

An extraordinary week: From the Trump-Putin phone conversation to yesterday's U.S.-Russia talks in Riyadh



Secretary of State Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov yesterday in Riyadh.

It's been an extraordinary week – one that began last Wednesday when President Trump spoke by telephone with President Putin and then President Zelenskyy and Secretary of Defense Hegseth spoke at the meeting in Brussels of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, continued Friday when Vice President Vance spoke at the Munich Security Conference and on Monday when President Macron hosted an emergency summit meeting of EU and UK leaders and officials to discuss the situation in Ukraine, and culminated yesterday when Secretary of State Rubio, accompanied by National Security Adviser Michael Waltz and Presidential Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff, met in Riyadh with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and other Russian officials.

After speaking last Wednesday with Putin, Trump described the conversation in some detail in a post on Truth Social: “I just had a lengthy and highly productive phone call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia. We discussed Ukraine, the Middle East, Energy, Artificial Intelligence, the power of the Dollar, and various other subjects.... We each talked about the strengths of our respective Nations, and the great benefit that we will someday have in working together. But first, as we both agreed, we want to stop the millions of deaths taking place in the War with Russia/Ukraine.... We agreed to work together, very closely, including visiting each other's Nations. We have also agreed to have our respective teams start negotiations immediately, and we will begin

by calling President Zelenskyy, of Ukraine, to inform him of the conversation, something which I will be doing right now. I have asked Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Director of the CIA John Ratcliffe, National Security Advisor Michael Waltz, and Ambassador and Special Envoy Steve Witkoff to lead the negotiations which, I feel strongly, will be successful.” In response to subsequent questions from reporters, Trump said he would be meeting with Putin. “The first time we’ll meet in Saudi Arabia, see if we get something done,” he said of a face-to-face meeting, without providing a date. He said the two would also visit each other’s countries to meet.

A summary of the telephone conversation was posted that evening on Putin’s presidential website: “Vladimir Putin had a telephone conversation with President of the United States of America Donald Trump... The leaders also discussed a possible Ukraine settlement. Donald Trump spoke in favour of stopping the hostilities as soon as possible and solving the crisis peacefully. In turn, Vladimir Putin pointed out it was necessary to eliminate the root causes of the conflict and agreed with Donald Trump in that a sustainable settlement could only be reached via peaceful negotiations. Additionally, the President of Russia expressed support for one of the US President’s key arguments, which was that it was time for both countries to work together.... The President of Russia invited the US President to visit Moscow and expressed willingness to receive visiting officials from the United States to discuss topics of mutual interest, including a possible Ukraine settlement. Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump agreed to maintain personal contact in the future, involving in particular in-person meetings.”

Trump also had a telephone conversation Wednesday with President Zelenskyy, a summary of which was subsequently posted on Zelenskyy’s presidential site: “President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy had a phone conversation with the President of the United States, Donald Trump. The leaders discussed the possibilities of achieving peace, the willingness to work together towards this goal at the team level, as well as Ukraine’s technological capabilities, including drones and other modern production. Volodymyr Zelenskyy thanked President Trump for his interest in what they can accomplish together. In addition, the parties focused on the results of the meeting between the President of Ukraine and the U.S. Treasury Secretary, Scott Bessent, along with the preparation of a new agreement on security, economic and resource cooperation. Donald Trump informed his counterpart about the details of his phone call with Vladimir Putin. The President of Ukraine and the President of the United States coordinated joint steps to stop Russian aggression and guarantee reliable and lasting peace; they also agreed to continue their contacts and meetings.”

In a subsequent post, Zelenskyy said, “I had a meaningful conversation with @POTUS. We long talked about opportunities to achieve peace, discussed our readiness to work together at the team level, and Ukraine’s technological capabilities—including drones and other advanced industries. I am grateful to President Trump for his interest in what we can accomplish together. We also spoke about my discussion with Secretary Bessent and the preparation of a new document on security, economic cooperation, and resource

partnership. President Trump shared details of his conversation with Putin. No one wants peace more than Ukraine. Together with the U.S., we are charting our next steps to stop Russian aggression and ensure a lasting, reliable peace. As President Trump said, let's get it done. We agreed to maintain further contact and plan upcoming meetings."

As the presidential conversations were going on, Secretary of Defense Hegseth attended a meeting at NATO headquarters in Brussels of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which includes, in addition to the 32 members of NATO, 25 other countries and the European Union. Expressing his appreciation for the opportunity to present President Trump's approach to the war in Ukraine, he said, "We are at a critical moment. As the war approaches its third anniversary, our message is clear: The bloodshed must stop. And this war must end. President Trump has been clear with the American people – and with many of your leaders – that stopping the fighting and reaching an enduring peace is a top priority. He intends to end this war by diplomacy and bringing both Russia and Ukraine to the table. And the U.S. Department of Defense will help achieve this goal. We will only end this devastating war – and establish a durable peace – by coupling allied strength with a realistic assessment of the battlefield. We want, like you, a sovereign and prosperous Ukraine. But we must start by recognizing that returning to Ukraine's pre-2014 borders is an unrealistic objective. Chasing this illusionary goal will only prolong the war and cause more suffering. A durable peace for Ukraine must include robust security guarantees to ensure that the war will not begin again...That said, the United States does not believe that NATO membership for Ukraine is a realistic outcome of a negotiated settlement. Instead, any security guarantee must be backed by capable European and non-European troops. If these troops are deployed as peacekeepers to Ukraine at any point, they should be deployed as part of a non-NATO mission. And they should not be covered under Article 5. There also must be robust international oversight of the line of contact. To be clear, as part of any security guarantee, there will not be U.S. troops deployed to Ukraine."

Hegseth concluded with these words: "We ask each of your countries to step up on fulfilling the commitments that you have made. And we challenge your countries, and your citizens, to double down and re-commit yourselves not only to Ukraine's immediate security needs, but to Europe's long-term defense and deterrence goals. Our transatlantic alliance has endured for decades. And we fully expect that it will be sustained for generations to come. But this won't just happen. It will require our European allies to step into the arena and take ownership of conventional security on the continent. The U.S. remains committed to the NATO alliance and to the defense partnership with Europe. Full stop. But the U.S. will no longer tolerate an imbalanced relationship which encourages dependency. Rather our relationship will prioritize empowering Europe to own responsibility for its own security."

An altogether extraordinary statement – one in which, in a few sentences, Hegseth ruled out restoration of Ukraine's pre-2014 borders, meaning acceptance of Russia's annexation of Crimea and presumably its subsequent annexation of other regions,

including Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine, as well; ruled out Ukraine's post-war membership in NATO; ruled out any deployment of post-war peacekeeping troops in Ukraine as part of a NATO mission; and ruled out any deployment in Ukraine of U.S. troops as part of any security guarantee.

But if those at the Munich Security Conference were surprised by what Hegseth said last Wednesday at the meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in Brussels, they were probably even more surprised – indeed, stunned – by what Vice President Vance said in his speech to the Conference Friday. Vance, who in a diplomatic faux pas declined to meet with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz but did meet with Alice Weidel, the co-leader and Chancellor-candidate of the right-wing, xenophobic Alternative for Germany (AfD), began by noting that, “We gather at this conference, of course, to discuss security. And normally we mean threats to our external security...But while the Trump administration is very concerned with European security and believes that we can come to a reasonable settlement between Russia and Ukraine – and we also believe that it's important in the coming years for Europe to step up in a big way to provide for its own defense – the threat I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia, it's not China, it's not any other external actor. What I worry about is the threat from within. The retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values: Values shared with the U.S. I was struck that a former European commissioner went on television recently and sounded delighted that the Romanian government had just annulled an entire election. He warned that if things don't go to plan, the very same thing could happen in Germany too.”

Continuing, Vance said, “Now, these cavalier statements are shocking to American ears. For years we've been told that everything we fund and support is in the name of our shared democratic values. Everything from our Ukraine policy to digital censorship is billed as a defense of democracy. But when we see European courts cancelling elections and senior officials threatening to cancel others, we ought to ask whether we're holding ourselves to an appropriately high standard. And I say ourselves, because I fundamentally believe that we are on the same team. We must do more than talk about democratic values. We must live them. Now, within living memory of many of you in this room, the cold war positioned defenders of democracy against much more tyrannical forces on this continent. And consider the side in that fight that censored dissidents, that closed churches, that cancelled elections. Were they the good guys? Certainly not.”

“And thank God they lost the cold war. They lost because they neither valued nor respected all of the extraordinary blessings of liberty, the freedom to surprise, to make mistakes, invent, to build. As it turns out, you can't mandate innovation or creativity, just as you can't force people what to think, what to feel, or what to believe. And we believe those things are certainly connected. And unfortunately, when I look at Europe today, it's sometimes not so clear what happened to some of the cold war's winners. If you're running in fear of your own voters, there is nothing America can do for you.”

“I look to Brussels, where EU Commission commissars warned citizens that they intend to shut down social media during times of civil unrest: the moment they spot what they’ve judged to be ‘hateful content’. Or to this very country where police have carried out raids against citizens suspected of posting anti-feminist comments online as part of ‘combating misogyny’ on the internet. I look to Sweden, where two weeks ago, the government convicted a Christian activist for participating in Quran burnings that resulted in his friend’s murder. And as the judge in his case chillingly noted, Sweden’s laws to supposedly protect free expression do not, in fact, grant – and I’m quoting – a ‘free pass’ to do or say anything without risking offending the group that holds that belief. And perhaps most concerning, I look to our very dear friends, the United Kingdom, where the backslide away from conscience rights has placed the basic liberties of religious Britons in particular in the crosshairs....”

“I come here today not just with an observation, but with an offer. And just as the Biden administration seemed desperate to silence people for speaking their minds, so the Trump administration will do precisely the opposite, and I hope that we can work together on that....In Washington, there is a new sheriff in town. And under Donald Trump’s leadership, we may disagree with your views, but we will fight to defend your right to offer them in the public square. Now, we’re at the point, of course, that the situation has gotten so bad that this December, Romania straight up cancelled the results of a presidential election based on the flimsy suspicions of an intelligence agency and enormous pressure from its continental neighbors. Now, as I understand it, the argument was that Russian disinformation had infected the Romanian elections. But I’d ask my European friends to have some perspective. You can believe it’s wrong for Russia to buy social media advertisements to influence your elections. We certainly do. You can condemn it on the world stage, even. But if your democracy can be destroyed with a few hundred thousand dollars of digital advertising from a foreign country, then it wasn’t very strong to begin with.”

“Now, the good news is that I happen to think your democracies are substantially less brittle than many people apparently fear. To believe in democracy is to understand that each of our citizens has wisdom and has a voice. And I really do believe that allowing our citizens to speak their mind will make them stronger still. Which, of course, brings us back to Munich, where the organizers of this very conference have banned lawmakers representing populist parties on both the left and the right from participating in these conversations. Now, again, we don’t have to agree with everything or anything that people say. But when political leaders represent an important constituency, it is incumbent upon us to at least participate in dialogue with them.”

“Now, to many of us on the other side of the Atlantic, it looks more and more like old entrenched interests hiding behind ugly Soviet era words like misinformation and disinformation, who simply don’t like the idea that somebody with an alternative viewpoint might express a different opinion or, God forbid, vote a different way, or even worse, win an election.”

“Now, this is a security conference, and I’m sure you all came here prepared to talk about how exactly you intend to increase defense spending over the next few years in line with some new target. And that’s great, because as President Trump has made abundantly clear, he believes that our European friends must play a bigger role in the future of this continent. We don’t think you hear this term ‘burden sharing’, but we think it’s an important part of being in a shared alliance together that the Europeans step up while America focuses on areas of the world that are in great danger.”

“But let me also ask you, how will you even begin to think through the kinds of budgeting questions if we don’t know what it is that we are defending in the first place? I’ve heard a lot already in my conversations, and I’ve had many, many great conversations with many people gathered here in this room. I’ve heard a lot about what you need to defend yourselves from, and of course that’s important. But what has seemed a little bit less clear to me, and certainly I think to many of the citizens of Europe, is what exactly it is that you’re defending yourselves for. What is the positive vision that animates this shared security compact that we all believe is so important?”

“I believe deeply that there is no security if you are afraid of the voices, the opinions and the conscience that guide your very own people. Europe faces many challenges. But the crisis this continent faces right now, the crisis I believe we all face together, is one of our own making. If you’re running in fear of your own voters, there is nothing America can do for you. Nor for that matter, is there anything that you can do for the American people who elected me and elected President Trump. You need democratic mandates to accomplish anything of value in the coming years.”

“Have we learned nothing that thin mandates produce unstable results? But there is so much of value that can be accomplished with the kind of democratic mandate that I think will come from being more responsive to the voices of your citizens. If you’re going to enjoy competitive economies, if you’re going to enjoy affordable energy and secure supply chains, then you need mandates to govern because you have to make difficult choices to enjoy all of these things.”

“And of course, we know that very well. In America, you cannot win a democratic mandate by censoring your opponents or putting them in jail. Whether that’s the leader of the opposition, a humble Christian praying in her own home, or a journalist trying to report the news. Nor can you win one by disregarding your basic electorate on questions like, who gets to be a part of our shared society.”

“And of all the pressing challenges that the nations represented here face, I believe there is nothing more urgent than mass migration. Today, almost one in five people living in this country moved here from abroad. That is, of course, an all-time high. It’s a similar number, by the way, in the United States, also an all-time high. The number of immigrants who entered the EU from non-EU countries doubled between 2021 and 2022 alone. And of course, it’s gotten much higher since.”

“And we know the situation. It didn’t materialize in a vacuum. It’s the result of a series of conscious decisions made by politicians all over the continent, and others across the world, over the span of a decade. We saw the horrors wrought by these decisions yesterday in this very city. And of course, I can’t bring it up again without thinking about the terrible victims who had a beautiful winter day in Munich ruined. Our thoughts and prayers are with them and will remain with them. But why did this happen in the first place?”

“It’s a terrible story, but it’s one we’ve heard way too many times in Europe, and unfortunately too many times in the United States as well. An asylum seeker, often a young man in his mid-20s, already known to police, rammed a car into a crowd and shatters a community. Unity. How many times must we suffer these appalling setbacks before we change course and take our shared civilization in a new direction? No voter on this continent went to the ballot box to open the floodgates to millions of unvetted immigrants. But you know what they did vote for? In England, they voted for Brexit. And agree or disagree, they voted for it. And more and more all over Europe, they are voting for political leaders who promise to put an end to out-of-control migration. Now, I happen to agree with a lot of these concerns, but you don’t have to agree with me.”

“I just think that people care about their homes. They care about their dreams. They care about their safety and their capacity to provide for themselves and their children. And they’re smart. I think this is one of the most important things I’ve learned in my brief time in politics. Contrary to what you might hear, a couple of mountains over in Davos, the citizens of all of our nations don’t generally think of themselves as educated animals or as interchangeable cogs of a global economy. And it’s hardly surprising that they don’t want to be shuffled about or relentlessly ignored by their leaders. And it is the business of democracy to adjudicate these big questions at the ballot box.”

“Embrace what your people tell you, even when it’s surprising, even when you don’t agree. I believe that dismissing people, dismissing their concerns or worse yet, shutting down media, shutting down elections or shutting people out of the political process protects nothing. In fact, it is the most surefire way to destroy democracy. Speaking up and expressing opinions isn’t election interference. Even when people express views outside your own country, and even when those people are very influential – and trust me, I say this with all humor – if American democracy can survive ten years of Greta Thunberg’s scolding you guys can survive a few months of Elon Musk.”

“But what no democracy, American, German or European will survive, is telling millions of voters that their thoughts and concerns, their aspirations, their pleas for relief, are invalid or unworthy of even being considered. Democracy rests on the sacred principle that the voice of the people matters. There is no room for firewalls. You either uphold the principle or you don’t. Europeans, the people have a voice. European leaders have a choice. And my strong belief is that we do not need to be afraid of the future.”

“Embrace what your people tell you, even when it’s surprising, even when you don’t agree. And if you do so, you can face the future with certainty and with confidence,

knowing that the nation stands behind each of you. And that, to me, is the great magic of democracy. It's not in these stone buildings or beautiful hotels. It's not even in the great institutions that we built together as a shared society. To believe in democracy is to understand that each of our citizens has wisdom and has a voice. And if we refuse to listen to that voice, even our most successful fights will secure very little. As Pope John Paul II, in my view, one of the most extraordinary champions of democracy on this continent or any other, once said, 'do not be afraid'. We shouldn't be afraid of our people even when they express views that disagree with their leadership. Thank you all. Good luck to all of you. God bless you." A stunning speech. And stunningly irrelevant at a Conference focused on security and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

As noted earlier, Vance met with Alice Weidel, the leader and Chancellor candidate of the AfD and reportedly discussed German politics as well as the war in Ukraine with her. Speaking at the Conference on Saturday, Chancellor Olaf Scholz responded to Vance's comments the day before and accused him of interfering in Germany's upcoming election on Feb. 23: "A commitment to 'never again' is not reconcilable with support for the AfD. We will not accept outsiders intervening in our democracy, in our elections, in the democratic formation of opinion in favor of this party. That is not done, certainly not among friends and allies. Where our democracy goes from here is for us to decide."

After his plane had to return to Joint Base Andrews Thursday night because of a cracked windshield, Secretary of State Rubio finally got to the Munich Conference, and on Friday he and Vance, accompanied by Special Envoy for Ukraine and Russia Keith Kellogg, met with President Zelenskyy. According to Zelenskyy's official website, "the teams of Ukraine and the U.S. agreed to continue their work on drafting the document on economic partnership between the two countries. The parties discussed a number of key issues. Ukraine looks forward to Keith Kellogg's visit [on Feb. 20] for further meetings and a deeper assessment of the situation on the ground. Volodymyr Zelenskyy stressed that Ukraine is ready to move as quickly as possible towards a real and guaranteed peace. Ukraine deeply values President Trump's determination, which can help stop the war and secure justice and security guarantees for Ukraine. The Head of State thanked the Vice President and the entire team for the productive meeting. Our first meeting. Not the last, I am sure. And what we really need is to talk more, work more and prepare a plan to stop Putin and end the war. We want peace very much, but we need real security guarantees. And we will continue our meetings and our work."

On Saturday, Rubio participated in a meeting of the Transatlantic Quint – the foreign ministers of the U.S., the UK, France, Germany, and Italy – with Kaja Kallas, the EU Commission Vice President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Also on Saturday, U.S. officials announced that, as Trump had mentioned in his post about his conversation with Putin, Rubio, accompanied by Michael Waltz, the National Security Adviser; Steve Witkoff, the Special Envoy to the Middle East; and Keith Kellogg, the Special Envoy for Ukraine and Russia, would meet with Russian officials in Saudi Arabia in the "coming days." Kellogg said Kyiv would be involved in

the talks but there wouldn't be a Ukrainian delegation. Zelenskyy responded, "Ukraine will not participate [in the talks]. Ukraine did not know anything about them. And Ukraine considers any negotiations about Ukraine without Ukraine useless. And we cannot recognize anything or any agreements about us without us. And we will not recognize such agreements."

On Sunday, France announced that President Macron had decided to call an emergency summit of European leaders, including British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, on Monday to discuss the war in Ukraine and security in Europe after Kellogg had said on Saturday that Europe would not be included in the peace talks between the U.S., Russia and Ukraine. French Foreign Minister Barrot said the "main European countries" would participate in the summit and the government subsequently announced that the leaders of Germany, the UK, Italy, Spain, Poland, the Netherlands, and Denmark would participate as well as António Costa, the president of the EU's European Council; Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission; and Mark Rutte, the NATO Secretary-General.

Not surprisingly, given the unanticipated announcement of a meeting the next day and the lack of any consultation and preparation for it, the meeting achieved very little. The leaders said they would spend more on their defense and discussed the possibility of sending European troops as peacekeepers after a negotiated ceasefire – something British Prime Minister Starmer had said the UK would do. But Starmer and the seven EU leaders failed to agree on what to say or do in regard to either ending the war or supporting a post-war settlement. Not surprisingly, some of the leaders expressed their frustration that Macron, on an impulse and with little consultation and preparation in advance, had called the meeting. Indeed, as he left the Elysée, Chancellor Scholz, who faces an election and likely defeat on Sunday, said, "It is completely premature and a completely wrong time to have this discussion [about sending troops to Ukraine after a ceasefire] now. I'm even a little irritated by these debates."

Yesterday, Rubio met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Riyadh. Following the meeting, the State Department released this statement: "Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov today as a follow up to President Donald Trump's conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin on February 12. Secretary Rubio was joined by National Security Advisor Mike Waltz and Special Envoy Ambassador Steve Witkoff, the team chosen by President Trump to reestablish the bilateral relationship. Foreign Minister Lavrov was joined by Russian Aide to the President Yuri Ushakov. President Trump wants to stop the killing; the United States wants peace and is using its strength in the world to bring countries together. President Trump is the only leader in the world who can get Ukraine and Russia to agree to that. We agreed to:

- Establish a consultation mechanism to address irritants to our bilateral relationship with the objective of taking steps necessary to normalize the operation of our respective diplomatic missions.

- Appoint respective high-level teams to begin working on a path to ending the conflict in Ukraine as soon as possible in a way that is enduring, sustainable, and acceptable to all sides.
- Lay the groundwork for future cooperation on matters of mutual geopolitical interest and historic economic and investment opportunities which will emerge from a successful end to the conflict in Ukraine.
- The parties to today's meetings pledge to remain engaged to make sure the process moves forward in a timely and productive manner.

One phone call followed by one meeting is not sufficient to establish enduring peace. We must take action, and today we took an important step forward. We would like to thank the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for hosting under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud."

In an interview in Riyadh immediately after the meeting concluded, when asked whether he was walking away from the meeting with any agreements for any follow-on conversations, Rubio said they had agreed on four important principles: "First is that we are going to work – we're going to point our teams respectively to work very quickly to reestablish the functionality of our respective missions in Washington and in Moscow. For us to be able to continue to move down this road, we need to have diplomatic facilities that are operating and functioning normally. The second point is that we're going to appoint a high-level team from our end to help negotiate and work through the end of the conflict in Ukraine in a way that's enduring and acceptable to all the parties engaged. The third point is to begin to work at a high level as well to begin to discuss and think about and examine both the geopolitical and economic cooperation that could result from an end to the conflict in Ukraine....And the last thing we agreed to is that, while our teams are going to be working on all of this, the five of us that were here today are going to remain engaged in this process to make sure that it's moving along in a productive way." When asked what an enduring and successful end looks like, National Security Advisor Waltz said "There are some underlying principles. This needs to be a permanent end to the war and not a temporary end. ... We know just the practical reality is that there is going to be some discussion of territory and there is going to be a discussion of security guarantees. Those are just fundamental basics that will undergird and underlie any type of discussion. But I think the most important part is the President has stated his desire, his determination, to end this war, to end the killing that is going on. The death and destruction that is happening as this war goes on and on, month after month after month in the killing field of eastern and southern Ukraine, is unacceptable. It is not in the interest of either country. It's not in the interest of the world and certainly not in the interest of the U.S. and Europe. So all of those things will drive the negotiation going forward."

David R. Cameron
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