

## Ukraine Holds a Weak Hand

If Zelensky rejects the Trump framework for peace, he's unlikely to force a better deal.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during the Oval Office meeting at the White House, Feb. 28.  
PHOTO: POOL/UKRAINIAN PRESIDENIA/ZUMA PRESS

“Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at” was the first of Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points. That meant international agreements should be produced by transparent diplomacy that the public could follow. Last week’s fire and fury between President Trump, Vice President [JD Vance](#) and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky tested that Wilsonian model of negotiations to the breaking point. Except for Mr. Vance, who turned a bit part into a starring role, nobody was happy with how things turned out.

***For Mr. Zelensky, the meeting was a disaster.*** He came to Washington hoping that a show of unity with Mr. Trump would reassure Ukrainians about their future and intensify the pressure on Russia to make a fair peace. *He left having exposed a massive rift between Kyiv and its patrons in Washington, and with his relationship with Mr. Trump apparently in tatters.*

***For Mr. Trump, the meeting was also a failure.*** *The U.S. president genuinely hates the war and everything about it. His bitterness about having to engage with it is palpable.* It isn’t just that what he sees as a common-sense effort to mediate a solution based on American interests exposes him to denunciation as a pro-Putin Manchurian Candidate. The war tests his coalition. ***The Ukrainian cause remains broadly popular among Republican voters and lawmakers, and there is a political cost in alienating them. But for many of the MAGA hard-liners at the core of the president’s base, the belief that you can flip Russia by dumping Ukraine is an article of faith.***

***Mr. Trump went into the meeting with the hope that he had found a path forward. He believes that Moscow is ready to accept a compromise peace that leaves Ukraine smaller, weakened and out of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but still viable as a country.*** He thinks that the minerals deal, which Mr. Zelensky’s White House visit was to celebrate, offers him a way to satisfy key constituencies while bringing the war to an end. *The minerals deal can be packaged as an “America first” win for the MAGA crowd, and it differentiates the Trump Ukraine policy from [Joe Biden](#)’s feckless approach.*

***That agreement, Mr. Trump believes, opens the path to important if limited security reassurances for Ukraine.*** *If the U.S. ends up having billions of dollars of investments in Ukraine and thousands of citizens working on mining and refining minerals and building economic partnerships with Ukraine’s burgeoning defense industry, then any Russian leader would think twice about launching invasions that could kill American citizens or occupy American property. From Mr. Trump’s perspective, this outcome offers the best security Ukraine can get while respecting Russian red lines about Western troops and treaties.*

*MAGA happy, Ukraine rescued, normal relations with Moscow restored as a first step in pulling Russia and China apart, and the outside chance of a Nobel Peace Prize—for Mr. Trump, this looks like a winner all around.*

***Kyiv understandably wants more. Burned by the failure of the Budapest Memorandum to offer protection when Russia invaded in 2014, and burned again when the West's response to the February 2022 attack proved insufficient, Kyiv wants Article 5-style security guarantees enshrined in treaties, ideally as part of NATO membership. It wants American and other NATO boots on the ground. It refuses to accept permanent cessions of territory to Russia as part of a final peace agreement.***

Now comes the hard part. In a perfect world, the U.S. and our European friends would take advantage of Russia's many vulnerabilities to press for more concessions, but that isn't the world we are in.

***Ukraine's concerns are well founded, but with Mr. Trump in the Oval Office, most of Kyiv's goals are unobtainable.*** Mr. Zelensky knows he must choose whether to work within the framework the Americans have offered him or to fight on with diminished and perhaps vanishing American assistance, relying on European economic and military aid together with the fighting spirit of the Ukrainian people to force Russia to agree to better terms. ***With European leaders urging him to consider a one-month cease-fire, the prospects for meaningful as opposed to theatrical European support seem slim.***

After the Oval Office meltdown, the question for Mr. Zelensky is simple: Is Ukraine better off accepting the Trump framework and trying to push for more favorable terms inside the process, or is it better off rejecting the framework up front in hopes of forcing Mr. Trump to offer something more appealing?

***Like many Americans, your Global View columnist regrets the failure of successive U.S. presidents to offer more support for Ukraine over the years. But given Mr. Trump's oft-repeated views, Mr. Zelensky would be wise to accept the minerals agreement and to let negotiations proceed. Sadly, no better offers are coming his way.***