

Ukraine Has Finally Given Up

di Phillips Payson O'Brien

For more than a year after Donald Trump returned to the White House, Ukraine held out hope—at least publicly—of winning him over. Trump, who revealed his affection for Russia's Vladimir Putin again and again, largely [halted](#) American military aid to Kyiv. He insulted Ukrainian leaders regularly, personally [berating](#) President Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office in February 2025. Nevertheless, Ukraine diligently took part in Trump's peace negotiations, which were tilted to reward Putin's invasion and turned out to be fruitless. Zelensky agreed to mineral deals that supposedly promised to enrich Americans. He even [lavishly praised](#) Trump himself. Despite Ukrainian leaders' growing doubts, they calculated that speaking sweetly of the American president would do no harm and just might gain his favor.

But now Kyiv appears to have given up on the United States. It is aggressively seeking new diplomatic and military partners—for instance, by [sharing](#) its hard-won expertise in drone warfare with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates and [forging](#) arms-production agreements with Germany. Ukraine has sent drones to [attack](#) oil-export facilities near St. Petersburg, deep inside enemy territory, in defiance of what Zelensky [called](#) “signals” from unspecified “partners” to avoid striking Russian energy infrastructure.

Using language that would until recently have been unthinkable, Zelensky has indicated that he no longer views the United States as a reliable ally and, even more astonishingly, that all of Europe needs to start moving on from the transatlantic relationship.

In an effort to keep energy prices from spiking further amid the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran, the Trump administration [eased sanctions](#) on Russian oil producers and sellers. In an interview last week with Italian radio, Zelensky [criticized](#) that decision. “In my

view, Russia played the Americans again—played the president of the United States,” he said. (The sanctions waiver [expired](#) earlier this week.) Lest anyone outside Italy miss his point, Zelensky amplified an English-language version of his comments on X. Not long afterward, Zelensky [argued](#) that, if the U.S. is truly planning to withdraw from NATO, as Trump has threatened, European democracies need a whole new security architecture. To defend itself from Russia without American assistance, Zelensky suggested, the European Union would need the capabilities of the nonmembers Norway, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Ukraine.

He was drawing a sharp contrast with European leaders who, in the past 15 months, have desperately pretended that the United States remains committed to its traditional allies. In the process, some leaders have debased themselves, as NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte did when he referred to Trump as “Daddy.” (Rutte, who is Dutch, subsequently described the comment as a “language problem.”) No one wanted to admit that Trump’s return had made the U.S. a threat to European security. Ukraine’s new willingness to speak honestly results from a combination of factors. The United States has reduced what little weaponry it was selling to Ukraine to conserve supplies for its war against Iran. Although at various points Trump has discussed putting harsh sanctions on Russia—perhaps to appease pro-Ukraine sentiments within his own party—he has lately not bothered with such gestures. Most discouraging for Ukrainians, the Trump administration has frequently [pressured](#) them to [cede](#) their territory and fellow citizens in the Donbas to Putin as part of a peace deal.

Those developments have persuaded Zelensky and others to speak the truth about America’s tightening alignment with Putin and to warn other European countries about the danger they now face.

The change in Ukraine’s public posture comes as the country’s military situation has improved, at least relative to its struggles last year. Relying overwhelmingly on their homegrown drone industry and military structure, Ukrainian forces have regained the initiative in many areas. In recent months, they have [reportedly caused](#) more casualties than Russia can replace—and have taken back more territory than Russia

has seized. Along the front lines, Ukraine has strengthened and extended its so-called drone wall, which restricts the movement of flesh-and-blood Russian forces. Earlier this week, Kyiv claimed to have seized a Russian position and captured a number of Russian soldiers while exposing no Ukrainians at all, only unmanned aerial and ground vehicles.

Meanwhile, Ukrainians have gained greater confidence in launching drone strikes on mid- and long-range targets far behind the front lines, as the attack near St. Petersburg showed. Finally, Ukraine continues to bottle up Russian naval power in the Black Sea. Vessels even in the most protected Russian naval bases are no longer safe from Ukrainian attack.

For the past 15 months, U.S. officials and many Western analysts have been fixated on Ukrainian weakness. Trump infamously insisted last year that Ukrainians had “no cards” to play. But their ability to adapt even without U.S. aid has been startling. Now a global leader in drone development and manufacturing, Ukraine is reportedly [planning](#) to produce up to 7 million military unmanned aerial vehicles in 2026.

Ukrainians would much rather have the United States on their side than on Russia’s. From 2022 to 2024, Washington provided more military aid than anyone else to Ukraine. Although much of this aid was delivered slowly, and in some cases with maddening limits attached, it was crucial in helping Ukraine survive the first few years of the war. But Ukrainians do not believe that losing American support will inevitably lead to their defeat. They see how they have sustained the war effort, using their own resources and with the help of European partners, even as the U.S. has moved away. Writing the United States off as a friend might once have been a sign of doom for Ukraine. It isn’t anymore.