

## Ukraine, EU excluded from Russia-Ukraine peace talks

# To what end Trump shuns allies?



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### OPINION

at least not enthusiastic, about the prospect of including any country in the high-stakes talks. It still is a bit amusing and very frightening to be reminded that no representatives from Ukraine, as the major party to this war, and the EU, as a major backer of Ukraine, were present at the talks in Riyadh.

This exclusion turned out to be not a slip of the mind to send an invite or anything borne out of goodwill in the context of what happened in Munich on Friday. At the Munich Security Conference, US Vice President JD Vance scolded European leaders so hard that a range of emotions followed. First, immediately after Vance's speech, he was booed off the stage — not by ordinary citizens, mind you, but rather by "450 high-profile and senior decision-makers as well as thought-leaders from around the world, including heads of state and ministers". Second, the outgoing chairman of the conference, Christoph Heusgen, broke down in tears on stage, receiving applause from EU officials. Heusgen specifically mentioned that his concerns were triggered by Vance's harsh attacks on the previously "common values" of the Transatlantic allies when Vance called for a pragmatic, interest-driven approach to global politics. Therefore, it can safely be assumed that the rift between the US and EU is only going to widen for some time while emotions run high on both sides.

The Riyadh talks were admittedly always going to be a small but important step to end the Ukraine war. There are more talks to be had, and it's hard to imagine that Kyiv and Brussels would be absent from those as well. The Ukrainian president has repeatedly stressed that his country would not recognize any peace agreements made without its participation.

Furthermore, it's given that the public would not become privy to what was said at the talks or even before, for example, on Wednesday when Trump and Putin had a "lengthy and highly productive" phone call. So, we are left to speculate on one important question: Why were Ukraine and the EU excluded from the Riyadh talks?

Americans and Russians met Tuesday in Saudi Arabia for their most extensive discussions in years to kickstart the negotiations to end the war in Ukraine. However, for days both prior to and after the event, it was overshadowed by the fact that the Trump administration was unwilling, or



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio (L) meets with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal before holding talks with his Russian counterpart, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on February 18, 2025.  
AP



The US top-ranking delegation (L) holds a high-stake negotiation with the Russian delegation (R) while the Saudis moderate the meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on February 18, 2025. The bilateral talks lasted about 4.5 hours.  
EVELYN HOCKSTEIN/AFP

There are a few possible scenarios that come to mind as an answer to that question, and frankly, none of them look good for Washington's allies.

#### Scenario one: Trump gets credit

Normally, for any other leader, this scenario would not be this high up the list, but after four years of Trump's presidency and more years of watching him on the campaign trail and on TV, we have to put real weight on this scenario. It is quite possible that Donald Trump, being the borderline narcissistic character that he is, is more concerned with getting the credit for ending the Ukraine war than anything else. He showed the same disposition a month ago when the Gaza cease-fire was achieved. Even though it was a cease-fire between two other countries and the US president at the time was Joe Biden, President-elect Trump was quick to claim victory over social media. We're not denying that he didn't

play a role, but many presidents, if not most, care more about the result than one-upmanship.

It is quite possibly the only reason why Trump has pulled out of so many deals, including the JCPOA. He seems to be fine with the end goal and the result of them, but he just wants his name to be on that piece of paper. Officials of countries like Iran already understand this about Trump with every fiber of their being. The cries and boos of EU officials show that since it had not happened to them with such intensity, they failed to put two and two together.

To be sure, it feels extremely peculiar that Trump is dealing more nicely with enemies than friends. Longtime allies like Canada, Mexico, Japan, and the EU are not just getting threatened by the Trump administration, they are suddenly being notified that the US has taken severe economic action against them. Meanwhile, the Russians are getting "invited" to "talk". It has to

feel personal, and it probably does. Trump has always admired strongmen who take what they want and now no longer dreams of being one; He is living his dream this time around.

#### Scenario two: backroom deals

This would be the greatest fear of Ukraine, to a greater extent, and the EU, to a lesser extent: to consider the possibility that a hand had been shaken warmly and they are left with lies and ultimately, a raw deal. It feels much more probable than the first scenario, too, because, after all, Trump could have gotten the credit for ending the war while other parties were present at the table as well — maybe not as much but enough. Now, this scenario could go two ways: either the Americans get something extra juicy from that backroom deal they are discussing with Russians, or they don't. Again, none are favorable to the Ukrainians, but the former has got to sting that much more. Let's not forget that NATO, led by

the US, knew full well that Ukraine joining the bloc would result in Russia's severe countermeasures and pushed them into the cross-fire of Moscow regardless. Now, with the chances of becoming a member getting slimmer as the war prolongs and Ukrainian towns turn into wastelands, it has to feel like a betrayal if the US manages to carve out something for itself behind closed doors and then pulls the plug on military aid to Ukraine to force it to agree to that deal.

When you deal with Trump, you cannot predict the specific goals he has set for himself in any negotiation with foreign countries. Usually, the US president would care deeply about not losing or

his base. The Trump team may eventually land on those goals, but it's quite possible that the US president may have prioritized his own image in the initial offers. After all, he lives and dies by his bragging.

#### Scenario three: shuttle diplomacy

This scenario would be the more benign one out of the three, which makes it more unlikely; again, if the objective was to make the deal happen, there were bound to be better ways of doing it than antagonizing both Ukraine and the EU. Nevertheless, according to this scenario, the US proposed to have a two-way talk with Russia to engage in shuttle diplomacy. The benefit of

signs point to the opposite. The Ukrainian president is understandably furious with the US for bypassing him and putting him in the limbo of mulling over the first two scenarios. However, he doesn't have much leverage with the US to do anything about it other than make for a break, which seems highly unlikely, given that the Trump administration has stated time and again that Ukraine eventually has to pay off its ever-increasing massive debt. That leaves Trump with his go-to move: threatening. He could moderate Russia's offers, but if Ukraine seemed hard to work with, he would pull out his numerous levers to force Zelenskyy to settle. I would argue against those



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (L), British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer (2nd-R), French President Emmanuel Macron (R) and then-German chancellor Olaf Scholz consult at a summit in Paris, France, on November 10, 2024.  
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building more military bases around the world, securing their position or edge against their competitors, and getting a better deal on energy, vital resources, and markets. As a rule of thumb, offers that align more closely with the policy of "America First" and bring in heaps of cash for the US are more likely to resonate with Trump and

this would be that any Russian offers that would be offensive to the Ukrainians could be tempered by the Americans through negotiation so that the chances of a better reception by the Ukrainians would increase. This scenario assumes that the US has significant capital or influence with both Putin and Zelenskyy, but all

who may claim that the exclusion of Ukraine and the EU from Riyadh talks was not as foreboding as I just made them to be. High on the euphoria of bending allies to his will, Trump will surely want to maintain momentum. And few things could be as big as ending the war in Ukraine. So, no step is one too far.



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