



It's High Time To Reassess The United States' Relationship With Ukraine

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Washington's relationship with Ukraine has become the latest football in America's partisan politics. Democrats charge that the Trump administration illegitimately put a new military aid package to Kiev on hold, using it as leverage to pressure Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, to include in his investigation of the previous government's notorious corruption the activities of Hunter Biden, Joe Biden's son.

The younger Biden had a lucrative post on the board of directors of a large Ukrainian natural gas company with close ties to that government. President Trump vehemently denies the allegation that he was improperly trying to coerce Kiev into harassing the Bidens. Zelensky's administration emphasizes that it wants to stay out of America's bitter political warfare.

Largely lost in all the partisan maneuvering and bickering is a more important issue: the nature of Washington's overall relationship with Ukraine and whether that relationship really serves America's best interests. To examine that issue it is important to overcome an especially tenacious foreign policy myth: that Trump has engaged in an appeasement policy toward Vladimir Putin's Russia. The appeasement accusation was an integral part of the "Russia collusion" narrative that not even the politically biased staff of former special counsel Robert Mueller could substantiate.

The reality is that the Trump administration's Russia policy has been noticeably more uncompromising and confrontational than the approach Barack Obama adopted, and nowhere is that aspect more evident than with respect to Ukraine. It may not be a wise policy, but it is decidedly hardline.

Despite explicit congressional authorizations, Obama refused to sell arms to Kiev, believing (with good reason) that such a step would exacerbate already serious Ukrainian-Russian tensions, and even more worrisome, exacerbate U.S.-Russian tensions. Conversely, the Trump administration approved two major arms sales to Ukraine during its first two years. The latter sale in the spring of 2018 even included Javelin anti-tank missiles.

The new arms package that Trump temporarily delayed was the third such measure to provide significant arms aid to Kiev. Since Moscow backs a secessionist war in eastern Ukraine and has been on bad terms overall with Kiev since demonstrators ousted the elected, pro-Russian government in 2014, the U.S. policy of boosting Ukraine's military capabilities is hardly a friendly act.

The arms sales are not the only indications of a significant escalation of Washington's support for Kiev under the Trump administration. Secretary of Defense James Mattis admitted that

Washington had adopted a program to train Ukrainian troops at a military base in western Ukraine.

One dramatic exception to the recent shrill partisanship surrounding Trump's alleged use of the latest arms deal for nefarious purposes is the attitude regarding the appropriateness of the sale itself. There is a bipartisan consensus in Congress that selling weapons to Ukraine is a good move that benefits America's security interests. But that assumption reflects poor judgment by both the executive and legislative branches.

Americans should ask themselves why Ukraine is now an essential security interest of the United States warranting Washington meddling in a civil war and adopting measures certain to antagonize Russia. Clearly, Ukraine was never a U.S. security interest of any sort during the Cold War, given that it was an integral part of the Soviet Union. Merely because it became independent is not a sufficient reason that a country deep inside Eastern Europe, directly on Russia's border, should now be an American security client. Yet that is what has occurred.

For some members of the U.S. political and foreign policy establishments, even the current cozy bilateral security relationship with Kiev is not enough. President George W. Bush strongly lobbied the North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies to offer Ukraine (along with Georgia) membership in the alliance. At the 2008 NATO summit, Bush pressed for a Membership Action Plan, the first stage of the process leading to admission.

Key European allies, led by France and Germany, balked for two reasons. First, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel told Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Ukraine was a dysfunctional mess in domestic politics and policies. Second, both Paris and Berlin feared that admitting Ukraine or Georgia would lead to serious trouble with Russia.

Those NATO members seem no more enthusiastic today about having a treaty obligation to defend Ukraine and Georgia than they did in 2008. Indeed, they seem anxious for an agreement between Moscow and Kiev ending the violent standoff over eastern Ukraine's secession. Zelensky's government has expressed worry that the West, especially Paris and Berlin, will pressure Kiev to make major concessions to Moscow to achieve that goal.

At the same time, enthusiasts in the United States continue to press for NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. Given the conflicting trends on the two sides of the Atlantic, the United States could find itself trying to protect its de facto Ukrainian client from Russian coercion when even its principal NATO allies have no stomach for such a mission. Indeed, comprehensive public opinion surveys in European countries show little willingness to fulfill mutual defense obligations to other current NATO members, much less to nonmembers on Russia's frontier.

Washington's entire Ukraine policy fairly cries out for a comprehensive reassessment. Unfortunately, the shallow partisan posturing over Trump's latest actions provides little hope that such a meaningful reassessment will occur anytime soon.

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