

Zelensky visits the US: a diplomatic failure rather than a 'victory plan'

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From 22 to 27 September, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky visited the United States, where he addressed the UN General Assembly in New York, met with US President Joe Biden and the two presidential candidates, Kamala Harris, and Donald Trump, and visited an ammunition factory in Pennsylvania. The main purpose of his trip was to unveil a new Ukrainian 'victory plan' to persuade the Biden administration to increase US military and political support for Ukraine in its war with Russia in a prompt and substantial manner. The US has announced the launch of a military support package for Kyiv worth approximately \$8 bn, including more than \$5 bn that is at the president's disposal (this sum comes from a \$61 bn package provided in April).

Zelensky's trip has failed to yield the results Ukraine expected to achieve. The Biden administration most likely did not endorse the 'victory plan', the details of which remain unknown, as it considered it too maximalist and unrealistic. Regarding the Ukrainian president's visit to Pennsylvania, one of the key swing states, the Republican Party perceived it as electoral campaigning in favour of the Democrats. This, in turn, could jeopardise Washington's continued support for Kyiv should Trump win the election.

Commentary

- **All indications suggest that Ukraine's 'victory plan' has failed to garner the support it anticipated from Washington.** Although the document has not been made public, media reports suggest it has proven disappointing due to overly high expectations. Allegedly, Kyiv's proposals included security guarantees to Ukraine, such as an invitation to join NATO, support for offensive actions on Russian territory (including the retention of territories in Kursk Oblast and missile strikes deep into Russia), as well as a significant increase in military support and financial assistance. Zelensky's warnings concerning Russia's intention to carry out missile strikes targeting Ukrainian nuclear power plants have also proved ineffective in persuading the Biden administration to permit Ukraine to use US-made long-range missiles.
- **Ukraine intends to utilise the final months of Joe Biden's presidency to secure support for the key proposals outlined in its 'victory plan', as this could provide an advantage over Russia.** The proposed expedited deadline for implementing these proposals (by the end of December) stems from Ukraine's concerns regarding a potential Trump victory. The Republican Party's candidate has called for a swift end to the war, and his potential

vice-president J.D. Vance has even suggested that Ukraine may need to relinquish some territories, abandon its plans to join NATO, and adopt a neutral status. These demands elicited a negative response from Zelensky in an interview with *The New Yorker* magazine, published on the eve of his visit to the US.

- **The Ukrainian president's visit to Pennsylvania has significantly strained Kyiv's relationship with the Republican Party.** Unfavourable sentiments towards Zelensky surfaced, especially following his comments in which he criticised Vance. Furthermore, the visit was perceived as interference in US domestic politics and a gesture of support for the Democratic candidate. The unfortunate choice of President Biden's home state – one of the most crucial states for the election outcome, governed by a Democratic governor whom Harris had recently considered as her vice-presidential candidate – proved to be a misstep for the Ukrainian side. Amid an increasingly tense US election campaign, Zelensky has become a target of Trump's criticism. Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mike Johnson, has demanded that Ukraine recall its ambassador, and prominent Republican politicians did not attend a meeting with Zelensky in the Senate. Highly critical comments directed at Ukraine, published by right-wing journalists, gained traction on social media, indicating that a portion of the Republican electorate has anti-Ukrainian sentiment. This has prompted some Republican politicians to adopt a harsher tone, as they believe that criticism of Kyiv could be beneficial in mobilising the electorate.
- **Although the meeting between Zelensky and Trump could help to mitigate critical opinions regarding Ukraine, it will not offset Kyiv's reputational damage.** The Ukrainian side's successful efforts to organise this meeting demonstrate its determination to maintain good relations with both US presidential candidates. However, despite the positive atmosphere of the meeting (for instance, the former US president recalled Zelensky's favourable attitude towards him during his first impeachment), the event has failed to elicit a shift in Trump's stance on the Ukrainian issue, and US right-wing commentators remain critical of Zelensky.
- **US military support to Ukraine primarily stems from domestic political developments.** In addition to the \$375 mn military aid package (mainly involving ammunition), Biden has announced additional support (worth over \$5.5 bn), to be provided under the Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA). The administration is required to utilise these funds by the end of September. Biden attempted to extend this deadline during the vote on the continuing resolution at the end of September; however, he was unsuccessful due to opposition from some Republicans in the House of Representatives. Simultaneously, the US Department of Defence (DoD) announced the provision of \$2.4 bn in military assistance (primarily to fund the production of missiles for Patriot and NASAMS systems) under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). This support was granted in response to pressure that Biden placed on the DoD to utilise the funds allocated for assisting Kyiv by the end of the current administration's term.
- **Despite the lukewarm reception of the Ukrainian 'victory plan' in Washington, Kyiv will continue to advocate for it as an effective tool to compel Russia to negotiate.** In the domestic political arena, the lack of US approval for the Ukrainian proposals will enable

Kyiv to shift the blame for any potential future failure on the front to its Western partners. Such a failure may compel Ukraine to initiate talks with Russia.