



Peace in Our Time

Appeasement, New Nationalism, and
Authoritarian Leadership in the Wake
of Trump and Putin

By Hunter Ford

Trump has continued his harmful rhetoric about the war in Ukraine and the possibility of Russian aggression in Europe. Congressional appeasement combined with Trump's "new nationalism" has already damaged US relations with its NATO allies and could lead to further devastating consequences in a second Trump term. If elected, Trump has already claimed that he will negotiate a peace with Russia and will not stand by NATO allies who don't "pay their bills," encouraging Putin do whatever he likes in Europe.

Introduction

September 30, 1938. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returns from the Munich Conference, proudly waving a printed statement. The statement assures the British people and, by extension, the rest of the world, that the Nazi Government would not be a threat to the United Kingdom. The statement calls back to another Prime Minister, Lloyd George, who just a generation before had brokered the Armistice and eventually the Treaty of Versailles. Chamberlain exclaims "I believe it is peace in our time" to the British citizens who respond with thunderous

applause.¹ He urges the British to "go home and get a nice quiet sleep."² These actions were understandable, though severely misguided, and historical consensus blames the harshness of the Treaty of Versailles as being one of the primary causes of the following World War. Because the UK was not blind to German aggression in August of 1939, Lord Halifax signed the "Agreement of Mutual Assistance Between the United Kingdom and Poland," promising the protection of Poland from "any European Power" (aka Germany).³ Hitler invaded Poland nine days after the signing of this treaty, starting the Second World War as a result.

¹ Neville Chamberlain, "Peace in Our Time -193," *Digital History*:
https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.fm?smtID=3&psid=4060

² Ibid.

³ Halifax, "Agreement of Mutual Assistance Between the United Kingdom and Poland," *The British War Bluebook*. 1939.
<https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk19.asp>

Donald Trump, 45th President and current candidate for 47th, holds two simultaneously disastrous positions regarding the current Russian war in Ukraine. In the first position, he is arguing for ending aid to Ukraine, defunding or withdrawing from NATO, and leaving our European allies vulnerable to attack from Vladimir Putin. This position is eerily similar to the appeasement at Munich in 1938. Appeasement has an ultimate end goal of peace via geopolitical sacrifice, and this first position fits this definition in a compelling way. In his second position, Trump seems to want more than a sacrificial peace; he wants to create a system of authoritarian internationalism between himself, Putin, and other authoritarian leaders. He is quoted via multiple interviews to have incredibly positive views of these authoritarians, and his proposed plans for NATO and Ukraine show a clear bias toward Putin. It is probable that Trump is attempting to position the United States away from the West and away from liberal democracy toward a possible alliance with Putin. While it is unlikely, nearly impossible even, to do this in one presidency, a second term for Trump could very easily lay the groundwork for a future of US-Russian relations built upon the cooperation of authoritarians, an alliance that would have serious and unprecedented consequences.

While the actions that Trump might take to directly shift the US away from alliances built over the Cold War would be unconstitutional, if not criminal, the recent *Trump vs United States* decision is further cause for concern. The Supreme Court has essentially declared full immunity for any action taken under the “core duties of the President,” including his duty as the “Chief Diplomat.”⁴ In short, the Supreme Court, now stacked in Trump’s favor, ruled that actions within core presidential duties are fully immune and unable to be admitted as criminal evidence in order to protect a “vigorous and energetic” executive.⁵ Trump has been granted an unprecedented ability to exercise his rhetoric and ideologies. Trump has

already used clear and dangerous rhetoric that leads to deadly outcomes in the US political sphere and in geopolitics, and now the US Supreme Court is willing to grant him the power and immunity to project these ideologies however he sees fit. If Trump wins in November, he will likely wield more power than any US president in history.

History has shown that Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler was a mistake. There is no doubt about that. However, people seem to have forgotten that lesson. Beginning with the Annexation of Crimea in 2014 and continuing to today, Vladimir Putin has gone on a crusade to “protect” a perceived diaspora of “Ethnic Russians” caused by the fall of the Soviet Union, justifying an invasion of Ukraine. According to one estimate, as of August 2023, 354,000 soldiers had been killed in the current war.⁶ The US has been sending billions of dollars of vital aid and equipment to Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion, likely one reason for Ukraine’s resilience against such a powerful foe. However, some politicians, including former President Trump, are considering ending this aid to Ukraine, effectively giving Ukraine to Putin. Although Trump and his supporters defend ending the aid with an “America First” ideology, this policy is at its best no different in terms of consequence than appeasement and should be regarded as such. At its worst, it could lead to a cooperation of authoritarian leaders with even more serious consequences. If nothing else, it would likely lead to more Russian attacks on NATO and NATO-friendly countries as well as the usurpation of large territories in Ukraine. Put plainly, any “peace agreement” brokered between Russia, NATO, Ukraine, and any other parties, without a significant and humiliating defeat of the Russian military, will end just the same as the Anglo-Polish agreement ended.

Authoritarianism and Perceived Diasporas

⁴ *Trump v. United States*, 29-939 U.S. (2024). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/23pdf/23-939_e2pg.pdf

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Guy Faulconbridge, “Ukraine War, Already with Up to 354,000 Casualties, Likely to Last Past 2023 – U.S. Documents,” *Reuters*, April 12, 2023.

It should not be lost on historians that both Putin and Hitler had dreams of reuniting a perceived diaspora from a fallen empire driving their invasions. Putin has, in another similarity to Hitler, published a manifesto justifying his ideology and explaining his skewed understanding of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine. Putin writes:

First of all, I would like to emphasize that the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space, to my mind is our great common misfortune and tragedy.⁷

This rhetoric raises an alarming comparison to the Nazi idea of *Lebensraum* (Living Space). Putin is effectively claiming that Ukraine and Ukrainians are no different than Russia and Russians. Furthermore, he is claiming that it is a misfortune for there to be a “wall” between these two peoples. These ideas resonate with justifications for both German and Italian Unification in the late 19th century, and they are shockingly similar to how Hitler spoke about the lands he wanted to invade in 1938:

When one day we shall be no more, then the coming generations shall be able to look back with pride upon this day, the day on which a great *Volk* affirmed the German community.⁸

The common thread between these two quotes is the belief that two separate nations, on the basis of a misconstrued history, should exist as one under the stronger power. It should be emphasized that this is a misconstrued history, a mythical understanding that ignores the diplomatic and war time victories of Bismarck and the Prussian invasions of France and their neighbors. It also ignores the strength of the Habsburg crown before Germany existed. This

⁷ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” July 12, 2022, *Wikisource*: [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Historical_Unity_of_Russians_and_Ukrainians)

⁸ Hitler, “Speech in Austria,” April 9, 1938: <https://www.uncp.edu/sites/default/files/2019-01/Hilter%26%23039%3Bs%20Speeches%20Key.pdf>

misunderstanding overlooks the historical animosity between Russia and Ukraine, and it further sweeps under the rug the atrocities such as the Holodomor, a devastating famine in Ukraine caused by Stalin’s drastic mismanagement of food and resources, and the incompetent leadership that led to Chernobyl. Ukraine is not Russia, just as Austria is not Germany. “Ethnic Russians” are only defined by self-reported data in Ukraine based on questions of “nationality” and “native language.” Eurac Research, a research institute in Italy, highlighted the multiple discrepancies in a recent census. Approximately 30% of people gave Russian as their native language, while only 18% responded that Russian was their nationality. The problems with the use of native language compounds this problem. 15% of ethnic Ukrainians listed Russian as their native language, along with 89% of Greek, 83% of Jewish, and 68% of German minorities in Russia.⁹ Language in former Soviet states is an insufficient method for finding alleged “ethnic” Russians. By way of comparison, the Austrians spoke German, they are Germanic people, and yet they were not “Germans” in any sense of national identity. It requires a leap to say that language is the unifying factor that should determine the legitimacy of an invasion. Putin has linked language to the conflict to falsely justify it both to his own people and the West. This is a clear example of using history as a tool for political power, a move directly out of the fascist playbook.

Putin has made it very clear that he wants Ukraine to be Russia, and he has been stating this belief as far back as 2008 to then President George W. Bush: “You don’t understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a state. What is Ukraine? Part of its territories is Eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us.”¹⁰ This may not sound like the genocidal language of the holocaust, and it isn’t, but it is a form

⁹ Sergui Constantin, “Ethnic and Linguistic Identity in Ukraine? It’s Complicated,” *EURAC*, March 21, 2022. <https://www.eurac.edu/en/blogs/mobile-people-and-diverse-societies/ethnic-and-linguistic-identity-in-ukraine-it-s-complicated>

¹⁰ Putin, “Russian President Vladimir Putin in Reported Comment to U.S. President George W. Bush,” *Just Security*, April 7, 2008. <https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/>

of “cultural” genocide no less. It fits precisely the definition of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Borrowing the language of the Convention, Putin and his leaders are intending to destroy in whole or in part the national and ethnic group of Ukraine and Ukrainians using methods including: (a) killing members of the group, (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the groups, and (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.¹¹ Historians may continue to debate the singularity of the Holocaust of European Jewry, but there is a consensus that the Nazis do not have a monopoly on genocide. Furthermore, the UN has provided a clear and concise definition of “genocide” that can be applied in this case.



A new mural by the Lithuanian artist Mindaugas Bonanu
(Credit: Petras Malukas/AFP/Getty Images)

Putin’s regime claims innocence for the genocide in Ukraine through a method similar to what is called “stochastic terrorism” in the United States, which basically means using rhetoric that incites violence while maintaining plausible deniability. There may not be gas chambers or hidden mass graves in Ukraine, and Putin will likely never be tried for war

¹¹ United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, January 12, 1951. https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocitiescrimes/Doc.1_Convention_on_the_Prevention_and_Punishment_of_the_Crime_of_Genocide.pdf

crimes, but his rhetoric dismissing Ukrainian sovereignty and dehumanizing the Ukrainian people has deadly consequences. Putin has described Ukraine as *Малороссия* (“Little Russia”) on multiple occasions. He calls Ukraine this in a similar way to how former Soviets referred to Ukraine as “The” Ukraine to cheapen the nation to a borderland between Russia and NATO. *Україна*, the Russian word for Ukraine, comes from the old Slavic word for borderland, and the Soviet Union used Ukraine as both a borderland due to its naturally defensible geography and as the “breadbasket” of Europe. It was under Soviet control that the Holodomor happened, and it was harsh Soviet control that created the intense rivalry between the two Slavic nations. Putin disregards all of this when he claims that Ukraine is not a real nation. He claims that his war in Ukraine is for the protection of people who he claims suffered “abuse” and “genocide” for 8 years under the Kiev regime.¹² Putin uses the term “genocide” in this context because he tries to link Ukrainian leadership to Nazis during World War II. He uses the Nazis as a boogymen to justify the war, harkening back to what Russians refer to as “the Great Patriotic War.” It is clear that Putin is using a fictional foreign adversary to position himself as the protector of the Russians in Ukraine, and therefore the “liberator” of all of Ukraine.

Putin has claimed that the fall of the Soviet Union was the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the century due to the displacement of so many Russians to foreign lands. While this is often cited to call Putin a communist, he is very clearly not. Putin is an imperialist through and through. This is evident, for example, in the fact that Putin consistently compares

¹² Rachel Martin and Charles Maynes, “Putin justifies Ukrainian Invasion as ‘Special Military Operation’,” *NPR Morning Edition*, February 24, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/24/1082736110/putin-justifies-ukraine-invasion-as-a-special-military-operation>

himself to Peter the Great.¹³ This is remarkably similar to the ideas that Adolf Hitler used to justify the Anschluss of Austria, the invasion of the Sudetenland (Southern Germany), and the eventual invasion of the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa (named for the Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich Barbarossa, a call back to a mythologized figure for the nationalists in Germany). Hitler used the idea of a German *Volks* to justify invading other sovereign nations, just as Putin is doing to Ukraine. Putin is using language that should be considered genocidal, just as Hitler was doing during his rise to power.

Identity Politics and Fukuyama's New Nationalism

Nationalism should be recognized as the liberal ideology that it started under. This is the primary reason that nation states formed in an era of multiethnic empires. Nationalism as an ideology was just as radical and “left” as socialism was because it is just as dangerous to the status quo. Nationalism may have begun as a leftist ideology, but it shifted to the right in the early 20th century due to the adoption of the ideology by fascists. Trump’s right-wing nationalism has been chronicled as dangerous ever since the famous “escalator announcement” in June 2015 that started his campaign for president.¹⁴ Trump has been playing on American fears since he entered the political arena. He has been trying to position himself as a “liberator” of sorts of the American people from “unfair” treatment by European countries. The cult of personality he has developed is a well-oiled, election-winning machine, as demonstrated by his surprising success in 2016. Francis Fukuyama, distinguished political scientist and

¹³ Andrew Roth, “Putin Compares Himself to Peter the Great in Quest to Take Back Russian Lands.” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/10/putin-compares-himself-to-peter-the-great-in-quest-to-take-back-russian-lands#:~:text=2%20years%20old-,Putin%20compares%20himself%20to%20Peter%20the%20Great,to%20take%20back%20Russian%20lands&text=Vladimir%20>

author of *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and Resentment*, describes the main driving force behind this form of right-wing “identity politics” as a “new nationalism.”¹⁵ Fukuyama claims that the *thymos* or “spirit” can explain the new shift in nationalism. *Thymos*, according to Fukuyama, comes from Plato’s *Republic* and manifests as either a need to feel superior to others (megalothymia) or a need to be seen as equal to others (isothymia). This need is not based on objective reality but on how individuals and populations perceive themselves. It does not matter if the wealth and power of a nation is concentrated in one ethnic group; if that ethnic group perceives itself to be oppressed, then it will act as though it is. Perceptions are an imperfect measurement, and the primary issue with that measurement in this case is that when one group has been the in-group for centuries, then any limitations on their power, however small, may cause it to feel oppressed, thus creating what Fukuyama calls a feeling of “invisibility.” According to Fukuyama, “one of the great drivers of the new nationalism that sent Trump to the White House (and drove the United Kingdom to vote to leave the EU) has been the perception of invisibility.”¹⁶ This led many Americans with these anxieties of invisibility to blame the “elites” of society. Fukuyama stresses the non-economic factors that influence right-wing voters, the “spirit” that links groups ranging from the religious right and strict constitutionalists to rural and suburban whites who feel out of place in an era of multiculturalism—all former “in-groups” who now perceive themselves as the “out-group.” *Thymos* doesn’t have to reflect reality; white, Anglo-Saxon, protestants are not being ostracized and oppressed, nor has the left created any system in which minorities have “taken” their place. Trump knows

¹⁴ Adam Gabbat, “Golden Escalator Ride: The Surreal Day Trump Kicked off His Bid for President.” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/13/donald-trump-presidential-campaign-speech-eyewitness-memories>

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, “Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy,” *Foreign Relations*, vol 97, no. 5, 2018.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 94.

this, so he shifts the blame to the “elites.” In 2016, Trump effectively positioned himself against these imagined elites using his famous “drain the swamp” rhetoric. It does not matter that the left hasn’t achieved the goals that the white middle-class conservatives believe they have; it only matters that they believe it and that Trump is there to manipulate their beliefs and fears. Fukuyama himself blames the left for the rise of right-wing identity politics. Fukuyama explains:

“. . .the worst thing about identity politics as currently practiced by the left is that it has stimulated the rise of identity politics on the right. This is due in no small part to the left's embrace of political correctness, a social norm that prohibits people from publicly expressing their beliefs or opinions without fearing moral opprobrium.¹⁷

Fukuyama has been criticized for this idea that it is the left’s fault for the right’s nationalistic identity politics. Fukuyama, it may be said, creates a false equivalency of left-wing and right-wing identity politics. He conflates the dangers and the motivations for usage of identity on both sides of the political spectrum when it isn’t clear at all that they’re comparable. Nonetheless, Fukuyama astutely observes how the left opened the door to right-wing identity politics. Fukuyama continues by calling attention to an interesting contradiction on the right; he implies that the left’s usage of political correctness in its identity politics ought to have led to a right-wing rejection of identity politics. The opposite, however, seems to be true:

And yet Trump's rise did not reflect a conservative rejection of identity politics; in fact, it reflected the right's embrace of identity politics. Many of Trump's white working-class supporters feel that elites have disregarded them. People living in rural areas, who are the backbone of populist movements not just in the United States but also in many European countries, often believe that their values are threatened by cosmopolitan, urban elites. And although they are members of a dominant ethnic group, many members of the white working class see

themselves as victimized and marginalized. Such sentiments have paved the way for the emergence of a right-wing identity politics that, at its most extreme, takes the form of explicitly racist white nationalism.¹⁸

This perceived marginalization explains why Trump has garnered so much support at home. Regardless of the realities or motivations behind political correctness, white, middle-class, non-college educated Americans, who are Trump’s primary voting base, feel they have been censored. It is this feeling of censorship compounded with the economic instability in recent years that has led to the sense of invisibility Fukuyama describes.

But what is the connection between Trump’s new nationalism and the international threat of Russian aggressions? Trump not only positions middle-class Americans as needing protection from the elites, but he also positions the United States as needing ideological protection from the social democracies of Europe. As President, and up through his 2024 campaign, Trump continually aligned himself with Putin and Kim Jong Un in a sort of authoritarian internationalism, or a cooperation among authoritarian nations on the basis of their leaders’ strength and ability, rather than the current liberal democratic world order. He chose to meet with these authoritarian leaders multiple times, referring to them as “interesting” and “very intelligent.” At the same time, he shows disdain for Western European democracy by pulling out of major agreements with Western European countries. He withdrew the US from the Paris agreement, pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Negotiations, threatened to not abide by Article 5 of NATO, and continues to antagonize US allies across the Atlantic at every opportunity.

Since his first term, Trump has been using these new nationalist concepts to gain more power and more support. He is continuing to use these tactics in the current campaign. He accuses other NATO members of taking advantage of the US, which pays significantly more than every other NATO country for the organization. However, he is obfuscating the fact that this NATO funding is the result of a choice made

¹⁷ Ibid, 101.

¹⁸ Ibid, 102.

domestically by elected officials in response to a global terrorist threat, and not a consequence of external pressure from NATO countries. The US increased this funding significantly after the September 11th attacks.¹⁹ 9/11 was also the first time Article 5 was invoked, likely the reason for the increased funding toward the organization. This does not show that Europe is taking advantage of the US; rather, it shows that the US values the organizations collective security clause. Yet Trump is quite effectively using these inaccuracies to rally people behind the concept that the US does not need NATO. Trump is likely pursuing a long-term goal of either drastically cutting funding to NATO or attempting to pull out of the organization entirely. This would open up a direct route for Putin to attack Eastern European nations. Whether this is the explicit intention of Trump's antagonistic behavior toward NATO or just an inevitable side effect of this behavior does not matter. If Trump continues to diminish trust in NATO, a door will be opened for a vote out of it.

Fukuyama reveals how right-wing identity politics has created a brand of racist nationalism that justifies the anti-democratic rhetoric that Trump has been using to demonize NATO and Western Europe while building up relations with and sympathy for other authoritarians. A second Trump term could mean an accelerated building of these unprecedented alliances. The dangerous rhetoric the world observed during his first term might be just the tip of the iceberg now that he has been given a blank check from the Supreme Court to do as he pleases without threat of criminal prosecution. Trump would come into his second term with an unprecedented amount of power and influence, and it cannot be understated how dangerous this is.

Ukraine or Russia, Mr. Trump?

¹⁹ NATO, *Funding NATO*, April 5, 2024.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_67655.htm

²⁰ "Trump Won't Say Whether He Wants Russia or Ukraine to Win War," *CNN YouTube*. 2023.

²¹ Trump, "Fair Trade for the American Worker," *Issues*. 2023.

While Trump has not explicitly said he wants to end aid to Ukraine, he is quoted in a 2023 CNN interview in which he clearly insinuates the policy.

[the EU] are a little bit more effected than we are, okay? So, they've got to put up a lot more money, because they're taking advantage of us just like every other country did. That's why I ended NAFTA and replaced it with the USMCA.²⁰

If this is not an endorsement to end aid, then it is horrible politicking. Trump is playing a dangerous game by comparing military aid to an economic treaty. America is not "confronting unfair trade practices" as his campaign website claims.²¹ Rather, the former President is leaving an ally, one that he has a history of undermining in meetings with advisors, to fall to foreign aggressors seeking to restore a former unified Slavic state (i.e., the USSR).²²

The former President has claimed, of course, to have all the answers for the Russo-Ukrainian war. In the same interview with CNN in 2023, he stated that none of the deaths and destruction would have even happened under his administration, even claiming that Democrats would agree with the sentiment.²³ He claimed to have a "very good relationship with President Zelensky" after Zelensky had claimed President Trump had done nothing wrong during his first impeachment.²⁴ After this, Trump made the claim that approximates appeasement.

Trump: *I would sit down, let me just put it a nicer way. If I'm President I would have that war settled in one day, 24 hours.*

Reporter: *How would you settle that war in one day?*

Trump: *Because I'll meet with Putin, I'll meet with Zelensky. They both have weaknesses and they both have strengths, and within 24 hours that war will be settled. It'll be over. It'll be absolutely over.*

Reporter: *Do you want Ukraine to win this war?*

²² Dawsey and Jaffe, "A Presidential Loathing for Ukraine is at the Heart of the Impeachment Inquiry," *The Washington Post*. 2019.

²³ "Trump Won't Say Whether He Wants Russia or Ukraine to Win War," *CNN YouTube*. 2023.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Trump: *I don't think in terms of winning and losing, I think in terms of getting it settled so we stop killing all these people and breaking down [unintelligible].*²⁵

In this quote, Donald Trump refused to give a proper answer the first time to the question was asked. Instead, he made an appeal to the masses. He only wants people to think of the end of a war, rather than the consequences of how that war ends. It is infinitely easier to justify handing Ukraine over to Putin if it is assumed Ukraine will agree to any terms that strips them of their sovereignty. Great powers, especially in times leading to war, often do attempt to strip the sovereignty of weaker powers. Historians documented this in the lead up to World War I and World War II. The Austrian Ultimatum, for example, the document which holds Serbia responsible for the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, attempted to strip Serbia of its sovereignty. Austria attempted to enact forced censorship of all criticism of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and forced geopolitical jurisdiction over the Serbian investigation into the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Putin is taking a similar line of steps as did the Nazis. Medvedev, the President of Russia in 2008 under which Putin was Prime Minister, invaded Georgia under pretense of genocide in the separatist regions of Georgia. This was an invasion that the world did little to prevent, similar to the annexation of Austria. Next, Putin invaded and controlled the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine with limited protest from the West, similar to the annexation of the Sudetenland during September of 1938. Hitler did not stop with annexation of the Sudetenland, and neither will Putin stop with the annexation of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Hitler invaded the whole of Czechoslovakia and then Poland before the West committed to stopping him. Treaties do not stop war-mongering countries, nor do they stop authoritarian regimes looking for their next land grab. Russia is not going to go for any sort of compromise, and neither will Ukraine, and all an agreement like the one Trump is describing would do is shift the burden of the US from providing funds to a foreign war today to having to declare war over a

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

broken treaty in the future. In the interview, Trump then avoids the question with a lame emotional appeal:

Reporter: *Can you say if you want Ukraine or Russia to win this war?*

Trump: *I want everybody to stop dying, they're dying. Russians and Ukrainians. I want them to stop dying.*²⁶

In the rest of the interview, Trump dodges the question, indicating his clear bias against a Ukrainian victory, eventually claiming that all he will say is that he wants Europe to pay their share. This is the most non-answer that the American people would accept, because, in truth, Trump does not care who wins the war. Just as Chamberlain abandoned the Czechoslovakian government and people, Trump wants to do the same with Ukraine--a quick and quiet end so that the powers that be can go back to their lives and pretend the threat is not there. The primary difference is that, as bad as appeasement went in 1938, it at least had good motives behind it. Chamberlain cared about the Czechoslovakians; he genuinely wanted to avoid death and destruction like what was seen 20 years prior. There's no evidence that Trump actually cares about the Ukrainians that are suffering. Rather, he cares about what ceasing aid will do for his own polling and for his relationship with Putin. Trump declines to condemn Putin, calling the invasion a "mistake" when asked if he still respected Putin.²⁷ In his view, then, Putin's only real "crime" was military miscalculation.

Paying the Bills

Donald Trump has continually claimed that the other NATO countries should pay their fair share. He is not completely unfair in this request. NATO has mandated a 2% minimum of a country's GDP to pay for their collective security capacity since 2006.²⁸ Despite this, the US continues to pay a higher rate than their non-US allies. According to a NATO report from June 2024, the combined wealth of the non-US

²⁸ NATO, *Defense Expenditures and NATO's 2% Guideline*, April 5, 2024.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49198.htm

Allies, measured in GDP, is almost equal to that of the United States. However, non-US Allies together spend less than half of what the United States spends on defense.²⁹ NATO is made up of the wealthiest nations on the planet, and much of the responsibility for the defense of those countries falls on the United States. However, as mentioned above, it is not a requirement from NATO that the US spend at current levels for the collective security aspect of the treaty. Rather, it was the US that made the determination to do so in response to terror attacks in the 21st century, and the US continues to benefit from cooperation with NATO in the fight against terrorism. This is why Trump's claims about NATO are false and misleading rhetoric meant to garner nationalistic support. Trump understands that it was the US that increased its spending, but if he can blame it on other countries, then he can capitalize off of economic discontent while putting more distance between the US and its European allies. According to a CNN article, during a speech in Conway, South Carolina, Trump claimed regarding the status of countries in NATO that have not fulfilled their 2% commitment that "[E]verybody's gonna pay."³⁰ Trump has been making this claim since his first term in office, yet never with the threat of invasion as high as it is now. Trump continues: "They said, 'Well if we don't pay, are you still going to protect us? I said, 'Absolutely not.' They couldn't believe the answer."³¹ It is abundantly clear why they (other NATO leaders) might be alarmed by Trump's rhetoric here: he is essentially claiming that he will disregard Article 5 which calls for the US to send troops into combat in the event of an attack according to the collective security agreement. In the same interview, Trump relates a conversation with an unnamed President of an unnamed NATO country. He claims this President asked him if the US would defend the country if Russia were to invade even if they don't reach their 2% GDP commitment. "No, I would not protect you . . . in fact,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kate Sullivan, "Trump Says He Would Encourage Russia to 'Do Whatever the Hell They Want' to Any NATO Country that Doesn't Pay Enough," *CNN*, February 11, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

I would encourage them (Russia) to do whatever the hell they want. You got to pay. You got to pay your bills."³² The ramifications of this cannot be understated, especially now that Polish intelligence shows Putin is preparing to attack small NATO holdings in Sweden or Estonia.³³

Trump is no stranger to making outlandish comments. Americans remember all too well the "very fine people on both sides" fiasco in response to Charlottesville in 2017.³⁴ This, however, goes beyond his usual, inarticulate off-the-cuff remarks. This is an implicit allowance for an attack against fellow NATO members. Trump is alienating NATO allies and showing a gross negligence regarding the ongoing violence in Ukraine. There are certainly valid criticisms to be made regarding current interventionist foreign policies, but there is a difference between isolationism and what Trump seems to be aiming for with this move. Trump is not looking for isolationism, nor does he have a history of it. This is the same man that killed an Iranian general with a drone, killed the leader of ISIS, and insisted on pulling the US from nuclear and climate deals. In a second Trump term, it is likely that he would increase the funds to Israel in their fight against HAMAS and intervene when and wherever else to suit his political interests. Trump has clearly shown a history of choosing sides. He is not the isolationist he would sometimes like the American people to believe. Rather, he is showing clearly authoritarian tendencies that align with Putin. This is not a case of mere inconsistency between rhetoric and actions; this is a clear case of propaganda meant to play on a mythologized historical understanding of "America First" ideology. There may be good isolationist arguments for scaling back American interventionism in some areas, but in this case, it would entail leaving European allies defenseless and granting Putin amnesty for his imperialist ambitions. Moreover, Trump's own ambitions seem to be more

³³ Emma Soteriu, "Putin is Ready to Launch Invasion of NATO Nations to Test the West, Warns Polish Spy Boss," *LBC News*, May 8, 2024. <https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/putin-ready-invasion-nato-nations-test-west-polish-spy-boss/>

³⁴ CNBC, *President Donald Trump on Charlottesville: You Had Very Fine People on Both Sides*, August 15, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmaZR8E12bs>

imperialist than isolationist as he seeks to align himself with other strong authoritarians he admires. Whether or not Trump is elected, his rhetoric has already had damaging consequences in the way it has changed the platforms of the Republican Party. If elected, Trump would likely not fully accomplish what he appears to be trying, but he would, at the very least, continue to sow the seeds for violent and dangerous action in the future. Trump has become the Republican Party and Trump is showing himself to be an authoritarian sympathizer at best and an outright fascist at worst. A second Trump term would likely have geopolitical consequences that will require more diplomatic expertise than Trump demonstrated in the past and lay the groundwork for a much darker world order built on authoritarian strength rather than liberal democracy. American bureaucracy would likely stop Trump from fully pulling out of NATO or officially allying the US with Putin, but Trump's position as Commander-in-Chief would allow him to prevent troop mobilization in the event of an attack from Putin. No US President has ever refused to send troops when either treaties or Congress required them to do so. It is unclear whether Trump would take such a drastic and unprecedented step, but the risk is real and must be avoided. Trump is ultimately unpredictable—a dangerous quality for the leader of the most powerful military in the world—and he has already done enough to alienate the US from its European allies.

Conclusion

Since the 2016-2020 presidency, Trump's rhetoric has continued to ramp up for a new, more positive stance towards Putin, a drawdown of support for Ukraine, and a further distancing from the US's European allies. Whereas Trump had been restrained in his powers to break treaties, attack foreign adversaries, and oppress US citizens by the criminal code during his first term, the Supreme Court has just granted him permission to act without fear of criminal prosecution. Trump was not able to break out of NATO during his first term, just as he was unable to call on the National Guard during the BLM protests of 2020 as he might have liked. With a Supreme Court

stacked in his favor, however, all bets would be off for his second term.

Trump and Putin's relationship is very dangerous one. Trump wants to align the US with Russia and pull out of NATO. If this were to happen, there is little that would stop Russia from invading the West with impunity. Trump would likely not be able to break away from the NATO treaty outright, but he doesn't need to. Trump could simply not honor it, clearing the path for future, like-minded Republican politicians to officially pull out. Even simply not honoring the treaty would effectively kill NATO as we know it. NATO might continue to exist, but it would have little efficacy without the funding and support of the US. This, combined with an emboldened Putin and an alignment of authoritarian powers, would be the end of the liberal democratic world order as it is known today. The 2024 election might well turn out to be one of the most important turning points in US history, and the stakes not only for Americans but for the entire global community couldn't be higher.

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