

The Article

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Does President Trump really have all the cards?



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Zelenskyy's Oval Office meeting and his showdown with Trump

President Donald Trump believes he has all the cards in the Ukraine issue.

Is he right? Answer: No. Here are some reasons why.

The first is that he, and many of his associates, as well as many others round the world of comment, are living in a time warp and a technology warp. They are still in a 20th century world, before the full dawn of the digital age, in which might was mostly right. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, we had the undoubted age of American primacy.

But then came China and then came the multipolar world, where power shifted from the West and power shifted from size. We began to enter the age of weak giants. Wiser and deeper-thinking Americans, including some in the military, saw that the simple picture of an international hierarchy, with America at the peak as acclaimed leader of the West, was fading –

in fact that even the concepts of East and West were dissolving amid new alliances and new networks.

Yes, networks: that is the great second change from the past. The gates have been opened wide to networks of cooperation, activity, innovation, common interest, direction and unity of purpose, working all the time, with or without government's help, sometimes without even official knowledge or comprehension and obeying their own laws, customs and procedures. These are the tangled, unmapped mazes where power has come to reside and hide, power to frustrate as well as create. Outcomes occur in quite different directions from official intentions or confident forecasts.

Hyper-connectivity has whipped all these trends and impulses together, making nonsense of the old motivations, driving predatory state aims and ambitions, whether driven by crude military conquest, by creeping annexation, historically revived claims, critical mineral resources or just the machinations of drug and crime cartels.

Networks never sleep and never stop demanding new forms of linkage, interweaving peoples and interests at all levels together. Towering over the connected world are the giant tech platform companies, several of them with market capitalisations measured in trillions (of dollars), well above the GDP of most nation states.

In most major countries, governments are scrambling to control and contain what these behemoths transmit on their screens. The key is to establish liability over what these companies let through. The unifying international approach to this common threat has yet to take shape.

There are no other comparable expansionist forces in operation in a powerfully computerised world today: not Russian boys in their massed ranks and dying en masse, not random missiles fired into civilian heartlands, not the most devious and persistent propaganda, not undersea cable cutting, not even the distortions of AI.

In his superb book *Chip Wars*, Chris Miller reminds us that the first semiconductors, produced by Fairchild in the 1960s, carried four transistors. Today Taiwan, the world's biggest quality chip producer, sells chips to Apple carrying eleven *billion* transistors. The impact on human relations and attitudes, on structures of governance, on patterns of global power, is as great as the birth of the printing press, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution all rolled into one. Indeed, it is greater. The numbers of people reached are infinitely larger, the impact on daily lives infinitely swifter and infinitely more widespread, reaching to almost every corner of the globe.

The second misunderstanding, shared on both sides of the Atlantic, is that saving and preserving Ukraine is a purely European issue. This is the massively and historically transformed world in which the President of the Great Republic believes he holds all the cards. But Trump's instruction book belongs to a previous century. Now it is Asia where the big growth in both economic and military power is going to occur over the next thirty years. No one (well, no one except in Moscow and Beijing) wants to see America the Beautiful, America the world saviour of freedom of eighty years ago, become America the feared and unloved. But now the cards have been shuffled and are held in quite different ways.

For a start, the vast majority of what are now sometimes described as the neo-non-aligned nations, large and small, want as much freedom and independence from the hegemon as

possible, whether Chinese or American. For instance, they are clearly finding the Commonwealth network, with its light central touch, its absence of binding treaties and legal tangles, and its connectivity, not just between governments but even more between people, quite attractive. Some are applying for Commonwealth membership accordingly.

It's hard to compare this kind of positioning with the American situation, or at any rate the Trump situation, especially if the new form of US neighbourliness amounts to grabbing Greenland, tying in Canada as the 51st state and maximising pressures on Mexico.

Then there is the question of Europe. Mr Trump clearly feels that Europe is indeed the zone of weak players with inadequate defence spending. Yet the latter are very largely calculated with erroneous percentages and on completely out of date measurements of what nowadays constitutes "defence spending" and what should be the priority targets to be defended in the age of hybrid war.

Let's assume that it's too late to correct that impression now. But one thing the Oval Office ought to be able to grasp is that war in Ukraine isn't just a European business or even just a Western business. The microchip has made it a world-wide task of upholding, or at least not upending, the international rule of law on which the entire balance between nations and the order of civilisation rests. That is why a nation like Japan, still by most measures the third biggest industrial power, is so strongly convinced that if Russian aggression is rewarded in Ukraine, it will mean the end of the rule of international law. The Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, will seize the opportunity to suffocate Taiwan by one means or another, starting war in the Pacific, and maybe the world. It is why Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada and many more feel involved in Ukraine – and deeply so.

And it is of course why even in the struggling UN the overwhelming vote for permanent Ukraine security came from across the entire planet — leaving, incredibly, America huddled against the rest along with Russia and North Korea, while China abstained.

This is all a matter of great regret for those who cherish good and friendly relationships and common ties with the USA. Perhaps some of the misunderstandings and the stand-offs might have been eased if the advice had been followed earlier to redraft and update the Anglo-American Special Relationship, 80 years old, in terms suitable for the 21st century, rather than leaving it riddled with the clichés of a past world.

We come to one final "card": the particular and rather narrow question of the UK's nuclear deterrent. Could we maintain a credible nuclear deterrent without very close ties with the United States? In other words, can we manage without mighty America? Whether it is to secure Ukraine or to defend ourselves at home against both further frontal and physical attack *and* against the more insidious kinds of undermining where modern war and hybrid war increasingly focus — on the civilian population, transport links, the energy utilities, health, schools, normal life. Break civilian morale, goes the chilling logic, and you break the morale of their front line troops as well. Hermann Goering knew that as he tried to flatten British cities in 1940-41. But lacking the weapons with anything like the range, and up against the RAF and superb British radar, he failed. Putin, of course, has these weapons now.

Can we protect ourselves and our neighbours against all this, and without the full blown advanced Trident missile programme? Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, the Clausewitz of today, says that, yes, for the most part, we could. Britain could construct its own vehicles, its own tactical nuclear weapons — the full suite, so to speak, as France already does. True, it

would require new shields, such as advanced and expanded versions of the Israeli Iron Dome. True, it would be more comfortable, and cheaper, and maybe safer from the nuclear proliferation point of view, to stay where we are, but quite suddenly that might not be on the menu.

In short, we could manage without the US, although needing to be better prepared. We could do without elsewhere. In a networked, hyper-connected, technology-dominated world we do have some cards. President Zelensky, caught in the firing line between President Trump and Vice-President Vance, also has a card or two, which he never had the chance to use in the Oval Office farrago.

The list of issues which should make America pause, before pursuing its present course of playing the 20th century superpower game, is a long one. Many other items not listed here arise, not least that great nationhood arises from serving the world, rather than overriding it.

But I raise one final card-playing issue. It may sound vague and inconsequential, but in fact could decide everything. It is a card that may have slipped onto the floor in the Oval Office. It is marked “good manners”.

Most diplomacy is on thin and fragile ice, especially at moments of high international tension, as now. If the American Vice-President JD Vance had remembered this, instead of letting fly at Mr Zelensky after telling European leaders at Munich that America did not trust them, the atmosphere would have been far better. Some degree of trust would have been retained in the card game now being played. The fact that Europe and the wider world does not trust the United States under present leadership would have remained less obvious, and perhaps even buried.

It is not just Europe but almost the whole world that knows Russia must be stopped and Ukraine lastingly preserved. And at the same time, to make America great again, it must be ready to serve freedom again, as it did in the past.

At this moment it is being led in precisely the opposite direction.

Lord Howell's new book, [Avoiding the Coming Anarchy: a short book for optimists in dangerous times](#), is available from Amazon [here](#).