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# Trump doubles down on big foreign policy bets in end-of-the-year flurry

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Analysis by  Stephen Collinson



President Donald Trump speaks at a campaign event in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, on ...



President Donald Trump is spending the end of the year trying to cash in huge foreign policy bets on which thousands of lives may depend and that will define his attempt to wield decisive power far beyond American shores.

Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in South Florida has become a center of global diplomacy, with high-stakes talks Sunday with **Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky** and with **Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** due to follow Monday.

The twin meetings mark significant attempts by Trump to cement a legacy as a global peacemaker. **In Ukraine**, he's seeking to finally end a war he once said he could fix in a day but that is still raging nearly a year into his second term.

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Trump also hopes to deliver a jolt to **Gaza peace efforts** to initiate the second phase of a deal that stopped widespread fighting in October between Israel and Hamas but that could fail without progress.

His intensified focus on Gaza and Ukraine came after Trump put his stamp on the holiday season by ordering US military action in the Middle East, Africa and the Western Hemisphere.

Trump announced on Christmas Day that **US forces struck** “ISIS Terrorist Scum in Northwest Nigeria,” whom he accused of persecuting Christians. A US naval armada is meanwhile prowling through **seas off Venezuela** in support of Trump’s **blockade of sanctioned oil tankers**, the latest escalation in his apparent bid to overthrow President Nicolás Maduro. US forces are chasing one vessel that fled into international waters.

And days before Christmas, the US **struck ISIS targets in Syria** following an attack that killed two US soldiers and a civilian interpreter.

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The flurry of military and diplomatic activity underscores Trump's wish to shake up the globe — untamed after 11 months of unpredictable leadership — just as comprehensively as he's shattered the status quo at home.

It's also a sign of a presidential legacy hanging in the balance before a critical midterm election year that could define the fate of Trump's major global initiatives. The president is fighting to shore up his political foundation at home amid splits in the MAGA movement and falling confidence in his management of the economy.

## **Trump hopeful of Ukraine deal but warns it could all fall apart**

The president emerged from a meeting with Zelensky in Florida on a revised 20-point peace plan optimistic that "we have made a lot of progress on ending that war." He added: "I do think we're getting a lot closer, maybe very close."

But Trump was also realistic after the meeting, which included a call that patched in European leaders who have worked to reshape a US peace plan that was originally seen as a largely Russian blueprint. "We could have something where one item that you're not thinking about is a big item, breaks it up. Look, it's been a very difficult negotiation," Trump said.

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The leaders are all working to solve the perennial riddle of the conflict: Is there a formula that Ukraine can agree to that Russia will be forced to accept?

In recent weeks, US negotiators have pressed Ukraine to ease its resistance to Russian President Vladimir Putin's demands for it to cede strategically vital industrialized areas in the eastern Donbas regions that Russian forces have yet to conquer. Washington has suggested creating a free economic zone in the area. Zelensky has in recent weeks shifted his positions to suggest he may be willing to compromise — but he is demanding rigorous Western security guarantees in return, which Moscow opposes.

Critics argue that Trump is trying to browbeat Ukraine into a peace deal that involves huge concessions even though it's the victim of an unprovoked invasion. Trump's pressure is unfolding at the same time as the latest murderous **Russian air attacks** on major Ukrainian cities and infrastructure. Trump on Sunday reinforced a frequent impression that he is leaning toward Putin by saying he'd bracket his talks with Zelensky with two phone calls with the Russian leader, who has shown little willingness to ease hardline positions.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and US President Donald Trump hold a press conference after their lunch meeting at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida, on Sunday. (*Jonathan Ernst/Reuters*)

Zelensky, meanwhile, faces his own constraints from a nation that is loath to allow Putin to claim a win after so much death and suffering. Ukrainian law requires any ceding of land to Russia to be put to a referendum.

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Trump's strategy is reinforcing fears in Europe that he's unconcerned about delivering a peace that delivers justice to Ukraine after years of war or that defuses critical security threats posed by Russia to US allies in future.

Yet Trump remains perhaps the only world figure with the capacity to force both Russia and Ukraine to the table.

As with all potential peace deals, the prospects for ending the Ukraine war depend on complex details of sequencing, language, enforcement and security guarantees. US, European and Ukrainian negotiators have been diving deep on these issue for weeks. But the core equation hasn't changed: Will Putin accept any deal at a time when he's showing he's willing to fight perhaps indefinitely?

Experience shows that even when Moscow acquiesces to breakthroughs in principle, it often uses exhaustive diplomatic processes to stall and undermine deals. In this case, Putin may seek to keep diplomacy alive to avoid angering Trump even while pushing for battlefield progress.

## Trump's other big bet: Gaza

Trump is expected to turn his attention Monday from a war threatening post-World War II European security in Ukraine to solidifying one of the major foreign policy victories of his first year in office — the ceasefire in Gaza.

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Netanyahu headed to the US on Sunday with Washington increasingly impatient to press ahead with the critical second phase of the ceasefire deal that ended large-scale fighting between Hamas and Israel in October.

Next steps include the setting up of the “Board of Peace” that Trump will head to oversee the reconstruction of Gaza after the devastating war triggered by the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023. There is so far little obvious progress on standing up the international peace force needed to facilitate another crucial aspect of the peace deal — the disarming of Hamas.

The situation could not be more urgent, as hundreds of thousands of Palestinian civilians bombed out of their homes are **living in terrible** conditions amid cold weather and heavy rains, many in tents that keep being washed away in floods.



Displaced Palestinians stand outside a tent shelter following heavy rains in the Nuseirat refugee camp, in central Gaza, on December 13. (*Eyad Baba/AFP/Getty Images*)



Displaced Palestinians gather to receive food portions at a charity kitchen in the Nuseirat refugee camp on December 20. (*Eyad Baba/AFP/Getty Images*)

The ceasefire is holding but looks increasingly fragile amid skirmishes between Hamas and Israeli forces. Without substantial progress, it may collapse under its own contradictions and unmet conditions.

There are multiple reports from the Middle East that Trump's negotiating team — including his son-in-law Jared Kushner — as well as US allies in the Gulf are growing frustrated with Netanyahu's delays over implementing the ceasefire, after intense US pressure forced him to sign on in the first place. The Israelis, meanwhile, may raise continued concern over Iran's ballistic missile programs following the Trump administration's attacks on Tehran's nuclear facilities this year.

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Trump is in a strong negotiating position with Netanyahu, since he's popular in Israel and the prime minister will be seeking his support ahead of an expected election next year. As always, Netanyahu is feeling heat from his hard-right governing coalition, but must walk a tightrope with a US president who is impatient for results as he pursues a Nobel Peace Prize.

## A new front for 'America First' foreign policy

Trump told Politico last week that he'd ordered deadly strikes against ISIS forces in Nigeria deliberately timed to send a message on Christmas Day. US Africa Command said it conducted the strikes in Sokoto state, which borders Niger to the

north, “in coordination with Nigerian authorities.” It assessed that “multiple ISIS terrorists were killed.”

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth warned on social media that there was “more to come.” Trump had **ordered Hegseth in November** to prepare plans to attack, warning he’d go in “guns-a-blazing” to protect Christians.

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The situation in Nigeria is complex, and analysts say there is evidence that Christians have come under attacks by Islamist groups. But many Nigerian Muslims have also been targeted in a fractious security situation by groups seeking to impose an extreme interpretation of Islamic sharia law.

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An image taken from video released by the US Department of Defense shows the strike on what President Donald Trump called "ISIS Terrorist Scum" on December 25. (*Dept. of Defense*)

Some violence is also being driven by criminal and tribal activity. And the Nigerian government may have its own incentives to welcome US action inside its country against its opponents, whether or not it turns out they are affiliated with ISIS.

This complicated mix threatens to undermine Trump's black-and-white presentation of the situation. The fact that US military action is certain to be popular with the Republican evangelical base as Trump's political coalition frays is causing suspicion among his critics. There is no conclusive evidence that Trump is not acting from purely humanitarian motives, even if local reports in Nigeria, including by CNN, uncovered confusion on the ground about targets and questions over whether US action is merely symbolic.

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But as with US actions in Venezuela — and with boat strikes against alleged drug traffickers in the Caribbean and Pacific — the administration has not offered a clear justification for American actions or detailed public briefings about who exactly is being targeted in Nigeria. This only reinforces an impression of a US president acting on a whim or for overtly political reasons while flouting congressional oversight and failing to build domestic political support.

Trump's continued focus on big gambles overseas might seem to undercut the "America First" focus of many of his voters. But his motives at home and abroad reflect a common goal — the imposition of unchallenged personal power.



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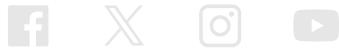
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