

Trump knows Putin has overplayed his hand

By Conrad Black

We are finally coming to a decisive moment in the Ukraine war. In this space and elsewhere, I have credited President Trump with being almost the only Western leader who saw that, in addition to preventing Russian reconquest of Ukraine, the principal Western goal in that war has been to avoid repulsing the Russian takeover in a manner so humiliating to Russia that it put it durably in the potentially lethal embrace of China. Apart from victory in its ill-considered and incompetently conducted aggressive war in Ukraine, the greatest damage Russia could do to the West would be to end up making an arrangement by which China shipped scores of millions of its surplus population to Siberia to exploit the resources there, which Russia has never been able to do, apart from oil. China would pay Russia a royalty that would reduce the proud and distinguished historic civilisation of Holy Mother Russia to vassalage and would install the People's Republic of China as the pre-eminent force on the Eurasian landmass, as well as transforming China for the first time in its 4,000-year history into a resources-rich country.



Putin, Modi, Xi, an embryonic opposition to Western alliance: 'an incongruous gathering in Beijing.' (Photo by Suo Takekuma - Pool/Getty Images)

Trump pursued a methodical course in attempting to achieve these two principal objectives. He went through an elaborate procedure of being an impartial third party to launch the first significant effort from any plausible source to achieve a negotiated peace in the war. This led to a serious flutter of apprehension amongst the other NATO countries that the United States was effectively ditching championship of freedom in the world for some sort of rapprochement with Russia. His more stentorian critics accused him of having been snowed by Putin. The effect of this was to convince the approximately 25 outright slackers in NATO that it was time to make a serious contribution to the alliance and to recognise the extreme vulnerability of many of the NATO states if they genuinely feel they could no longer rely on the military alliance with the United States.

With this alliance-wide commitment to raise defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP, Trump was able to reengage very positively with all of NATO except the aberrantly leftist Spain, and arrange for the contingency of advancing the most

sophisticated weapons to Ukraine in fully sufficient quantities and with strengthened rules of engagement by selling them to NATO partners who would then donate them to Ukraine. This completely shut down the isolationist component of Trump's governing domestic coalition. He met with Putin in Alaska and while we do not know exactly what was said, he presumably advised the Russian leader that if the Kremlin did not behave reasonably it would now be facing a united NATO, a heavily armed Ukraine, and an economic blockade based on America's imposition of secondary sanctions which would reveal that every country in the world except possibly Belarus would prefer to trade with the United States than with Russia.

On July 14 President Trump had given President Putin 50 days to become serious about a reasonable negotiated settlement and in response to Putin's frivolous reaction, he reduced that deadline but seems to have reopened it after the upbeat meeting in Alaska. Since then, Putin has behaved with considerable bad faith, intensified attacks on the civilian population of Ukraine and had his foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, rescind practically every placatory utterance Putin had made. The 50-day deadline expires September 3, and it is time for President Trump, having formalised the regained unity of the NATO Alliance by receiving its principal European members and general secretary in a convivial session of agreement at the White House for three days after the Alaska meeting with Putin, to show the Alliance's teeth.

This will be timely as the effective response to the White House meeting is this past weekend's incongruous gathering in Beijing to observe the 80th anniversary of World War II. This was effectively the embryonic opposition to the ever-tightening and more purposeful Western Alliance: China, India, Russia, North Korea, Iran, Myanmar, Serbia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkestan, Mongolia, Belarus, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Laos. No one could deny the right of China, India, Russia, and Pakistan to attend such an anniversary as eminent allies

against Nazi Germany and Imperialist Japan. North Korea, Slovakia, (though a NATO member), Serbia, Belarus, and Vietnam, could to some extent claim to be victims. The presence of Iran and the former Muslim republics of the Soviet Union and Mongolia is Beijing's feeble attempt to impress the world with its expanding influence. India is apparently only present because of irritation at Trump exercising secondary sanctions against India for buying oil from Russia. For the most part it is a very fragile Sino-Russian led rag-bag of minor and not very successful despotisms.

In all of the circumstances, it will be disappointing and out of character if President Trump does not now finally begin systematic imposition of the West's superior military and diplomatic strength to bring this outrageous war to a satisfactory end. Putin has overplayed his hand. The United States and its allies have both the right and the ability to force a satisfactory end of this war and it is time to do it.

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