning from the Victory Day celebrations in May, Putin faced renewed demands from the United States and its European allies for an immediate unconditional ceasefire.²² In response, the Russian President proposed resuming direct negotiations in Istanbul, again without formal preconditions.²³ However, the composition of the Russian delegation, together with ongoing front line offensives and continuing bombardment of Ukrainian cities, indicated that the initiative was essentially a cover for Moscow’s continuing war effort. The escalation of strikes against civilian targets drew particular attention in Washington. By late May, Trump was signalling growing frustration, and his tone toward Russia hardened markedly, remarking that Putin had “gone absolutely crazy”.²⁴

Following this shift in the US position, Russian diplomacy developed a set of recurring messages that it sought to convey throughout late May, June and July. Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov articulated these messages, commenting several times a week on the state of US–Russia relations, often repeating the same themes. Four main strands can be identified in this communication strategy.²⁵

The first, and most prominent, was the consistent acknowledgement of Washington’s central role in Russian–Ukrainian negotiations. Peskov repeatedly emphasised US influence and expressed gratitude to Trump personally for what he described as significant US contributions to a peaceful settlement. According to Peskov, even Trump’s airstrikes against Iran did not change the Kremlin’s position on him.

The second was reassurance that Trump’s increasingly sharp rhetoric had had no adverse effect on Moscow’s perception of him. In contrast to Putin’s earlier sensitivity to personal remarks by US leaders, Peskov framed Trump’s criticism as part of his distinctive political style, characterised by strong language and a direct manner. Between late May and July, the Kremlin spokesperson was obliged to address Trump’s remarks on roughly a dozen occasions,

¹³ *Time*, 21 January 2025, <https://time.com/7208695/trump-end-putin-rule>

¹⁴ Interfax, 20 February 2025, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/1009952>

¹⁵ United Nations, 24 February 2025, <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2025/02/1461601>

¹⁶ Interfax, 4 March 2025, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/1011853>

¹⁷ President of Russia, 27 March 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76557>

¹⁸ BBC, 31 March 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/c70wjz2j04wt>

¹⁹ The Insider, 10 April 2025, <https://theins.ru/antifake/280444>

²⁰ YouTube, 30 April 2025, Time-code 25:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x47cIU02bo>

²¹ *The Economist*. See n 11 above.

²² Politico, 10 May 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/european-leaders-win-trumps-support-to-pressure-putin-into-unconditional-ceasefire/?fbclid=IwY2xjawKNANleHRuA2FibQlxMABicmlkETFFYzdpVENxak5lZ0tZYW9kAR6s9R4_eyY6OiJiwglkce04ygVzBcnvV31dd7Dqx_i6baR90KRB-uGPefTZA_aem_1cMwTosX-kKu88rCWy9Yx4Q

²³ President of Russia, 11 May 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76899>

²⁴ Truth Social. @realDonaldTrump, 26 May 2025, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114571369956761390>

²⁵ Hereinafter, TASS news reports are used.

usually without reference to their specific content, and always downplaying their significance.

The third message stressed the continuation of confidential contacts between Russian and American officials through diplomatic and intelligence channels. In late June, Peskov noted that these exchanges had begun only recently and were progressing slowly. By the end of July, the Kremlin described the normalisation process as neither moving rapidly nor stalled. In other words, it portrayed it as incremental but sustained.

Finally, Russian officials underscored that Moscow had no intention of abandoning its objectives in Ukraine, which they characterised as existential. Putin reportedly communicated to Trump that Russia intended to retaliate for Ukraine's Operation Spider Web and the subsequent airfield strikes of 1 June, and sought President Trump's condemnation of those actions. While presenting Russia's goals as paramount and immutable, Kremlin statements portrayed ongoing hostilities as resulting from the alleged impossibility of achieving these aims through political or diplomatic means.

Events on the ground reinforced this narrative. During the summer, Russia carried out some of its heaviest bombardments of Ukrainian cities since the start of the war, with Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odessa among the principal targets. The scale of destruction spoke more forcefully than official rhetoric, contributing to a further hardening of Trump's public statements during this period.

Mutual containment: whose initiative?

Following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, an approach centred on defending Europe through the containment of Russia²⁶ gained traction in the United States. Nevertheless, the Joe Biden administration implemented this policy inconsistently, partly because of Putin's nuclear threats.²⁷ The Lend-Lease Act for Ukraine, passed by Congress in 2022, has not taken effect. During the first three years of the war, the United States calibrated its assistance to ensure Ukraine's survival, rather than to enable a decisive victory.²⁸ Moscow's reliance on nuclear signalling reinforced its status as a great power. In 2015, Stanford University Professor Martin Hellman characterised this behaviour as a form of "madman" politics.²⁹ This tactic is based on President Nixon's "madman theory",³⁰ which he employed in the early 1970s.

Since Trump's return to the White House, however, the dynamics of containment have shifted markedly. Putin has moderated his own nuclear rhetoric and delegated the role of issuing threats to his former successor, Dmitry Medvedev. But Medvedev's lack of authority weakened the credibility of Russia's signalling. In contrast, application of the "madman theory" has migrated back to its American origins and now characterises Trump's political style. The US President underscored this by circulating a photo collage that compared his summit with Putin in Alaska to Nixon's talks with Khrushchev in Moscow.³¹

Trump's governing strategy has centred on unpredictability, which he has cultivated into a principal political asset. Commentators frequently interpret this as a continuation of practices he honed in his New York real estate career.³² It's worth noting the extent to which this approach has proved effective. Although Trump began his second term with sharp criticisms of European allies and Canada, he presided over a NATO summit on 24–25 June at which member states demonstrated unity and committed to raising military spending to 5 per cent of GDP.³³ This outcome reflected the paradoxical effectiveness of unpredictability in reinforcing alliance cohesion. As George Kennan argued in his so-called "Long Telegram", unity among allies is essential for a viable policy of containment.³⁴

Events between May and July 2025 demonstrate the declining potency of Russia's nuclear signalling. On 20 May, shortly after a Trump–Putin telephone call, Medvedev threatened that Western isolation of Russia could provoke nuclear war. The following day, Trump announced the development of a national missile defence system, the "Golden Dome",³⁵ to be deployed within three years. Moscow offered no substantive criticism.³⁶ Simultaneously, the United States tested the Minuteman III missile, underscoring its strategic capabilities.³⁷ While Washington had earlier floated the idea of reducing its European troop presence,³⁸ by late May it announced an expansion of its deployments in the High North and the Baltic region instead.³⁹ On 26 May, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz lifted restrictions on the range of weapons supplied

26 CEPA, 31 January 2024, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/containing-russia-securing-europe>

27 President of Russia, 21 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390>

28 Riddle, 1 May 2025, <https://ridl.io/the-riddle-of-lend-lease-for-ukraine>

29 *Newsweek*, 1 April 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/2015/04/10/impeccable-logic-behind-putins-madman-strategy-318529.html>

30 *Financial Times*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/3d-8b94e9-0db7-4aa5-ac6a-9fef2ce43ab6>

31 Truth Social, @realDonaldTrump, 21 August 2025, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115067056991519965>

32 BBC, 6 July 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czxww2kez20go>

33 NATO, 25 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm

34 The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State, Moscow, 22 February 1946, telegram, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>

35 DW, 21 May 2025, <https://www.dw.com/ru/trump-ssa-postroat-sistemu-pro-zolotoj-kupol-za-175-mlrd-dollarov/a-72617546>

36 *The Moscow Times*, 21 May 2025, <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2025/05/21/kreml-ne-reshilsya-kritikovat-ssha-za-novuyu-sistemu-pro-a164007>

37 *The Moscow Times*, 21 May 2025, <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2025/05/21/ssha-ispitali-dostayuschuyu-dorossii-yadernuyu-raketu-posle-ugrozi-medvedeva-nachat-tretyu-mirovuyu-voinu-a163983>

38 Reuters, 16 May 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-start-european-troop-withdrawal-discussions-later-this-year-us-nato-2025-05-16>

39 *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 May 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/the-u-s-reinforces-europes-northern-front-fearing-war-with-russia-b499ef50>

to Ukraine,⁴⁰ with France, the United Kingdom and the United States joining Germany in this policy.

Further exchanges reinforced the asymmetry. After the US strikes against Iran in June, Medvedev suggested online that unnamed countries “might be prepared” to supply nuclear weapons to Tehran.⁴¹ Trump publicly dismissed the claim, reminding observers of the precision of the United States’ missile strikes.⁴² Although Medvedev later amended his remarks, the White House did not overlook them. By mid-July, reports indicated that Trump was considering the transfer of Tomahawk missiles to Ukraine and had raised the matter with President Zelensky, suggesting that Russian cities – including Moscow and St Petersburg – could be targeted to try to bring them to the negotiating table.⁴³ At a press conference with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, Trump linked forthcoming sanctions against Russia to this broader strategy while again highlighting US military capabilities in Iran⁴⁴ as an implicit warning to Moscow.

Tensions escalated further on 2 August, when Trump responded directly to Medvedev’s latest nuclear threats by stating that the United States was “totally prepared”⁴⁵ for nuclear confrontation, if necessary. Shortly beforehand, he had announced the repositioning of atomic submarines in response to what he termed Russia’s “provocative” statements.⁴⁶ Within a week, at Moscow’s request, the US Special Envoy Steven Witkoff travelled to Russia for the first time since April, and preparations began for a Trump–Putin summit in Anchorage.

In the lead up to the summit, Washington successfully mediated in the South Caucasus. In late July, Trump hosted a ceasefire agreement between President Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia, which granted the United States exclusive transit rights through the Nakhchivan corridor. The contrast with Biden’s cautious approach was striking: Trump ignored red lines traditionally emphasised by Moscow, whether regarding the supply of long-range weapons to Ukraine or US involvement in the post-Soviet area. This disregard for Russian warnings has now become a defining feature of the political landscape; one that the Kremlin must accommodate for at least the duration of Trump’s presidency.

⁴⁰ *The Moscow Times*, 26 May 2025, <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2025/05/26/ssha-britaniya-frantsiya-i-germaniya-snyali-ogranicheniya-po-dalnosti-s-postavlennogo-ukraine-oruzhiya-a164331>

⁴¹ *The Moscow Times*, 22 June 2025, <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2025/06/22/medvedev-obvinil-trampa-vnachale-novoi-vojni-isoobschil-ogotovnosti-ryada-stran-peredat-iranu-yadernii-boekomplekt-a166791>

⁴² Truth Social, @realDonaldTrump, 23 June 2025, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114733380709403439>

⁴³ *The Washington Post*, 14 July 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/07/14/trump-ukraine-war-missiles-russia-arms-package>

⁴⁴ YouTube, 14 July 2025, Time-code 2:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe-j0OQCqX0>

⁴⁵ CNN, 2 August 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/08/01/politics/nuclear-submarines-russia-trump-medvedev>

⁴⁶ Truth Social, @realDonaldTrump, 1 August 2025, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114954549017557270>

The strategy of 20 January 2025, and its results

Russia’s foreign policy toward the United States shifted immediately after Trump’s inauguration on 20 January. Putin personally formulated new narrative strategies to be directed at Washington. Implementation of this approach relied on a core group of senior officials, including Presidential Aide Yuri Ushakov, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Kirill Dmitriev, Head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund. Senator Grigory Karasin and Ambassador Alexander Darchiev, who were in Washington, took part in the negotiation process. At the same time, Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergey Naryshkin and Federal Security Service advisor Sergey Beseda reopened intelligence channels. Spokesman Peskov stated the Kremlin’s leading positions regarding the United States.

The Kremlin’s “maximum programme” for this strategy was ambitious: securing US termination of aid to Kyiv, engineering Zelensky’s removal from office through White House pressure, and achieving a relaxation of sanctions at the executive level. The “minimum programme” was more limited: restoring regular personal contact between Putin and Trump, persuading Washington to suspend or reduce its support for Ukraine, and delaying the imposition of new sanctions for as long as possible.

The maximum programme failed to achieve its objectives. Although the dispute within the Oval Office early in Trump’s term, suggested that Moscow had come close to creating friction between Washington and Kyiv, subsequent developments moved in the opposite direction. Trump’s attitude towards Zelensky had grown notably warmer since Pope Francis II’s funeral in late April. On 20 May, in a call with President Zelensky and allied leaders, Trump, for the last time, indicated to them his willingness to withdraw from peace negotiations.⁴⁷ At that exact moment, European allies launched a mechanism for procuring American weapons for Ukraine, which then became operational. The prospect of sanction relief was never considered seriously. Instead, Trump automatically extended existing measures for another year.

By contrast, the minimum programme yielded at least partial success. Although the Pentagon briefly suspended assistance to Ukraine in early July, the White House described that interruption as a misunderstanding,⁴⁸ and deliveries soon resumed. Still, by August, Trump had spoken to Putin by telephone on seven occasions and met him in person, while also refraining from introducing new sanctions. This restraint reflected a recognition in Washington

⁴⁷ *The Financial Times*, 20 May 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/55dfa1ca-aac9-497e-80af-5817594aabe8>

⁴⁸ CNN, 8 July 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/08/politics/hegseth-did-not-inform-white-house-ukraine-weapons-pause>

that sanctions alone were unlikely to bring the war to a rapid conclusion.

Looking ahead, Trump faces a familiar strategic triad to the one that has shaped US policy options since the invasion: (i) disengagement from the conflict; (ii) escalation of economic pressure through additional sanctions or manipulation of oil prices; or (iii) a significant increase in military assistance to Ukraine, including the provision of what some commentators have called “weapons of victory”. On 21 August, Trump hinted directly at the latter course of action.⁴⁹ The consequences of such a decision remain uncertain. What we can assess, however, is the trajectory of US–Russian relations over the 8 months from January to August 2025. This paper has sought to reconstruct that trajectory and to evaluate the interplay of strategies that have defined the first phase of Trump’s second term.

⁴⁹ Truth Social, @realDonaldTrump, 21 August, 2025, <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115067017601499775>

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The Kremlin's wager on Trump's second term: *the shifting game of containment*

- Since Trump's return to the White House, Putin has employed a set of rhetorical strategies designed to re-establish regular contacts between Russia and the United States, ease the sanctions regime and bring about a change of government in Ukraine.
- These tactics, relying primarily on overt flattery and economic "Potemkin villages", have achieved only limited results. Trump has retained the existing sanctions against Russia and shifted toward a more conciliatory stance in relations with Zelensky. The continuation of dialogue, with an uncertain outcome, has become the only tangible outcome of Russian diplomacy.
- At the same time, invoking President Nixon's "madman theory", Trump has demonstrated more resilience to Moscow's ongoing nuclear coercion and capacity to seize the initiative in the dynamics of mutual restraint.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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