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The Trump-Zelenskyy Spat: Assessing the Impact on Europe

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ABSTRACT

The February 28, 2025, Trump- Zelenskyy confrontation has sparked debates on America's role in the Ukraine conflict and its implications for European security. In addition to straining ties between the United States and Ukraine, this conflict has made European nations re-evaluate their reliance on American military assistance and their approach to Russia. Europe's new worry on defence readiness and NATO's future are intensifying as a result of Trump administration's challenges to established alliances, which have prompted urgent talks on military autonomy and geopolitical stability.

Keywords: Trump 2.0; Zelensky; Europe; NATO; Ukraine-Russia war

INTRODUCTION

During his 2024 presidential campaign, Trump pledged to end the Russia-Ukraine war swiftly, asserting he could negotiate peace within a day of taking office. He criticized NATO allies for not meeting defense spending targets and suggested that U.S. support would be contingent on allies fulfilling their obligations. Trump also labeled the EU a “foe” in trade matters and emphasized an “America First” foreign policy, indicating a potential shift away from traditional alliances.¹ Donald Trump's second term as U.S. President has significantly reshaped the dynamics of the Ukraine conflict and the transatlantic alliance. His administration's approach has introduced a more transactional and isolationist U.S. foreign policy, compelling the European Union (EU) to reassess its role in regional security and its relationship with both Ukraine and the United States. The Trump 2.0 administration adopted a less engaged stance

toward the Ukraine conflict. Despite initial promises, Trump expressed frustration with both Ukrainian and Russian leadership, suggesting that the U.S. would not lead peace negotiations and proposing that Europe or the Vatican take the initiative. This hands-off approach has raised concerns among European allies about the diminishing American leadership in European security.

The debates about the United States' role in the Ukraine war and the implications for European security escalated after the face-off between US President Trump and Ukrainian President Zelenskyy on February 28, 2025. In addition to straining ties between the United States and Ukraine, this conflict has made European nations re-evaluate their reliance on American military assistance and their approach to Russia. Europe's new worry on defence readiness and NATO's future are intensifying as a result of Trump's administration's challenges to established alliances, which have prompted urgent talks on military autonomy



and geopolitical stability. The Trump-Zelenskyy meeting has considerably influenced the global security environment, especially in Europe. As a result, European leaders are now having urgent security-related talks and emphasizing less dependence on the United States.

This study analyses the geopolitical ramifications of the Trump-Zelenskyy conflict on February 28, 2025, with a focus on transatlantic ties and European security. It aims to determine how the spat has affected Europe's sense of American reliability as a security partner, sparked re-evaluations of NATO's function and cohesion, and hastened conversations about European strategic autonomy. The study also looks into changes in European defence policies and strategic outlooks in reaction to uncertainty about the United States foreign policy commitments.

THE OVAL OFFICE CONFRONTATION

On February 28, 2025, President Zelenskyy visited the White House with the primary agenda of signing a minerals deal aimed at bolstering Ukraine's economy and strengthening ties with the United States. However, the meeting quickly escalated into a heated exchange. President Trump accused Zelenskyy of harbouring "tremendous hatred" towards Russian President Vladimir Putin, suggesting that such sentiments hindered diplomatic efforts. Vice President J.D. Vance echoed this sentiment, emphasizing diplomacy as the sole path to peace. Zelenskyy, on the other hand, recounted Russia's previous violations of agreements, questioning the efficacy of diplomacy under such circumstances. President Trump accused Zelenskyy of "gambling with World War III" and abruptly ended the meeting without signing the anticipated minerals deal². The confrontation culminated with President Trump cancelling a planned minerals deal and stating that Zelenskyy had "overplayed his hand"³. Reports suggest Trump suggested a controversial peace deal for Ukraine, which included significant concessions to Russia and limited Ukraine's sovereignty. Critics argue that this deal undermines Ukraine's independence and security. The proposed deal would allow Ukraine to maintain some territory but under heavy Russian influence, limiting its ability for independent foreign policy. This raises concerns about Ukraine's long-term sovereignty⁴.

The tensions between Trump and Zelenskyy can be traced back to 2019 when Trump allegedly sought to use Ukraine as a political pawn against his domestic rivals. The controversy stemmed from a phone call in which Trump allegedly pressured Zelenskyy to investigate Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, in exchange for military aid. This led to his first impeachment in the U.S. House of Representatives. Although the Senate acquitted him, the damage to U.S.-Ukraine relations had already been done⁵. Following Trump's departure from office in 2021, Ukraine faced an escalating war with Russia, with U.S. support playing a crucial role in resisting Moscow's advances. Under

President Joe Biden, Ukraine received billions in military aid, including advanced weaponry and intelligence support. On the other hand, Trump has repeatedly questioned the extent of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine, suggesting that European nations should take on a greater share of the burden⁶. Trump 2.0 has revived his criticism of NATO, threatening to reduce U.S. involvement unless European nations increase their defence spending. This position undermines Zelenskyy's push for Ukraine's NATO membership, which he views as essential for long-term security⁷.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE

The fallout from the Oval Office incident was immediate. European leaders rallied in support of Ukraine, expressing solidarity with President Zelenskyy. French President Emmanuel Macron underscored that Russia is the aggressor in the conflict, stating, "There is an aggressor which is Russia. There is an aggressed people which is Ukraine." He further criticized any notion that supporting Ukraine could lead to global conflict, asserting that if anyone is playing at World War III, it's Vladimir Putin. Macron also warned that Europe must prepare to defend Ukraine without relying on U.S. military assistance. Germany and other EU nations have since pushed for increased defence spending and a stronger European security policy, reflecting growing concerns about the U.S. commitment to NATO⁸. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa jointly assured Zelenskyy that he was "never alone," reaffirming their commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and quest for peace. German leaders echoed this sentiment. Friedrich Merz, poised to become the next Chancellor, underscored the importance of distinguishing between the aggressor and the victim in the war. At the same time, outgoing Chancellor Olaf Scholz reiterated Germany's unwavering support for Ukraine⁶.

Following the altercation, the Trump administration announced a freeze on military aid and intelligence-sharing with Ukraine. These actions might have a severe impact on Ukraine's war operations. On March 6, 2025, European Union leaders called an emergency summit in Brussels to discuss growing security concerns. European leaders mostly concentrated on reaffirming their defence pledges and guaranteeing ongoing assistance for Ukraine during the conference. French President Macron's proposal to expand France's nuclear deterrence umbrella to other EU nations was a particularly noteworthy event at the meeting⁹. The geopolitical tensions have also impacted Europe's economy, particularly in the energy sector. The failed meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy dashed hopes for a potential peace deal that could have led to the resumption of Russian gas supplies to Europe. Consequently, European gas prices surged by up to 6.7%, exacerbating the



existing energy crisis following a harsh winter. The prospect of reviving the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, previously halted due to the conflict, has resurfaced, indicating potential shifts in Europe's energy strategy.¹⁰

European economies are already finding it difficult to handle the conflict's long-term effects due to growing oil prices and persistent inflation. European reactions to Trump's approach deviate from the United States' usual support for democratic nations under attack and cast doubt on the consistency of Western responses to Russian aggression. The current geopolitical situation is significantly impacted by America's lack of involvement in European affairs, which has alarmed European politicians. This situation reflects previous conflicts and raises concerns about military reliance on the United States. As history of European conflicts emphasizes that internal European conflicts, rather than outside forces, were the main cause of both World Wars. This exemplifies Europe's ongoing turmoil. Furthermore, Trump's trade policies differ from traditional U.S. foreign policy by undermining long-standing international trade accords and affecting ties with allies. International diplomacy is made increasingly challenging by this alteration.

The security architecture of Europe is significantly impacted by the tense relations between the United States and Ukraine. The United States has long been a vital source of military assistance and a deterrent against Russian aggression in Europe. French President Macron emphasized the need for Europe to strengthen its defence capabilities, saying that the continent must be ready to protect Ukraine on its own without help from the United States. He emphasized that remaining passive in the face of aggression would be "crazy," advocating for increased European defence spending and strategic autonomy¹¹. Other European countries' acts reflect a similar sentiment. Germany has announced intentions to significantly boost military spending, indicating a move toward increased defence independence. The European Union as a whole is looking into ways to improve its collective defence systems and lessen its dependency on the US. The necessity for European countries to strengthen their own defence capabilities has been brought to light by the questioning of the significance of the United States as a security guarantor for Europe. On 2nd March 2025, the UK Prime Minister convened a meeting of European leaders to discuss regional security, reflecting a collective effort by Europe to defend itself and address these emerging challenges without American support¹². The Oval Office incident has further strained transatlantic relations, particularly within the NATO alliance. European leaders have expressed frustration with the U.S. administration's approach to the Ukraine conflict. The suspension of U.S. military aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine has raised concerns about America's commitment to European security. In response, European nations are contemplating the formation of a more autonomous defence posture, potentially leading to a

redefinition of NATO's role and the U.S.'s position within the alliance¹³.

Zelenskyy has been pushing for accelerated EU and NATO membership, viewing them as crucial for Ukraine's future security. However, Trump's reluctance to support NATO expansion could slow down Ukraine's accession, leaving the country vulnerable to future Russian aggression. Trump's potential distancing from NATO could embolden Russian President Vladimir Putin, leading to heightened security threats for Eastern European nations. If U.S. military support diminishes, European countries such as Poland, Germany, and France may have to significantly increase their defence expenditures. NATO's unity could also be tested as differing views on supporting Ukraine might emerge among member states.

CONCLUSION

The Trump- Zelenskyy spat in the White House is causing Europe to review its security strategies, economic dependence, and geopolitical ties. The event underlined the need of a strong and coherent European response to foreign threats as well as the vulnerability of depending on outside forces to guarantee security. As Europe negotiates this demanding environment, the emphasis on strategic autonomy and resilience will most likely shape its policy in the next years. This conflict highlights a graver issue: Europe's reliance on American leadership in global conflicts. Is Europe able to take more responsibility for her own security? Can the EU afford to keep helping Ukraine without a clear American dedication? The disagreement marks a turning point in European foreign policy and security going forward, not only a one-off disappointing meeting. Whether this leads to more independence for Europe or more instability is a matter of open discussion. The breakdown of the collective West points to notable changes in geopolitics and a reduction of coordinated Western reactions. Europe is about to change. Will conflicts among Western partners compromise the coordinated reaction to Russian aggression, or will it step in to cover any shortcomings generated by a changing U.S. policy? Solutions to these issues will shape European security for many years to come. Moscow has always tried to exploit variations among its Western partners. A wrecked US-Ukraine relationship under Trump could give Putin an opportunity to reach his war targets. Should Ukraine be forced into peace negotiations on Russia's conditions, it could set a precedent for next territorial conflicts in Europe and motivate other totalitarian governments to pursue aggressive expansionism.

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