

China may not be waging war in Ukraine. But it still stands to win

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It seems clear that US President Donald Trump achieved little more than a photo opportunity from the [bilateral summit](#) in Anchorage, Alaska, with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his subsequent meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and other European leaders. Now, a ceasefire seems more out of reach than ever.

For a negotiated peace agreement, Putin has insisted on his demands that Ukraine give up ambitions to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, as well as land occupied by Russian forces. However, with the backing of top European leaders, Zelensky has rejected giving up Ukrainian land as a non-starter.

As a result, [any potential meeting](#) between Zelensky and Putin, as announced by the White House after Trump's meeting with his Russian counterpart, doesn't seem like it will happen any time soon, as both belligerents are intensifying their combat efforts on the battlefield as well as their rhetoric in the press.

The Western mainstream media is full of frustration towards Trump for his openly enthusiastic interactions with Putin on US soil and for his thinly veiled contempt of [Washington's European allies](#), as evidenced by the widely circulating picture in which Trump met Zelensky at the White House while European leaders sat down as if they were being lectured.

However, European allies who pushed back on the Trump administration's agenda could argue that it is because of their solidarity with Zelensky that Trump did not go as far as they had feared to appease Putin and completely sell out Ukrainian interests.

Amid all this, one thing is crystal clear: the Trump administration's efforts to distance itself from the war in Ukraine are becoming so obvious that Trump's personal, red-carpet welcome to Putin in Alaska reminds one of the lavish courtesies [usually accorded](#) to the latter by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The striking visual sense of familiarity is not to be explained away by Trump's claim that Ukraine is "Biden's war, not mine". Moreover, Putin's agreement with Trump – that the war would not have occurred had the latter been in office – should not be taken as just a fulsome compliment. In fact, this moment marks the unequivocal return of big-power politics.

Putin knows how to take advantage of Trump. He is aware that Russia's persistent request to have its security guarantees addressed won't be easily met. He is nonetheless confident that Xi will continue his diplomatic embrace of the Kremlin as China hardens its stance against American trade wars – even while economically and technologically engaging with the US.

One must not forget how Chinese deputy representative to the United Nations Geng Shuang refuted American accusations that Beijing supports Moscow's war effort in Ukraine. Geng has previously said that the war would have turned out differently had China indeed aided Russia militarily.

Nor should we forget the blunt message given by Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) in his face-to-face meetings with European Union leaders. Wang reportedly told them that China doesn't want to see a Russian loss in Ukraine for fear that the US would then shift its whole focus to Beijing.

As for Europe, some observers who look upon the continent might see weakness, indecision and even foolishness due to European elites being stuck in a mess of their own ideological making and political naivety. However, I believe the Europeans are patiently holding onto Washington's sleeve until they are confident they are fully free to handle their own affairs and initiate a grand reset of their relations with Russia.

As a rising superpower in the 21st century, China has emerged without an imperial past – in the context of the modern era – at a time when the US is still very much a hegemonic force in the world system. Of course, Russia used to have its own share of grandeur as a superpower, as shown by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov when he wore a Soviet-era jumper during his visit to Alaska. Meanwhile, Beijing is on a learning curve as it observes how Washington and Moscow behave.

I once entertained a scenario whereby Russians and Europeans can form a third pole of the grand chessboard of world politics, aside from the US and China, simply by coalescing with each other. After all, Europe's weak military spine cannot prop up its economic torso. Russia had a brief run of global dominance in the form of the Soviet Union. However, despite its military prowess, it was ultimately unable to keep its position in the world system.

As the US steadily becomes aloof under the Trump administration, the scenario is evolving. Meanwhile, China is quietly biding its time.

The late [Henry Kissinger](#) – who was the US national security adviser and secretary of state during the Nixon and Ford administrations – once sternly reminded his fellow Americans about the rationale of Washington maintaining close ties with both Beijing and Moscow as part of the US triangulation strategy. He argued that by being closer to each of them than they were to each other, the US would achieve maximum diplomatic flexibility.

Now, it seems it is Beijing who is in this position of flexibility.

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