

Time To Cure America's 'Clientitis' Over Ukraine

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Too many officials seem to place Ukrainian interests over those of their own country—even if it risks a major provocation with Russia.

An especially dangerous disease for leaders of any major nation is “clientitis”—the willingness to place the interests of a foreign ally or client on a par with or above the interests of one’s own country. And American officials appear to have a virulent case with respect to Ukraine.

The United States has no treaty obligation whatsoever to defend Ukraine from an adversary. Even though George W. Bush and Barack Obama pushed NATO allies to make Kiev a member of the Alliance, Germany, France, and other key NATO powers balked at doing so. And since Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union before the dissolution of that country at the end of 1991, no serious American previously ever regarded Ukraine as a relevant, much less a crucial, U.S. interest.

Yet over the past decade or so, policymakers have acted as though that country is vital to America’s own security and therefore merits Washington’s unquestioning support. The Obama administration shamelessly meddled in Ukraine’s internal affairs to help oust an elected, pro-Russia government and install a cooperative client regime. The Trump administration approved multiple weapons sales to Kiev and trained Ukrainian troops—a policy the Biden administration is intensifying. An April 2 White House press release confirmed that, in a telephone call to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Biden “affirmed the United States’ unwavering support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia’s ongoing aggression in the Donbas and Crimea.” Other high-level administration officials, including Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, have done the same. Worse, the Biden foreign policy team is engaging in saber rattling, strongly indicating that the United States is even willing to go to war to back Ukraine in its ongoing confrontation with Russia.

Ever more blatant manifestations of sycophantic clientitis on the part of U.S. officials have accompanied that radical transformation of Washington’s policy. A new incident appears to be truly shocking. Veteran international affairs reporter Martin Sieff relates that the defense attache at the U.S. embassy in Kiev, Colonel Brittany Stewart, visited a Ukrainian government military unit confronting separatist forces in the eastern Donbas region to show U.S. solidarity with Kiev’s effort to suppress the rebellion.

That was questionable enough behavior, but photos of the visit indicated that she wore a Ukrainian military insignia on her uniform—something that is utterly improper for a U.S. officer. Still worse, it appears to have been a “Ukraine or death” (or “death’s head”) insignia, whose roots go back to the Nazi SS and their Ukrainian allies in World War II. If true, such a display

not only suggested her support for Kiev's aggressive policies in the Donbas, but for some of the worst ultra-nationalist, even neo-Nazi elements in Ukraine.

Senior members of Washington's diplomatic corps have displayed brazen, utterly uncritical backing for Ukraine in recent years. That much became apparent during House committee hearings on the first effort to impeach President Donald Trump for allegedly soliciting an illegal quid pro quo. William Taylor, who served as the interim U.S. ambassador to Kiev in mid-2019, was quite candid about his motive for testifying against Trump, stating that he intended "to provide the committees with my views about the strategic importance of Ukraine to the United States." Taylor expressed the dismay he and his colleagues felt about Trump's delay in providing promised military aid to Kiev: "The Ukrainians were fighting the Russians and counted on not only the training and weaponry [in the aid package], but also the assurance of U.S. support."

At times it seemed as though Taylor was Ukraine's ambassador to the United States rather than the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine. In a subsequent op-ed in the *New York Times*, he elevated Ukraine's importance to stratospheric levels. "Ukraine is defending itself and the West against Russian attack," Taylor wrote. "If Ukraine succeeds, we succeed. The relationship between the United States and Ukraine is key to our national security..." Indeed, in "the contest between democracies and autocracies, the contest between freedom and unfreedom, Ukraine is the front line."

Similar attitudes emerged from the testimony of former ambassador to Ukraine Marie Jovanovich (whom Trump had removed from her post earlier that year), Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George P. Kent, and NSC staffer Alexander Vindman. Kent stressed that "we have focused our united efforts across the Atlantic to support Ukraine in its fight for the cause of freedom, and the rebirth of a country free from Russian dominion." He added, "The United States has clear national interests at stake in Ukraine. Ukraine's success is very much in our national interest in the way we have defined our national interests broadly in Europe for the past 75 years." He neglected to mention that Ukraine was not even an independent country for 47 of those years, much less a "clear national interest" of the United States. Kent even described the 2014 Maidan Revolution that brought a pro-NATO government to power not by that usual name, but by the laudatory label "Revolution of Dignity," the term Ukrainian nationalists embrace. As in Taylor's case, Kent identified with Ukraine's cause to an unsettling degree.

Vindman likewise emphasized his full agreement with "the strategic importance of Ukraine as a bulwark against Russian aggression." In some ways, his identification with Ukraine and its anti-Russia posture was even more pronounced than those of his colleagues. He was born in Ukraine, and his family had left the Soviet Union four decades earlier. Vindman's rhetoric, both in his congressional testimony and in his public statements, exhibited a pronounced hostility to Russia and the Russian government. Ukrainian leaders considered him such a valuable ally that, according to Vindman's own admission, Kiev had offered him the post of defense minister on three separate occasions.

Such clientitis is profoundly dangerous for the United States. Officials afflicted with the condition are alarmingly willing to entangle their country in a war that could escalate to a nuclear holocaust. Incredibly, they are willing to do so on behalf of another country that has little intrinsic importance to the United States. It is irresponsible behavior, and policymakers who succumb to clientitis need to be removed from their posts.

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