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We’re not all Ukrainians now

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Insisting that the United States and its NATO allies should want exactly what Ukraine does is understandable politics — but it’s also dangerous policy.

Such insistence not only risks dragging us potentially into a nuclear war, it also risks giving Ukraine false hope and delaying a settlement. And our natural sympathy for Ukraine shouldn’t be confused for fully aligned interests.

Throughout the West, Russia’s invasion has prompted a widespread outpouring of support and solidarity. NATO members have helped frustrate Russia and have enabled Ukraine to mount an effective resistance with arms transfers, intelligence sharing and economic sanctions. And civil society has mobilized aid, making the Ukrainian flag a popular symbol of heroic defiance, internationalism and the survival of sovereign liberty.

For British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, “one of the proudest boasts in the free world is, ‘Ya Ukrainets’ — ‘I am a Ukrainian’.” According to U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, “our job is to support the Ukrainians. They’ll set the military objectives, the objectives at the bargaining table . . . we’re not going to define the outcome of this for them. That is up for them to define and us to support them in.” Even President Joe Biden argues Ukraine is not just a humanitarian cause for the U.S. but a frontline state in a global war between freedom and autocracy.

At the same time, however, the British and U.S. governments have also made it clear that they will not give Ukraine all the weapons it wants or directly enter the conflict by imposing a no-fly zone or deploying troops. That reluctance reflects an obvious divergence of interests between the West’s and Kyiv’s.

Ukraine, with its independence on the line, wants all the NATO help it can get — escalation serves its interests. NATO countries on the other hand, sensibly wary of Russia and its nuclear arsenal, rightly resist.

So, a gap has opened in Western capitals between deeds that suggest an outer limit of involvement and words that suggest a harmony of interests.

In large part, this is just politics. Leaders of democracies tend to oversell the stakes to promote policies that entail great risk. But such a gap is dangerous.

For one, it attracts domestic calls for escalation, including demands for maximal war aims, from the restoration of Crimea to direct military intervention. Secondly, the White House's rhetoric also undermines its own refusal to comply with Ukraine's demands for high-risk assistance in the form of no-fly zones, the complete economic shutdown of Russia or actual troop deployments, undercutting its own restraint.

But if Western stakes were indeed as dire as Ukraine's, if the future of the world order hung on the course of this conflict and our democracy was at stake along with Ukraine's, then why wouldn't NATO be willing to join the fight for it?

Crucially, this rhetoric-policy gap could also raise excessive Ukrainian expectations of support. But those insisting the West should give Ukraine whatever it wants ignore that what Ukraine wants partly depends on what the West will give them — or at least what it says it will. And claims of fully aligned interests may fuel Ukrainian dreams of total victory that are probably untenable and only conducive to prolonging war.

Though peace talks are now at a standstill, they may revive when Russia's Donbas push either succeeds or ends in stalemate, and Ukraine may again be presented with an unpleasant peace offering — lose Crimea, accept more autonomy for much of the Donbas, commit to neutrality. If Kyiv thinks Western support is endless, or likely to grow more direct, it may end up rejecting a deal it should have taken and suffer for it when the help it banked on doesn't materialize.

The problem here isn't helping Ukraine, it's pretending the help is unconditional.

This conflict itself was partly precipitated by a series of false but beguiling assurances from Washington to Kyiv, which gave the impression of an alignment of interests.

The fatal dalliance included promises of "ironclad" support, the hollow suggestion of eventual NATO membership and the establishment of a security partnership backed by increased material and military assistance that fell short of a guarantee. That all left Ukraine in a vulnerable no-man's land: without the shield of actual Western commitment yet emboldened to take measures that accelerated Russia's determination to stop it from joining the West, like rejecting neutrality.

The idea that nations can heavily contribute to a war effort without any say in its execution is offensive. Those arming Ukraine may not be risking enough to suit Ukraine, but they aren't risking nothing — the danger of Russian retaliation remains. And sanctions entail economic pain for those sanctioning as well as the sanctioned.

Moreover, the terms and timing of war-termination will affect NATO countries too, determining the extent and severity of economic blowback, as well as the likelihood of another invasion and resulting crisis. Surely Western leaders have a right — even a responsibility to their constituents — to determine how to use their military aid and economic sanctions in ways that also serve their interests, not just Ukraine's.

The normally banal observation that Ukraine has different interests than the U.S. or U.K. has now become essential to sound policy choice, and pretending there is no difference risks war escalation with potentially horrific consequences.

Reasonable people can disagree about precisely where Western interests lie in the terms of the war's end. But they should not disagree that this interest is not identical to Ukraine's.

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