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For Democrats, Trump isn't hawkish enough on Ukraine. That's not impeachable.

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The case laid out by the House managers in President Trump's impeachment trial confronts senators with some stark charges: Trump corruptly sought a favor from the Ukrainian government. The president made military aid to Ukraine contingent on its leaders helping him get dirt on his political rival. He did it in contravention of the Impoundment Control Act. And his corrupt actions have undermined the national security of the United States.

As one of the House managers, Rep. Jason Crow (D-Colo.) put it, providing military aid to Ukraine is vital because "We help our partner fight Russia over there so we don't have to fight Russia here."

Not really.

Trump may be guilty, but unquestioning support of Ukraine is not in America's national interest. It is the allegations of corruption that are at issue, not the foreign policy implications. But by conflating the two, Democrats come perilously close to arguing that insufficient support of Ukraine and — by extension — insufficient belligerence toward Russia is an impeachable offense.

We have heard variations on this throughout the hearings. In October, Army Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman testified to the joint House Intelligence, Oversight and Foreign Affairs committees that "a strong and independent Ukraine is critical to U.S. national security interests because Ukraine is a front-line state and a bulwark against Russian aggression." In a New York Times op-ed earlier this week, William B. Taylor Jr., former top diplomat in Ukraine, argued "Ukraine is the front line" in a hybrid war against Russia that includes the United States.

In his closing argument last week, hoping to convince senators of the gravity of Trump's actions, Rep. Adam B. Schiff (D-Calif.) took these arguments a step further: "These funds, they don't just benefit Ukraine, they benefit the security of the United States," he told senators. Having the resources provided by our aid makes the Ukrainian war effort "more effective. It might even shorten the war," he said, adding: "That's in our interest! This isn't just about Ukraine, or its national security; it's about our national security. This isn't charity, it's about our defense as much as Ukraine's."

In the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment report, the Republicans opposing impeachment offered a similar sentiment: "The minority wishes to note for the record its unwavering commitment to security for the people and the nation of Ukraine." You might be forgiven for concluding that withholding military aid to Ukraine is the first step in the collapse of the West.

Democrats undoubtedly have an incentive to frame the impeachment issue in this way; national security concerns often appear more pressing than questions of simple corruption. Perhaps the impeachment managers hope wavering senators can be persuaded by a presentation that takes a more typically Republican and hawkish approach to foreign policy. They can even make a good case that Trump has violated the bipartisan will of Congress: The Ukraine aid package delayed by the Trump administration was passed with overwhelming support in both the House and Senate.

The foreign policy reality, however, is more complicated. The United States and Ukraine are not long-term allies. Aid increased substantially only after the 2014 Russian invasion, and lethal military aid was not approved until 2017, in the first year of the Trump administration. The Obama administration feared sending lethal aid — weaponry and ammunition — to Ukraine would only provoke Russia and prolong the conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region. It was a view shared by many experts at the time: Fiona Hill, who would later serve on Trump's National Security Council, and who was a prominent witness in the House impeachment hearings last year, co-wrote a Washington Post op-ed in 2015 arguing that if the United States were to send weapons, "the Ukrainians won't be the only ones caught in an escalating military conflict with Russia."

Though we have been lucky enough to avoid escalation, there is little evidence that U.S. aid has been a game-changer for Ukraine's military. As one study describes, "Despite the remarkable changes in Ukraine's military forces since 2014, major problems in its defense sector remain." And the weapons provided are sometimes more symbolic than useful: The much-hyped Javelin missiles, for example — referenced repeatedly during the impeachment proceedings — are explicitly required by the United States to be stored far from the front lines. Our military aid has not enabled an accelerated, favorable peace settlement.

Nor is Ukraine a bastion of Western democracy. Governments in Kyiv have alternated between pro-Western and pro-Russian positions in the post-Cold War period. The post-Maidan revolution governments have made a valiant effort to implement a pro-democracy, anti-corruption policy, but we have seen this story before. The government that followed the 2005 Orange revolution made similar attempts before succumbing to the corruption and elite capture that are deeply-rooted features of the Ukrainian political system.

It makes sense for our leaders to root for the success of Ukraine's current leaders. But it is a mistake to hitch our national security hopes to their success, rhetorically or otherwise. We cannot guarantee the next Ukrainian government will continue a pro-Western approach. Even if the Ukrainians succeed at fashioning their country into a flourishing, Jeffersonian democracy, it will still be close to Russia. As President Barack Obama once said, "The fact is that Ukraine, which is

a non-NATO country, is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we do.”

The unpleasant reality is this: Ukraine will always be less important to U.S. foreign policy than Russia is. Russia may be a great power in decline, but it still possesses the capacity to undermine U.S. foreign policy around the world. It holds a veto at the United Nations Security Council. It possesses thousands of nuclear missiles, most of them aimed at us. We do not have to like Russia’s ugly and belligerent foreign policy, but we have nothing to gain from adopting an increasingly hostile posture toward it and plenty to lose if we cannot work on issues of common concern.

Maintaining a working relationship with Russia, for example, could be the difference between effective arms control or no arms control at all. A new nuclear arms race would be far more dangerous to Americans than continued fighting in eastern Ukraine.

It is understandable Democrats are tempted to paint Trump as soft on Russia and Ukraine as part of the broader issue of impeachment — from their point of view, it highlights the stakes of his actions. But it also means hawkish foreign policy choices toward Russia are being presented as gospel. It makes it sound as if choosing a more dovish approach is a dereliction of presidential duty. Although congressional Republicans accept the same assumptions, by making this particular case, congressional Democrats inadvertently reduce impeachment to a “policy disagreement,” as the president’s lawyers assert — and a shortsighted one, at that.

In adopting this position, Democrats paint themselves into a corner. Such policies substitute Ukrainian interests for American ones. They worsen relations with Russia, lock us into an unending sanctions regime and make it more challenging for any future presidential administration to work toward stability in places like Syria and Ukraine, cooperate on issues like nuclear nonproliferation or effectively deter future Russian election meddling.

Even if they see it differently on the foreign policy implications, Democrats should still be wary. Trump’s apparent corruption and evident perversion of the policy process are more than sufficient grounds for impeachment. Do they really want to make hawkishness a metric that should be applied in future presidential impeachments?

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