



Is American Support for Ukraine on Borrowed Time?

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The Quincy Institute recently raised the possibility that the American public is growing weary of supporting the war in Ukraine with a poll conducted on their behalf by the left-leaning Data For Progress. It's worth considering the source. Quincy is a liberal think tank with a stable of experts who seem firmly in the Russia appeasement camp. But, after over seven months of war and billions in American aid, it is worth asking whether American support can continue. There are signs of concern other than the Quincy poll that the Biden administration had better heed.

Favoring Ukraine, opposing Russia, disapproving Vladimir Putin and approving Volodymyr Zelensky are just about the only issues with bipartisan consensus. In a recent YouGov poll, 81 percent of Americans considered Russia “unfriendly” or an “enemy,” with Democrats at 83 percent and Republicans at 82 percent, and Putin at 76 percent disapproval (both Democrats and Republicans disapprove of Putin at 77 percent — meaning each dislikes Trump and Biden, respectively, more than Putin). The best support for Russia is in the 18-29 demographic, but there still 70 percent view Russia negatively and 64 percent disapprove of Putin. (Note: Unlike the Quincy poll, YouGov has asked a consistent set of neutral questions over time on Ukraine and Russia.)

Support favors Ukraine against Russia at 69 percent to 5 percent, with Democrats at 81 percent support. Republicans and independents are at 64 percent and 63 percent respectively, but that does not translate as greater support for Russia, which is at 8 percent and 3 percent, respectively. As for Zelensky, his approval is at 56 percent approval v. 17 percent disapprove (Democrats: 70 percent; Republicans 53 percent). In fact, Zelensky has a higher approval than any domestic U.S. politician. Perhaps Zelensky should be running for U.S. president rather than Biden or Trump.

But support for Ukraine may be weaker than the polling indicates.

Americans still don't care about foreign affairs. In the Quincy poll, the Ukraine war ranked last among issues. YouGov has just 6 percent saying “national security” is their most important issue (“foreign policy” clocks in at zero). And that sentiment is justified. The war has had much less impact on the United States than the rest of the world. While it may have exacerbated inflation,

massive federal stimulus seems a bigger culprit. Unlike in Europe, there is little prospect of energy shortages here or any direct physical threat from Russia.

The best explanation for support for Ukraine is an offended American sense of justice and moral outrage. Americans don't like bullies, and Putin revels in playing that role.

Unfortunately for Ukraine, injustice is a tough basis for political support and can be overwhelmed by self-interest. The Quincy poll seems rather accurate in showing weakening public support when a price is attached. When faced with rising gas prices and inflation, 58 percent are less likely to support Ukraine (note that 52 percent are less likely in the face of a nuclear threat — suggesting that Americans are more afraid of the price at the pump than thermonuclear war).

Importantly, Americans cite inflation as their number one concern (YouGov) with Republicans at 25 percent, far ahead of anything else. Even though the \$50 billion for Ukraine hardly compares to the multi-trillion stimulus of the past two years, that spending is a fat target for anti-inflation, deficit hawks. After all, stopping checks to foreigners is easier than stopping them for American citizens.

A Republican House will likely exert more scrutiny over future Ukraine aid. Biden will have to make a much more robust case for continued aid and defending the rules-based international order is not going to cut it. The administration will need to shore up its argument by connecting aid with the interests of the United States. They will also need to provide some path toward an endgame. An endless war is not going to be popular, and Team Biden will pay dearly for unwillingness to provide decisive aid and arms earlier in the conflict.

And it is the American public that is the most important constituency for Ukraine. The large European Union nations have proven to be unreliable, temporizing and unwilling to provide the kind of military support needed (just as Putin surmised). Germany, for one, remains in a state of unending debate on the provision of offensive weapons. And the French promise of a few self-propelled artillery could be more about marketing their defense industry than helping Ukraine.

Support Ukraine, send Russia the bill

Fortunately for Ukraine, the need for the Democrats to blame anyone but themselves for losing to Trump in 2016 puts them firmly in favor of more aid for anyone fighting Putin. Bolstering Republican support is the main issue that has to be addressed.

Zelensky and Biden could rather easily engage in preventative action to forestall Republican weakening on Ukraine by explicitly stating that Russia will have to pay the bill for American military aid. The United States and western countries have frozen hundreds of billions of dollars in Russian central bank funds. In addition, they have seized personal assets from sanctioned individuals. It is hardly a stretch to consider any Russian-based company an arm of the state, which opens up even more assets for seizure.

There is opposition to violating the “sovereign immunity” of Russia from elements of the international elite and even some Washington think tanks such as the increasingly-

irrelevant Cato Institute. It seems to me (and I think the American public would agree) an unprovoked invasion, civilian massacres, nuclear blackmail and a patently illegal annexation are enough to suspend Russia's international "rights."

In addition, it would be wise for Zelensky and the Ukrainian government to give American companies preference in any reconstruction. After all, if the United States is fronting the lion's share of the military bill and providing the most effective weapons, Americans should be at the front of the line for the re-build. Already Ukraine has ejected the Russians from their nuclear industry in favor of Pittsburgh-based Westinghouse. Zelensky should make it clear there is more where that came from.

Ukraine is on a pretty good run militarily, and Putin's megalomania and sociopathy are playing right into Zelensky's hands. But sympathy for the underdog can only last so long.

As the bills pile up and the war drags on, the American public is likely to be less enthusiastic. The best time to ensure future support is to do it when times are good. Waiting for public opinion to soften is a recipe for disaster. And for Ukraine, it is American public opinion that matters more than any and every other nation.