

Back to Russia with love – détente is a win for everyone

By Eugene Doyle, *Pearls and Irritations*, Feb 24



One key fact was absent from virtually all of the reporting around the astonishing events of this past week. It was scarcely mentioned in stories about the Munich Security Conference, the call between Presidents Trump and Putin, the freezing out of the Europeans, the jaw-dropping statements by US Defence Secretary Hegseth, the ending of cherished plans to expand NATO into Ukraine, and the historic face-to-face meeting between Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Riyadh. The missed central point: Russia has, in effective terms, won the war where it counts – on the battlefield. That more than anything is driving the calculus in Washington.

No incoming administration wants to be burdened with the failed military adventures of its predecessor and clearly this American administration is realistic enough to assess that the Russians cannot, and will not, be defeated in a struggle they see as existential. This was obvious years ago to independent commentators like myself but, most notably, to my mentors in the international relations field such as John Mearsheimer, Glenn Diesen and Chas Freeman.

Now Russia and the US are setting to work on something even bigger than the Ukraine conflict: normalising relations between the two superpowers which will have huge consequences economically, geopolitically and, hopefully, all to the benefit of the long-suffering Ukrainians and other peoples caught between the two behemoths.

The new détente is likely to result in reconstruction for Ukraine, resumption of diplomatic relations between Russia and the West, the chance to move the doomsday clock back a tick or two, create trade opportunities and lower energy prices.

Russia weathered the storm of years of US sanctions, the seizing of hundreds of billions of dollars of sovereign assets and its share of losses in a brutal attritional war. It would certainly welcome a return to whatever counts as normal today. But not at any price. NATO is still sending huge amounts of arms into Ukraine so this is far from a done deal – and one brain explosion from Trump could upend the whole thing.

The summit between the two leaders, however, is likely to produce further confirmation of a seismic shift in US policy. After \$350 billion has been spent on bombs, drones, missiles and the like, the US State Department website now says with almost comedic understatement that the US wishes to “establish a consultation mechanism to address irritants to our bilateral relationship with the objective of taking steps necessary to normalize the operation of our respective diplomatic missions”.

All Russia’s stated goals are likely to be realised and, despite the endless rhetoric of the European leaders and the Biden administration, a successful cessation of hostilities will not result in Russian westward expansion.

Not so, Volodymyr Zelenskyy said this week: “The risk that Russia will occupy Europe is 100%.”

Not so, said Vladimir Putin: “Russia has no reason, no interest — no geopolitical interest, neither economic, political nor military — to fight with NATO countries.”

On the “threat” of further Russian aggression, I bow to the wisdom of the team at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft in Washington. In an excellent article “Right-Sizing the Russian Threat to Europe” their leading scholars argue, “Russia likely has neither the capability nor the intent to launch a war of aggression against NATO members.” They also state: “There is no evidence that Russian leadership seeks to revise the status of post-Soviet and post-Warsaw Pact states that are already in NATO, particularly the Baltics, Poland, and Romania.”

Several of Russia’s key objectives appear to be conceded even before formal negotiations start. The Russian position that Ukraine needs to return to neutrality and not be part of a Western military alliance is one. Normalisation — the end of the West’s ridiculous position of insisting on no diplomacy, only strength through war — and trying to turn a great power into a pariah state, is over. For the first time in years we will see fully functioning reciprocal diplomatic missions in Moscow and Washington.

“For us to be able to continue to move down this road, we need to have diplomatic facilities that are operating and functioning normally,” Secretary of State Marco Rubio said.

It signals a long-overdue resurrection of diplomacy as a tool of US (and hopefully EU) foreign policy.

“Somehow they thought it was a wonderful idea to fight a war and have no contact with the enemy during that war,” retired US Ambassador Chas Freeman told Judge Napolitano this week. “That is a recipe for a forever war. We are now in a war termination phase – and you can only do that by talking to the other side.”

Another sign of the times is that the US side acknowledged this week what the Russians have said all along. “This needs to be a permanent end to the war. And not a temporary end, as we’ve seen in the past,” US National Security Adviser Mike Waltz said in Saudi Arabia. A core challenge is to create an agreed security architecture for the whole of Europe and beyond – addressing the concerns of all parties: what missile systems are acceptable,

how many and where, verification, respect for territorial sovereignty, conflict resolution and crisis management, how to ensure compliance with agreements, and so on. Not trivial issues, not easy – but do-able.

Ukraine is likely to have to cede the ethnic Russian territories in the east of the country where a bitter war has been fought since 2014. Only a few diehards want to fight on; polling confirms most Ukrainians want peace, accept territory will be lost, and want the chance to rebuild shattered lives and infrastructure. That may not please warmongers in the West but I believe time will prove that an ugly peace delivers more than a beautiful war.

The West needs to start the slow and painful journey towards accepting that it has lost another war. It is not a cause for celebration, but should be a cause for reflection. Hundreds of thousands are dead. A country is shattered and, given the demographic wound the war has inflicted, is likely to take generations to recover. The shock of the truth breaking through, shattering long-cherished beliefs is painful, but I think something really positive can emerge: young Russians and Ukrainians of all ages will not be sent to needless death; lives and economies will be given a chance to recover; diplomacy, so long absent from the Western world, is returning – at least in respect to US-Russia relations.

Ukraine and its people must be protected. The best interests of both the ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russian Ukrainians must be balanced and respected. Everyone's security interests must be recognised. Calamity still stands on every corner. Nonetheless, here we are, on the threshold of a new geopolitical reality. I believe in peace. I believe in diplomacy. I believe it is time to choose both.

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