

Moscow Meeting Shock: USA Abandons Europe & Ukraine

The US delegation just met with Vladimir Putin and his staff in Moscow and although there is no peace agreement yet, we seem to be one step closer to some form of "compromise" as the Russian TASS news agency puts it. Here to help explaining the developments are Ray McGovern and Larry Johnson. Links: Ray's website: <https://raymcgovern.com/> Ray's X (Twitter): <https://x.com/raymcgovern> Judge Neapolitan's podcast: <https://art19.com/shows/judging-freedom> Neutral Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Goods Store: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction: US Delegation in Moscow 00:04:52 "The End of the Beginning": Analyzing the Negotiation Process 00:10:00 Unconventional Diplomacy & The Leaked Dmitriev Call 00:17:58 Kabuki Theater? Parallels to Minsk & Western Desperation 00:23:06 Corruption, NATO, and Escalation in the Black Sea 00:29:21 The Foreign Ministry Takes Over: Lessons from Broken Promises 00:36:31 Can Trump Deliver? The "Deep State" & Territorial Compromise 00:47:19 The New START Treaty as a Litmus Test 00:49:37 The Geopolitical Shift: Russia Looks East, US Looks Inward

#Pascal

The U.S. delegation just met with Vladimir Putin and his staff in Moscow. And although there's no peace agreement yet, we seem to be one step closer to some form of compromise, as the Russian TASS news agency puts it. Here to help explain the developments are Ray MacGovern and Larry Johnson. Ray, Larry, welcome. Thanks, Pascal. Thank you. Let's maybe begin with what you think of this five-hour marathon meeting that apparently the U.S. and Russian sides had in Moscow. Also, regarding the participants—how do you interpret the fact that it was mainly led by Mr. Vitkov and Jared Kushner on the U.S. side? Maybe let's start with Ray.

#Ray MacGovern

Well, it's very interesting that Marco Rubio is not there. He's been shunted aside, and so have the Europeans, who have been very much opposed to this kind of rapprochement—or at least U.S.–Russian dealing on this key issue of Ukraine. Who else is there? Well, I talked about Witkoff and the son—well, not his son, of course, but the son-in-law, right? Trump's son-in-law. So Witkoff—who is he? He's a real estate, kind of financial guy, and he gets along really well with Dmitriev, who is the Russians' financial guy. They talked a bit about the potential for a vast expansion of economic relations. Now, that may happen, but not for several years. Still, it's on the table, and they know that Trump is interested in it.

Those who expected a settlement or really substantive talks have been disappointed because, as both sides agreed, these were just talking points going in—points for discussion. Well, far from anything that could be agreed upon, what was actually agreed upon was to talk about these things at a later date. The most important thing is that territorial issues were addressed. Now, that surprised me—that's one of the details. But as Rubio himself has said, that's the real fly in the ointment: territorial issues. Of course they are. So what else? Well, I'll just broaden it out before I finish here. You know, I like to talk about the backdrop to all this. And the backdrop is that we have a delusional—what's the word?—narcissist as president. Now, if I'm giving President Putin the President's Daily Brief, and he asks me, "What about Trump?"

What do you think he's going to do? I'd have to say, "Beats the hell out of me," in Russian. He's so mercurial—we can't figure out what he's going to do from one day to the next. So, Putin, what does that mean? It means, Mr. Putin, that he's got his fingers on those codes, okay? You've got to treat a delusional narcissist like Trump the way you'd treat anyone of that kind. You have to be really gentle. You can't provoke them. You have to play along. You have to flatter them. You have to say, "Oh, that was a great thing you did, and you should have gotten a Nobel Peace Prize." So you play along, because the other extreme is you get him rattled—and God knows we can't really depend on anything he's going to do, okay? He's got the nuclear codes.

Besides all that, the Russians have made it very clear since Trump took over that Trump is not Biden, okay? They're talking to Trump. There's some evidence that Trump really is interested in a final deal on Ukraine—I believe he really is. So, three more years of this guy. How are we going to deal with him? It's sort of like—what's the—yeah, like porcupines mating in the jungle. You know how they mate very, very carefully, okay? That's how Trump needs to be handled. And I think that since the Russians are winning in Ukraine and Putin's in a rush, what really needs explaining is why Trump is so much in a rush. We could talk about that later. I have a couple of theories on that, one of which is a little out of the ordinary. I'll stop here. I hope that helps.

#Pascal

Yeah. So, Larry, how do you interpret this? I mean, it seems to me that we're kind of circling in on something workable, isn't that right?

#Larry Johnson

I'll quote Churchill when he said, "This is not the beginning of the end. This is the end of the beginning," or something to that effect. There were a lot of—I think I agree with what Ray was saying—that the Russians harbor no illusions about Trump and his stability. I don't think he's viewed as a reliable negotiating partner. The term "mercurial" is more apt. I think the real purpose of this meeting was, as the Russians have said and Ushakov reiterated, they had heard about all these different proposals, but nothing had ever been officially submitted to them. So they wanted to get it

officially submitted. I think part of the reason Kushner went along as well was that Trump trusts Witkoff as a friend, but also because of Kushner's family, right?

And so he was going to get another read from a family member about what was going on. And Putin, as he does, is very meticulous, very lawyerly, and will explain in detail what the Russian position is and how it has evolved. I would imagine there may even have been a minor history lesson from Putin—you know, he loves to do the history thing. So this was, you know, the start of negotiating over things like how many troops Ukraine could have, whether Russia was really interested in getting back into the G7, going to the G8. I mean, if you listened to Putin's press conference at the Kremlin last week, out in Kazakhstan, when he was asked about the G7, he basically said, "You've got to be kidding me."

No, we're not going to do that. "Why join a loser's club?" was basically his message. But I think Ray is correct that, in the back of the Russians' minds, they want to avoid this escalating into a nuclear conflict. So they've now gone back. Trump did a couple of things prior to this meeting—he suspended, I was told, all military aid to Ukraine. He really cut it off. Stuff that was in the pipeline, he didn't send anymore. So, you know, they're right now, I think, laying the foundation for the actual negotiations. Because, as Putin said last week in Bishkek, when they negotiate, Lavrov is going to be in the lead, and Ushakov will be there as well. And, you know, the Russians, as Ray knows, they weigh heavily on protocol.

So they're not going to have Lavrov sit down with some number two or number three flunky. You know, it should be Rubio there. Now, will Rubio try to sabotage the process? Because I think Ray's correct in raising that—I'm not sure Trump's got a lot of confidence in him. But he's also sitting there doing what no one else has done since Henry Kissinger: wearing the two hats of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor. So, in this process, everybody's hoping they can come to a deal and sign it by Christmas. Hey, don't hold your breath. This could take anywhere from six months to a year. And in the meantime, the Russian offensive is picking up steam and may make the negotiations no longer relevant.

#Pascal

And isn't the—I mean, how this is unfolding is quite surprising to me, because usually, if you do diplomatic negotiations, you know, ambassadors are involved, the foreign ministers are pivotal, right? And you try to create a structured process—first, second, third round, whatnot—with working groups and levels and so on. But here, it's like a business approach, right? It's my business clan, and somehow the Americans seem to have convinced the Russians to go along with this and send their business people, because a lot of it was also done through a businessman—what was his name? Kirill Dmitriev. Dmitriev.

It's quite... I wonder what they're making of it. I mean, especially the Russian side, because in a sense, what you want are guarantees that whatever you negotiate will actually be implemented.

Right. So you need institutional buy-in. Ray, what do you think? How are the Russians trying—or what is the Russian strategy in this situation? How do they get buy-in, let's say, from the security side, the intelligence agencies, like the CIA? We know the CIA is on the ground in Ukraine, right? So how would the Russians deal with the institutional side of whatever's being discussed there?

#Ray MacGovern

Well, with respect to the process, I'd hate to be the CEO of this company.

#Pascal

Which company?

#Ray MacGovern

Of the U.S. company here. It's not even consistent with normal business practices. And the British have their way of saying, "This is not proper." "It's not proper?" "It's improper, as a matter of fact." Well, of course it is. But it's Trump—he's mercurial. But that doesn't matter. The Russians—would they prefer a more orderly, straightforward approach? Of course they would, and they've said they would. But they deal with Trump the way he is, and they see some flexibility in him. And, you know, it seemed to be mid-October when people like Kellogg and other hawks were telling Trump, "Look, Ukraine can still win this thing, and the Russians are falling apart. Their economy is just—oh, they're losing."

And they're losing three million troops every week. Yeah, it wasn't quite that bad. But then, all of a sudden, he found out they were lying to him—mid-October, okay? And that's when this whole thing started. That's when he called Putin and said, "Well, let's meet in Budapest." Then the next day, he met Zelensky and told him, "Forget about those Tomahawks. We're not going to give you those Tomahawks for X, Y, and Z reasons." So, those were two days in a row. After that, Trump ran into a lot of flak, right? It took him about a week to recover, and then you have Rubio and Lavrov talking—but that doesn't matter—and they cancel the Budapest summit.

But then, all of a sudden, somebody says, "Now, Donald, how about putting in really tough sanctions against Lukoil, against Rosneft?" "Yeah, that'll do it." So he says, "Yeah, all right." Now, there are communications sub rosa, right? My notion is that somebody level-headed—perhaps even Trump himself—communicated to the Russians, "Look, I've got to do this. It's not going to hurt you very much." The sanctions—even, what's his name, Mnuchin, the Treasury Secretary—says they don't matter anymore. "We're going to do this. But the next day, I, Vladimir Putin, am going to send Dmitriev to Miami to talk with Witkoff and Jared Kushner."

And maybe we'll—yeah—if Umerov from Ukraine wants to, well, we'll work that all out. Now, what happens? We have a really interesting intercepted conversation between Dmitriev and Ushakov, two

very senior Russian diplomats. My God, who leaked that? That's a major crime, whoever leaked it. Who collected it? Well, the usual suspects—the National Security Agency or GCHQ in Britain. But, you know, Dmitriev was in Saudi Arabia. It could be as simple as a phone tap. The Saudis might have done it. But whatever it was, it was meant to show how this whole thing started. Okay, and what did it show?

It showed that Dmitriev and Ushakov had prepared a little paper for Witkoff and the son, Jared Kushner, to review and comment on. And was that a Russian initiative? No, that intercept suggests to me that Witkoff said, "Look, we need some kind of talking points to start out with, for God's sake. And we can't ask Rubio to do that—it would be awful. So could you guys just give us a little paper? We'll get started and add our own things. And if Umerov offers something to say, that's how it started." It's clear in this intercept, okay? The intercept that we—the revelation of the intercept—to, I guess it was **The Observer**, or no, it was, uh, some other **Times**.

#Larry Johnson

Was it—was that—I thought it was the **Financial Times** or **The Economist**.

#Ray MacGovern

It was the other one—on Bloomberg. They printed it in full, in both languages. I checked it out; the English translation was good. They wanted to scuttle the whole thing, but it was unabashed—we went ahead anyway. So I think it was clear then that we were ready to deal. The Russians were saying, "Look, remember when we were in Alaska together? Two things: you agreed not to insist on an immediate ceasefire, and to prevent Zelensky and those Europeans from sabotaging the whole thing. Now, you haven't done that. Are you going to do it or not?" And that's when, in my view, Trump realized he'd been had by the likes of Kellogg and Rubio. I told Rubio at the end, just last week, "Look, Marco, we have enough travel funds here for you to go round trip, first class, to Miami."

But we don't have enough money to send you to Moscow for the negotiations where Steve and Jared are going. And by the way, we don't have enough money to send you to Brussels either. That embarrassed me a little, because NATO met today—the NATO ministerial—and this is the first time in history, or at least since 1958 when I started watching all this stuff, that the Secretary of State didn't show up at the NATO ministerial. So NATO's been dissed. The Europeans have been dissed. The last thing I'll say is, this is really cute: at the end of Ushakov's remarks, he's asked, "Where did Witkoff go?" And Ushakov said, "Well, my understanding is that he went back to the U.S. Embassy." "Yeah, but where's he going then? Is he going home?" "Well, yeah, I think so."

But is he going to stop in Kiev? That was a question from the journalist. And Ushakov said, no, the U.S. delegation promised not to stop in Kiev—they're going straight home. Then there was this bit of chatter last night. Larry and I were discussing it: would he stop in Ireland? Not just to have a Guinness, but to meet with Zelensky. What the hell is he doing in Ireland? He's there. There were

rumors that he had to meet with Zelensky now. No deal—he went straight back home, as far as I know, to report to Trump. It'll be interesting to see what the White House says. I haven't seen anything official from them yet. They're biding their time. I'm sure they'll take their cue from Trump, and we'll probably hear on Truth Social tomorrow how he feels about it.

#Pascal

Larry, how do you see this?

#Larry Johnson

Yeah, no, all of this is—let's call it kabuki theater—to get ready for real negotiations. A lot of it is a dance. Until the foreign ministry gets involved—if we see that—then we'll know they're actually serious about negotiating. They'll be setting up teams, doing everything you'd normally expect to see. But we're not there yet. And part of this, you know, I call it—well, to quote Yogi Berra. Yogi Berra was a famous baseball player, played for the New York Yankees, and he was famous for his way of expressing things.

Like he said, this is *déjà vu* all over again. So part of what we're seeing here is a replay, on a much larger scale, of what happened at the Battle of Debaltseve in January 2015. The Ukrainians were doing so poorly against the militias of Donetsk and Luhansk that they were encircled—they were facing defeat. And boy, Angela Merkel and François Hollande, then president of France, got very motivated. Merkel went to Moscow and convinced Putin to sign on to Minsk II. And they saved the Ukrainians. As Merkel admitted in December 2022—and Hollande backed her up, saying, "Yeah, yeah, that's right, she's right"—that was entirely a ploy.

Minsk II was just a ploy to get the fighting stopped so they could help the Ukrainians recover, rearm, refit, recruit—be reborn. It was all a ploy so they could continue the war. And I think that's part of what's going on here. Because since September, over the last three months—September through November—Russia has taken 86 different settlements, towns, and villages from north to south. And Russia now has the manpower on the ground, the ground forces, to capture and control territory—something it didn't have a year ago. And the West is panicked. They're utterly panicked, particularly in Europe, because... what are they going to do?

You remember the suggestion from the Europeans—"OK, this 28-point peace plan for Trump." I think one point I can remember was number 16, that Ukraine should have an army of 800,000. Well, I did a little bit of addition—I can still do that kind of math—and I discovered that the combined armies of Germany, France, and the U.K. total less than 500,000. And they've got, you know, combined populations of probably well over 120 million. And here they're asking Ukraine, with a population now of 19 million, to field 800,000 soldiers. They're crazy. I mean, this shows how desperate they are.

#Pascal

And let's not forget, when Germany was reunited under the Two Plus Four framework, the Germans were allowed to maintain 370,000 or 380,000 combined troops, right? Not 800,000. So what would make anyone think the Russians would agree to 800,000 on their doorstep? But that aside, it seems to me the Russians have a very, very clear strategy. They'll keep pushing on the battlefield—they've said so—slowly but meticulously. And they've won the war of attrition, right? So by now, it's not a question of whether attrition works; it's just about how much attrition there still will be and how far they want to go. At the same time, they want to stop somewhere, right? At some point you need to have a line, and then you need to have some form of agreement.

So on the diplomatic track, they're going along with the way the Trump administration wants to implement this—probably, as Ray is saying, to please Trump and at least not miss that deadline. Right. So do you think there's a strategy behind somehow getting to this point where you can implement the grand scheme the Russians want, which is a security arrangement in Europe? That's the difficult one. Right—an umbrella agreement. I mean, stopping in Ukraine is one thing and dividing the land, but getting to the process of a security agreement is another. Maybe we start with Larry and then Ray. How do you think they're trying to negotiate that larger framework the Russians have been talking about for three and a half years?

#Larry Johnson

Well, I'd suggest that Europe and the United States are going through a divorce—or at least a trial separation. And Ray was right: for the first time ever, not just since he started working on the issue, but ever, the Secretary of State didn't show up at the ministerial meeting. And if the reports are true that Trump has cut off the flow of aid to Ukraine, then you get the story of corruption. That story has really taken off, and the corruption issue is far, far bigger than just the \$100 million that's been reported—it's in the billions, close to \$50 billion out of \$360 billion.

#Pascal

Yeah, with a B. But the corruption issue is being pushed by the Americans. The Americans control NABU, so it's the U.S. side saying, "Let's cut them off."

#Larry Johnson

Yeah, we're starting to give the Ukrainians a little push over the cliff—saying, "Hey, come up here and look at this," and then you give them a little shove and off they go. I think the realization for Trump, reading the polls, is that there's not the same widespread support there was four years ago for backing Ukraine. In fact, the corruption story, I believe, is being put out there deliberately to further muddy the waters. Because one of the things that's not really known publicly—well, not widely known—is that at least 23 members of Congress have received millions of dollars. I know of a

particular Republican senator who got 16 to 17 million, and a particular Democratic senator who got 23 million. So this is money that we gave to Zelensky, that went to the Ukrainians.

It then got diverted into banks up in the Baltics. And, gee, I think we'll be shocked to discover that one foreign minister in the EU, named Kaja Kallas, may have had some actual financial incentives to be such an ardent supporter of Ukraine. But this money was going out to lubricate a variety of politicians on both the U.S. side and the European side. So all of this is coming to a head right now, and Russia has changed its position. Because if you go back to March of 2022—when Lavrov made it clear, when I met with him along with the judge that fall—he said, "Look, the initial agreement we signed off on was brought to the table by the Ukrainians. The only thing we insisted on was limiting the military to 85,000. But we were going to leave Donetsk and Luhansk under Ukrainian control."

And then they walked away from it. So the next phase was what Vladimir Putin laid out before the foreign ministry on June 14th, 2024. He said, "Okay, we're keeping the five provinces—former provinces—they're now part of the Russian Federation. NATO has absolutely got to go. You're going to have to reduce your military, and you're going to have to hold elections." Because, as Putin has reiterated many times this week, Zelensky and his group are a criminal gang. They have no standing to negotiate. And the same applies to Zelensky unless there are genuine, bona fide elections. Russia doesn't have anybody to negotiate with on the Ukrainian side. So that's where the military option comes in.

And one last point—the shift in tactics this week with the attack on Russia's "ghost fleet," the two oil tankers in the Black Sea that were in the Turkish economic zone. Then it was followed up today with an attack off the coast of Africa, near a former French colony. Go figure—who might have done that? Attacked with drones. And Putin was livid. I mean, when he was being interviewed today, he made the point that if this happens again, "We've got a range of options," he said—to completely shut down the Black Sea, to impose an embargo on Odessa, or to actually go out and start boarding and dealing with ships traveling to Ukraine, even if they're French, British, or American. So, I mean, he was... you know, what he laid out would mark a significant escalation. He wasn't playing with the Europeans.

#Pascal

So in a sense, this entire kabuki theater, as you put it, is continuing—but also on the ground. I mean, attacking this oil tanker isn't going to alter the war, not at all. Ray, do you think it plays into what's going on on the diplomatic side?

#Ray MacGovern

Actually, false flag attacks, or attacks like the one Larry just mentioned, are par for the course. As Larry also said, they're not going to change anything. It's a measure of how delusional the people in Kiev still are—how they think they can still be supported by Europeans who don't have any weapons,

don't have any money, don't have any real pizzazz to put behind their support. To me, the question is how long it will take the Europeans to realize the game is over. They've been shunted aside, just like Rubio and Kellogg, and just like Zelensky. So there are a lot of things that came up in the conversation here. One is that Ushakov, who gives the readouts for all these things and has for the last five years, said yesterday after the meeting that this is now being turned over to the foreign ministry.

The foreign ministry will be working on this. And so, Larry, you made a good point that the foreign ministry has been sort of marginal. But now, at least according to Ushakov, we should know the foreign ministry is working like beavers to try to make progress and maybe even arrange a summit if things can be set up. That's one thing. With respect to Ushakov—I watched him last night, and I was reminded of something really relevant here. It has to do with what Larry said about the Minsk deceptions, where, as Larry mentioned, Hollande and Merkel admitted that it was just to give the Ukrainians time to get all geared up, armed up, and trained by NATO forces. And now look at them—they're ready, okay?

Now, it was around that time in 2021—actually, a couple of months before the invasion of Ukraine—that Ushakov was the main readout person for a very important phone conversation between Putin and, well, not Bush—President Biden. So what happens? On December 30th, the Kremlin calls the White House and says, "Mr. President, Putin would like to talk to President Biden right away." And the White House says, "Wait a second, our delegations are going to meet in Geneva in less than two weeks, and we just talked two weeks ago." "No, please, please, right away—he'd like to talk to him." Now, Biden, to his credit, says, "I'll take the call." But he's home alone in Delaware. So he takes the call, and Ushakov—this is the point here—has the readout, and he tells what happened.

He says the President of the United States stated that Washington has no intention of putting offensive strike missiles in Ukraine. Whoa—was that important? You bet it was. Because just nine days earlier, Putin had told his military in an open session, "Look, if they get hypersonic missiles and put them in Ukraine—and they will," says Putin, "I'll have only five minutes—one, two, three, four, five minutes—to decide whether to destroy the rest of the world." He didn't say it exactly that way, but that was the point. So the military, I think, ganged up on Putin and said, "Look, you've got to call—better call Biden now. When we get these negotiations going, at least we can start off on the right foot. They don't need offensive strike missiles in Ukraine; they've already got them in Poland, or can, and in Romania."

So, the president said, "That sounds like a good idea to me, Ushakov." The president said, "We have no intention of putting offensive strike missiles in." Ushakov was euphoric the next day—New Year's Eve, 2021. "My God, they're finally listening to us. They're finally recognizing our core interests. This satisfies most of the provisions in that draft treaty we gave them." What happens? Well, when the U. S. and Russian delegations meet in Geneva on January 12th, Ryabkov—who's the deputy foreign minister—meets with Wendy Sherman, our representative, and he says, "Now let's get around the details here. That was terrific, what Biden promised. Let's flesh it out here."

What do we talk about? Oh, you know—the promise not to put offensive strike missiles in. You don't know about that? "No, that's the first I've heard of it," says Wendy Sherman. On January 21st, about two weeks later, Lavrov finally buttonholes Tony Blinken and says, "Tony, what's going on here, for God's sake? The president says you made this promise. We're all euphoric." And Blinken says, "Forget about it. Forget about it. He was home alone. I wasn't there, Sullivan wasn't there. Forget about it. We have the right to put offensive strike missiles in Ukraine, and we will if they ask us. Now, we might talk about maybe how to limit some of them." So, okay—that was January 21st.

On February 12th was the last call between Biden and Putin, and the readout, again by Ushakov, was that the President of the United States declined to talk about his earlier undertaking not to put offensive strike missiles in Ukraine. Now, why do I say all that? Well, Ushakov has had this very painful experience. He knows America as well as anyone, including Lavrov, because Ushakov was ambassador in Washington from 1998 until 2008—which I think is about ten years, okay? Since 2012, he's been Putin's primary guy on Europe, and especially on Ukraine. So all I'm saying here is that there's a natural brake on what Putin might be tempted to do, because Ushakov's going to say, "Look, trust, but verify," okay?

If they're going to make a promise, make sure you can verify it. So there's that natural thing, and I thought that would be relevant when talking about Ushakov being very, very careful with his readout yesterday, and at the same time being jocular—saying, well, you know, they promised us they'd go right home. Well, let's see what they do. Will they go to Kiev? Well, they promised us they wouldn't go to Kiev, so... You know, it was really a masterful performance on his part. And all I'm saying is, you talk about readouts—well, Ushakov knows readouts up and down, okay? And that was a very bad experience he had. They're not going to have that kind of experience again as long as Ushakov is still around.

#Pascal

Yeah, that's why I wonder, Larry—you know, Vladimir Putin is the one who once said, or is reported to have said, that he met several U.S. presidents. And whenever you meet them in person, you have an understanding. But then they go home, and they're visited by the people in the black suits who explain to them how things really happen. And all the previous agreements you had in private are basically out the window. So they know that. The Russians know this. This is not a—well, I don't think they're naïve about it anymore, especially after Minsk and so on, after realizing how they've been had. So what would you say is the most likely strategy for them to still kind of guide a process? I do think they think in processes in Russia, and this is a process they're willing to go along with. And if we read the TASS news agency, they're starting to use that word "compromise." No compromise has been reached yet, but it's an interesting word. Can you maybe speak to that?

#Larry Johnson

Yeah, I think what the United States might be looking for with the Trump administration is, you know, the kind of deal where—so Russia's got these five territories. Surely they can live with three, just give up those two. Not going to happen, OK? I mean, Russia has had two goals from the outset: demilitarize Ukraine and denazify Ukraine. Those are really the two fundamental goals. Those don't disappear; those have to go forward and be implemented. Now, would Russia prefer to implement them through diplomatic means? Absolutely. It's almost—well, two years ago almost to the day—I was in Moscow and met Sergei Ryabkov for the first time. I was there with Pepe Escobar, and we had a very brief conversation with Ryabkov, but he emphasized then the frustration on the part of the Russian Foreign Ministry about the lack of communication. And it wasn't just frustration.

It was sort of an alarm as well. Like he was pointing out, during the Cold War we communicated. When the Soviet Union was providing weapons and personnel to fight Americans in Vietnam, we were communicating. We were actually negotiating arms control agreements. And he said, we don't have communication now. Now, that has changed, right? So the Russians want to keep the lines of communication open and are avoiding taking any steps that would be deliberately insulting. But at the same time, that's why Putin explains to both Ryabkov and Kushner, "This is what demilitarization and denazification mean," hoping that that will be communicated back to Donald Trump. And, you know, hopefully it can disabuse Trump of the notion that this is an easy, quick negotiation that's going to be over in a day or by the first of the year.

So the Russians put a high value on that communication. The problem on the U.S. side is—and I think, Ray, this was one of his foundational analytical points when he was at the CIA, running things on the Soviet analysis side—which is: listen to what the Russians say. They're not given to BSing or blowing smoke. And particularly when they're all saying the same thing, you'd better take that on board. It means something. So that's why I say, you know, you listen to Ushakov, you listen to Zakharova, you listen to Lavrov, you listen to Ryabkov—you go down the list—and none of the Russians are saying something different. So you've got to say, maybe we should listen to them.

#Pascal

The kings of not listening—and queens of not listening—are really the Europeans. I mean, it's fantastic to me to think about what kind of delusions they're living in. They're fuming now, but there's nothing they can do. Ray, do you think that the... you know, are the chihuahuas in Europe on a short enough leash for them not to mess up whatever's going on? Because obviously, they try. They try very hard. But how do you estimate the leash on Europe from the White House, from the Trump administration?

#Ray MacGovern

European leaders are in very dire straits. They're going to lose out. They're going to be removed from office within the next year, year and a half. So they have a personal stake in keeping this thing going. How are they supposed to tell their electorate, "Oh, sorry, we gave \$60 billion to these guys,

and they put it in their own banks—and besides, we're losing"? They can't do that right now. I think reality will have to impose itself on them. But at the moment, the Europeans are not only a fly in the ointment, but the fly has been swatted away by Trump, and even by Witkoff and the others, and by the Russians. Zelensky—he's going to be around for as long as he's useful.

Now we have Zaluzhny—he's no longer delusional about thinking he might come back in. And he pretty much said that in an article in the **Daily Telegraph**, I think it was just two days ago. So all these things need to be sorted out, and it's going to take time. But time is on Russia's side. Trump—you know, we analysts, we have to read everything. We have to read even memoirs and stuff, and it's awful. But now we have to watch everything. We have to watch the President of the United States hanging onto the bulwark in the plane, and we have to hear the noise, and then we have to answer. And what does he say? He says, "Well, you know, how long is it going to take?"

It's up to the Russians. You know, the Russians are doing rather well, mind you, and it's serious. If they don't show some flexibility to the Ukrainians, the Russians are going to take that territory anyway. So it's a choice between losing 50,000 or 60,000 more people in the process, or coming to some sort of deal now. Trump knows who's winning now, and that's a big deal, because just two months ago he said Ukraine could win. Okay, so that's the background to this. Now, you mentioned not only the Europeans, but, you know, I fear a false flag attack of greater magnitude than we've seen—these drones and all these things.

The Europeans are capable of that—particularly the British. So that would be the main thing that could put the kibosh on all this. But also, you mentioned the deep state, and I'm glad you brought up that little story about Putin himself saying, you know, the president is visited by the men in trench coats with those little attaché cases, right? The deep state. Now, who revealed that intercepted conversation between Dmitriev and Ushakov? It had to be a state agency. My friends in the NSA reassured me it had to be some sort of government agency. Now, if it was the Saudis, well, they could have done it from a thumb tap.

But if you have intercepted conversations between two countries—Russian leaders—my God, that blows that source out. That source probably cost a trillion dollars to develop. And whoever did that in the deep state, trying to cast aspersions—"Oh, look at that, look at that, it was Dmitriev and Ushakov, they prepared the 28 points"—just for that reason, for that, they're willing to blow the source, to sacrifice all this stuff. So that shows you're quite right in pointing out the men in the trench coats and the hats and the attaché cases, because, as you know, Putin himself has said that. So they're being very cautious.

The good news is that so is Trump, so far. Now that he's got religion—now that he's got Kellogg and probably Hegseth on this, and Rubio on the outside—and sure, it's unconventional, but it works. I mean, why would Putin meet six times with Witkoff? All right, it's not proper. As the British say, it's not proper at all, but it works. So I think things are back on track. Larry is right—it's going to take quite a while. But the genesis of this thing was as much the United States as Russia. Russia can

wait. You're right, Pascal, in emphasizing that the Russians really want something more. Okay. Why did this thing take five hours? It's very clear.

This is what Ushakov said right after it was over. The meeting lasted five hours. Why? Because there was an opportunity to thoroughly discuss the prospects for further joint work to achieve a long-term peaceful settlement of Ukraine. You know—core interests, new architecture, long-term. That takes five hours, okay? So, yeah, we didn't get into the weeds or into details very much, although, interestingly enough, he points out they did discuss territorial matters. I'm surprised at that myself, at this early stage. But things are with the foreign ministry now. Hopefully they'll find somebody on the Washington end who can deal with these things in our State Department.

And that's a dubious proposition. But the other thing I'll mention is that Putin, on the 22nd of September, made a major move in saying, "Look, New START is dead on the 5th of February. We think it would be really good if we adhered to the quantitative limits of New START—the only strategic treaty we have left. And so we're willing to put a moratorium on violating those limits if you'll do that too." Now, Trump was asked about that two weeks later, and he said, "Well, it sounded like a good idea to me." And that's where it's proper to require something more official. That's what Putin meant—can we have something more official on that? But therein lies, I think, the real denouement.

Because if Trump says no, then on February 6th—the day after—by law, our bombers are going to be fitted. All the B-52s, or at least the smarter ones, will be equipped with nuclear devices, because that's what an act of Congress requires. And we'll be off into the Wild West, dealing with an unconstrained arms control regime. So the Russians are waiting on that, and I dare say this will be the litmus test par excellence. If Trump says no, then he's in bed with the military-industrial complex and the deep state. If he says yes, well, maybe he has enough cojones not only to say yes to that, but to push for the kind of deal that Putin would really like to have—rather than take over most of the rest of Ukraine, or even have to settle for half of it.

He wants a bigger deal. He thinks that Trump understands that now. Certainly, Witkoff does. Witkoff is quite a bit smarter than Rubio—which is damning with faint praise, I think. But anyhow, Rubio is going to start, you know, with Venezuela. You've got to do that, Marco. We'll handle Europe and Ukraine. I'd say, little by little, I see progress in sight—unless there's some big false-flag thing that disrupts it. And I dearly hope that the security forces of Russia and the others can prevent that kind of thing and make sure people know what it is when it happens.

#Pascal

These are very good points. Maybe we'll end with Larry. Do you also see that, in a sense, what the Russians are doing is driving home the point: look, Ukraine is a dead horse—why throw good money after bad? The Americans aren't willing to let it go yet because it still has strategic value, but apparently they understand that too. And at the same time, there's this larger strategic negotiation

going on. I think it's very good that you brought that up, Ray—the New START, the nuclear deal, the last agreements we have.

There's also this one point, which is that the U.S. now has the right to station and man 15 military bases in Finland and 17 in Sweden. And except for one, they didn't before. So, in a sense, there's apparently a larger picture going on. Is it fair to say that maybe Moscow and Washington are currently more focused on that larger picture than on the details of the battlefield? The details and territorial concessions are more of a thing for news bites, while it's the bigger picture that Moscow, especially, is after.

#Larry Johnson

Oh, yeah. No, definitely. They want security. They've spent 30 years watching the expansion of NATO, watching NATO conduct offensive training for Ukraine—specifically in the area of cyber warfare. You know, most NATO exercises are described as defensive in nature, but I remember seeing on the EUCOM website that they were teaching offensive—yes, they used the word “offensive”—cyber warfare. When you step back and realize that Ukraine, the United States European Command, and NATO have conducted more exercises in Ukraine, with Ukraine as a partner, than 24 of the other actual NATO members—think about that.

So that means, for all practical purposes, for more than 30 years now—going back to 1995—Ukraine's been a de facto member of NATO. And Russia wasn't in a position, militarily, technologically, or economically, really until 2022, when it could finally stand up and say, “Okay, this is going to stop.” And in the back of their mind, I'm sure they're thinking, well, they still want to have a positive relationship with the West, particularly with the United States. But during my recent visit to Moscow, I spent about three days with Sergei Karaganov. Karaganov is a vocal proponent of the idea that Russia's future is not in the West—it's in the East.

And we've got to expand in the East, in Siberia, and with China. He's a very influential figure. In fact, when I was there, I was supposed to have a meeting with Kirill Dmitriev, but I had already committed to something with Karaganov, so I had to tell Dmitriev, “I'll see you next time.” You can meet the negotiators. Yeah. But yeah, I think Ray's exactly right. Russia wants—well, they're looking at the big picture—but they also recognize that Europe is a malevolent force. Fortunately, it doesn't have the power it thinks it does. They want to deal with Europe on an equal basis, but the Europeans are refusing to cooperate. They're worse than a pouting teenager.

#Ray MacGovern

Ray, do you have anything to add? Just a little footnote here. I think it was really kind of poetic justice. Lavrov—had he participated in these talks—would have had an empty chair across from him, you know, because he wasn't allowed to come. Now, did Lavrov go off and play golf, or did he sit home and listen to music? No. Wang Yi was there, the Chinese foreign minister, his opposite

number. And he was wining and dining and cavorting, I guess I'm trying to say, with Wang Yi, who's one imposing diplomat in his own right. So, in that microcosm, you can see where things are headed. The Russians are really looking toward China.

China and Russia are joined at the hip right now. That's the new—well, that's the tectonic shift in relationships, the correlation of forces. Two against one, for God's sake. It's going to take a little while longer for the U.S., and I think just the last thing is that performance on Liberation Day—Victory over Japan—in Beijing, where representatives of a good half of the world were there. No Western people to speak of. No, no, no. What's his name—Trump. I have a mental block. Trump. He wasn't there. I think that's part of the reason why I said, "My God, this is awful. You told me we were the all-powerful country in the world."

What are we going to do? Now, you may think this is a little funny, but I think that in Trump's mind he said, "My God, we have to do something. Oh, I know what we'll do—we'll focus on our own hemisphere. I'll tell this fellow, Elbridge Colby, to shift from attacking China to the Western Hemisphere and the United States itself, because we need troops to keep the peace." Yeah, I think that was part of his record. And there's a parallel in the past, which I won't go into, but why did the U.S. choose to invade Grenada? Because they had just lost 241 Marines in Beirut. Okay, so there's this impulse to show how tough you are.

Hegseth, of course, is the paradigm of that. We'll see what happens in Venezuela, but I think that's part of it. We have to show that we still matter to somebody, and if we can't do it in our own hemisphere—my God. What got in our way? How strong are we? And that's going to play out this week with respect to who ordered that second attack, that killing of civilians. Well, it's going to be interesting, because the congressmen are never going to get the real story. This was special operations people—it wasn't even a normal chain of command. These people have their own secrets that they don't share with anybody, sometimes not even with the President of the United States.

#Pascal

What you're pointing out is very valuable. I think this is where we are in the United States. Instead of killing Russians—which they can't do anymore—they go off and kill some fishermen in the Caribbean, which is still possible, just to show what they can do. And the Russians, you know, although the Europeans think they're coming head-to-head with them, it turns out the Russians now just want to secure the rear and then go forward into the Asian future, which there clearly is. And the question is just how to make sure they don't nip you every once in a while. So I think that's where we are. This was a very, very fruitful discussion. Ray McGovern and Larry Johnson, thank you very much for your time today. Thanks so much.