

KENTSAM Policy Paper of Geopolitical Fires: Türkiye and the Crisis in Ukraine-March 12, 2025

The hybrid workshop, a significant event titled "Geopolitical Fires: Türkiye and the Crises in Ukraine, Syria and Palestine", took place on 12 March 2025 in Kent University's Kağıthane campus. Under the auspices of Istanbul Kent University International Strategic Research and Application Center (KENTUSAM), it brought together academics and diplomats from around the world to share insights on the threats surrounding Türkiye: Ukraine, Syria, and Palestine. Moderated by Ozan Ormeci of Kent University, the event was concluded in four sessions, each focusing on a different crisis and the last one as a final assessment. It was kicked off with the Palestine crisis by Hakan Keskin's presentation and continued with Syria as Saffet Akkaya's fruitful contributions. The final session, led by Yasar Onay, provided a comprehensive analysis of the Ukraine crisis. The event concluded with a final assessment and Q&A Session, leaving the audience well-informed and engaged.

The Crisis in Ukraine, Yaşar Onay

During Donald Trump's presidency from 2017 to 2021, relations between the United States and Russia navigated a contradictory and often perplexing trajectory. The Trump administration maintained certain sanctions against Russia, yet simultaneously, Trump's personal rapport with Russian President Vladimir Putin and his ambivalent rhetoric spotlighted a period characterized by a form of "soft power" approach toward Russia that diverged from traditional US foreign policy norms.

Trump exhibited a consistently friendly demeanor towards Putin, expressing a desire to normalize relations between the two countries. His "America First" policy, however, complicated these intentions. This doctrine emphasized prioritizing American interests, prompting a break from established diplomatic practices and facilitating a more pragmatic, albeit inconsistent, relationship with Russia. This complexity in Trump's policies added notable layers of intricacy to US-Russia relations, making it challenging to predict outcomes and responses.

A pivotal moment in this diplomatic dance came during the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki in 2018. This meeting marked a striking instance of rapprochement, during which Trump notably suggested he could trust Putin's denials regarding allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election. This assertion ignited considerable backlash within the US, revealing deep divisions in public opinion and within the political landscape. The fallout underscored the gravity of Trump's approach, one that often undermined US intelligence assessments in favor of personal diplomacy.

Despite Trump's overtures toward building a friendlier rapport with Russia, Congress maintained a tough stance against Russian aggression during this period. In 2017, Congress overwhelmingly passed the "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act"

(CAATSA), which Trump begrudgingly signed despite its implications on his administration's diplomatic goals. CAATSA broadened the scope of sanctions against Russia, targeting numerous officials and organizations as a response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, electoral meddling, and military interventions in Syria.

Furthermore, despite rhetorical commitments to friendlier relations, the Trump administration did not shy away from demonstrating military resolve against Russian interests. An example of this was the 2018 US airstrike in Syria, which resulted in the deaths of a significant number of Russian mercenaries. This incident illustrated the administration's willingness to exercise military power even while attempting to engage diplomatically with Moscow.

The Trump administration's policies regarding Ukraine also warrant attention, as they represented a dramatic shift from the Obama administration's approach. Trump authorized the sale of lethal weapons to Ukraine, a move that elicited strong reactions from Russia and highlighted the complexities of US-Russia dynamics. Yet, in a controversial 2019 decision, Trump suspended military aid to Ukraine and controversially tied it to an investigation into Hunter Biden, leading to his impeachment. This scandal underscored the precarious balance between Trump's intent to support Ukraine and his complicated entanglements in domestic politics.

Additionally, while the Trump administration took a detached stance regarding Ukraine's relations with NATO, it simultaneously approved various military assistance packages aimed at bolstering Ukraine's defenses against Russian aggression. This inconsistency in policy further muddled the waters, as Trump's ongoing dialogue with Russia combined with his administration's military support for Ukraine created tension within the US's response to the conflict.

In the broader Middle Eastern context, Trump's withdrawal of US troops from northern Syria in 2019 played a crucial role in reshaping power dynamics in the region, leaving a vacuum largely filled by Russian and Turkish influence. This withdrawal was perceived as a departure from traditional US foreign policy and indicated a significant recalibration of American military involvement abroad.

Moreover, while the Trump administration adopted a confrontational posture towards Iran, it proved less effective in curbing Russian-Iranian collaboration, allowing Russia to enhance its foothold in the Middle East. This dynamic not only weakened US influence in the region but also facilitated Russia's burgeoning role as a key player in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The implications of Trump's policies towards Russia were further laid bear with the onset of the Ukraine War in 2022. This conflict, rooted in longstanding tensions between Ukraine and Russia, illustrated the complexities developed during the Trump administration. In reaction to the war, the Biden administration adopted a markedly tougher stance toward Russia, shifting away from Trump's softer approach and reinforcing US commitments to NATO. In this context, Trump's presidency can be seen as a critical period that contributed to evolving US foreign policy frameworks and realigning roles within international alliances.

In recent years, the dynamics of U.S.-Russia relations have become increasingly intricate, particularly under the Trump administration. Trump's questioning of the United States' NATO membership and his critical stance towards allied nations allowed Russia to probe the West's resolve in Eastern Europe, ultimately leading to its aggression against Ukraine. Throughout his presidency, Trump publicly argued that NATO allies were disproportionately reliant on U.S. military support, insisting they must increase their defense expenditures. This rhetoric sowed seeds of doubt in Europe regarding the reliability of America's security commitments, creating an environment ripe for Russian expansionism.

Under Trump, U.S.-Russia relations were marked by a paradoxical mix of détente and antagonism. Trump expressed a strong desire to foster good relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, yet his administration's policies were often characterized by a contradictory approach. Despite Trump's personal rapport with Putin, marked by cordial exchanges and an apparent affinity for the Russian leader, U.S. intelligence agencies and Congressional skepticism about Russia's intentions loomed large. Consequently, while Trump embraced diplomatic overtures and attempted to establish a personal connection with the Kremlin, he simultaneously implemented military and economic measures that exemplified a tough stance against Russia, complicating the bilateral relationship.

This dual approach—supporting warm diplomatic ties with Russia while enforcing sanctions—deepened the internal debate within the United States regarding its foreign policy consistency. The consequences of Trump's policies became increasingly pronounced in the wake of the Ukraine conflict, leading to a more assertive stance from the Biden administration against Moscow.

With Donald Trump winning re-election in 2024, U.S.-Russia relations are poised to enter a new and potentially transformative phase. Trump's prior engagement with Putin during his first term will likely shape his foreign policy strategies regarding the Ukraine conflict in his second term. As his administration seeks to redefine U.S. global security policy, several major scenarios could unfold:

1. Reduction of Support for Ukraine and Push for Peace Negotiations: Throughout his campaign, Trump consistently emphasized an America-first approach, advocating for a withdrawal from foreign entanglements. This philosophy raises the possibility that military and financial support for Ukraine could be significantly curtailed during his presidency. By minimizing U.S. assistance, Trump may compel Ukraine to enter negotiations with Moscow, possibly at the cost of territorial integrity. Such a shift would not only shift the balance of power on the battlefield but could also lead to a peace agreement that demands painful concessions from Ukraine.

2. Tensions with NATO and Consequences for European Security: Trump's previous criticisms of NATO suggest that he may push allied nations to shoulder more responsibility for Ukraine during his second term, potentially leading to decreased U.S. financial contributions to NATO. This approach may draw into question the cohesiveness of the alliance and embolden Russia to exploit perceived divisions within NATO, challenging European security structures and complicating the alliance's collective defense posture.

3. Easing of Sanctions Against Russia: Trump may advocate for a more conciliatory policy towards Russia, which could involve lifting or relaxing economic sanctions imposed for various aggressive actions. Such an easing of sanctions could create fresh avenues for trade and diplomatic engagement with Moscow, yet it would likely incite significant backlash from Congress, allies, and defense officials who view sanctions as crucial to holding Russia accountable.

4. Balancing China and Russia: Strategic Recalibrations: The Trump administration is expected to maintain its characterization of China as the preeminent threat to U.S. interests. To this end, it may elect to adopt a more lenient posture towards Russia to prevent its further alignment with China. Engaging in economic and diplomatic outreach, the U.S. could attempt to dissuade Russia from deepening its ties with Beijing. However, given the historical and strategic closeness between Russia and China, the success of this strategy remains uncertain.

5. The Ukraine War's Ripple Effects on Global Security Dynamics: Trump's approach to the Ukraine conflict could catalyze substantial changes in the global security landscape. A contraction of U.S. support for Ukraine might compel European nations to develop independent security strategies, diminishing their reliance on American military backing. This shift could offer Russia the latitude it needs to pursue an aggressive agenda, further undermining stability in Eastern Europe.

Conclusion: Should Trump secure a second presidential term, the trajectory of U.S.-Russian relations could shift dramatically. Key factors such as reduced support for Ukraine, rising tensions with NATO, potential sanctions relief, and evolving dynamics in Moscow's relationship with Beijing will significantly shape this period. Trump's historical affinity for Putin suggests an inclination towards fundamental shifts in U.S. strategy concerning the Ukraine crisis. Nonetheless, these policy directions are bound to provoke considerable debate and dissent within the U.S. political landscape and among allied nations, raising crucial questions about America's commitment to its foreign policy principles and alliances