

Foreign Policy

There's Less to Trump's Ukraine Shift Than Meets the Eye Europe will buy unspecified weapons for Ukraine, and Russia gets a long reprieve from sanctions.

By Christian Caryl

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The day before U.S. President Donald Trump's long-touted announcement of a shift in his policy toward Ukraine, he made a revealing comment to reporters at Andrews Air Force Base. Explaining that the United States would be sending weapons to the Ukrainians that European countries would pay for, he [went on](#): "It will be business for us, and we will send them Patriots, which they desperately need, because Putin really surprised a lot of people."

Really? Russian President Vladimir Putin "surprised a lot of people"? This is one of Trump's favorite [rhetorical tics](#)—the conjuring up of a mythical community ("people are saying") that agrees wholeheartedly with some highly questionable assertion. Who are these people who were surprised by Putin's lies and obfuscations about the war? Very few of them were probably national security experts or professional Russia watchers; it would be very hard to find anyone in Ukraine, the former Soviet Union, or much of Europe who might have been caught off guard by Putin's deft avoidance of any diplomatic commitments that might have constrained his prosecution of the war.

How could anyone, at this point, be "surprised" by Putin's unwillingness to come to the negotiating table? The war in Ukraine, after all, is the very definition of a war of choice: Russia invaded Ukraine, not the other way around. By most accounts, Putin believes that he is winning and that time is on his side—which is why he continues to saturate the skies over Ukraine with missiles and drones. Why on earth would he want to bring the war that he started to a halt?

Trump did not mention any of this in his July 14 press conference with NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte in the Oval Office, where the two men announced the new weapons plan. Trump framed his change of heart about the Russians less as a strategic decision than as a [fit of pique](#).

"I speak to him a lot about getting this thing done, and I always hang up saying, 'Well, that was a nice phone call,' and then missiles are launched into Kyiv or some other city, and I'd say 'strange,'" Trump [said](#). "And after that happens three or four times, you say, the talk doesn't mean anything." The statement echoed another one of his comments at Andrews: "He talks nice, and then he bombs everybody in the evening. So there's a little

bit of a problem there. I don't like it."

But Trump stopped short, in both cases, of commenting on the broader motives behind Putin's lack of niceness. The U.S. president conspicuously lacks any [deeper strategic insight into why the war started](#), why it continues, and how it will end. Like his diplomatic envoy Steve Witkoff, Trump views everything through his highly personalized deal-making lens: Putin must now be called to order because he, Trump's erstwhile friend, has betrayed him.

"What is the strategy here?" Ben Hodges, the former commanding general of the U.S. Army in Europe, told me in an interview. "What's still missing is the desired end state. Why doesn't the president say, 'the end state is that Russia lives inside its own borders like every other sovereign nation, and that it stops attacking its neighbors.'" Instead, Hodges said, we are left with an assemblage of half-baked statements and vague assertions.

Trump should be congratulated for finally expressing some doubts about Putin's mindset. But there is still plenty of reason for skepticism about the U.S. president's strategy. The new policy, if it comes to pass, may be better than an outright halt of supplies to Ukraine, but it is still a reduction from what was originally planned under the Biden administration. Weapons that were supposed to be given to the Ukrainians for free using the president's drawdown authority will instead be sold to the Europeans, who will then pass them on to Kyiv. And details about the specific types and numbers of weapons that will be delivered are still unclear.

Shifting the expense to Europe is clearly a sop to MAGA isolationists, who will presumably be reassured by the notion that the United States is no longer giving free stuff to the Ukrainians. And that, in turn, raises serious doubts about the sustainability of the process; here, too, the lack of a broader strategic rationale promises trouble down the road. If this is just another one of Trump's notorious "deals," [we cannot assume that he will stick to it](#). He has on many occasions demonstrated his willingness to [renege](#) on prior agreements.

Perhaps even more disturbing is Trump's declaration that he would impose "very serious tariffs" on Russia if it refused to end the war within 50 days. Translation: Putin gets another reprieve from any serious U.S. economic pressure. It's also a remarkably generous time frame for a country that has repeatedly dodged cease-fire agreements and serious negotiations. Moreover, Trump has already shown remarkable flexibility—critics might say flagrant inconsistency—[on his tariff deadlines](#). My working hypothesis is that he will extend this deadline as soon as Putin pretends to come back to the negotiating table.

And what Russian trade, precisely, is Trump planning to tax? The United States has [almost no trade](#) with Russia. He did speak glancingly of “secondary tariffs” (meaning, presumably, secondary sanctions) on countries that buy Russian oil (such as India and China), which [could actually be an effective stick](#) to wield against Moscow. But it remains completely unclear whether Trump’s sanctions plans build on the harsh [sanctions package](#) sponsored by U.S. Sens. Lindsey Graham and Richard Blumenthal, which has found wide bipartisan support in the Senate. Even that bill leaves sanctioning Russia entirely at Trump’s discretion, and he has shown no inclination to do anything more on sanctioning Russia than talk.

A similar confusion surrounds the issue that is the most urgent for Ukrainians—which weapons they will get, how many, and when. It is of course good news for Ukraine that arms deliveries will start flowing again, but the details remain vague. The same day as Trump and Rutte’s announcement, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, who was in Washington to meet with U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, [confirmed](#) that Germany is considering buying two new Patriot batteries, which go for roughly \$1 billion apiece, for Ukraine. According to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Norway is ready to buy a third, but Ukraine needs several more. Then there are the Patriot interceptor missiles, which appear to be in short supply. How many of those is Kyiv getting? What else are the Europeans ready to buy for Ukraine, and how much of that is Trump willing to deliver? Will someone in the administration block, pause, or otherwise impede these shipments again?

Hodges, the retired Army officer, sees a president who is essentially inventing policy on the fly. Other presidents, he said, could rely on a policymaking apparatus in the National Security Council and the Defense Department that would help formulate objectives, coordinate messaging, and generally ensure a degree of reliability in U.S. decision-making.

All that, he said, is out the window now. [Chaos reigns](#) in the upper levels of the Pentagon, and the traditional national security policymaking structure in the White House has been [largely dismantled](#). In addition to his job as secretary of state, Marco Rubio is moonlighting as acting national security advisor—“a 25-hour-a-day job in itself,” as Hodges put it. So perhaps it should come as little surprise that Trump seems to be making it all up as he goes along.

If Trump’s statement on resuming weapons deliveries to Kyiv was meant to put serious pressure on Moscow, then one might expect the Russians to react with horror and fear. But Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov simply shrugged: “Fifty days. There used to be 24 hours; there used to be 100 days—we’ve been through all of this.” Ex-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declared: “Russia doesn’t care.”

Meanwhile, the Moscow stock market [soared](#) in relief after Trump's announcement, and the Russian ruble [strengthened](#) as well. The Russians, it seems, weren't very impressed with Trump's latest show in the White House.

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