



THE CLOCKTOWER SERIES

HOW THE KREMLIN NEGOTIATES

STRATEGIC COMPETITION SECURITY SERIES – RUSSIA'S END STATE

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The following analysis summarizes the eighth George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC) Strategic Competition Seminar Series (SCSS) virtual seminar for US fiscal year 2025 (October 2024 to September 2025). On July 22, 2025, under the Chatham House rule, presenters Iuliia Osmolovska and Donald Jensen, in a session moderated by Graeme Herd, provided insights on Russian leaders' negotiations tactics. This summary reflects the historical realities of the conflict at the time of the seminar.

INTRODUCTION

On July 4, US President Donald Trump publicly [expressed](#) disappointment in and frustration with Russian President Vladimir Putin: “. . . He's very nice all the time, but it turns out to be meaningless.” By July 14, Trump had issued an ultimatum: Russia had 50 days (September 2) to accept a cease-fire, or the United States would respond accordingly. Trump could authorize the purchase of Patriots by Ukraine and threaten tariffs and secondary sanctions against Russia if no cease-fire emerges.

However, Russia consistently states that it will only negotiate with Ukraine once Ukraine is defeated. Russia feels it can “play Trump,” and through negotiations about negotiations shred US strategic credibility, weaken and isolate Ukraine, divide Europe and consolidate Global South support. Vladimir Frolov [notes](#): “Moscow will not adjust its strategic goals in the conflict and soften its negotiating position as long as it has an advantage on the battlefield.” As war is now the functional foundation of Putin's regime, why would Putin negotiate?

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This seminar offered a timely opportunity to identify the general enduring factors that provide continuity in how Russians view negotiations, and it provided a more context-specific focus on Russian tactics and tricks in actual negotiations themselves, particularly as they relate to Ukraine, including possible future scenarios.

ENDURING FEATURES

In considering continuity through time in Russian negotiating behavior, it is worth pondering the [words](#) of Joseph Stalin in 1913. “A diplomat’s words must contradict his deeds—otherwise what sort of a diplomat is he? Words are one thing, deeds something entirely different. Fine words are a mask to cover shady deeds. A sincere diplomat is like dry water or wooden iron.” Every state may use negotiations as a diplomatic tool to advance its strategic objectives, but as Stalin’s words indicate, Russia consistently approaches negotiations through the win-lose or zero-sum prism, not win-win, with peace in and of itself as the central objective.

Rather than the Harvard model of win-win prevailing, in Russia, negative-sum thinking is also present alongside zero-sum propositions, manifested in the notion of revenge with self-harm. For Russia to win, it is necessary that its opponent loses. Such attitudes are deeply embedded in a broader Russian strategic culture that reflects a broadly shared worldview and supports a set of assumptions that [see](#) Russia as a special “state-civilization.” This display of imperial mentality exhibits a mercantilist-patrimonial view of Russian foreign policy, a tendency embodied by the [role](#) of Kirill Dmitriev as a chief Russian negotiator.

Yet this strategic culture only provides the framework for Russia’s approach. The Kremlin can and does demonstrate flexibility in negotiations, responding to different challenges in contexts and formats in different ways. Putin’s own role in shaping negotiations after 2012 have become more pronounced as relations with the West have deteriorated. Putin himself has become more isolated as a decisionmaker and has taken greater personal interest in certain issues, particularly Ukraine, his obsession. In addition, the inter-agency context between the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), military, and other security branches has become more relevant. Moreover, the siloviki, Russia’s elite [group](#) of officials from the intelligence services, the police, the investigative committee, and other law

enforcement agencies with close ties to business are exercising more influence. At this stage, US negotiations with Russia have become more difficult as compared to negotiations over the 2010 [New START](#) treaty and the 2015 [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA) under the Obama Administration.

RUSSIA’S NEGOTIATION TACTICS

In terms of win-lose, Russia itself privileges indirect intangible wins concerning pride, respect, authority, recognition, and acceptance over direct tangible financial and military costs. The Kremlin approaches negotiations as a fighting not partnering proposition. Russia enters such negotiations with a status-conscious defensive mindset that is imbued with competitive arrogance, whether explicit or implicit, and seeks to neutralize its opponent’s rational brain.

Russia’s official position—Ukraine does not exist—is publicly and repeatedly expressed, as [by](#) Putin himself on June 20, 2025 in front of an international audience at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum: “The whole of Ukraine is ours.” On June 1, Alexei Roshchyn, a Russian political technologist, captured perfectly Russia’s need for respect and the role of intangible factors in its strategic calculus when [commenting](#) on the attitude of Ukrainians to Russia.

They are not afraid of us! Alas, now it has to become clear for everybody why Russians do not like Ukrainians; even, one can say, feel deep enmity turning into hatred. Our people always have had a suspicion - even long before the war - that Ukrainians are not afraid of us Russians. Meaning, literally, NOT AT ALL. Somehow for themselves they [Ukrainians] understand and behave themselves on [SIC] equals with us. For a Russian man, who cannot in principle comprehend how it is to be ‘on equals’, that simply means that Ukrainians despise us as some clowns. And this is what drives us mad to insanity, to black outs! How does it come? How dare they? Are they idiots not to see that we are 100 million more people, that we possess a vast territory, we have [SIC] golden reserve and prosperity fund that they will never ever in their life be able to accumulate despite all wishes? A classical Russian question: do you have a respect to [SIC] me? - and unbelievably light-hearted answer: no! Only Ukrainians can afford to act like this.

Ukraine's key sin in the eyes of Putin and the Russian elite is its resistance and defeat of Russia in the first three months of Russia's full-scale invasion, and then subsequently, Ukraine's potential destruction of the image of Russian greatness, namely that only Russia was capable of defeating Nazism. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's "I need ammunition not a ride" [appeal](#) sealed the destruction of this myth of greatness.

Russia's negotiating tactics can be identified and analyzed. For example, Russian negotiators attempt to create time and energy exhaustion in the opponent through prolonging negotiations, in evidence during the Minsk-II negotiations on February 12, 2015 (18 hours) and in the March 25, 2025 US-Russia Riyadh meeting on the Black Sea and critical infrastructure (12 hours). They also use the opposite tactic—shortening negotiations to indicate their lack of interest, as in the Ukraine-Russia meetings in May 2025 (less than two hours) and June 2025 (less than one hour). Another tactic Russian negotiators employ involves creating an urgent need for the other party to seek a negotiated solution because of increased battlefield pressure. Bluffing, brinkmanship, and deep anchoring ultimatums are also part of Russia's negotiation arsenal, from statements declaring endless war to the instrumentalization of a principal-agent combination, whereby toxic figures

such as senior presidential aide Vladimir Medinsky heads a delegation in Putin's name but cannot effectively function as a negotiator.

As for ultimatums, Russia has issued them to the United States (December 2021, January 2022) and has done so constantly to Ukraine throughout the conflict. These ultimatums include but are not limited to military deployment, mobilization, martial law cancellation, military aid, third-country deployments, and presidential and parliamentary elections (which are to take place no later than 100 days after the cancellation of martial law—the latest one was submitted to the Ukrainian side on June 2). Russia's negotiation tactics are also at times characterized by sudden, last-minute changes in agreed-upon commitments. This occurs especially when Russia is negotiating simultaneously in different formats where "package deals" are possible, with an added preference for no witnesses in the room. Examples of this include Russia's behavior during negotiations with the United States on the critical infrastructure and energy ceasefire negotiated with Ukraine in March and April 2025, and a negotiation with Ukraine in May and June 2025 in which Russians insisted that talks should be conducted without Türkiye and US representatives, despite the fact that the latter is in a role of facilitator/broker.

Future Scenarios, Probability and Russian Behavior

Scenario Focus	Probability	Russian Behaviors Exhibited/Characteristics
1: Hybrid-type WWII – blurring of acute regional conflict bin MENA, Indo-Pacific, Caucasus, Balkans.	20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 'Controlled chaos' strategy with US and Europe (3D negotiations) Advance negative alternatives (hybrid attacks, 'package deals') Bluffing and brinkmanship on Eastern Flank military activity
2: RF war in UKR – current attrition, hostility levels, Europe/US provide optimal level military/financial assistance to UKR.	13%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stalled negotiations US-RF, RF-UKR Shifts to alternatives (US - NATO+mil UKR; RF-PRC/NK) Deep anchoring rigidity
3: RF war in UKR – current intensity attrition, RF making breakthroughs along the frontline after full mobilization and withdrawal of US military support.	4%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stalled RF-UKR with US walking away Intensified RF-US; RF-PRC; RF-PRC-US Resort to alternatives
4 : RF war in UKR – war of attrition but with lower intensity of hostilities due to resource deprivation on both sides.	38%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imitation negotiations compromised/stalled, alternatives limited success Coercive diplomacy with the West; diplomatic blackmailing (nuclear safety) Growing significance US-EUR; intra-EUR negotiations (CoW, Trio)
5: RF war in UKR – ceasefire and transition to peace process but conditions unacceptable to UKR.	11%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RF-US prosper; package deal with US; coercion on UKR Return to "big 3 table" - US-PRC-RF (3 Sept in Beijing) Undermined EUR; RF focus is revenge vs UKR.
6: RF war in UKR – US brokered ceasefire acceptable terms for UKR and RF but not sustainable peace.	12%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forced to negotiate to compromise, softening of demands (Fall 2025) Patchy peace process with violations of ceasefire and delayed revenge Dragging negotiations (time and energy exhaustion to resume hostilities)
7: RF war in UKR – ceasefire and transition to peace process addressing UKR's interests and security.	2%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forced to a temporary compromise (delayed revenge) Ambiguity agreement open to disputable interpretations US-EUR, US-PRC, intra-EUR and EUR-PRC dialogue raise in significance

Figure 1. Future [scenarios](#) of Russia's war in Ukraine (information amalgamated from *Seven Security Scenarios on Russian War in Ukraine for 2025 - 2026: Implications and Policy Recommendations to Western Partners*, GLOBSEC, June 13, 2025)

A 2025 GLOBSEC [report](#) compiled by 61 Ukrainian subject matter experts identified seven potential alternative future scenarios in Russia's war of imperial aggression against Ukraine. The report assessed the probability of each and suggested potential elements of Russian behavior, including negotiating tactics. Figure 1 outlines the central thesis, identifying four military scenarios and three negotiated outcomes, with a 75 percent and 25 percent probability respectively.

CONCLUSIONS

President Trump's September 2 Russian ceasefire deadline [ultimatum](#) "or else" also should be considered in terms of its potential to change Putin's calculus. Former US Ambassador John Bolton [predicts](#) that "Mr. Trump is building his own off-ramp from Ukraine. . . . By the time the 50-day deadline arrives, Mr. Trump will be free to find reasons to do nothing against Russia, washing his hands of the whole affair. He knows he has failed even to approximate his campaign pledge to achieve a cease-fire in 24 hours, and he has no interest in further underlining that failure."

Whether or not Bolton's prediction is true, Putin will only negotiate when his strategic calculus [tells](#) him it's in his survival interests to do so. The question, then, is what can change Putin's strategic calculus? A US policy shift toward empowering Ukraine would change Putin's calculus. This involves enabling Ukraine to impose cross-domain functional defeats on Russia—on land, sea and in the air—to the operational depth of 30 to 300 km from the front line. The effect of this [strategic](#)

[neutralization](#), where war becomes operationally pointless for Russia. This policy shift could be implemented in a way that ensures Ukraine becomes a catalyst for improved regional and transatlantic security outcomes, including European-led conventional defense and deterrence; a stronger European pillar of NATO; and accelerated US burden sharing among Allies and partners. This approach would also enable the United States to devote a greater share of resources in defense of the first island chain in the Indo-Pacific (including Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and the northern Philippines).

As Europe with Ukraine becomes stronger, Russia would become weaker. The intangible set of emotions associated with Russia's great power status would be eroded, exacerbated by diplomatic, informational, military and economic pressure resulting from secondary sanctions on states that purchase the Russian oil that funds the war. Further, one indirect effect could be societal unrest as banking transactions become frozen or unreliable. A resulting societal revolt would thus also enter Putin's calculus. Reportedly, three of Russia's 13 systemically important banks currently [seek](#) bailout talks with Russia's Central Bank. Putin may consider he faces a de facto ceasefire as war becomes operationally pointless, and it is evident that Russia is losing across the board. In such a scenario, Putin may determine negotiations to be the least bad option. Putin may of course still prefer the certainties of a bad war to the perils and unpredictability of a good peace. ~ Σ

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Graeme P. Herd serves as a faculty member in the Research and Policy Analysis department at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. His latest books include *Understanding Russia's Strategic Behavior: Imperial Strategic Culture and Putin's Operational Code* (London: Routledge, 2022) and *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme P. Herd (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021).

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