



Trump and Zelensky: Bad Manners or Strategic Disaster?

By

Stephen J. Cimbala

By any standard, the February 28 White House meeting between President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was a breathtaking fiasco. After back-and-forth discussions, the conversation degenerated into a donnybrook of apparent misunderstandings and snarky exchanges that left expert commentators and others gasping.

Professional diplomats in the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies might have wondered if this was an unrehearsed skit from Saturday Night Live. Only Alec Baldwin playing the role of Trump was missing. Allies do not talk to each other like in front of the media.

It was clear that Trump and Vice President JD Vance expected to have a pleasant conversation in front of the cameras, have a nice private lunch, and then publicly sign a mineral deal with President Zelensky. They did not expect the pushback and demands that came near the end of the conversation. As a famous French diplomat once said, with respect to another diplomatic blunder, it was “worse than a crime. It was a mistake.”

Zelensky ended up being unceremoniously escorted out of the White House without lunch or a deal. The agreement that would allow the United States to mine rare Earth minerals in Ukraine was that it would repay the United States for the more than \$160 billion that American taxpayers have invested in Ukraine’s defense. Profits from American mining operations would also help rebuild Ukraine. American businesses operating in Ukraine would also offer de facto security guarantees to Ukraine. Absent such an agreement, it was feared that China may partner with Ukraine to mine these critical minerals.

While President Trump is likely genuine in his desire to see the killing end and Ukraine rebuilt, Ukraine is only a small part of a larger strategic game the United States is playing. The Trump administration believes that Europe is no longer the strategic pivot of international relations. Instead, the focal point of American diplomacy and military preparedness is the Far East, with a rising China as the main adversary standing in the way of American global leadership and international influence. Europe is a secondary theater of operations, and it is time Europeans bare the burden of their own defense.

This view is a tectonic shift in American focus, but understandable. China has ambitions that go well beyond military and political competition with the United States in China’s backyard.

China’s global strategy of multi-domain competition with the US includes all spheres of power and influence. Its tool kit includes explicit challenges to the United States in the development and deployment of nuclear weapons, the military use of space, artificial intelligence development, cyberwar, and economic influence.

China’s ambitious naval expansion may fall short of driving the US Navy from the high seas, but its combined arms approach to anti-access and area denial (A2AD) in East Asia is intended to deter and, if necessary, defeat any power that would oppose China’s mastery of its immediate sphere of influence, including Taiwan.



Nevertheless, recognition of the threat posed by a rising China does not invalidate the strategic significance of events in Europe. America's commitment to the defense and security of a free Europe is not transactional, it is existential. This is embodied in the NATO alliance.

NATO is the result of symbiotic relationships among democratic states that provide collective security within a context of political freedom. Ironically, this is why JD Vance's challenge to European allies at the Munich Security Conference was so interesting. Vance noted that the United States and Europe are linked, not only by procedures and financial commitments, but also by shared values, including free speech. He rightly urged the European members of NATO and the European Union to enhance their commitments to free speech that, in his view, are in decline across Europe.

Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine, with its objective of destroying Ukraine's armed forces, economy, infrastructure and its viability as a state is clearly grossly immoral. But evil in the world is nothing new, nor is it incumbent on the American taxpayer to fund every effort to eradicate all evil in the world. American efforts to impose liberal democracies where they do not exist has a poor track record of success.

Europe was the cradle of American civilization, but Americans fled Europe because of religious persecution, a lack of economic opportunity, and other reasons that are inconsistent with freedom. Doubtless, Zelensky and other European politicians drive their American partners crazy at times. During the Second World War, Charles de Gaulle drove British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight Eisenhower to distraction. But the imperious de Gaulle was the symbol of French nationalism for those who opposed Germany and the Vichy regime.

An American abandonment of a free Europe would leave Europe to repeat its past mistakes, which the continent has repeated over and over and over again. Zelensky is far from an ideal partner. However, a Ukraine swallowed by Russia will result in a less stable Europe.

Vladimir Putin clearly sees a free Ukraine as a political and economic threat to Russia. He denies that Ukraine is a distinct civilization or country. He constantly refers to Ukrainians as neo-Nazis. A negotiated settlement will not change this perspective. Any agreement with Putin must follow President Ronald Reagan's dictum, trust but verify.

Ironically, one outcome of the war between Russia and Ukraine is the enlargement of NATO with the addition of Finland and Sweden. Thus, NATO added considerable strategic depth and an ability to prevent Russian ships from leaving port in the Baltic Sea. Without the United States, European NATO may waiver. In the end, President Trump's efforts to push European states to play a larger role in their own security are important, but they should never lead to an American departure from the Alliance.

Stephen Cimbala, PhD, is a Professor at Penn State University at Brandywine and a Senior Fellow at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies.