

Closing the skies, liberating Ukraine

The greatest national security challenge facing the United States is the partnership of aggressive authoritarian regimes seeking to undermine US leadership globally. The larger long-term threat comes from the People's Republic of China. It has a large economy that, while not as strong as often depicted, can support its fast-expanding conventional military force and its forced-march nuclear weapons program aimed at achieving parity with the US in a decade. But the greatest short-term danger to the US comes from our peer nuclear power, Russia, which is conducting a savage war designed to subjugate Ukraine and which would like to restore political control over all the territory of the Soviet Union, including three NATO states. The coalition of authoritarians also includes Iran and North Korea (and even Hamas), who are launching constant provocations against us and our allies also from Northeast Asia to the Middle East and Africa.

There is a great deal of muddled thinking about these challenges to the US and it is reflected in the tendency to look at each threat in isolation. So, some naïve public figures talk about the provocations in the Western Pacific and/or the Middle East and say our focus must be solely on those problems, or that the US is no longer the global power that it had been and does not have the means to deal with multiple threats. And they conclude that somehow, the massive war launched by our only peer nuclear rival does not require an American response. This is nonsense. The only thing more dangerous and expensive than dealing with an emerging threat is to let it fester and then having to address it when it becomes larger. These critics also seem to have forgotten that we still have a global network of allies and partners equally threatened by these actors and eager to work with American leadership to hold back the threat.

Russian Aggression at the Core of the Global Threat to the US and its Allies

The pointiest spear of this rogue coalition is wielded by the Kremlin, and it is stuck not-quite firmly in Ukraine. This is the place where we can and must deal a decisive blow to our adversaries. That is not to say we can ignore the dangers elsewhere. But if we help Kyiv defeat Putin in Ukraine, we prevent further Russian aggression to the west and send a cautionary message to Xi to lay off Taiwan.

At the same time, by helping Ukraine defeat Russia, we make it much harder for Moscow to enable further Iranian aggression in the Middle East, which has been the key factor in Hamas' assault on Israel and the Houthis' attacks on global shipping in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

What does this mean for American policy now that Congress has passed the aid bill for Ukraine (and Israel and Taiwan) that was fecklessly delayed for over six months? Part of the answer is found in the legislation itself. The bill notes that the Administration has yet to put together a strategy to secure our national interests in Ukraine. It asks for objectives, a plan, and timeline for our engagement there. This is necessary, but not all that is needed.

The Administration must first identify what is at stake in Ukraine. The answer is obvious, but not frequently mentioned. The problem is not a crisis or a war in Ukraine, but an aggressive nuclear superpower that seeks to subjugate Ukraine before it moves further west. Its future targets

include our NATO allies Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. It may also include Poland and Romania, and our new allies Finland and Sweden. It is noteworthy that these long-time neutral nations asked to join NATO on an urgent basis after Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This is persuasive evidence of Moscow's ill-intent that, somehow, fringe thinkers on the left and especially the right refuse to acknowledge.

Containing a Revisionist Russia...

Two things flow from this. First, we need a policy of containment for an aggressive Kremlin, a position endorsed by representatives from ten think tanks at a [Capitol Hill conference](#) in early February. The place to contain and defeat Moscow is in Ukraine, a large country fighting for its sovereignty and its right to live free as proud Ukrainians. This is much smarter than fighting a Kremlin boosted by victory in Ukraine on the much less advantageous grounds of one of the Baltic states. It also does not involve American soldiers. If we understand the need is to contain and defeat Russia, we recognize that providing Ukraine \$40B in aid a year is not a gift to Ukraine, but a smart investment in US security that represents under 4% of our defense budget. With aid from the US and our allies, Ukraine has destroyed approximately 50% of Moscow's conventional military capability.

Second, we need a clear policy goal towards Moscow's war on Ukraine. The Administration has repeated frequently that it would "stay with Ukraine as long as it takes." While that is better than cutting off aid to Ukraine – because that would hand a victory to our nuclear adversary – it is no substitute for the clear goal of dealing a defeat to Russia or enabling a victory by Ukraine. This is what the moment requires – to serve our interests in Europe and beyond.

Since the start of Moscow's big invasion and even before, numerous commentators, some with impressive resumes, and influential politicians, have insisted that the mathematical advantage in personnel and equipment ensure that Russia will win this war. Some of these savants – including in our intelligence agencies – said that Putin would easily take Kyiv within weeks of the big offensive and others, when that failed, that Moscow's 2022 summer offensive in Donbas would like a steamroller take-over the entire region. While history has not been kind to their analysis, they have taken heart by the limited gains Ukraine achieved with its 2023 counteroffensive on land. Of course, they ignore the fact that the Administration's refusal to send the necessary weapons systems for such an offensive – long-range ATACMS, advanced tanks and F-16s in large numbers – set Ukraine up for only limited gains, which was my prediction over a year ago.

And Enabling a Ukrainian Victory

Moscow was deeply encouraged by the aid delay, but the passage of the aid bill has punctured that balloon. We need to follow this up not just with a clear description of the Kremlin danger, but with a plan to help achieve Ukrainian victory over a manageable timeframe. What does this look like and what do we need to achieve it?

The Administration properly understands that the first order of business is to secure Ukraine's defensive lines to ensure that Russia does not capitalize on the incremental gains made during the half year that US military aid was in doubt. Russia is trying to take the town of Chasiv Yar

west of Bakhmut and to seize the city of Kharkiv, located 30 KM from the Russian border. The Administration has moved smartly since the aid package passed to get ammunition and artillery to Ukraine. That will help with the defense of both locations.

But more needs to be done to protect Kharkiv, other Ukrainian cities, and critical energy infrastructure from Russia's massive aerial assault. This requires more air defense systems – American-produced Patriots and French SAMP-Ts. Ukraine has three Patriot batteries; it needs at least nine more. Some allies not in harm's way could fill this void. There is a second dimension to this problem coming from American reluctance until mid-last year to support the sending of F-16s to Ukraine even from European countries. NATO Allies are now on track to deliver over an air brigades' worth of aircraft. Ukraine needs well over 100 F-16s in order to stop Moscow's successful use of glide bombs, launched from Russian warplanes that have been pounding Kharkiv and that were instrumental in Moscow's conquest of Avdiivka – after a many-months-long campaign – in January. These F-16s would also be essential to any Ukrainian offensive in 2025. To enable that, the White House needs to decide now to arrange the transfer of US F-16s with the necessary avionics and missiles.

Regarding Ukraine's next offensive, the targets will be chosen by Kyiv. It is worth noting, however, that Putin's greatest achievement in his 10-year war on Ukraine was the seizure of Crimea. But that asset is also a liability. Supplying Crimea with energy, water, and weapons is not easy. Crimea is a peninsula jutting into the Black Sea that has a population of approximately 2.4M and 13,000 soldiers. Crimea and Russian troops in south mainland Ukraine are supplied via the Kerch Bridge and the "land bridge" from occupied Donbas to Crimea. The principal supply line on the land bridge is the railroad that runs south of Melitopol; roads are a secondary artery. The Russian fear that a Ukrainian move 25-50 KMs south and east of current lines could jeopardize the rail supply line has prompted Moscow to start constructing a new line along the coast of the Sea of Azov.

The US needs to take the lead in supplying Ukraine the means to jeopardize these supply lines. Were this to happen, the Kremlin would find it very expensive to supply not just its troops but even its civilian government in Crimea, and Russian troops in Ukraine's mainland south might find it necessary to retreat to either Crimea or Donbas. This would be a major setback for Moscow and might pose political problems for the Putin regime. And were such developments on the battlefield to push the Kremlin to seek real negotiations – not a temporary ceasefire before seeking to conquer the rest of Ukraine – it would position Kyiv nicely for the talks.

The Administration must not repeat the mistakes of the first two years since the big invasion -- undue caution in approving the transfer of the more advanced weapons systems Ukraine needs for success and then sending the systems slowly and in inadequate numbers. The aid bill explicitly calls on the Administration to avoid this approach and to send the longer range ATACMS that Ukraine has requested for over 18 months; and to its credit, Washington sent these missiles covertly in March. Such boldness must continue.

A strong policy designed to promote a Ukrainian victory would include an arms package with more demining equipment, tanks, artillery, and advanced electronic warfare (EW) capabilities. But the key here is not to enumerate all the current weapons needed. **It is to make sure our**

policy follows military developments closely with the objective of anticipating and responding quickly to meet new Ukrainian needs on a fast-evolving battlefield. This also means that we need to change the Rules of Engagement that we require of Ukraine for use of our weapons. We should follow the British lead and permit Ukraine to use our equipment to strike all military and military-related economic and logistical targets not just in occupied Ukraine, but in Russia. Russian troops and supplies are massed in Russia, less than 100KM from Kharkiv. Why should we shackle Ukraine's defense of its second largest city with the burden of waiting until they cross the border to strike. Why should launch sites in Russia for missiles that are murdering Ukrainian civilians and wreaking havoc with its energy infrastructure be off limits to Ukrainian attacks? This means only more Ukrainian suffering and a longer road to defeating Russian aggression.

Organizing and Innovating for Success

The US must also organize itself to meet the grave national security challenges of the moment posed by the revisionist great powers. We need to put ourselves on a crisis or even a war-time footing. We have learned in Ukraine that a major power war is arms- and burn-rate intensive. This means that the US and our allies need to substantially ramp up arms production, not just to arm Ukraine for success, but to prepare ourselves for a possible confrontation with Russia or China.

In addition, the US should name a senior official with the authority to ensure both our increase in defense production and our efforts to facilitate a Ukrainian victory. That official would make sure that we are expediting the delivery of our military aid and other assistance and ensure that we are integrating the lessons learned from the battlefield into our assistance and plans for our own weapons production. And this must be done in full coordination with our sanctions policy and diplomatic efforts to ensure maximum impact.

Finally, the Administration should remove restrictions on military contractors from working in Ukraine. It would aid the Ukrainian war effort to establish maintenance and sustainment facilities for US equipment. For security reasons such facilities would not necessarily require US/Allied contractors permanently stationed at the front, but they could travel for short duration and with a small footprint. But having them in Ukraine would facilitate the maximum potential of these weapons systems.

Congress too has an ongoing, critical role to play in ensuring that Ukraine has the means to defeat Putin's aggression – beyond its wisdom in passing the aid bill. The Ukraine war shows the need for much greater flexibility in defense authorizations and appropriations. This means multi-year appropriations. It also means greater flexibility in approving specific defense expenditures. Normally, Congress approves specific weapons projects. But the war in Ukraine has shown how rapidly even new weapons find themselves thwarted by electronic warfare countermeasures. This means that approved weapons expenditures must have built in approval for adjustments to those systems as required by developments in the battlespace.

The US won in World War II and in the Cold War in part because we had the ability to out-innovate and out-produce our foes. We need to build into our appropriations process measures

that enable constant innovation with the understanding that there will be failures that can then be rapidly improved to face this near peer enemy.

All of this is a tall order; but none of this is beyond our means. We have a proud history of marshalling our material and intellectual resources to meet even the greatest challenges. Doing so to ensure a Ukrainian victory is the smart way to keep us secure and prosperous. It is also the right thing to do to make sure that Moscow's massive war crimes in Ukraine cease.