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MEL GURTOV

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The Trump-Zelensky Feud: The Lies Have It



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The Lies Never Stop

On February 18, Presidents Trump and Zelensky spoke by phone following US-Russia talks in Saudi Arabia that aim at ending the war in Ukraine. Their conversation boils down to this: Trump offered his usual mix of lies and outrageous demands, and Zelensky politely and indirectly suggested that Trump was selling Ukraine out.

“I would like to have more truth with the Trump team,” said Zelensky, who, rather than criticize Trump directly, excused him for being “caught in a web of [Russian] disinformation.” Zelensky rightly is accusing Trump of parroting the Russian line on the war, and thus making the US untrustworthy.

Trump said Ukraine “started” the war, that it should have ended the war three years ago, and that he would have ended it had he been in power. All nonsense, but music to Putin’s ears. Indeed, Putin is publicly thanking the Americans for finally not blaming Russia and wanting

to look ahead. (But wait: Trump has amended his statement with another lie, saying on Fox Radio: “Russia attacked, but they [Biden and Zelensky] shouldn’t have let him attack.”)

Further in line with Russian talking points, Trump criticized Zelensky’s leadership directly: “Think of it, a modestly successful comedian, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, talked the United States of America into spending \$350 Billion Dollars, to go into a War that couldn’t be won, that never had to start, but a War that he, without the U.S. and ‘TRUMP,’ will never be able to settle.”

Trump called Zelensky a “Dictator without Elections [who] better move fast or he’s not going to have a country left.” I guess Putin doesn’t qualify as a dictator without elections.

Keir Starmer, Britain’s PM, had a response: “The prime minister expressed his support for President Zelenskyy as Ukraine’s democratically elected leader and said that it was perfectly reasonable to suspend elections during war time as the UK did during World War II,” a spokesperson said.

Trump’s Game

But truth doesn’t matter when you have near-absolute power. Trump is determined to end the war, cutting costs, promoting business opportunities in Russia, drastically reducing the US role in NATO, and enabling him to focus on China. Ukraine means nothing to him, whereas cozying up to white Christian nationalists like Putin means everything to Trump and his minions as they seek to redraw the map of Europe.

Zelensky is bargaining from weakness: He’s excluded from the US-Russia talks, he knows he can’t rely entirely on Europe for security, and he also knows that Ukraine will have to sacrifice territory in a settlement with Russia.

Worse yet for Ukraine, Trump has made further US aid conditional on Ukraine’s agreement to a one-sided selloff of its mineral and oil wealth. Trump is demanding \$500 billion worth of Ukraine’s resources—more than four times the \$119 billion in actual US aid to Ukraine, according to a research organization in Germany, the Kiel Institute.

It’s a disgraceful arrangement that would essentially make Ukraine a US colony—as though Ukraine is the aggressor and must pay reparations. The proposed deal provides no protection from Russia, which would not have to pay a dime for what it has done to Ukraine’s people and resources. And it’s sign or else, says Trump: “We’re going to either sign a deal, or there’s going to be a lot of problems with them.”

Ukraine’s Resilience

There is another, completely different side to this war’s next stage that is rarely discussed—one in which Ukraine, following on Zelensky’s warning, rejects a US-Russia deal and fights

on. Ukraine would encounter mounting logistical problems over time, but it has the capability to withstand Russia's assault for another year or more. Writing in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Natalya Gumenyuk, a Ukrainian journalist, cites strong Ukrainian support for no deal rather than a bad deal. She emphasizes the country's resilience:

Despite intense pressure on civilian areas, Ukraine has managed to preserve and even rebuild a degree of normalcy in everyday life. Following the economic shock of the initial invasion, Western budgetary support, which now makes up 20 percent of Ukraine's GDP, has allowed the economy to grow by an average of 4.4 percent over the past two years; there has been real household income growth, and inflation remains fairly low. Since the middle of 2023, when Ukrainian drones had effectively neutralized Russia's Black Sea Fleet, maritime routes have been open again, with Ukrainian exports up by 15 percent over the past year. And according to the government in Kyiv, some 40 percent of the weapons Ukraine is using on the frontlines are now produced domestically, compared with hardly any in 2022. None of these changes take away from the extraordinary hardships of war, but they have helped give Ukrainian society a kind of adaptability and endurance that may not be fully visible to outsiders.

Let's remember this about Ukraine: It's their country, it is the victim of an aggressive war, and it has fought courageously to preserve its independence. Ukraine deserves better than to be cast aside so that Trump can serve his own narrow and seditious ambitions.

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Mel Gurtov is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Portland State University, Editor-in-Chief of *Asian Perspective*, an international affairs quarterly and blogs at In the Human Interest.