

London calling

Europe vows to defend Ukraine, but prays for Trump's support

A summit in London is stalked by the fear America will walk away



Photograph: AFP

Mar 2nd 2025

AN EMERGENCY summit meeting in London of the main European NATO countries, plus Canada, ended on March 2nd with broad agreement that Europe must now step up to the challenge of securing and defending a just peace deal for Ukraine. But few if any details were on offer.

After the [appalling scenes](#) in the White House on February 28th when Volodymyr Zelensky was subjected to sustained verbal abuse by Donald Trump and J.D. Vance, the hastily expanded summit had a sense of urgency. The number of countries attending had swollen to 15, as well as the heads of NATO and the European Union, and President Zelensky.

For Britain's prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, who chaired the meeting and who had experienced a more congenial visit to Washington on February 27th the priority was to secure European commitments to defend Ukraine while repairing bridges between Europe and America, and between Mr Zelensky, who sat next to Sir Keir at the summit, and Mr Trump.

The American president, Sir Keir insisted before the summit opened, was as committed to a lasting peace deal for Ukraine as were he and the other European leaders gathered. He omitted, however, to say whether the kind of peace deal being developed by Mr Trump would be one that either Ukraine or Europe could accept. The meeting ended after around two hours with agreement on principles; but no details, if they had been agreed, were shared.

Speaking from the airport as he left Britain, Mr Zelensky struck a defiant note. Ukraine needs security guarantees, he said, and without those a ceasefire would be futile, since it would be broken by Russia with impunity. He refused to countenance concessions by Ukraine, either on territory or withdrawing sanctions on Russia.

The proposal endorsed by the meeting was for European countries, led initially by Britain and France, to work with Ukraine on a plan to stop the fighting, which might then be put to Mr Trump. It will consist of four pillars: military aid should continue flowing into Ukraine while the war grinds on, and economic pressure on Russia should increase; Ukraine must be at the table for any peace talks and any lasting peace must ensure its sovereignty and security; third, that after a peace deal has been struck Europe will continue to boost Ukraine's defence capabilities; and finally that a European force, driven by a coalition of the willing, would deploy to Ukraine to deter Russian aggression. American military muscle would need to be behind it as a "backstop" should Vladimir Putin be tempted to test its resolve.

It is on that last point that the plan could well founder. Both Sir Keir during his visit to Mr Trump and [Emmanuel Macron](#), France's president, who saw the American president earlier in the week, had pushed hard for the American backstop without which they are painfully aware any European force would be acutely vulnerable. However, they came away with essentially nothing. Sir Keir says he has subsequently spoken with Mr Trump and has hinted that he has received some encouragement, although scepticism over this is in order.

Whereas Sir Keir and other European leaders, not least Mr Zelensky, believe that any commitment entered into by Mr Putin is likely to be broken whenever it suits him, Mr Trump seems to regard him as entirely trustworthy.

Mr Trump even told Mr Macron that the Russian president was perfectly fine with the idea of a deployment of European troops in Ukraine: "I've specifically asked him that question. He has no problem with it." The claim was speedily rejected by the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, who said it "would further fuel the conflict".

Despite the hopes expressed after the London summit, the chances of the European plan leading to a peace deal that Ukraine or indeed Russia could accept remain fairly slim.

The danger for Ukraine and Europe is only too clear. Mr Trump [has not forgiven Mr Zelensky](#) for his unwillingness to come up with dirt on the Biden family in 2019 after an encounter with Mr Trump that helped lead to his first impeachment. Nor is he likely to overcome his irritation with the Ukrainian president's obstinacy during talks over the minerals deal that he hankered after and his "disrespect" when challenged by the sneering Mr Vance. Combine that with the administration's declared conviction that it is past time for Europe to take responsibility for its own security and the complete cutting off of any American military support for Ukraine looks only too possible.

If American aid is cut off, the first pillar of the Starmer-Macron plan—that Ukraine should be turned into a "steel porcupine" as Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission put it—is the one that Europe will have to focus on. The challenge will be considerable but not impossible. First of all, Europe can afford to pay more. While the Nordics and most of the eastern Europeans have contributed between 1-2.5% of their GDPs, Germany and Britain have allocated less than 0.2% (about the same as America) while France, Spain and Italy have managed about half that.

There is much activity under way surrounding the relaxation of the EU's debt rules for defence expenditures, tapping the bond markets to establish a European defence fund and talk of a rearmament bank modelled on the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Europe needs to find a lot of money for [its own rearmament](#), but the immediate priority would be to keep Ukraine in the fight.

There is also €210bn (\$218bn) of Russian assets frozen in European banks. Sir John Chipman, of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a think-tank, says that Europe should [seize frozen Russian assets](#) and use them to rebuild Ukraine's military and civilian infrastructure. "That will give Ukraine the means to buy the most advanced military equipment available."

More cash could be invested in Ukraine's defence industrial base. During the Soviet era it had a mighty arms industry and it is on course to become a defence manufacturing powerhouse again. Denmark has pioneered an approach that other European countries are following in which they finance contracts between the Ukraine government and local arms manufacturers.

Mr Zelensky has claimed that around 40% of his country's battlefield needs are being met through domestic production, often in joint ventures with Western defence firms, such as Germany's Rheinmetall and KNDS, a Franco-German one. Sir Lawrence Freedman, a strategist, puts the figure even higher. Ukraine's defence firms are focused on producing drones of all shapes and sizes, electronic warfare systems and artillery.

Still, even with more cash, there will still be problems if America walks away. Europe's defence industries are expanding, but not rapidly enough to fill gaps in key capabilities. Buying off the shelf may not be a quick fix. South Korea makes the kind of kit that Ukraine needs. However, much of its production is earmarked either for Poland, which has inked \$16bn worth of contracts since 2022, or the country's own armed forces.

Buying from America might appeal to the notoriously transactional Mr Trump. But Keir Giles, the author of “Who Will Defend Europe?”, warns that if Mr Trump blames Ukraine for blocking his cherished peace deal, he might refuse American firms export permissions or demand limitations on the capabilities of any weapons they sell. Europe would find it extremely hard to fill that gap, so it should not be a surprise that Sir Keir and Mr Macron will continue their bridge-building efforts, forlorn though they may appear to be.■