

## How Hegseth's Speech Could See the End of the Ukrainian Conflict

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The world continues to look differently as far as geopolitics is concerned with alarming regularity. The latest change being set about by the speech of the United States (US) Secretary of Defence on 12 Feb. While speaking at the end of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Defence Ministers' meeting in Brussels, Pete Hegseth gave out a roadmap regarding the US' stand on bringing an end to the Russo-Ukrainian War. Ultimately, Hegseth argued that Ukraine's future was Europe's problem. The US was no longer 'Primarily Focused' on European security.

He further said, "We want... a sovereign and prosperous Ukraine. But we must start by recognising that returning to Ukraine's pre-2014 borders is an unrealistic objective", adding, "Chasing this illusory goal will only prolong the war and cause more suffering".<sup>[1]</sup>

Hegseth asserted that Donald Trump was 'The perfect dealmaker at the table' who would not rule anything out in his efforts to try to end the near three-year full-scale war.<sup>[2]</sup>

### European Leaders Shocked

The speech along with a 90 minutes-long phone call between Trump and Vladimir Putin sent alarm bells ringing in European capitals. The US President has stated that he was convinced Putin 'Wants Peace'. He also called for Russia's return to the G-7 group of nations, saying its expulsion was a mistake.<sup>[3]</sup>

Saudi Arabia, after being named by Trump as a likely venue for a meeting with Putin, [said](#) it would welcome holding any talks between the two leaders. As per Keith Kellogg, the US special envoy to Ukraine, Washington, Moscow, and Kyiv would be involved in talks, but Europe was not invited.<sup>[4]</sup>

But the fact is that Hegseth's bluntness has shocked European leaders. The US Defence Secretary said "Everything is on the table" to bring peace to Ukraine and suggested that reducing the number of American troops in Europe could be part of any deal.

The curtailment of the US' commitment to European security and the refusal to be the guarantor of peace in Ukraine will be costly for Europe. Many Europeans had hoped that they could avoid having to confront reality by convincing the US to express its intent with greater ambiguity. Hegseth's carefully crafted clarity has made that untenable.

### The Emerging Scenarios

There are now several unpalatable futures that Ukraine and Europe must plan for. The first is that Trump negotiates an outcome directly with President Putin, excludes the Ukrainians, and then uses the threat of withdrawing the US supplies to coerce Ukraine into accepting a deal. The second is that Trump does not accept Putin's proposed terms to end the conflict and negotiations become protracted while Russia continues its ground offensive, further gaining territory. The third would be if Trump forces Putin into a ceasefire, but Ukraine must then weather a politically divisive election, economic paralysis due to a lack of foreign direct investment, and the possibility that Russia could restart the war. Ukraine would then struggle to keep its forces mobilised after a ceasefire. Russia, meanwhile, will ensure that its defence industries restock its arsenals.<sup>[5]</sup>

Averting or managing all three of these scenarios depend on some foundational measures. To prevent Trump from forcing Ukraine to accept peace on unacceptable terms, it is necessary for Europe to prepare to fill the gap that would be left in the absence of the US military-technical assistance. If Putin tries to continue the offensive, preventing him from doing so will depend upon the sustainment of Ukraine's capacity to resist. If a ceasefire places Ukraine in a position of increased vulnerability, ensuring that its hold will come down to Europe's ability to deter Russia from recommencing offensive operations.

As far as Europe is concerned, the rules have been altered and in spite of the rhetoric from European leaders over the last three years, they must now confront the reality of making their commitments deliverable. Ukraine could be forced into a bad deal that leaves the continent facing an emboldened Putin.

In terms of support for Ukraine, European troops could expand training given to the Ukrainian military. It is entirely possible for Europe to scale existing technologies to expand the production of explosive energetics and, therefore, shells. As regards deterrence, NATO has large fleets of highly capable aircraft. Its aircrews lack the training or munitions, while its air force lack the command and control to effectively suppress Russian air defences without the US. But most air forces know what would need to be done to change this situation.[\[6\]](#)

Such options are only possible if Europe invests in its own defence. It should be a matter of embarrassment in Europe today that while many defence enterprises have expanded their capacity to produce shells over the last 18 months, order books at Europe's defence companies are far from full. There is significant industrial capacity that European countries are leaving on the table.[\[7\]](#)

There is another favourable future possibility that is achievable. If Russia does protract talks, it is possible that European defence industry can increase output across key classes of weapons such that Ukraine's fight can be sustained. It is also feasible that with an expanding deep strike campaign, the costs begin to be felt in Russia such that a mutually hurting stalemate develops and Putin reaches for a deal. But while possible, it is difficult for the leverage to pivot back the other way.[\[8\]](#)

### **Ukrainian President Seeks Security Guarantees**

Meanwhile Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he sought '[Security Guarantees](#)' when he met the US Vice President on 14 Feb at the Munich Security Conference.[\[9\]](#)

He needs to ensure that Ukraine is not sidelined in Washington's push to wrap up the three-year war. Zelensky stressed the need to 'Speak More' with the White House before any endgame to the war is formulated. "We want peace very much, but we need real security guarantees". In his interview with NBC, he said Ukraine "Will have low, low chance to survive without support of the US".[\[10\]](#)

He has also said that Putin wants to come to the negotiating table, not to end the war but to get a ceasefire deal that would lift certain international sanctions on Russia and would allow its military to regroup.[\[11\]](#)

In a bid to keep the US close, there are now reports that Kyiv has held talks over granting access to its rare mineral deposits in return for future US security support. Trump has said, "We are going to have all this money in there, and I say I want it back. And I told them that I want the equivalent, like USD 500 bn worth of rare earth", adding, "And they have essentially agreed to do

that, so at least we do not feel stupid". He also confirmed that he will soon send his special envoy Keith Kellogg, who is tasked with drawing up a proposal to halt the fighting in Ukraine.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Conclusion

Thucydides, in the 4th Century BCE, wrote the History of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE). The conflict bears many similarities to wars waged through the ages across both the maritime and continental domains that it offers lessons to this day. The years of fighting depleted manpower and financial resources on both sides. Amongst the lessons that stand out are that wars of attrition between balanced alliances do not yield spectacular victories, rather, exhaustion and a blurring of lines between victor and vanquished.

The widening gulf between Europe and the US comes at an especially delicate time for Zelensky and an exhausted and depleted Ukraine. There is little ambiguity on Trump's determination to get Europe to spend more on its defence. For now, it is Ukraine that must navigate between the US indifference and European's inability to protect them. Stopping the Russians from advancing and preventing the Ukrainians from falling back requires the US' backing. For all the rhetoric from European leaders over the last three years, it is now that they must confront the reality of making their commitments deliverable.

The silver lining is that so far while these are important statements, there have been no agreements and the negotiations are yet to commence, though the glacial plates have started moving. But President Trump has made clear that his campaign slogan is now his resolved policy.

As far as analysts are concerned, while Russia has not achieved its maximalist goals, it has ensured that Ukraine will not be part of NATO, will be a neutral country, and will not be in a position to reclaim its lost territory. But more important is that there are signs of a new security architecture in Europe giving Russia a sphere of influence. While there is no certainty that Trump will accept all Russian demands, there are plenty of other possible outcomes that will still benefit Russia, such as the erosion of Western unity and a reduction in Western support for Ukraine.

The European leaders and Ukraine may be shocked by this US change of stance which has fundamentally undermined European confidence in the US' commitment to [NATO](#) and the principle of mutual defence, but the fact is that they have no alternatives. Peace, and not war, seem to be finally dominating the headlines and Ukraine seems to have paid the price for being the proxy.

## Endnotes

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[1] 'Seeking an End to Russia's War on Ukraine', VOA, <https://editorials.voa.gov/a/seeking-an-end-to-russia-s-war-on-ukraine/7982117.html>

[2] Dan Sabbagh, 'Pete Hegseth says 'everything is on the table' to end Ukraine war', *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/feb/13/pete-hegseth-says-everything-on-table-end-ukraine-war>

[3] Twitter post by US President Donald

Trump <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/113991956474899296>

[4] 'Saudi Arabia, UAE seen as possible venues for Trump-Putin summit, two Russian sources say', *Reuters*, 03 Feb 2025 <https://www.reuters.com/world/saudi-arabia-uae-seen-possible-venues-trump-putin-summit-two-russian-sources-say-2025-02-03/>

[5] Andrew Roth, Dan Sabbagh, Pjotr Sauer, 'Trump says he has spoken to Putin and agreed to negotiate Ukraine ceasefire', *The Guardian*, 12 Feb 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/12/trump-putin-ukraine-ceasefire>

[6] Dr Jack Watling, 'US Clarity Underscores Ukraine's Peril', *RUSI*, 14 Feb 2025 <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/us-clarity-underscores-ukraines-peril>

[7] Ibid

[8] Ibid

[9] Frank Zeller and Max Delany, 'Zelensky calls for European army as US backing questioned', *Yahoo News* <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/zelensky-munich-security-meet-trump-025424128.html>

[10] 'Zelensky seeks 'security guarantees' as US presses end to Ukraine war', *The Economics Times* <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/zelensky-seeks-security-guarantees-as-us-presses-end-to-ukraine-war/articleshow/118268123.cms?from=mdr>

[11] Alexander Smith and Alexandra Marquez, 'Zelenskyy: 'Very difficult' for Ukraine to survive without US military support', *NBC News*, 15 Feb 2025 <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/zelenskyy-difficult-ukraine-survive-us-military-support-rcna192196>

[12] 'Zelensky seeks security guarantees', *The Economics Times*

**Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)** is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

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