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Trump-Zelensky shouting match exposes clash between US and European powers



Vice President JD Vance (right) criticizes Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (left) as President Donald Trump listens in the Oval Office at the White House on Friday, February 28, 2025 in Washington D.C. [AP Photo/Mystyslav Chernov]

US President Donald Trump and Vice President JD Vance engaged in a publicly televised shouting match with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during his appearance at the White House Friday, exposing the crisis triggered by the failure of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the growing confrontation between the United States and the European imperialist powers.

Following White House meetings this week with French President Emmanuel Macron and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Zelensky arrived Friday in the White House for what was billed as a signing ceremony for an agreement that would hand over Ukraine's mineral resources to the United States.

Instead, plans to sign the deal were scrapped, and Zelensky was ejected from the White House following an unprecedented confrontation.

During the 13-minute exchange, Trump and Vance gave a devastating picture of the current state of the US-NATO war against Russia. “Right now, you guys are going around and forcing conscripts to the front lines because you have manpower problems,” Vance said.

“You’re not in a very good position,” Trump added. “You’re gambling with the lives of millions of people, you’re gambling with World War III.” He added, “Your country is in big trouble. You’re not winning this.”

Trump continued, “We gave you, through this stupid president [Joe Biden], \$350 billion in military equipment. You’re buried there. Your people are dying. You’re running low on soldiers.”

Even while excoriating the presidencies of Obama and Biden, Trump took pains to identify himself with the arming of Ukraine, declaring, “Obama gave you sheets, and I gave you Javelins,” referring to anti-tank missiles provided to Ukraine by the US during the first Trump administration.

In publicly berating Zelensky, Trump sought to appeal to domestic disillusionment with the Ukraine war, which enjoys no significant support outside of the affluent upper-middle class base of the Democratic Party.

But whatever Trump’s intentions, the public confrontation in the Oval Office was a testament to the deep crisis of US imperialism, of which the collapse of the Ukraine war is a particularly acute expression.

The project of turning Ukraine into a NATO garrison state now spans five administrations, Democratic and Republican alike. Beginning with the declaration by the Bush administration in 2008 that Ukraine “will become” a NATO member, the United States and its NATO allies have expended hundreds of billions of dollars and staked the reputation of US imperialism on the project of using Ukraine as a lever to destabilize and, it was hoped, destroy Russia.

The Ukraine war was the central foreign policy project of the Biden administration. By drawing Russia into a war on its borders, the Biden administration hoped to unify the NATO alliance under US hegemony. One month after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Biden declared, “NATO has never, never been more united than it is today.”

From its inception, NATO was aimed at unifying the European imperialist powers within the framework of a “Pax Americana”: First, against the Soviet Union, then against Russia.

Within this framework, the United States expended vast resources to serve as the arbiter of intra-European and transatlantic imperialist tensions.

Biden's effort to unify the NATO alliance by waging a "hot war" against Russia sought to cover up the basic reality of a growing rift between the United States and its NATO allies.

Inter-imperialist conflict is now very much at the center of geopolitics. The deepening US conflict with the European powers comes as the Trump administration is attempting to respond to the crisis of US global hegemony through a reorientation of US foreign policy, aimed at dominating the Americas in order to create a supply base for war with China, the greatest geopolitical competitor of US imperialism.

As Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth explained last month:

Stark strategic realities prevent the United States of America from being primarily focused on the security of Europe. ... The US is prioritizing deterring war with China in the Pacific, recognizing the reality of scarcity, and making the resourcing tradeoffs.

On January 7, just two weeks before taking office, Trump raised the prospect of using military force to annex Greenland, an overseas territory of Denmark, a member of both NATO and the European Union.

Just two days ahead of his meeting with Zelensky, Trump announced that the United States would impose 25 percent tariffs on goods from the European Union, declaring that the EU was formed "to screw the United States."

In response, European Commission trade spokesman Olof Gill said, "The EU will react firmly and immediately against unjustified barriers to free and fair trade."

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez added, "We are going to defend our interests when our economies are attacked with tariffs that are completely unjustified and represent a veiled threat to our economic sovereignty."

But Friday's shouting match has thrown gasoline on the flames engulfing the NATO alliance. "Today, it became clear that the free world needs a new leader," the European Union's top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, said in a speech. Former French President François Hollande added, "The Trump administration is no longer our ally."

Earlier in the week, the *Telegraph* reported that Germany and France were in talks to station French nuclear-capable bombers in Germany "as the US threatens to withdraw its forces from the Continent."

Trump's efforts to reorient US foreign policy have triggered a crisis within the US political establishment. Trump's shift is deeply opposed by sections of the bourgeoisie who believe that abandoning the conflict with Russia and breaking apart NATO would be catastrophic for

American global influence. While they support Trump's assault on social programs and democratic rights, this issue directly impacts the global dominance of American imperialism. "Putin Wins the Trump-Zelensky Oval Office Spectacle," declared the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal*, which has otherwise fully backed Trump's policies. The *Journal* wrote that the war in Ukraine provided the US with the ability to undermine Russia "without US soldiers ever having to fire a shot." That "core interest hasn't changed, but berating Ukraine in front of the entire world will make it harder to achieve."

Elissa Slotkin, the leading "CIA Democrat" in the US Senate, issued a statement worrying that the confrontation with Zelensky was "not a great day for anyone but Putin—or maybe Xi Jinping." That is, that a reversal in Ukraine could undermine, rather than strengthen, American imperialism in its conflict with China. Slotkin has just been chosen to speak for the Democrats in response to Trump's address next Tuesday to a joint session of Congress.

There is no anti-war faction of the US political establishment. The Democratic Party is committed to escalation of war against Russia. Trump, meanwhile, is intent on establishing a US colonial empire aimed at setting the stage for conflict with China, in the process stoking the conflict with the European imperialist powers.

In this deepening crisis, the working class must adopt an independent, internationalist position, not aligning with one or another faction of the ruling class in any country. Workers in every country must rally to the banner of socialist internationalism, which opposes the war plans of the imperialist powers through the international unity of the working class.

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