

Trump's Ukraine Moment

A U.S. president saying that he wants the war over is a big change.

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President Trump speaks to the media on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, Jan. 24. Photo: Al Drago - Pool via CNP/Zuma Press

An interesting moment has arrived in the Ukraine war. “Putin is not yet desperate” says a headline in Foreign Affairs magazine, over an article by a well-informed former employee of Russia’s central bank. Of course, [Vladimir Putin](#) wouldn’t wait until he’s desperate. The time to negotiate is when you think your hand is strong, not weak and getting weaker.

Meanwhile, longtime Ukraine supporters and frequent decriers of [Donald Trump](#) are starting to encounter cognitive dissonance of their own. Mr. Trump’s tweets have clearly begun sizing up Mr. Putin for a pressure campaign over a war Mr. Trump says is “destroying Russia.” Trump critics murmur that his claims of “millions and millions” killed are wildly out of line. They do so quietly because Mr. Trump’s megaphone is the biggest and even his critics realize his exaggerations usefully reach the ears of Mr. Putin’s constituents.

From analysts I respect come widely discordant takes. Formerly cynical and self-preserving, Mr. Putin now is driven by sweeping historical and ideological motives. China’s embrace is not grudging or expedient. Beijing will take sizeable risks to advance Mr. Putin’s anti-NATO goals.

If Mr. Putin allows a cease-fire, some say, it will only be to rearm and restart the war. No, say others. Mr. Putin is 72. His war is a botch. His domestic allies, not to mention the Chinese, won’t tolerate another attempt.

Yet others say trying to read Mr. Putin is a fool’s errand. He’s so KGB, he conceals his true intentions even from himself. After all, the recommended Western policy remains the same in every case: Keep up the pressure until Mr. Putin decides his path has become untenable.

Put me in the last category. Instead, the big change the world should notice is the baton-passing that occurred in the U.S. on Jan. 20. [Joe Biden](#) had to pretend Mr. Putin was already desperate, always fingering his nuclear weapons, to justify Mr. Biden’s own ultra-cautious approach, aimed at not frightening Americans with the prospect of a doddering, half-asleep president managing a superpower showdown.

Mr. Biden has been succeeded by the most shocking peacetime seizer and user of power since Andrew Jackson. Mr. Trump has turned global psychology on its head simply by saying America wants the war settled and fast.

In a sense, the two defining political miscalculations of our time have become one. Democrats told us Mr. Trump was Hitler. In their behavior, they had him down as a patsy. They could run a senile incumbent against him. They could throw open the border for three years and in the fourth pretend they didn't.

The other miscalculation was Mr. Putin's, who mistook the low comedy of our domestic politics, especially the Russiagate hoax and its sequels, for America's unraveling, which meant Ukraine was ripe for the picking. Never mind that this required him (and others) to ignore certain contrary evidence: America's booming Covid recovery, its innovation-led dominance of global energy markets, its invention of artificial intelligence.

Lost on Mr. Putin and others not only was the resilience of America's constitutional system and its underlying civil society. The low comedy turns out to have been the rivet-popping sounds of a large, bureaucratic, democratic society overturning its elites and redirecting its energies via the imperfect but available instrument of Mr. Trump.

In his own way, Mr. Putin is a hard-bitten, clawing survivor, but consider the dimensions on which he can't compete:

Mr. Trump prevails against enemies who nevertheless remain powerful and even dominant in the culture, in many institutions and the bureaucracy. He doesn't need to silence or jail them. He watches MSNBC to hear the worst his opponents have to say about him, then figures out how to turn it to his advantage.

His family life is intact. His capacity to relate is intact. He may assert outlandish claims when it serves his interests, but he does so instrumentally knowing his statements will be loudly contested. Mr. Trump bulls ahead against enemies who always live to fight another day. His opponents stand ready, as they should, to gain strength from his failures as they did during Covid and will again if his economic plans go awry or he makes a hash of his Ukraine moment.

Mr. Putin exists in a hall of mirrors. Only an implausible nuclear bluff has kept his floundering war afloat through 2½ years of Bidenism and Mr. Putin's fear of certain segments of his own population.

His flunkies like Dmitri Medvedev and the talking heads on Russian TV who want to nuke the world only say it because they don't mean it. Mr. Putin himself knows he can't put off a reckoning with his failed gamble of February 2022 forever. It's a reckoning, if he bothered to count, he will realize he shares with most Soviet as well as Western leaders who started wars since 1945.