



Peter Trubowitz

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## Trump's attempts to realign US-Russian relations may mean an unjust peace for Ukraine



*This week has seen the opening of peace talks in Saudi Arabia between the US and Russia about ending the war in Ukraine, though without representation from Kyiv. In this Q&A Phelan US Centre Director, **Professor Peter Trubowitz**, writes that for Donald Trump, the negotiations are more about realigning US relations with Russia than ensuring security and a just and stable peace for Ukraine.*

### Is Ukraine to blame for Russia's invasion?

If anyone believes **Trump's assertion** this week that Kyiv started the war, I have a bridge in Brooklyn that I would like to sell them, to borrow an old **New York con**. Trump's declaration is nothing short of strategic gaslighting and should be seen for what it is: an effort to structure the negotiations over the war in a way that is less about guaranteeing Ukrainian security than it is about realigning US-Russian relations. This is what the meeting between American and Russian diplomats in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, really was aimed at and what we should be keeping our eyes on as this story unfolds in the coming days and weeks.

### What does the Riyadh meeting mean for Moscow?

For Russian President, Vladimir Putin, the **telephone call** with Trump last week and the **meeting** between US and Russian diplomats in Riyadh this week has effectively put an end to America's efforts since 2014 to isolate and punish Moscow internationally as a pariah for its actions towards Ukraine. It has opened a path to treating Putin as a "**partner**," as Secretary of State Marco Rubio put it. For Trump, this stunning turnaround, bringing Russia in from the cold, has all the trappings of grand theatre: boldness, drama, and surprise. Whether it actually moves the needle closer to a just peace in Ukraine is another thing altogether and, it would appear, not a priority for Mr. Trump.

## Who were the big losers at Riyadh?

So far, the big losers in all of this are Kyiv and Europe. By making sure the Ukrainians and Europeans were not at the table, Moscow and Washington have used the negotiations over the war to redefine their strategic relationship and set the parameters that Volodymyr Zelensky, Emmanuel Macron, Keir Starmer, Olaf Scholz, and others will be forced to work within. What we don't know is the extent to which the US team has already agreed up front to the Russian team's key demands with respect to Ukraine: no European peacekeeping forces, presidential elections in Ukraine (ironically), and no security guarantees for Ukraine (e.g. membership in NATO).

## Is a lasting peace in Ukraine still possible?

There may be peace, but it is likely to be an unjust one. If the negotiations continue on the trajectory Trump and Putin have set in motion, any peace agreement is more likely to favor Putin's interests at the expense of Kyiv's, strategically, economically, and territorially, while offering few guarantees (i.e. a strong US peacekeeping presence) of stability in Ukraine and the region going forward. The question no one seems to be asking is how much Trump can concede to Putin diplomatically and get away with it domestically, in the US. My guess is a fair amount.

## What does Trump want from Europe?

It's hard to see how any of what has unfolded over the past week will improve relations between Washington and Europe. Trump is raising the **price of US security** and the question to be asking is why. The short answer is to extract concessions from Europe on things Trump wants: trade, looser European regulatory policies, and increased purchases of US weaponry. I see this mostly as an effort to shake down Europe by taking advantage of its dependence on the US and the EU's longstanding inability to forge a common position on security matters.



- *This article is based on an interview with Professor Trubowitz with DW News on 19 February 2025.*
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### About the author



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Peter Trubowitz is Professor of International Relations, and Director of the LSE's Phelan US Centre. His main research interests are in the fields of international security and comparative foreign policy, with special focus on American grand strategy and foreign policy. He also writes and comments frequently on US party politics and elections and how they shape and are shaped by America's changing place in the world.

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