

Ukraine: Buying time

by GWYNNE DYER

There was rejoicing when US President Donald Trump announced that he was going to let Ukraine have weapons after all, but it was conspicuously contained joy. Half-smiles and sighs of relief were plentiful; cheers were absent or faked.

The Ukrainians were relieved because this is the first time they will be getting weapons actually ordered by Trump. The stop-go dribble of arms that the US has sent Ukraine at intervals in the past five months was really the tail-end of Joe Biden's last package, although Trump had to approve each shipment.

What Trump is willing to send now remains unclear, but at least it's on his own initiative and \$10 billion has been mentioned. And Ukrainians don't care that the money will really be provided by other NATO members, who will buy the weapons from the US but pass them on Ukraine's armed forces.

What does concern Ukrainians is that Trump's threatened 'secondary tariffs' (more accurately secondary sanctions) on countries like India and China that are still buying cut-rate Russian oil and gas and supporting Moscow's war economy won't kick in for 50 more days.

That gives Russian President Vladimir Putin 49 more days to bomb Kiev and other Ukrainian cities with impunity, and Trump is notorious for shifting his deadlines to later dates. (TACO, as they say 'Trump always chickens out'). Moreover, Trump warned Ukraine not to attack Moscow in return.

So the Russian reaction to Trump's apparent change of heart was relief that it wasn't worse. It is mostly 'hot air?', wrote Konstantin Kosachev, a senior Russian politician, on Telegram. 'A lot can change in 50 days' on the battlefield and in the mindset of those in power, both in the US and in NATO.'

That's mostly correct, but not so much about NATO, most of whose other members have privately concluded that the United States under Donald Trump is no longer a trustworthy ally.

That leaves them dreadfully exposed if Russia conquers Ukraine and they become the next item on Putin's agenda. The historical 'division of labour' within the NATO alliance has left the Europeans lacking in key military categories like aerial surveillance, satellite data and nuclear deterrence.

Trump imagines that the recent commitment of most NATO countries to spend 5 per cent of GDP on defence 'twice or more than they were spending two years ago' was a response to his demands. It was really a decision to achieve strategic independence from the United States. They have realized they are on their own.

Their problem is that it will take at least five years of strenuous effort to reach that goal, and until then they will still need US support 'which explains the fake adulation and fulsome flattery they offer Trump at every opportunity.

Boot-licking is hard work and they probably can't keep it up for five years, but every month makes a difference. Most European decision-makers understand that a Russian victory in Ukraine must be avoided at all costs, and that they must therefore do whatever they can to keep Trump on side.

Is that really possible? Not if the slide of the United States into a 'soft fascism' accelerates. Not if China invades Taiwan and panics the US into a global war. Not if Putin dies or is overthrown, only for an even more ruthless and reckless ruler to take his place.

The negative possibilities are big and plausible 'but so are less disastrous outcomes. It is still possible to draw a credible scenario in

which the current stalemate in Ukraine endures for another year or so and then reaches an 'in-place' ceasefire like the one that has lasted in Korea for 72 years.

It is possible that the US can be kept in NATO long enough for the European members plus Canada to get their act together and become an independent strategic body. It is possible that China will retain its half-hearted loyalty to the international rule of law and not become another rogue state.

It is likewise possible that the United States, having spent some time under a capricious and authoritarian government, will return to its democratic roots, which run very deep. Regime change in Russia might re-awaken the desire for democracy that was so prominent in the late 1980s and early '90s.

It's not over until the fat lady sings. It's not even over after the fat lady sings. We are heading into a period where all bets are off because climate change will change all other calculations, and the only rational response will be cooperation on a global scale.

No promises, but despair is rarely the right move.