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Friday fiasco : A disaster in the White House for Volodymyr Zelensky—and for Ukraine

J.D. Vance set a trap for the Ukrainian president, who declined to flatter Donald Trump



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

WHEN VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY arrived at the White House on February 28th the America-Ukrainian relationship was fragile and uncertain. By the time the Ukrainian president left, it was shattered. After a full-blown shouting match in front of the television cameras—with Donald Trump and his vice-president, J.D. Vance, furiously accusing the Ukrainian leader of being ungrateful and of risking a third world war—Mr Zelensky will return home more embattled than ever. Hopes for a peace deal seem more distant than ever.

The breakdown in relations, and Mr Trump's contention that Ukraine was not ready for peace, raises the risk that his administration will now cut off military and financial aid to Ukraine at a time when Russia retains the initiative on the battlefield. It is hard to think of a diplomatic moment that has gone so totally awry in recent history.

"I'm not aligned with anybody. I'm aligned with the United States of America," Mr Trump explained, sitting in the Oval Office alongside Mr Zelensky, Mr Vance and several aides. The American president offered to take another question, and Mr Vance interjected. He suggested that "what makes America a good country is America engaging in diplomacy. That's what President Trump is doing."

At this point Mr Zelensky might perhaps have flattered and cajoled Mr Trump, a course of action favoured by other recent visitors to Mr Trump's White House including Emmanuel Macron of France and Sir Keir Starmer of Britain. Instead he recited a history of the conflict stretching back to 2014 and noted that Vladimir Putin had broken past deals. "What kind of diplomacy, J.D., are you speaking about?" Mr Zelensky asked in imperfect but clearly sardonic English. This played straight into the hands of Mr Vance, who had doubtless intended all along to attack and humiliate Mr Zelensky.

Mr Zelensky had gone to Washington with two principal tasks: to protect Ukraine's war effort with a continued flow of weapons, and to lay the basis for a peace deal that will last. Ukraine rightly believes that a ceasefire without credible Western-backed security guarantees is a trap that would allow Russia to rearm, and destabilise Ukraine internally. Mr Zelensky said as much: "We will never accept just a ceasefire." But it was the wrong time to have that discussion with America's leaders.

"I think it's disrespectful for you to come into the Oval Office and try to litigate this in front of the American media right now," the vice-president shot back. He then attacked Ukraine for "forcing conscripts to the frontlines" and, when asked by Mr Zelensky whether he had visited Ukraine, dismissed visits by other international leaders to the country as nothing more than "propaganda tour[s]".

Going into the meeting, hopes had been raised that frosty relations between the two leaders had somewhat thawed. At his press conference with Sir Keir Starmer a day earlier, Mr Trump denied having referred to Mr

Zelensky as a dictator. The Ukrainian leader was, on the contrary, “very brave”, someone he had “a lot of respect for”. There was a [deal almost to be signed](#) for joint mineral exploitation. Before the talks began, a European official in Kyiv dared to hope: “We want them to leave smiling,” he said.

During the Vance-Zelensky scuffle, Mr Trump initially appeared almost passive, the good cop to Mr Vance’s bad cop. Then Mr Zelensky went too far. “During the war, everybody has problems,” he asserted. With a “nice ocean” America was insulated for now “but you will feel it in the future.”

Mr Trump plainly did not like that. “Don’t tell us what we’re gonna feel,” he snarled, as the summit meeting tipped into catastrophe. He then added that Ukraine was in a bad place and was “gambling with world war three”. He warned that “what you’re doing is very disrespectful to this country.” Mr Vance jumped in to helpfully remind the president that Mr Zelensky had appeared with Democrats in Pennsylvania during last year’s campaign, and told the visitor to show more appreciation to his benefactors. Mr Trump’s anger deepened.

It wasn’t long before Mr Trump was rambling about Hunter Biden, the son of the former president, and pointing out that he had provided Ukraine with Javelins when Barack Obama had refused to provide lethal aid. The president lamented, “it’s going to be a very hard thing to do business like this,” and continued to belittle Mr Zelensky and his country.

Mr Macron, France’s president, had visited Washington on February 24th; Sir Keir did so on the 27th. Both trips were viewed in Europe as successes: each leader pressed Mr Trump on the issue of security guarantees, and both meetings ended on encouragingly upbeat terms. But the blow-up on February 28th has already caused deep alarm in European capitals. Donald Tusk, Poland’s prime minister, promptly issued a message of solidarity with Ukraine: “Dear [Zelensky], dear Ukrainian friends, you are not alone”. Almost every significant [European leader](#) followed suit.

Europe’s leaders are due to meet in London on March 2nd to co-ordinate their positions on a potential military deployment to Ukraine after any ceasefire, and how to pay for higher defence spending—talks that now have far greater urgency. But there is no question that America remains central to Ukraine’s war effort. Although Europe provides the majority of aid, 60% to America’s 40% on one estimate, Ukraine relies on American air-defence interceptors, as well as a flow of intelligence and spare parts for American weaponry.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, there was unalloyed glee. “The insolent pig finally got a proper slap down in the Oval Office,” enthused Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy chairman of Russia’s security council. “The Kiev regime is ‘gambling with WWII’.”

“It’s amazing what comes out through emotion,” Mr Trump posted on social media shortly after the fight. He added that Mr Zelensky was “not ready for Peace” and chided the Ukrainian for disrespecting America: “He can come back when he is ready for Peace.” A scheduled press conference was cancelled, and Mr Zelensky left the White House early, without having signed the mineral-rights deal that had ostensibly brought him to Washington in the first place.

The road ahead for Ukraine is now unclear, but strewn with danger. It seems likely that internal and external actors will increase the pressure on Mr Zelensky to resign, hold elections or both—though how that can happen during wartime without cancelling martial law and thus tipping the country into chaos is not clear. “Getting into a dialogue with Trump in this way doesn’t leave him a chance,” says an opposition MP in Ukraine. “He is going to have to destroy Zelensky now. I worry the price will be our whole country.”

Even deputies from Mr Zelensky’s inner circle agreed that it had been a disaster. Some reasoned the president had been tired, three years into war and a long transatlantic flight. He had been provoked into a manufactured fight. “J.D. was the problem,” said one of them. “Zelensky had to show strength to be credible for negotiations, but the emotions were too much.” A senior Ukrainian security source said Mr Vance seemed to be pleased that the negotiations never even happened. “As a wrecker, Vance had been well prepared,” he says. “He did his thing professionally.”

At the end of the shouting match, Mr Trump quipped, “This is gonna be great television.” The president of Ukraine scowled as he sat with his hands clasped. Mr Vance smirked. His work was done. ■