

Opinion – Ukraine’s Future Is Not in Its Own Hands

Written by Mazlum Özkan

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/03/03/opinion-ukraines-future-is-not-in-its-own-hands/>

MAZLUM ÖZKAN, MAR 3 2025

Ukraine is no longer in control of its own war; great power politics have overtaken its struggle for sovereignty, as seen in its exclusion from key diplomatic negotiations and its increasing reliance on external military and economic aid. While Kyiv fights for survival, the U.S. and Russia pursue larger strategic goals, reshaping the global order. This is not a war of democracy versus autocracy—it is a battle over power and influence, with Ukraine caught in the middle.

Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in 2022, the U.S. has framed the war as a defense of democracy, shaping public perception and policy decisions by justifying increased military aid and economic sanctions against Russia. This framing has also strengthened NATO cohesion and rallied Western support for Ukraine, though critics argue it oversimplifies the conflict’s geopolitical realities. But this narrative masks a deeper reality: a geopolitical contest over Eastern Europe’s balance of power. The U.S. strengthens NATO to contain Russia; Russia fights to keep Ukraine in its orbit. As a result, Ukraine’s ability to act independently is shrinking.

At the core of the conflict is a long-standing power struggle between Washington and Moscow. The U.S. aims to maintain dominance over European security, while Russia seeks to dismantle the post-Cold War order that placed NATO on its borders. The Kremlin has repeatedly warned that Ukraine’s Western alignment is a red line, but U.S. policymakers have dismissed these concerns as revisionist grievances rather than legitimate security threats. This deadlock has turned Ukraine into the focal point of an escalating power struggle.

For Russia, the war is not just about territory—it is about status. Vladimir Putin frames the conflict as a defense against Western encirclement, citing NATO’s expansion and U.S. military aid to Kyiv as provocations. Moscow’s broader goal is to force a realignment in European security, one that recognizes Russia’s sphere of influence and weakens U.S. hegemony.

Under Joe Biden, the U.S. provided billions in military and economic aid to Ukraine, arguing that supporting Kyiv was essential for upholding the liberal order. However, as the war drags on and domestic concerns over foreign spending grow, this approach is being reassessed.

With Donald Trump’s return to the White House, U.S. policy has shifted toward a transactional approach, a shift that became evident when he excluded Ukraine from recent U.S.-Russia negotiations in Saudi Arabia, dismissal of NATO allies’ calls for a unified stance against Russia, and willingness to negotiate directly with Vladimir Putin—effectively sidelining Kyiv from key discussions that will determine its future. His strategy prioritizes economic agreements over direct military support, shifting U.S. engagement toward a pragmatic recalibration of interests.

This shift was further highlighted during the recent confrontation between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House. The meeting, originally intended to finalize a U.S.-Ukraine rare-earth minerals deal, devolved into a heated exchange. Trump accused Zelenskyy of being “disrespectful” and “gambling with World War III,” revealing deep fractures in U.S.-Ukraine relations. The cancellation of a planned joint press conference underscored the breakdown in diplomatic relations, signaling that Ukraine’s leverage in negotiations with Washington is diminishing.

The Trump administration’s treatment of Zelenskyy serves as a stark warning to smaller nations reliant on Western

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support. It highlights the precarious nature of alliances based on strategic convenience rather than genuine commitment to democratic values or sovereignty. Ukraine, once a symbol of Western resolve against Russian aggression, is now being subjected to political maneuvering that undermines its struggle for self-determination. The world is witnessing how great powers prioritize their own interests above the survival of their supposed allies, reinforcing the notion that smaller states can never fully trust the policies of global hegemony.

This behavior is not just characteristic of Trump and his administration but is a fundamental aspect of how great powers operate. They perceive their own interests and ideological positions as superior to those of smaller nations, imposing their will under the guise of strategic necessity. The treatment of Ukraine illustrates this dynamic vividly—portraying Ukraine’s justified struggle for sovereignty as though it were a reckless endeavor rather than an existential fight against aggression. The U.S. and its allies, despite claiming to defend Ukraine, have manipulated its war effort for their own geopolitical advantage while simultaneously blaming Ukraine for the very crisis it was forced into.

Trump recently emphasized this approach in a statement following a meeting with President Emmanuel Macron at the G7 Summit. He highlighted a proposed “Critical Minerals and Rare-Earths Deal” between the U.S. and Ukraine, describing it as an “Economic Partnership” aimed at recouping American investments while aiding Ukraine’s economic recovery. Simultaneously, he revealed discussions with President Vladimir Putin regarding an end to the war and potential U.S.-Russia economic cooperation, signaling a shift away from military support toward economic and diplomatic agreements.

However, tensions flared when Trump and Vice President JD Vance berated Zelenskyy during his February 28 visit, accusing him of ingratitude and pressuring him into a peace deal on U.S. terms. The heated exchange led to the cancellation of a joint press conference and minerals deal signing ceremony. Zelenskyy left the White House abruptly, further deepening the rift between Ukraine and its supposed ally. The public fallout reinforced how great powers prioritize their own strategic interests over the sovereignty of smaller nations, leaving Ukraine increasingly sidelined in decisions that determine its fate.

As global power struggles intensify, Ukraine finds itself increasingly excluded from decisions about its own future. Kyiv remains committed to its defense, but external actors—Washington and Moscow—are negotiating their interests over Ukraine’s fate. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s exclusion from key diplomatic discussions, such as the Saudi-hosted talks, underscores this reality. While Biden framed Ukraine as a vital partner in the West’s struggle against Russia, Trump’s approach suggests that Kyiv’s role may be reduced to a bargaining chip in a larger geopolitical realignment.

The Ukraine crisis illustrates the brutal calculus of great power politics, where smaller states become instruments of broader strategic struggles. The U.S.-Russia rivalry has dictated the war’s course, with shifting U.S. policies—from Biden’s interventionism to Trump’s pragmatism—reshaping its trajectory. As Washington and Moscow explore possible diplomatic realignments, Ukraine’s sovereignty risks becoming secondary to great power interests. Great powers dictate the terms of war and peace, leaving Ukraine with fewer choices of its own. The question is not whether Ukraine will survive, but under whose terms it will exist.

About the author:

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