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Itself a Winning Hand in the Diplomatic Game?”

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Putin Plays His *Trump* Card: How Moscow is Dealing Itself a Winning Hand in the Diplomatic Game?

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The Deal Behind the Diplomacy

For nearly three years, the Russia Ukraine war has appeared locked in a grinding stalemate, defined by incremental offensives, exhausted armies, and a world growing increasingly accustomed to the daily rhythm of attrition. Yet recent weeks have brought a sudden shift in tempo, not on the battlefield but in the corridors of diplomacy. A ceasefire proposal has emerged from Washington, hurriedly circulated, quietly debated, and quickly met with unease among Americas allies. The Europeans, in particular, were struck by the clear sense that the proposal carried the imprint of Russian influence long before it reached European desks.

In Brussels, the reaction was immediate. The draft was flagged as containing concessions Moscow has pursued for years, including limitations on Ukraine's military, acceptance of territorial changes, and a push toward neutrality. These terms align squarely with Russia's long-standing demands, suggesting that the first version of the deal may not have originated from the established structures of United States foreign policy but from the alternative orbit surrounding Donald Trump.

This orbit is personal, flexible, often improvisational, and fundamentally different from conventional diplomatic machinery. Analysts across Europe and the Middle East openly describe Trump as a bridge to Putin, a leader whose interpersonal rapport cultivated over time creates a pathway for dialogue

separate from formal institutions. Alongside Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Trump forms a channel that enables Putin to bypass large scale negotiations and operate through direct personal influence.

This informal architecture appears to be shaping the current moment. And within that architecture, Putin is playing his Trump card with growing confidence.

Coercion Timing and the Illusion of Diplomacy

Russia's strategy in this phase is not confined to diplomatic manoeuvring. It is built on a deliberate choreography of battlefield pressure and political signalling. In the weeks leading up to the emergence of the United States proposal, Russia intensified its strikes on Ukraine's power grid, oil refineries, and industrial backbone. These attacks were not random. They were targeted and effective in weakening Ukraine's resilience heading into winter. By degrading the country's infrastructure, Moscow reduces Kyiv's capacity to fight, but more importantly, heightens Ukraine's vulnerability at the negotiating table.

The timing speaks for itself. Shortly after this wave of strikes, the United States ceasefire proposal surfaced with terms that appeared notably aligned with Russian preferences. Observers pointed out a familiar pattern. Russia applies pressure, then a diplomatic

initiative appears that seems to concede ground to Moscow rather than deter its coercive behaviour.

Meanwhile, Trump's role in this process is unmistakable. His foreign policy instincts are defined by personal relationships, direct deals, and a preference for bilateral agreements over multilateral frameworks. He gravitates toward symbolic gestures rather than sustained economic pressure. This environment plays directly into Putin's strengths. The Kremlin is most comfortable when negotiations are built around personalities rather than institutions, and when ambiguity becomes a tool rather than a liability.

In this context, Trump's positioning of himself as the potential architect of a Ukraine peace deal becomes a central element of the unfolding story. Analysts note that he is motivated not only by geopolitical calculation but by the chance to claim a personal diplomatic triumph, something he could present as stopping another war. Putin understands this motivation well. By encouraging an environment in which Trump can appear as the peacemaker, Moscow stands to gain concessions that Kyiv and Europe would otherwise resist.

At the same time, Trump's sanctions posture has shifted into a pattern described as symbolic rather than substantive. These measures create an impression of toughness without significantly damaging Russia's energy revenues. For Putin, this provides ideal conditions. The United States looks firm, Russia absorbs minimal impact, and negotiations proceed on terms that tilt in Moscow's favour.

Russia is not merely reacting to diplomatic developments. It is shaping them.

The West Divided the Battlefield Shaped and Russia Back in Control

Across Europe, anxiety is rising. There is a growing fear that Washington and Moscow are edging toward a bilateral framework that

sidelines the continent entirely. European policymakers insist that no agreement is possible without Europe, yet they increasingly find themselves responding to proposals rather than originating them. This sidelining is precisely the strategic outcome Russia has pursued for years. A divided West is a weaker negotiating bloc. A strained transatlantic alliance gives Moscow room to manoeuvre. And an American political environment leaning toward rapid settlement gives the Kremlin leverage it has not enjoyed since the early days of the war.

Compounding this is the volatility inherent in Trump's approach. Those who served in Washington during his first term describe a policymaking process that can shift dramatically based on the president's mood. For Putin, this unpredictability is an opportunity rather than a complication. Russia's statecraft is built on exploiting volatility, improvisation, and moments of imbalance. A leader who governs through impulse is easier to influence than one guided by structure.

At the same time, the battlefield continues to reinforce the diplomatic narrative. By escalating selectively, especially through strikes on Ukraine's energy and industrial systems, Russia increases Ukraine's desperation and heightens Western fatigue. The goal is not to break Ukraine's will, but to reshape Western calculations. If Europe views the conflict as increasingly unmanageable, a ceasefire proposal, even one that favours Russia, begins to look acceptable.

This is the logic of Putin's Trump card. He does not need a total victory. He seeks a political settlement that locks in territorial gains, fractures Western unity, and reasserts Russia as an indispensable player in European security. Trump, whether deliberately or not, offers a channel that helps Moscow move toward that objective.

In this moment, Russia is not simply returning to the diplomatic table. It is rearranging it. ■



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