Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Can the UK work on Washington to ease the pressure on Ukraine?

Ukraine, backed by its European allies, this week won at least a temporary reprieve in its battle to forestall a US-imposed peace deal widely condemned as a sellout to Russia.

After weekend talks in Geneva that included national security advisers from the UK, France and Germany, US and Ukrainian representatives met to agree on a revised plan that would leave the most contentious issues until last.

Despite reported progress towards a Washington-Kyiv agreement on the final terms, the Europeans remain wary of proposals that reflect Moscow's priorities in the almost four-year war.

When a 28-point draft of the original plan was leaked a week ago, European allies reacted with barely suppressed fury to proposals that would oblige Ukraine to hand over territory to Russia and to slash the size of its military.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer was among those who insisted that at least some aspects of the plan were unacceptable to those who backed Ukraine.

How far will soft power diplomacy go?

President Donald Trump appeared to drop a deadline of Thursday this week for Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to accept its terms by saying it was "not my final offer".

Until Geneva, European and Nato allies were frozen out of the process that led to the draft plan, which was formulated in talks between Washington and Moscow. So it is not known what role their pushback played in Trump's decision to look at it again.

However, the pause leaves an opportunity for the Europeans, and the UK in particular, to wield some personal diplomacy as negotiations proceed.

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In a half-hour call at the weekend, Starmer and Trump focussed on Ukraine and agreed, according to Starmer's office, that "all must work together at this critical moment to bring about a just and lasting peace."

Since the start of the US president's term, Starmer has established an unexpected level of bonhomie with Trump, which is credited with producing some positive results.

His courting of Trump, which included the invitation to a state visit, may have been a factor in allowing the UK to escape the worst of the president's tariff war.

But how far will such soft power diplomacy go in tempering Trump's stance on Ukraine, an issue on which he appears to place more good faith in Russia than in the US's traditional allies?

The UK's potential dual challenge

The UK has a potential dual challenge, with Starmer continuing to play the role of what the Wall Street Journal once described as "Europe's soft-spoken Trump whisperer" while acting as Ukraine's diplomatic guide.

Prominent in this second track is Starmer's national security adviser Jonathan Powell, a veteran diplomat and negotiator who represented the UK at the weekend Geneva talks.

Powell, who has emerged as Starmer's point man on Ukraine, is credited with having coached the Ukrainians on how to deal with an often brittle Trump following Zelenskyy's disastrous confrontation at the White House in February.

Powell is seen within the White House as the top negotiator on the European side

He has meanwhile worked on deepening the UK's relations with the Trump team, even coming to the defence of US negotiator Steve Witkoff earlier this year when he faced criticism for being out of his depth on Ukraine.

Powell was also credited with employing his close relationship with both the Ukrainians and his US counterpart Mike Waltz in helping Kyiv craft an abortive ceasefire proposal in March that led to Washington resuming intelligence sharing and military support for Ukraine.

A veteran of the Tony Blair premiership in which he helped seal the Northern Ireland peace deal, Powell is seen within the White House as the top negotiator on the European side.

But do Starmer's blandishments, Powell's shuttle diplomacy, or a combination of the two stand any chance of diverting Trump from moves the Europeans fear would amount to meeting Moscow's demands?

In the frontline of a shadow war

The latest Ukraine crisis comes at a difficult time for the Labour government ahead of a potentially contentious budget and amid continued speculation about leadership challenges facing an unpopular prime minister.

Despite broad public support for the Ukrainian cause, Starmer has faced opposition jibes of "Never Here Keir" for the amount of time he has spent abroad pursuing foreign policy goals during a term dominated by domestic economic gloom.

The leader of the Reform party in Wales, Nathan Gill, was jailed after admitting to taking bribes for pro-Russian interviews and speeches

Starmer benefits at least from a relatively stable party political consensus on the extent of the overall Russian threat. Senior officials have warned that the UK is in the frontline of a shadow war in which Moscow uses cyberattacks and subversion to undermine the UK.

One example surfaced this month when the leader of the Reform party in Wales, Nathan Gill, was jailed after admitting to taking bribes for pro-Russian interviews and speeches dating back to his time as a pre-Brexit member of the European Parliament.

The case put Reform leader Nigel Farage on the defensive in view of his own previously softer stance towards Vladimir Putin and mainstream warnings that a future Reform government would be a reward for the Kremlin.

More at stake than just the future of Ukraine

It is unlikely these domestic UK concerns will do much to influence Donald Trump. But Starmer will doubtless use whatever access he has to the president's ear to warn him not to trust any assurances that might come from Moscow.

The UK may be best placed to highlight the virtues of retaining a transatlantic alliance that appears to be increasingly irrelevant to Trump's Washington

Such interventions may prove fruitless in the face of a US administration so committed to redrawing the geopolitical map. Europe may have to turn increasingly to its own devices to ensure its own security.

Meanwhile, the UK may be best placed to highlight the virtues of retaining a transatlantic alliance that appears to be increasingly irrelevant to Trump's Washington.

To talk the president around, the British side have to convince their American counterparts that there is more at stake in bowing to Moscow than just the future of Ukraine.