A better strategy

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A person can increase the chance of winning a contest – regardless of whether the contest is a game, a business competition, or a military conflict – by playing a good strategy. In the game of checkers, the player who controls the squares on the side of the board often wins (because the pieces on the side of the board cannot be jumped). In an industry dominated by a large well-known firm with a good reputation, a small firm can be profitable if it offers a product that is substantially different than what the dominant firm produces. This difference gives consumers a reason to take a chance on buying the product from the less well-known small firm. In war, the general who keeps his best troops in reserve and deploys them at a decisive moment has a better chance of winning the battle.

As I watch Donald Trump implement his strategy in Ukraine, I cannot help but think he can deploy a better strategy. As of now, Trump seems to be telling Ukraine that it can no longer expect material and financial help from the United States. Trump has even temporarily paused aid payments to Ukraine. Taking away our support from Ukraine will make Ukraine more likely to seek a peace deal. Ukraine will realize that it cannot win its war without the U.S.'s help, especially since Europe is unlikely to provide enough assistance for Ukraine to prevail.

But while Trump's strategy of cutting off aid to Ukraine will make Ukraine more likely to seek peace, it will make Russia less likely to want peace. Ukraine will have fewer weapons and less money that it can devote to its defenses. This will give Russia a weaker opponent that will be easier to take land from. Given Russia's expected victories, it will want to postpone peace until it can grab more land, especially since many peace deals let countries keep the areas that their militaries control at the time of the deal. Russia will not agree to a peace deal now unless the deal allows it to keep land that it expects to capture in the future.

This outcome is bad for the United States. Our ally will have lost a conflict to one of our adversaries. Our other allies will not believe that we are dependable.

Trump would be better off taking the exact opposite strategy. He should flood Ukraine with weapons, so many weapons that Ukraine will start winning military victories and start regaining some of its land. If Russia is being pushed back on the battlefield, it will want to agree to peace now, before it loses any more land. That way Russia could keep the land it occupies now rather than the smaller amount of land it would occupy after a few months of Ukrainian victories.

Of course, if Ukraine is pushing back the Russians, it will want to keep fighting. But here is where Trump can adopt a successful strategy. He can work with Europeans to agree to cut off weapons to Ukraine if it does not agree to a peace deal while it is pushing Russia back. Ukraine will have to go along with Trump and the Europeans. It cannot win if both Europe and the U.S. withhold their support.

In short, Trump needs to give Russia an incentive to stop the war by allowing the Ukrainians to start winning on the battlefield. This will make Russia want to stop the war before it loses more land. Then, Trump needs to put pressure on Ukraine to agree to an end of the war.

Trump's strategy is backwards. He is creating an environment where the Russians win on the battlefield. This will give the Ukrainians an incentive to stop war right away before they lose more land. But, it will also create an environment where Russia wants to keep fighting. Regrettably, Trump will be unable to pressure Russia to agree to stopping the war. He can only apply that kind of pressure to Ukraine. So, again, he needs to develop a strategy that makes Russia want to stop the war, so the pressure he can effectively apply can end the war.

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