

OPINION

Collins, Kutelia: Get Russia right. End the 'resets' and win the peace



President Donald Trump greets Russian President Vladimir Putin on the tarmac after they arrived at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Anchorage, Alaska, on Aug. 15, 2025. (Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP/Getty Images/TNS)



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For over three decades, U.S. “resets” with Russia have failed. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, successive American presidents have entered office and engaged with Russia under the illusion that personal relationships with Russia’s leaders, mutual economic interest and appeasement of Russian demands would transform Russia’s role in the world.

Each “reset” failed.

So too did Biden’s policy of keeping Ukraine on life support while revealing fear of provoking Putin.

President Trump has an opportunity to change this. To do so, he should look back to Reagan, the last American president who got Russia right. Only by getting Russia right can Trump end the bloodshed in Ukraine. That means recognizing who Putin is, adopting a policy of peace through strength, and consistently enforcing it.



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When Putin betrayed the Alaska peace agenda, Trump began to see this. He recently condemned Putin’s attacks on civilians and even declared Ukraine to be capable of victory. This past week, he imposed new sanctions on Russian oil companies, the first on Russia since January. Trump’s turn is a welcome shift from years of flattering and incentivizing Putin. Even Trump’s proposed deal — territory for peace — fell flat. Russia’s dictator wants more.

Appeasing and negotiating with Putin has failed for decades. America's pattern of naïveté and capitulation reached its nadir under Obama, who blamed Russian aggression on Bush and NATO expansion. Remember Hillary Clinton pressing the big red "Reset" button with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, just six months after Russia invaded Georgia? Their "Reset" ended in Putin's 2014 seizure of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. Without Baltic, Polish and Romanian membership in NATO, we would undoubtedly be facing a wider war today.

NATO's strength, not appeasement, has deterred Russian imperialism from seizing more of Europe.

President Biden's policy since mid-2022 exhibited a veneer of strength, but its incoherence failed Ukraine and damaged American credibility. Belated, incomplete sanctions, straightjacketing Ukraine's ability to use American weapons, and trepidation at Putin's nuclear saber-rattling encouraged Russia to seize more territory. Insufficient piecemeal sanctions, half-heartedly implemented, allowed Russia's military to rebuild and grow. Biden kept Ukraine alive. But he refused to help Ukraine win, and he refused to let Russia lose.

Trump's policy should be based on a realistic understanding of Russia, and the pursuit of American values and interests. Trump should revisit the Reagan Administration's 1983 National Security Decision Directive 75, which "recognize(d) that Soviet aggressiveness has deep roots in the internal system." Reagan saw the USSR for what it was: "an evil empire" that not only repressed the freedom of its own citizens, but also sought to overthrow democracy in the West.

Reagan believed, like Kennedy, Truman and Roosevelt, that America should promote human liberty. This clarity pushed U.S. defense investment, reinvigorated NATO, and intimidated Soviet leadership, who ultimately recognized that they could not compete. Reagan empowered Afghanistan's resistance to the Soviet invasion – escalating Soviet losses and fueling discontent. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, Reagan also used diplomacy to press the Soviet leader to allow religious freedom, refrain from force in Eastern Europe, withdraw from Afghanistan, and "tear down" the Berlin Wall.

American strength and resolve induced Gorbachev to respond. The leaders of two superpowers, once locked in a Cold War confrontation, became peacemakers. The groundbreaking INF agreement, the freeing of Eastern Europe from Soviet-imposed communism, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and the end of the Cold War followed.

American leadership reunified Europe under democratic, capitalist systems – ushering in economic prosperity and NATO-backed security. But this freedom evaded Russia because the Soviet system was never fully dismantled. America has failed to see this, and Putin has relentlessly exploited repeated “resets”: in Chechnya, in Georgia, in Syria, in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine.

Putin is no peacemaker. Yet, when countered with decisiveness, Putin has retreated. In 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian jet violating its airspace. In February 2018, when 200 Russian Wagner fighters attacked U.S. special forces in Syria, Trump launched airstrikes that devastated Wagner. In April 2018, the U.S., U.K., and France launched 105 missiles against chemical weapons sites in Syria. In each instance, Russia threatened escalation – but backed down.

Just two weeks ago, when Trump entertained the idea of sending Ukraine Tomahawk cruise missiles, with the potential to strike deep and decisively inside Russia, Putin got on the phone to seek negotiations. Yet, after Trump stalled on the Tomahawks in his meeting with President Zelensky, Putin cagily shifted again. A stony-faced Lavrov delivered the message that Russia had not changed its position since August. In a show of strength, Trump subsequently cancelled the proposed summit in Budapest. Now he needs a comprehensive policy that demonstrates that strength and reverses the mistakes of the past.

A strong Russia policy means bolstering NATO, the organization that has kept the West strong and free for decades. Five years ago, Republicans were right to criticize NATO's European members; they spent too little on defense. But now all NATO members are projected to meet NATO's targeted 2% of GDP. Poland spent almost 5%, followed by the Baltics and Norway. No longer a laggard, Germany last year became the fourth-largest military spender in the world. Strengthening NATO also demands a united front. The U.S. must lead NATO in coordinating a response to Russian violations of NATO airspace, cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, social media and electoral

Like Reagan, Trump should invest in defense production at home to rebuild America's and allies' weapons stockpiles. He should facilitate joint venture defense partnerships with Europe and streamline the overly bureaucratic and political process of selling arms to our allies on Russia's front lines.

A strong Russia policy must defund Russia's war machine through sanctions that work. Trump should pressure China and Turkey, as well as India, to stop buying Russian oil and gas. He should leverage his relationship with Viktor Orbán in Hungary to reduce Russia's energy exports – while promoting Qatar and Azerbaijan as alternative suppliers.

Countries and companies still funneling dual-use technologies to Russia's military must also be stopped. The Biden administration identified the routes through Central Asia and elsewhere, but neither Biden nor Trump has blocked them.

Trump's decision to provide targeting intelligence that enhances Ukraine's ability to strike inside Russia is a crucial step. Beyond this, Trump must facilitate Europe's transfer of \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets to Ukraine to finance its victory. And he should sell Ukraine long-range weapons, such as Tomahawks, without restrictions on their use against legitimate military targets and oil refineries.

For 35 years, the U.S. has cautiously avoided Russia's defeat. Yet, a Russia routed by Ukraine, as the USSR was by Afghanistan, might be our best hope for change — for a Russia that at last abandons its imperial dreams.

President Trump has the opportunity to bring peace through strength. He can end the bloodshed in Ukraine, finally stop 18 years of Russian aggression under Putin, and solidify the liberty and security of the West. If he does so, Trump will have earned his Nobel Prize.

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