

## **US foreign policy**

# **No experts in the room: Donald Trump to meet Vladimir Putin after loss of Russia specialists**

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Reduction in federal workforce has hollowed out the number of knowledgeable officials in Washington

**Amy Mackinnon** in Washington

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In 2018, when Donald Trump held a joint press conference with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin at the Helsinki Summit, it went so badly that his top Russia adviser, Fiona Hill, said she had contemplated faking a seizure in an attempt to shut the whole thing down.

When Trump [meets Putin in Alaska](#) on Friday, Russian experts are unlikely to be in the room.

In his second term in office, [Trump](#) has prioritised loyalty over experience from his senior aides, while waging an aggressive campaign to gut the rank and file of the federal workforce.

Negotiations with Moscow have been led by real estate developer Steve Witkoff, a foreign policy neophyte, while career experts have been sidelined, maligned and forced out of their jobs.

“It’s safe to say that Trump does not have a single policymaking person who knows [Russia and Ukraine](#) advising him,” said Eric Rubin, a former career diplomat who served as US ambassador to Bulgaria during Trump’s first term.

Ahead of a high-stakes meeting with Putin, US government officials would typically be working furiously to ensure the president is well briefed and ready to [tackle any topic the Russian leader may raise](#).

Putin, who has ruled Russia for a quarter of a century, is known to have a strong command of details and is skilled at catching his interlocutors off guard.

Eric Green, who served as senior director for Russia at the National Security Council during Joe Biden’s presidency, said: “You want to avoid getting entrapped by his skill

at debating those points and avoid agreeing to something that may sound reasonable the way it's presented by Putin but in fact is distorted.”



From left: John Bolton, then US national security adviser, the then US ambassador to Finland Robert Pence, President Donald Trump, and ex-secretary of state Mike Pompeo in Helsinki, Finland, in 2018 before the Trump-Putin meeting © Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP

The NSC, which is responsible for co-ordinating input from across government agencies, would typically lead preparations for summits.

But in Trump's second term, the NSC has been drastically pared back, with dozens of foreign policy and national security experts [ousted from their jobs](#) in May.

A senior US official familiar with the matter said: “My understanding is that the traditional Washington foreign policy process led by the NSC has largely broken down in this administration.”

More than 1,300 officials were let go at the state department last month as part of a government-wide drive to slash the federal workforce. Among them were analysts who focus on Russia and Ukraine at the agency's bureau of intelligence.

The US diplomatic corps, the foreign service, has also lost a significant portion of its workforce in Trump's second term through cuts, buyouts and resignations.

While the state department has not released official figures, the American Foreign Service Association, the union which represents US diplomats, estimates some 25 per cent of foreign service officers have left their jobs since January. Among those who remain, morale is “as low as it possibly could be”, said Rubin, who served as president of the AFSA until 2023.

Top jobs in the administration dealing with Russia and Ukraine remain unfilled, Rubin noted. Trump enters into talks with Putin without a Senate-confirmed assistant secretary of state for European affairs, or an ambassador in Russia or Ukraine.

“It is false to assume that more staff equates to better results,” the state department said. “The reorganisation of the department will make us leaner, and processes faster so that we can execute on the things that matter.”

“On Russia and every topic, President Trump always receives feedback from his talented national security team, including leaders from [the] state [department], NSC and the intelligence community, and ultimately makes the decision he feels is best for the country,” said deputy White House press secretary Anna Kelly.

“Under President Trump’s leadership, and thanks to secretary [of state Marco] Rubio’s joint roles, the NSC is more relevant and consequential than ever before,” Kelly added. Rubio is [serving](#) as acting national security adviser among other roles.

After meeting [Putin in Helsinki in 2018](#), the US president questioned the conclusions of his own intelligence community and took the Russian leader’s assurance that he did not seek to meddle in the presidential election at face value.

Trump, who conducts his foreign policy on the basis of instinct and personal relationships, on Monday said the summit with Putin would be “a feel-out meeting a little bit”, adding he would know within two minutes whether progress is possible.

“I may say ‘lots of luck, keep fighting’, or I may say ‘we can make a deal’,” he said.

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Donald Trump believes he can get a deal with Vladimir Putin to stop the fighting © Reuters

While the White House on Tuesday [damped expectations of a deal](#) in Alaska, the president's approach has prompted alarm in foreign policy circles.

"You can't have him and Witkoff winging it because they just don't know enough," said Daniel Fried, the former US ambassador to Poland. "You need somebody in the room who can just look at the president, roll his eyes and shake his head."

Trump's relationship with Moscow was subject to intense scrutiny during his first term in office, as multiple investigations sought to probe his campaign team's ties with Russia and the Kremlin's efforts to sway the 2016 presidential election.

Trump also contended with a more assertive Congress, and his foreign policy team was made up of seasoned experts who came to be known as the "adults in the room". After leaving government, many detailed their struggles to brief the president and their efforts to contain his more alarming impulses.

"He rarely does prep work," said John Bolton, who served as Trump's national security adviser during his first term.

Bolton, now a Trump critic, recalled his attempts to brief the president about nuclear weapons en route to the Helsinki summit with Putin in 2018 while the US leader was watching a soccer game.

Trump has ensured things will be different in his second term. Fried said: “This is not an administration that is going to have an experts-led process.”

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