Opinion
NCR Voices



President Donald Trump delivers remarks at the 2025 U.S. Military Academy commencement at Michie Stadium on May 24, 2025, in West Point, New York. (Official White House Photo/Daniel Torok)



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President Donald Trump took to social media to proclaim his belief that Russian president Vladimir Putin had "gone absolutely CRAZY." Trump has now given Putin two weeks to embrace a peace proposal to end the war in Ukraine.

This is quite a change. Earlier this year, Trump was repeating Kremlin talking points and berating Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in an Oval Office meeting. He has little to show for currying the Russian autocrat's favor. The war Trump promised to end "on day one" continues. Trump's impotence to resolve it is on full display and it is doubtful there is any adjective Trump abhors more than to be considered impotent.

There is something still missing from Trump's revamped approach to Putin, however: It is not tied to any sense of democratic values. He seems upset that Putin is not doing his bidding, nothing more, nothing less. This is sandbox diplomacy.

We saw a similar dynamic during Trump's visit to the Arabian sheikdoms last month. In Saudi Arabia, Trump praised Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Standing in front of the Saudi audience, Trump gushed about the prince: "He's your greatest representative, greatest representative. And if I didn't like him, I'd get out of here so fast. You know that, don't you? He knows me well. I do — I like him a lot. I like him too much. That's why we give so much, you know? Too much. I like you too much."

The president forgot to mention that U.S. intelligence concluded bin Salman was complicit in the murder and dismemberment of Saudi dissident and Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

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In all three Arab states, Trump touted the trade deals he had secured, but it is not clear the numbers add up. A White House fact sheet only accounted for $243.5

billion, not the $1.2 trillion Trump claimed.

More disturbingly, in Qatar, Trump embraced the regime that has been a principal supporter of terrorism, especially of Hamas. The Qatari regime hosted the terrorist group's leaders until President Joe Biden insisted they be expelled after they repeatedly failed to strike a ceasefire deal. After Trump won the White House, Hamas leaders moved back to the wealthy sheikdom. They still have not signed a deal for a ceasefire.

Steve Cook of the Council on Foreign Relations told NPR that Trump is "miscalculating when he thinks that a deal's a deal, whether it's about a luxury hotel or it's about Iran's nuclear program or it's about a hostage deal and ceasefire, that these are all the same. They're going to run into problems because the president wants to go with his gut."

There is, quite evidently, nothing in Trump's gut that tells him democracies with shared values should support each other. There is no humanistic impulse in Trump's gut: The deaths in Ukraine bother him no more than the deaths in Africa caused by the elimination of U.S. foreign aid programs. Trump's ignorance of history keeps him from acknowledging the high cost that was paid in the last century because "America First" prejudices kept our nation from defending Western civilization in Europe until it was almost too late. Nor does he grasp the intrinsic relationship between the values that animate our democracy at home and the values we aspire to champion in our foreign diplomacy.



President Donald Trump is greeted by Amir of Qatar Sheikh Tamin bin Hamad Al Thani at Lusail Palace in Doha, Qatar on May 14, 2025, to attend an official State Dinner. (Official White House Photo/Daniel Torok)

The president did not attend the celebrations marking the 80th anniversary of Victory in Europe day. That could have been his first foreign trip. Instead, he went to the anti-democratic, authoritarian kingdoms of the Arabian peninsula. And he fit right in.

Idealism has its limits. The League of Nations was the child of Woodrow Wilson's ideals. It was also feckless. The U.S was once allied with Joseph Stalin, the second greatest monster of the 20th century, in order to defeat the greatest monster, Adolf Hitler. Foreign policy is the careful balancing of interests and values. All this is to say what St. Augustine explained 1,600 years ago: Ours is a fallen world.

With Trump, however, it isn't only the absence of values. It isn't even clear that the national interest takes priority. In the weeks before his visit to Qatar, the Trump family company inked a deal to build a golf resort in that country. The president's

sidekick, Elon Musk, tagged along on the trip and left with a bucketful of new deals also.

Grift is now that animating force of U.S. foreign policy. Not values. Not the national interest. Until the Congress steps up to its duty to rein in Trump, the country will continue its bizarre dance with authoritarianism, at home and abroad. It says a lot when you recognize that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were highly principled by comparison with what we have today, but there it is.