



With a \$40 billion plan, the US is setting itself up for an expensive failure in Ukraine

Eight decades ago, America's 'arsenal of democracy' helped in the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. In recent years, however, it's been less effective

Scott Ritter

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American democracy in action is as perturbing and frustrating to watch for a US citizen as it is confounding to outsiders. It's become especially true in this age of extreme partisan politics, where legislation is prepared, debated, stalled, passed, or killed through parliamentary procedures and processes that are opaque even to those participating in them. Rare are the moments of bipartisan agreement, when the democratic processes appear to flow seamlessly, allowing critical legislation to be enacted in a timely fashion.

However, when Democrat House Speaker Nancy Pelosi pushed through a massive \$40 billion appropriations bill for aid to Ukraine, she did so in a single day. The text of the proposed legislation was released in the morning, a 'debate' was held throughout the day (in actuality, little more than a series of speeches by lawmakers on why this legislation was so important), and then a vote was taken that saw the bill approved by a 368-57 margin.

It was then sent on to the Senate, where both the Democrat's majority leader, Chuck Schumer, and the Republican minority leader, Mitch McConnell, were ready to similarly chaperone the legislation through their chamber and onto the desk of President Joe Biden, who had indicated he would sign it immediately.

Then something happened that speaks to the wisdom of the Founding Fathers when they crafted the bi-cameral makeup of the US Congress. James Madison, one of the major architects of the US Constitution, had envisioned that the US Senate would function, by design, as a deliberative body, serving as a check on the potential of the House to succumb to the passions of populism.

Yet when the Senate became mired in endless debate, and thus failed to advance legislation critical to the interests of the Republic, it was compelled to impose a legislative procedure designed to speed things along. Called 'unanimous consent', this procedure was designed to forgo the kind of lengthy debate that formed the core of the Senate's inherent constitutional responsibility for deliberation.

Both Schumer and McConnell had envisioned the Ukraine aid bill sailing through the Senate chamber using this ‘unanimous consent’ procedure. But then Rand Paul, the junior Republican senator from Kentucky (the senior being the aforementioned McConnell), decided that his duty to the Constitution superseded his subservience to political process and refused to give his consent. *“My oath of office is to the US Constitution, not to any foreign nation and no matter how sympathetic the cause, my oath of office is to the national security of the United States of America,”* Senator Paul declared. *“We cannot save Ukraine by dooming the US economy,”* he continued, pointing to a 40-year-record inflation rate of 8.3% as an indicator of the economic pain being suffered by the American people. *“Congress should evaluate the cost of going down this path,”* Paul said. *“We cannot save Ukraine by killing our economic strength. So I act to modify the bill to allow a for a special inspector general. This would be the inspector general that’s been overseeing the waste in Afghanistan and has done a great job.”*

Senator Paul was referring to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), a position created by the National Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year of 2008. SIGAR’s oversight mission provided, among other things, for the carrying out and supervision of audits and investigations relating to programs funded by US taxpayer dollars appropriated by the US Congress. Inherent in this mandate was the ability to promote efficiency and effectiveness in the administration of American funded programs and to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse.

One of the greatest problems faced by the US in Afghanistan, SIGAR declared, was the failure to *“place a high priority on the threat of corruption in the first years of the reconstruction effort.”* The problem of corruption was so great that, by 2009, Washington recognized that systemic corruption in Afghanistan represented a strategic threat to the overall American mission in the country. As US Ambassador Ryan Crocker noted in 2016: *“The ultimate point of failure for our efforts...wasn’t an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption.”*

From the perspective of SIGAR, two of the major reasons for the American failure in Afghanistan revolved around the failure on the part of the US government to develop an adequate sense of context, resulting in situations where *“US officials often empowered powerbrokers who preyed on the population or diverted US assistance away from its intended recipients to enrich and empower themselves and their allies.”*

Likewise, the failure to adequately monitor and evaluate funded programs created an environment where, void of periodic reality checks, US program implementors ran the risk *“of doing the wrong thing perfectly: A project that completed required tasks would be considered ‘successful,’ whether or not it had achieved or contributed to broader, more important goals.”*

When looking at the rush to provide Ukraine with tens of billions of dollars of US aid and assistance, one cannot help but be struck by a sense of déjà vu that Washington is repeating the same mistakes that helped produce the Afghanistan debacle. In particular, it is a failure to operate with an *“adequate sense of context”* regarding Ukraine while proceeding to fund programs devoid of anything resembling a properly mandated and organized monitoring and evaluation system. According to the CATO Institute, US officials (including members of Congress) *“have created a stunningly misleading image of Ukraine”* as *“a plucky and noble bulwark of freedom and democracy. The conventional narrative would have us believe that Ukraine is an Eastern European version of Denmark.”*

Nothing could be further from the truth. “Ukraine,” the CATO report notes, “has long been one of the more corrupt countries in the international system. In its annual report published in January 2022, Transparency International ranked Ukraine 123rd of the 180 countries it examined, with a score of 32 on a one-to-100-point scale.”

The obvious lack of contextual awareness which doomed the Afghanistan mission is very much an ongoing problem for the US when it comes to Ukraine. The failure to address the problem of corruption up front at a time when the US Congress is trying to rush through some \$40 billion in appropriations seems to be little more than an instance of history repeating itself. The bill includes \$11 billion in presidential drawdown authority funding that allows the White House to send military equipment and weapons directly from US stocks. It also provides for \$6 billion in Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative funding, which can be used to buy weapons directly from contractors and then provide those weapons to Ukraine.

On the surface, this would appear to be simply about weapons. However, buried in this funding is up to a billion dollars earmarked to pay the salaries and pensions of Ukrainian government workers and soldiers. This isn’t a one-time payment – the government of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has indicated that up to \$7 billion per month will be needed to keep Ukraine functioning. While most US citizens might not blanch at the thought of their taxpayer dollars being used to underwrite Ukrainian soldiers and civil servants, the reality is that much of this money will be deployed to pay the salaries and pensions of ultra-right Ukrainian politicians and soldiers who espouse neo-Nazi ideology.

Context is everything. In the aftermath of embarrassing photographs showing US soldiers providing hands-on training to members of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, a former independent militia drawn from the ranks of Ukraine’s right-wing supporters of Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist who fought alongside Nazi Germany during the Second World War, the US Congress, in June 2015, passed legislation that banned the training of Azov members by the US military, as well as any transfer of US weapons to Azov control.

“I am grateful that the House of Representatives unanimously passed my amendments last night to ensure that our military does not train members of the repulsive neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, along with my measures to keep the dangerous and easily trafficked MANPADs out of these unstable regions,” Representative John Conyers Jr., a Democrat from Michigan, remarked after the legislation was approved.

Within in a year, however, the Pentagon had lobbied the US Congress to remove Conyers’ amendment from the 2016 budget, claiming that the amendment was unnecessary in light of the existing Leahy Law, which prohibited funding to groups that have “*committed a gross violation of human rights.*” The problem, however, was that the US Congress had never formally designated the Azov Battalion as a group covered by the provisions of the Leahy Law. Accordingly, the US military was once again given the green light to train and equip Ukraine’s neo-Nazi military formations. Congress eventually woke up to the Pentagon’s end-around, and in 2018 reinserted the language of the 2015 Conyers amendment into the defense budget, stipulating that “*none of the funds made available by this act may be used to provide arms, training or other assistance to the Azov Battalion.*”

The Biden administration, together with the US Congress, seems content to ignore the restrictions imposed in 2018 – none of the current funds being allocated to Ukraine are hampered

by any such restrictions. Underwriting the training, equipping, and sustainment of Ukraine's neo-Nazi element is de rigueur for American politicians, it seems.

This would not be the case, however, if the mandate of SIGAR were expanded, as Senator Paul is demanding, to include the current Ukraine defense programs. The spectacle of the US Congress being confronted with an official report detailing how it has facilitated the use of US taxpayer dollars to underwrite neo-Nazi militancy in Ukraine, however, would not make for comfortable reading. Nor would the fact that this money was being handed over to Ukraine's neo-Nazi element with little or no checks. Without an oversight group such as SIGAR, US taxpayers will have absolutely no idea how their hard-earned tax dollars are being spent.

This is why Senator Paul's moment of compelled Senate-level deliberation will ultimately fail. Eager to be seen defending a supposedly free and democratic Ukraine, his fellow senators seem to have fallen victim to the same self-blinding urgency as their brethren in the House. But this is a view of Ukraine that exists only in the minds of lawmakers who once knew that using US taxpayer money to underwrite Ukrainian neo-Nazis was fundamentally wrong, but who have since fallen victim to politicized Russophobia. A SIGAR empowered to audit US taxpayer dollars spent in Ukraine would be politically inconvenient, and thus will never be allowed to exist.

While it seems unthinkable that the members of Congress could forget the lessons of Afghanistan so quickly when it comes to providing billions of dollars of poorly managed money to a deeply corrupt political regime in Ukraine, the reality is that the US has a history of providing military assistance to corrupt causes, all of which have failed to achieve their desired objectives.

This was not always the case. In March 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt helped put meaning behind the phrase 'the arsenal of democracy' when describing the mobilization of American industry for the purpose of arming allies to defeat fascism. Under the so-called 'Lend-Lease Act', the US provided billions of dollars of military aid to the United Kingdom, Soviet Union, and China to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The program's impact was undeniable, and it played a critical role in enabling America's wartime allies to survive and ultimately defeat the threat posed by a common foe.

However, since the end of the Second World War, the US has embarked on a series of misadventures where the 'arsenal of democracy' was engaged to support causes which, despite the infusion of American money and arms, ultimately failed. From 1961 until the fall of Saigon in April 1975, Washington spent more than \$141 billion supporting the South Vietnamese government in its war against communism, including tens of billions of dollars' worth of military equipment supplied as part of the so-called 'Vietnamization' program, which was designed to give the South Vietnamese military the ability to fight and win without direct US military assistance. When Saigon fell, it is estimated that North Vietnam captured some \$5 billion in US military equipment, nearly half of which the North Vietnamese army was able to integrate into its force structure.

In the aftermath of the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, the US spent some \$25 billion rebuilding an Iraqi military capable of standing on its own two feet. And yet, less than three years after the US withdrew its combat forces from Iraq, the Iraqi army, in the summer of 2014, collapsed against the forces of the Islamic State, abandoning not only the city of Mosul

and vast swaths of territory to the Islamist movement, but also billions of dollars of US military equipment, including heavy tanks and artillery.

Similarly, between 2005 and 2021, the Afghan military received more than \$18 billion worth of weapons from the US ‘arsenal of democracy’; but when the Afghan government collapsed in August 2021, more than \$7 billion worth of advanced US military equipment fell into the hands of the Taliban.

What connects these three historical failures of American military assistance is the common theme of hubris-driven ambition, where the on-the-ground political realities were ignored by military professionals who placed all of their faith in the preeminence of US military equipment, doctrine, and training. In supporting a corrupt, ideologically unsavory government in Ukraine with billions of dollars of US military equipment, the Biden administration appears to be falling into the same trap as its predecessors who stoked the fires of US-supported conflict in South Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

By signing new ‘Lend-Lease Act’ legislation intended to fast-track US military assistance to Ukraine along the lines of the original act during the Second World War, the Biden administration ignores the lessons of history when it comes to providing military aid, namely that the cause being supported must be a just one. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were both odious regimes deserving of the justice that the allies meted out, armed in part by the ‘arsenal of democracy.’

Over time, the US has ignored the critical predicate of having a cause worthy of the sacrifice asked by those opposing it, focusing instead on sustaining through force of arms alone regimes which, in many ways, were more corrupt and unworthy of support than the forces they were arrayed against. (This is saying a lot, given that in two of these conflicts – Iraq and Afghanistan – the forces of the Islamic State and the Taliban would normally be easily classified as an enemy worth confronting.)

By supporting a Ukrainian military that has been thoroughly infiltrated by the odious ideology of neo-Nazism, the US is setting itself up for failure by once again aligning itself with a cause which, in the long run, is not worthy of the sacrifice being asked of those called upon to defend it. Allowing this military assistance to go forward devoid of the kind of mandated oversight that a SIGAR-like organization would provide all but assures that not only will US taxpayer dollars be squandered in a losing cause, but that any chance of detecting the shortcomings of the aid program early on and making the kind of critical policy adjustments necessary to stave off catastrophe will be lost.