

MEMO Published February 12, 2026 · 8 minute read

Trump's Diplomatic Shortcuts are Undermining US Security

Sumona Guha & Mary Sagatelova



There is a difference between ending a war and announcing that you have. And right now, as the Trump Administration pushes a renewed diplomatic effort on Ukraine, they are betting that the latter can substitute for the former.

With the four-year anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine approaching, Trump Administration officials are preparing a peace plan that could be announced in the coming weeks. Like Trump's previous peace deal frameworks, it is likely to be high on optics but fuzzy on details. The Administration has already claimed credit for ending eight wars, spanning conflicts in Southeast Asia, the Caucuses, and the Middle East. But in each case, the declaration of peace has raced far ahead of the actual conditions required to sustain it. We've already seen ceasefires fray, conflicts freeze rather than resolve, and tensions persist.

And Americans are increasingly noticing the same pattern. In focus groups conducted in early February by Third Way in partnership with Impact Research, participants repeatedly described the administration's approach to diplomacy as chaotic, disorganized, and self-serving.

Congressional leaders have the opportunity to present a different vision of US leadership when allies gather at the Munich Security Conference this month.

Busy on the Surface, But Brittle Underneath

Late last year, the Trump Administration once again tried to prioritize speed and spectacle in its attempt to broker a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine. The 28-point plan, delivered by former real estate developer and long-time Trump confidante, Steve Witkoff, was heavily tilted toward Russia. It included a play by Moscow to bring American businesses back to Russia, which would require lifting sanctions, with no concessions in return.

Ukraine and its European allies sharply rejected that opening gambit. Subsequent negotiations have continued, but the US has sidelined our European allies, who are critical for sustaining peace in the region. This omission is not accidental -- it shows clearly that the Trump Administration's diplomatic priority is not to secure peace, but to stage it. These are not isolated missteps, but structural features of a diplomatic approach built for announcement, not enforcement.

President Trump appears intent on reaching a deal with Russia about Ukraine, without Ukraine and US allies in Europe. This would be a brittle peace, with Russia gaining power, Ukraine more vulnerable, and Europe under threat. Congressional leaders should use their conversations at the Munich Security Conference to showcase how America's alliances with

Europe, despite the careless handling by the Trump Administration, provide the enforcement, credibility, and staying power that unilateral agreements alone cannot achieve. America should seek a just peace to end the violence in Ukraine, not a brittle agreement that could ultimately prolong the conflict.

In Third Way's recent focus groups, participants consistently said they wanted the US to lead by example on the world stage, working with our allies and honoring our commitments. They don't want less American leadership; they want a version that looks serious and coordinated.

President Trump's Diplomatic Shortcuts Are Undermining US Security

The Trump Administration's approach to diplomacy is not disrupting outdated processes for the better—it is structurally weakening US global leadership. By prioritizing speed and optics over leverage, enforcement, and allied coordination, the Administration is leaving the US with fewer tools and higher risks. Americans should not feel confident that this diplomatic push will yield an outcome that makes the United States more secure. Here are three reasons why:

- **The US is weaker because Trump pushed Europe away.** President Trump has sharply broken with our European allies, in multiple ways, including launching a tariff war, endorsing far-right parties in Europe as the guardians of European civilization, and the recent, serious crisis in which President Trump failed to rule out using US military force against Denmark, a NATO ally, to take Greenland. European leaders are quickly learning to trust US leadership less and instead, look for alternatives. However, the Russia-Ukraine conflict is fundamentally about European security, and Europe must maintain a leading role in negotiations. In practical terms, European leaders will play a fundamental role in enforcing any kind of peace agreement. If our allies don't buy in, the burden doesn't disappear; instead, it shifts back onto the US. The Trump Administration is risking a paper agreement that might be spinnable in the short term as a victory but is doomed from the start.
- **Trump Mistakes Publicity with Progress.** The Trump Administration has offered concessions without getting anything in return, such as ending Putin's diplomatic isolation by inviting him to the United States. Kremlin officials have claimed that Presidents Putin and Trump reached an understanding in their August meeting in Alaska—a claim that Trump himself has denied. Understanding or not, Moscow has not altered its behavior. Not only has Russia continued to launch deadly assaults inside Ukraine, but it has not backed down from maximalist positions on keeping all

territory acquired by force, or even getting more land. Thus far, Putin hasn't moved an inch and is actually trying to extract concessions not only from Ukraine but from the United States.

- **Putin will use Trump's obsession for a deal—any deal—to get what he wants.** Vladimir Putin is a former KGB agent with decades of experience exploiting asymmetries in power and manipulating leaders. He has organized the entire Russian government and economy around his wartime objectives and has staked enormous personal prestige on a victory in Ukraine. When the US enters negotiations underprepared, it signals to adversaries that America is weak and that it can be outmaneuvered and ultimately tricked into a bad deal. Putting a timeline on when the negotiation should be concluded undermines the US position.

To the Trump Administration's credit, it has not only maintained but in some areas even strengthened the sanctions regime imposed on Russia during the first Trump Administration and the Biden Administration. The US and Europe remain aligned in sanctions and export controls that limit Russia's access to the US financial system and constrain Russia's energy, defense, and technology sectors. This should give the United States an important source of leverage that should not be squandered. But leverage only matters if it is used strategically, and right now, there is a real risk that it is being treated as background noise rather than a central tool of American diplomacy.

Congressional leaders should seize this opening to present a clear alternative for how American power and influence should be used to enhance US security in a durable way. This will inject a focus on core US interests and avoid the trap of endorsing or opposing the next "peace" deal. Below, we outline a few talking points to help Congressional leaders anchor foreign policy conversations in competence and US interests.

- **Trump is still getting Russia wrong.** His promise to bring peace in one day of his presidency was based on a complete misreading of Putin. Trump's failure to quickly end Russia's war in Ukraine is because he consistently underestimates how evil and desperate Vladimir Putin is, fused with his overconfidence in his own negotiating skills. This combination sows chaos, emboldens our enemies, and weakens our alliances.
- **Russia is a direct threat to America.** Whether it's through malicious cyber activity, election interference, or disinformation campaigns, Russia seeks to challenge and undermine the United States. These are not hypothetical risks—they are ongoing realities. We need to be a hard target to face these threats. We need to rebuild our resilience by strengthening cyber defenses and protecting democratic institutions, not offering Moscow easy concessions or new business deals.

- **European security is tied to American security.** Russia is still a threat to our allies in Europe. America's decades-long military, diplomatic, and economic relationships with Europe are a strategic asset to the US, not a burden. The European Union as a bloc is our largest trade and investment partner. Unlike China and Russia, we have alliances that are force multipliers for everything we want to do in the world. Europe is paying more for its own defense, as it should. But we must work with our European allies—not sideline them—to ensure war does not expand across the continent.
- **Real peace starts with a real ceasefire, not territorial surrender.** Putin can't be trusted to honor vague commitments, and we should not bend to his demands for territory. The US position should be to demand an immediate ceasefire—that means NO missile barrages destroying Ukrainian infrastructure and killing innocent civilians, and a pullback of Russian troops. The US and Europe need to be clear about what steps Russia must take in exchange for sanctions relief and unfreezing of assets. Any security guarantees should be closely coordinated and enforced by Europe—otherwise, they risk over-committing the United States.
