

America and Ukraine

## The lesson from Trump's Ukrainian weapons freeze

And the grim choice facing Volodymyr Zelensky



Photograph: US Air Force

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DONALD TRUMP'S foreign policy works on a simple formula: the more you depend on America the worse he can treat you. That is the lesson the world should take from a devastating week, which culminated in an announcement on March 3rd that America is pausing all [military aid to Ukraine](#) until it accepts Mr Trump's terms for peace with Russia.

Bitter as it will be, [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), Ukraine's president should now swallow his pride and do what he must to salvage as much American help as Mr Trump is willing to give. Do not imagine that the outcome will be good for Ukraine, Europe or even America. It will just be less awful than what would follow from Mr Zelensky's continued defiance of a president who so catastrophically miscalculates his country's interests.

Ukraine's dependency on America dates back to Russia's invasion three years ago. Rather than see a tyrant in the Kremlin crush a fledgling democracy, President Joe Biden honoured America's values and pursued its interests by supplying Ukraine with money, arms, communications and intelligence.

With Mr Trump in the White House, dependency leads to mistreatment—as if Ukraine were in an abusive relationship. Without additional American weapons, Mr Zelensky can fight on until the summer, and longer if Europe increases its support. Yet his country will suffer from having progressively weaker air defences. If communications and intelligence are cut off too, the effect will be immediate and grave.

Mr Trump and his supporters argue that his tactics are justified because he is working in the cause of peace. He shares the Biden administration's fears that a proxy conflict with nuclear-armed Russia is highly dangerous, and that Ukraine could end up dragging America into “world war three”.

When Mr Zelensky pleads for American security guarantees, Mr Trump argues that he is providing them in the form of mining investments to extract what he calls “raw earth” and other critical minerals. Russia, he argues, would not dare to invade Ukraine if that entails seizing American assets and killing American workers.

In a post Mr Trump described his own plan as “genius”. In fact, it is incoherent. The last nationwide minerals survey of Ukraine was back in the 1960s; since then there have been local surveys, but not with modern techniques. In other words, nobody knows how much rare-earth mining would take place or how soon.

Even if American miners were present, they do not offer Ukraine much extra security. Russia could simply bypass the mines, while guaranteeing their ownership and the safety of their personnel. The presence of American-owned businesses across the country did not protect Ukraine when Russia attacked in 2014 or 2022.

And if Western security fails in Ukraine, then Russia will be emboldened to threaten and harm other countries—especially because Mr Trump is rapidly normalising relations with Russia, including by reportedly preparing to lift sanctions. World war three would be closer, not further away.

Mr Trump retorts that Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, would never cross him. But why not? Mr Trump has just demonstrated that he does not think Ukraine is worth fighting for. For Mr Zelensky to put his faith in America's president would be perverse after Russia violated Donbas ceasefire agreements during Mr Trump's first term—especially after the mauling he received in the Oval Office on Friday. And even if Mr Putin held back out of respect for Mr Trump during the next four years, he may not feel bound to keep the peace after 2029.

For all these reasons Mr Zelensky was justified in asking for American security guarantees in Washington last week. But he did not get them and he will not. Britain and France, which have said that they could provide a stabilisation force after a ceasefire, have pleaded with Mr Trump for American support—with the implication that America will back them up if they come under Russian attack. Mr Trump has not said whether he will offer that support either.

The choice for Mr Zelensky is therefore a bad minerals deal without security guarantees, but with the possibility of at least some American support and with a European military presence; or no deal and no American support. He should take the deal, because it raises the chances that he will continue to receive American communications, intelligence and even some weapons. Mr Trump is also more likely to agree to European countries buying American weapons to equip the Ukrainian army in case Mr Putin breaks a ceasefire. The deal also gives Ukraine a little bit of leverage over Mr Trump, because it can threaten to walk away from it and embarrass him if he tries to impose an unacceptable peace.

This is a grim outcome. There was a time when America's allies could count on it to do right by them, even if they got into arguments. These days, by contrast, America's allies have to prepare for the worst. Mr Trump says he is merely "pausing" the supply of weapons, but Ukraine's allies have to act as if this is about to become permanent, even if in doing so they annoy him.

They should seize Russian state assets in Europe and use them to pay for Ukraine's defence. It is time to purchase American arms for Ukraine, supposing Mr Trump will agree to it. They need to finance Ukraine's own arms producers. They need to increase Europe's own production of weapons. And they need to continue to back Mr Zelensky and to champion Ukrainians' right to self-determination.

NATO has been the most successful military alliance in history. But as Mr Trump continues to see his allies' dependency as a vulnerability to exploit—witness the 25% tariffs he has imposed on imports from Canada and Mexico—so Europe must prepare to be abandoned or extorted. Not to prepare for that could leave Europe vulnerable to Russia and to an increasingly hostile America. And yet to prepare for that will accelerate the very collapse of NATO that Europe most wants to avoid. Unfortunately, that is the tragedy of Mr Trump. ■