

Kyiv is collateral in Trump's showdown with Xi

The US leader wants swift denouement in Ukraine so he can pivot to the main business of his presidency

Roger Boyes

Tuesday March 04 2025, 9.00pm, The Times

The relentless US attempt to squeeze the breath from President Zelensky continues apace with the freezing of military aid to Ukraine. Even by the standards of Trumpian blitz politik, the speed of this attempted ousting of the Ukrainian leader is jaw-dropping. For three years, Zelensky was hailed as a war hero fighting to keep the Russians out of Europe's backyard. Now, egged on by the new US administration, the hero seems to be heading for zero.

Why the rush to get him out of the back door? Why the jeering about his war effort? The main cause seems to be resentment at Zelensky's claims of agency, his irritating assumption that he might have something useful to say in the otherwise promising talks between Russians and Americans.

The fact is, President Trump's team is itching to move on from the depressingly 20th-century war in eastern Europe and gear up for the big geopolitical challenge of the presidency: the face-off with China. It is this that gives the administration its buzz, even if China barely figures in the public discourse apart from some word-fencing about tariffs. That's about to change.

[How much military aid has the US sent to Ukraine? Freeze could be 'devastating'](#)

The Trump logic in ending the Ukraine war quickly is that it might help declutter the stage, enabling a strategic rapprochement with Russia. That in turn could help the US to weaken the supposedly unlimited friendship between Moscow and Beijing. Marco Rubio, the secretary of state, has already held out the prospect of economic co-operation with a modernising Russia. There is talk of the US opening the way for Russia returning to the G8.

The survival of an independent and prosperous Ukraine appears to be of secondary interest. Instead, the priority is preventing the Sino-Russian alliance developing permanent military structures. China has helped Russia's military-industrial complex throughout the war, covertly transferring dual-use tech and drone production. Some 80 per cent of sanctioned western components arrive in Russia via Chinese private companies. China has become a high-tech hub for President Putin's Russia.

A "normalised" relationship with the Kremlin, sought by some in the US administration, would mean the phased loosening of sanctions against Russia - and (Washington hopes) a Moscow pivot away from China. Many Russian nationalists have warned over the past three years about the suppressed rivalries with China, in the development of Siberia, in the opening of the melting Arctic sea routes, in Chinese tech saturating Russian markets.

All these fears have been brushed aside by the status of Beijing as a discreet war ally. The Chinese, for their part, are uneasy about harnessing themselves to an only moderately

successful war leader who regularly threatens the use of nuclear weapons, who had to fend off a mutiny and who deploys thousands of North Korean troops without Beijing's explicit blessing.

There might then be some space for US strategic manoeuvre. One China hawk, Robert Atkinson, of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, has caught the eye of the tech mogul Maga converts. Atkinson compares China to Germany between the late 1880s and the Second World War. Germany weaponised trade, focused on importing goods needed for the war machine, sought control of maritime trade routes, kept its currency undervalued to increase competitiveness and used tariffs and export subsidies to boost steel, chemical and machinery industries. That set Germany on the war path.

Today, it's China, using similar updated methods to snatch global leadership in electric vehicles and commercial nuclear power; to challenge the US on AI, quantum computing, robotics, semiconductors. That's translating into military nimbleness, developing so-called wingman drones that are at the heart of the race between China and the US for air superiority. The tech competition will be central to the next war - for control and conquest of Taiwan, for example.

Ukraine has been a testing ground for an army using and adapting modern tech to even up the odds against a numerically superior Russian army. But although Zelensky's Oval Office critics claim to be motivated by wanting to stop the killing - a necessary precondition for the Nobel peace prize shortlist - their main concern seems to be about the US winning in the next big global challenge.

The suspension of US arms deliveries will not necessarily end the war. Only 20 per cent of military hardware supplied to the Ukrainian military now comes from the US; 55 per cent is home-produced in Ukraine, while the remaining 25 per cent comes from Europe and the rest of the world. But it is a gesture: the US component includes some of the most lethal and advanced arms systems. Without those, the war will slow, Russia may gain momentum and the calculated humiliation of Zelensky will be stretched out.

[Trump allies say Zelensky failed to grasp 'genius' chess move](#)

It's a cynical gamble that aims for a political result: the resignation perhaps of the Ukrainian leader, a peace conference that allows Putin to hold on to land he has snatched and held. Will that achieve the strategic aim of weakening the China-Russia axis? Probably not. But if it's any consolation to Zelensky and his nation of warriors, they never stood a chance; they were always doomed to lose the endgame when the new US president started to yawn about a war that interfered in his plans for historic victories elsewhere. The Ukrainians simply became collateral in a geopolitical turn of the screw. Nothing personal, Trump's men will say after a "peace" is declared. No hard feelings.