News

US ties with Ukraine hit new low as Trump slights Zelenskyy and eases up on Russia



President Donald Trump speaks to the media on the South Lawn of the White House before walking to board Marine One, Monday, Oct. 19, 2026, in Washington. AP PHOTO/MARK SCHIEFELBEIN

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S.-Ukraine alliance is careening toward a possible breaking point, with Moscow strengthened by President Donald Trump's recent rejection of new Russia sanctions and Kyiv undermined by disruptions in satellite support for its drones during the war.

Trump's relationship with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has always been a moving target, while the Republican president has frequently boasted of his rapport with Russian leader Vladimir Putin. But relations between the U.S. and Ukraine appear to be at a new low, threatening to tip the balance of the war to Russia's favor and imperil America's security interests across the globe.

"At this moment in time, things look blacker than they ever had regarding this administration's policy towards Russia and Ukraine," said John Herbst, a former ambassador to Ukraine under President George W. Bush and now a scholar with the Atlantic Council.

Trump has been lobbing insults at Zelenskyy for over a week and turning to policies that benefit Putin, while Ukraine's president has said he feels betrayed and worries for his country's future. But the American president can still shift on Zelenskyy — especially as he faces bipartisan outrage from lawmakers — which Trump has done before.

Trump famously thrashed Ukraine's leader in the Oval Office last year, warning him to "make a deal or we are out." Washington briefly suspended intelligence sharing. But Trump was praising Zelenskyy by that July and said they "actually developed a good relationship."

"Trump is a mercurial guy," Herbst said. "He can wake up tomorrow morning, decide he's done enough on this, and he might start to lean back in the other direction."

No one has taken responsibility for satellite restrictions on Ukraine

Trump's recent decisions have baffled experts and infuriated Democrats and some Republicans ahead of pivotal midterm elections in two weeks.

After The Wall Street Journal reported that Putin raised the prospect of a meeting with Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping to negotiate an end to the war in Ukraine, Trump told reporters Monday that he was open to it but expected it to focus on denuclearization efforts. Asked whether he would be willing to negotiate the end of the war without Zelenskyy, Trump appeared to indicate yes.

"I think it's time for somebody else to negotiate on behalf of Ukraine," Trump said.

Trump decided Friday to waive sanctions on Russia in a bill that Congress overwhelmingly passed to support Ukraine. Named after late South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, the legislation targeted the flow of financial resources fueling Russia's war.

That rebuke followed Trump's announcement of a deal to import Russian diesel fuel in a longshot effort to curb high gas prices. The agreement was pilloried by Republicans and Democrats alike who say it will help Russia without making a difference in global fuel prices, which are elevated mostly due to Trump's war against Iran.

Then there were changes in SpaceX's satellite support to Ukraine's military, for which no one has taken responsibility.

Starshield is a military-grade version of SpaceX's Starlink satellite internet service and the backbone of Ukraine's drone operations and communication. Zelenskyy says his country is facing major speed restrictions, so Ukrainian drones have been unable to intercept Russia's jet-powered drones.

SpaceX chief Elon Musk, a Trump ally, has said Starshield is controlled by the U.S. and any limits are decided by the military and ultimately Trump. But Trump told reporters Friday that he did not order restrictions and doubted that Musk did either.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Saturday that Ukraine wants access to Starshield but doesn't have it. On Monday, he said the Pentagon controls Starshield, and "Ukraine has benefited from it" and wants to expand its use to conduct attacks beyond its territory.

The U.S. military has not responded to questions about its involvement.

And while Russia has launched new attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, Zelenskyy said Monday that Kyiv once again received no early warning of the latest attacks from partners such as the U.S.

"Russia killed six people, including a mother and her child, who was just over a year old," Zelenskyy said on X, adding that this "is how Russia responds to sanctions waivers and reduced pressure."

Trump and Rubio say Washington hasn't stopped providing intelligence to Kyiv that has helped Ukraine counter Russian attacks.

Experts say Trump is trying to appease Putin

Dan Fried, a former U.S. ambassador to Poland and assistant secretary of state for European affairs under Bush, said he was mystified by the Trump administration's shifting positions on Ukraine.

Fried said he first thought Trump's diesel fuel announcement was aimed at trying to influence the midterms with cheaper fuel prices. But what followed has changed his opinion.

"It all seems designed to put pressure on Zelenskyy and curry favor with Putin," said Fried, now a scholar with the Atlantic Council.

Fiona Hill, who was Trump's Russia adviser on the National Security Council during his first term, said Trump could be trying to appease Putin over worries that Russia could do more to support Iran.

Since Trump launched the Iran war in February, Russia has sent drone technology to Tehran and information that could help it strike American warships, aircraft and other assets in the region.

"So maybe this is it — Putin's just calling in a chit for not devastating Trump through Iran as he could do by helping the Iranians," said Hill, now a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution.

Trump revealed his worries on social media Sunday, saying, "Russia is doing very little, if anything, to help the Islamic Republic of Iran, compared to what they could be doing, and I want to keep it that way, and will, unless stupid people get in the way."

Criticism grows in Congress

One factor that could nudge Trump toward a detente with Zelenskyy is the cascading criticism from Republicans. They are facing a surge of Democratic momentum in the final stretch of the midterms, which will determine control of Congress.

Pennsylvania Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, a moderate Republican in a competitive race, is calling for congressional hearings into the Starshield disruptions and "immediate harsh and punitive budget cuts to any responsible agency or agency head."

Democratic Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal said on X that he and retiring Republican North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis organized a call with Zelenskyy and a bipartisan group of lawmakers Monday, including about disruptions to U.S. intelligence sharing.

Zelenskyy, in a video of the briefing posted online, also noted that Ukraine has "almost no Patriot interceptors left from the United States" and claimed "the Pentagon is delaying the delivery of missiles that our partners have already paid for."

Mississippi Republican Sen. Roger Wicker, who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, urged Trump to take up Zelenskyy's pledge to stop attacks on Russian energy infrastructure in exchange for U.S. targeting assistance to stop Russia's missiles.

"President Trump can lower prices at the pump today by simply agreeing to this deal!" Wicker posted on X.

Regardless of which political party controls Congress next year, lawmakers will likely revolt if Trump enters into a deal with Russia and China over Ukraine, said Fried, the former ambassador to Poland.

"It is clear that we are sitting on considerable leverage over Putin," he said, "but also clear that we are not using it. It's a mess."

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