

Western leaders must seize the moment to make Europe safe

As they meet in London, Vladimir Putin will sense weakness



Photograph: Getty Images

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SINCE THE early months of the war in Ukraine three long years ago, the front line on the battlefield has hardly moved. But in the Oval Office on February 28th, as Donald Trump and J.D. Vance [attacked Volodymyr Zelensky](#), Ukraine's defences crumbled in a few devastating minutes.

As the world looked on, first the vice-president and then his boss savaged a man who has stood with America in a struggle against an aggressive dictator, united by the shared values of democracy and freedom. But Mr Trump and Mr Vance did not care about that. [Mr Zelensky](#) had not shown America "respect", they said; he was not "thankful". Neither of those accusations is true, as the record of the war years shows. But the hectoring Mr Trump and Mr Vance did not care about that either.

It was painful to see Mr Zelensky attempt to persuade Mr Trump that their agreement should include security agreements—and to witness his foolish and impolitic loss of self-control. But worse was the vivid, real-time demonstration of how this administration has cast off decades of American leadership. In this administration what matters are Mr Trump's transient and flawed notions about [what is to his advantage](#) and his overweening belief that, under him, his country has the power to secure them—an outlook which is not so very different from that of Mr Zelensky's enemy, Vladimir Putin.

The disaster in the Oval Office contains a warning for America, Ukraine and, most of all, Europe. For America the warning should be that Mr Trump's might-is-right schemes often work to their country's disadvantage. The president and his base see Friday's row as a sign that America is strong. In fact, he has rehabilitated and emboldened Mr Putin, betrayed Ukraine and weakened the cohesion of NATO. Yet, barring a miracle, the legendary dealmaker will now have no peace to show for it.

The president argued that to stop the fighting, he simply had to position himself midway between Mr Putin and Mr Zelensky. His idea was that America's peace with Mr Putin was more important than anything else. But he misunderstands Mr Putin's repeated breaches of treaties and agreements—something that Mr Zelensky attempted to point out on Friday in vain. And he underestimates Ukrainians' willingness to make sacrifices for a cause that is bigger than they are. In the past they have suffered untold misery under Moscow's rule. They do not want to repeat it.

The warning for Ukrainians should be that Mr Trump's ill-temper has opened up a possible path towards a catastrophic defeat. Without a ceasefire, America could withdraw military aid, intelligence and battlefield communications. Ukrainian morale could buckle. Fomented by Mr Putin no doubt, politics in Kyiv could rot.

The country could succumb to a betrayal narrative that goes on to poison relations with its remaining allies in Europe. That would be a tragedy for Ukraine—and a threat to Europe and America.

When European leaders, plus Canada's outgoing prime minister, Justin Trudeau, meet Mr Zelensky in London on March 2nd, the temptation will be to spend their time working out how to rebuild relations between Ukraine and America. A better understanding would be worth something, obviously. But after Friday's row, to put your trust in the steadfast support of Mr Trump would be a terrible mistake.

And that leads to the third warning, for Europe. Mr Zelensky happened to be the one receiving an Oval Office mugging, but it could have just as well have been the leader of one of the Baltic states, pleading for support as Russian saboteurs crippled their country. Or the European Union asking for American backing after the Russian infiltration of a far-right political party that enjoyed the sympathies of Mr Vance. If Mr Trump is asked to stand with Europe against Russia, his first question will be what's in it for me?

In the face of that reality and Ukraine's new peril, the London summit has taken on an urgency and importance that nobody could have foreseen. European leaders need to seize the moment.

For a start Europeans must be clear that Ukraine will enjoy their immediate support. This means promising more money and showing that it really will arrive by committing the [\\$300bn or so of Russian state assets](#) that have been seized, most of them under Europe's jurisdiction. So far it has talked about this, but several countries, including France, have dithered.

Likewise its pledges to increase defence spending. It will take at least a decade to enable Europe to be ready to stand alone. Leaders like Friedrich Merz, the probable next chancellor of Germany, and Sir Keir Starmer, the British prime minister, have sworn that they understand the scale of the task.

However, their policies belie their words. Mr Merz has shied away from removing [a constitutional limit to borrowing](#)—which subjects his promise to boost defence spending to annual votes. Sir Keir has indeed increased spending, but only by 0.2 percentage points of GDP, to 2.5% by April 2027.

The gulf between words and actions telegraphs weakness to the Kremlin. Instead, NATO as a whole needs to follow the lead of Poland, which spends 4.7% of its GDP on defence. Tomorrow's meeting is the moment when they need to signal that they have understood the threat. Even a blanket 3% would make a difference.

European leaders should turn the televised fight in the Oval Office to their advantage. Their voters have just witnessed an extraordinary and reprehensible episode of public presidential bullying. If ever there were a time for Europe to stand up and stand together, it is now. If ever there were any hesitation, Mr Trump has just shown voters why action is urgent. ■