

U.S. Ukraine Security Dialogue XVI

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Why Ukraine's security matters enough to its neighbors and the world at large to merit serious military assistance in time of need?

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Thank you, Walter.

As a U.S. government official, let me just add the usual disclaimer that my remarks are my personal views and do not necessarily reflect the position of my employer.

It's a great and undeserved honor of having the first word at a conference where many of the speakers are rightly considered national treasures given the breadth of their service and the depth of their expertise.

As this especially timely conference gets underway, you will mostly hear about the "how" of Ukraine's defense. This is the harder and, I believe, the more important question to answer. Thankfully, today's speakers are eminently qualified to make specific proposals that should be carefully considered here in Washington and in Europe at this dangerous moment of Russia's unprovoked and genocidal war against Ukraine. For, as military strategist Mick Ryan wrote in a recent Foreign Affairs article entitled, "Russia's Adaptation Advantage."

The longer this war lasts, the better Russia will get at learning, adapting, and building a more effective, modern fighting force... Ultimately, if Russia's edge in strategic adaptation persists without an appropriate Western response, the worst that can happen in this war is not stalemate. It is a Ukrainian defeat.

To be sure, this is far from a foregone conclusion, but it is a wakeup call to Western policymakers who have yet to fully rise to the gravity of the moment and get about the business of committing to nothing less than a timely—and total—Ukrainian victory.

Mercifully, I've been given the easier task of speaking to the "why" of Ukrainian defense. Specifically, why Americans and their democratically elected

representatives should care enough to continue to render serious military assistance to Ukraine in its time of need. And, I would add, to even increase the scope and scale of our military support.

In a room like this, I'm confident the answer to these questions is self-evident. But, outside this room, many of our fellow citizens who, after all, pay their taxes and vote their consciences, remain unconvinced, confused, or indifferent. And, in some cases, in addition to being taxpayers and voters, these people are elected officials.

While not a comprehensive list, many of their doubts fall under these broad themes.

- It's not our problem.
- Ukraine is corrupt.
- Ukraine is a left-wing political cause.
- Europeans aren't paying their fair share for their own security.
- Ukraine can't win.
- Giving Ukraine what it really needs to win risks nuclear war with Russia.
- Putin will stop with Ukraine.
- China's a bigger threat and Ukraine is a distraction from our preparations for possible war in East Asia.

In fairness, some of these objections are rooted in a partial truth or a reality stripped of necessary context. Others are rooted in fear. And many are often made in bad faith. But if we're to make progress in overcoming the political stalemate in this town that is contributing to Russia's recent success on the battlefield, we'd do well to presume good faith and look for every opportunity to engage the skeptics on the merits in hopes of widening our coalition.

I know we all have our own rebuttals to these objections, but I think the substance of any rebuttal is secondary to the imperative of engaging objections that we might be tempted to ignore or dismiss as misinformed and unconvincing.

On the positive side of the “why” question, our national leaders could do a much better job of making the case. Here are three points that I think should be emphasized in our national debate at every opportunity.

First—We’re too focused on the price tag of Ukrainian victory and not nearly focused enough on the cost of Russian victory. It’s easy for the Congressional Budget Office to score a Ukraine supplemental, but much harder to assess how much more the United States and our allies will be forced to spend on defense to mount a credible European deterrent to a Russian military emboldened by a win in Ukraine. Should this come to pass, that emboldened force will be much closer to the NATO borders that we’re treaty-bound to defend. The financial cost of this scenario is surely greater by at least an order of magnitude, and that’s not even counting the non-monetary cost, which includes the risk of a much wider war. I’d like to see more policy papers examine the cost of various suboptimal scenarios so that their numbers can appear on the big charts you see in the chambers of Congress during debates.

Second—Helping Ukraine defeat a neo-Stalinist Russia should be seen as unfinished business from the Second World War and rooted in the sacrifice of the Greatest Generation to bring peace to the Continent and create the necessary conditions for prosperity. Two fascist states conspired to start the war in September 1939, one was utterly defeated, occupied, and rebuilt, but the other never was. Our alliance of necessity with the Soviet Union obscured the truth about the origins of the war and ensured that Stalin would never be held to account for the Holodomor and the Great Terror. These monstrous crimes were closer then to the start of war in 1939 than we are now to the start of Russia’s current war against Ukraine in 2014. This burying of inconvenient historical truths inflicted a grave wound on the post-war architecture created, ostensibly, to keep the peace, but which now fails to do so—as if by design. It also hasn’t made it any easier for the people of Russia to face their past with the unflinching honesty needed to transcend that past. Given Russia’s nuclear deterrent, Moscow will never be occupied like Berlin was, but a defeat in Ukraine holds some possibility of creating more favorable conditions for the societal accounting that is needed to durably mitigate the threat from the Kremlin.

Third—The war in Ukraine, while a monumental catastrophe and collective failure of decades of transatlantic security policy, presents an opportunity to mend the frayed normative order that made war more likely. Thanks to the valor of the Ukrainian nation, we all still have a shot at a safer end state than the one that prevailed in the status quo ante of 2013. Ukrainian victory is the best shot we have

of repairing and remodeling a security order that was largely built at a time of great political clarity and seriousness by Americans to protect our interests. Standing by and watching Ukraine lose this war will be for the international order like taking a wrecking ball to an aging and drafty house that we all still live in and which, despite its age, still provides us with shelter. And then risking new construction, built by others at a political moment marked by its relative pettiness and chaos. To walk any further down this dangerous path is to commit national security malpractice.

In this Christian season of Lent, which is marked by greater sacrifice, hopefully greater charity, and—in Ukraine—unspeakable suffering. Let me conclude with St. Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians as I believe it contains a simple, but relevant, message for our own polity at this moment and underscores the urgency of our discussions, “Behold, now is the acceptable time.”

Ukrainian victory is still possible, but each of us has a critical role to play to help make this a reality.

Thank you.