

U.S. Leadership Needed in Defense of Ukraine and Transatlantic Security

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Russia has been conducting an aggressive, sizeable military buildup along its border with Ukraine and in occupied Crimea.

The Biden Administration's response to this test from Moscow will have long-term implications for the transatlantic community and the notion of national sovereignty.

The U.S. should immediately reaffirm its commitment to, and support for, an independent Ukraine—making both America and its allies safer.

Over the past few weeks, Russia has been conducting a sizeable military buildup along its border with Ukraine and in occupied Crimea. Most of these Russian deployments seem to be spontaneous and unrelated to any scheduled training exercises. Over the same time period, fighting has increased in eastern Ukraine. So far in 2021, 20 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed and another 57 wounded while fighting Russian and Russian-backed forces. Russia's plan is unclear, but one thing is certain: Moscow is testing the Biden Administration.

During this sensitive time, the United States should immediately show its solidarity with Ukraine with a visit to the country by President Joe Biden or Vice President Kamala Harris. The U.S. should also rally European North Atlantic Treaty Organization

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MAP 1

Conflict Areas in Ukraine



SOURCE: Information Analysis Center, National Security of Ukraine, “MAP ATO – 23.02.2017,” <http://mediarnbo.org/2017/02/23/map-ato-23-02-2017/?lang=en> (accessed April 21, 2020).

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(NATO) members to show solidarity with Ukraine, share intelligence of the Russian military buildup with Ukraine and make satellite imagery available to the public, help Ukraine to improve its defensive military capabilities, and ensure that Ukraine remains on the path to NATO membership.¹

A National Struggle

Ukraine is in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its future geopolitical orientation: the West or Moscow. The outcome of this struggle will have long-term implications for the transatlantic community and the notion of national sovereignty. Since 2014, almost 5 percent of Ukraine’s landmass and more than half of its coastline have been under illegal Russian occupation in Crimea. In eastern Ukraine, Russia and Russian-backed separatists continue to propagate a war that has resulted in more than 13,000 lives lost and 30,000 wounded,² has inflicted heavy damage on the Ukrainian economy, and has slowed down Ukraine’s progress toward deepening ties with the transatlantic community.

Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia illegally occupies Crimea. Russia provoked, and now supports, a Russian separatist movement in eastern Ukraine that did not previously exist. Russia is the aggressor, and Ukraine is the victim. Modern Ukraine represents the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path and to decide with whom it has relations, and how and by whom it is governed. No outside actor (in this case, Russia) should have a veto on membership or closer relations with organizations like NATO. It is in America's interest that Ukraine remain independent and sovereign, and maintains the ability to choose its own destiny without outside interference.

Russia's Goals in Ukraine

Russia's long-term strategic goal is to ensure that Ukraine remains out of the transatlantic community and distanced from organizations like NATO and the European Union. (Russia would also benefit from the long-term integration of Ukraine into Moscow-backed groups like the Collective Security Treaty Organization or the Eurasian Economic Union.) The most effective way for Russia to achieve this goal is by keeping the conflict in eastern Ukraine "frozen"—meaning that the major fighting stops but localized fighting remains without a conclusive end to the conflict.³

Given the right circumstances (that is, lack of U.S. and European resolve), another plausible scenario is that Moscow helps the separatists to consolidate gains in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine to create a political entity that functions more like a viable state. This would include the capture of important communication and transit nodes, such as the city of Mariupol and its port, and the Luhansk power plant, all of which are under Ukrainian government control. While this could be done in a piecemeal manner, such a move would also require the complete abandonment of any notion of a cease-fire.

The most aggressive scenario could involve Moscow's attempting to re-establish control of the Novorossiia region of imperial times in southern Ukraine. This would create a land bridge between Russia and Crimea, eventually linking up with the Russian-occupied Transnistria region of Moldova. This scenario would require that Russia take over Mariupol and Odessa, Ukraine's 10th-largest and third-largest cities, respectively, as well as a large-scale and public mobilization of the Russian armed forces. Such a course of action by Russia would fundamentally change the geopolitical and security landscape in Eastern Europe in a way not seen since World War II.

Since the Ukrainian military is far more capable, trained, and equipped than it was in 2014, local resistance would be sure to strengthen as Russian troops and their proxies move west, especially across the Dnieper River. Therefore, the aggressive scenario would prove to be very costly, making it unlikely that Russia will undertake it. However, nothing should be ruled out regarding Vladimir Putin.

Recommendations for the U.S.

Since President Joe Biden took office, Ukraine has seen some of the fiercest fighting of the past three years. The Biden Administration is being tested. Because Ukraine is not a NATO member, it does not enjoy a security guarantee from the U.S. However, the situation is not black and white. The alternative to a grand U.S. military intervention to liberate Crimea is not to sit by idly and do nothing.

In order to ensure that U.S. interests in Eastern Europe are met, the U.S. should take the following actions immediately:

- **Show a more visible political presence in Ukraine and pay an early visit to Kyiv.** President Biden or Vice President Harris should make an early visit to Ukraine to get a better understanding of the situation on the ground. Furthermore, occasional Cabinet-level visits should be followed up with regular visits by senior officials from all areas of the U.S. government.
- **Share intelligence of the Russian military buildup with Ukraine.** As Russia continues its military buildup along the border with Ukraine, Washington should take steps to share satellite imagery and intelligence with Kyiv in an appropriate and responsible manner. When possible, satellite imagery should be made available to the Ukrainian public.
- **Increase the U.S. Navy presence in the Black Sea, using 2014 levels as a benchmark.** Soon after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the U.S. stepped up its presence in the Black Sea. However, since then, this presence has been drastically reduced. In 2014, the U.S. Navy spent a total of 204 days in the Black Sea. In 2020 the total was 82.⁴ In a hopeful sign, the Navy so far in 2021 has had a near persistent presence in the Black Sea—which needs to be sustained at least through the summer.⁵

- **Improve situational awareness of the front lines.** The Commander of the United States Europe, General Christopher Cavoli, should visit the Donbas region. A visit by America's top Army commander in Europe would help to get an enhanced understanding of the security situation on the ground, as well as a better sense of Ukraine's defensive requirements. Not only would this better inform U.S. policy, it would also serve as an important symbolic signal to Russia and Ukraine of America's resolve.
- **Kill Nord Stream 2 once and for all.** Nord Stream 2 is a Russian gas pipeline that will connect Russia directly to Germany through the Baltic Sea. Russia prefers this method because it removes Ukraine from the transit route to European markets. Nord Stream 2 is neither economically necessary, nor geopolitically prudent. The Biden Administration should use every tool available to stop the almost-complete construction of Nord Stream 2 once and for all. Then, the Administration should double down on supporting an expanded Southern Gas Corridor connecting Caspian gas to southern Europe, encouraging the construction of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline to bring natural gas from Central Asia to Europe bypassing Russia, and bolstering the Three Seas Initiative to improve energy connectivity in Eastern Europe.
- **Reaffirm NATO's open-door policy for Ukraine.** NATO should reaffirm that its open-door policy remains in place and that Russia does not have a veto right, including over any future Ukrainian membership.

In order to ensure that U.S. interests in Eastern Europe are met, the U.S. should take the following actions in the short term:

- **Increase joint exercises with Ukrainian forces.** U.S.-led and NATO-led training exercises in western Ukraine have helped to create a professional and capable Ukrainian military. This is in America's long-term interest. When possible, the number of U.S. troops participating should be increased. For example, during the Rapid Trident 20 exercise held last September, only half the number of U.S. troops participated as in the Rapid Trident 19 the year before.⁶

- **Supply more weapons to Ukraine with fewer restrictions.** When Ukraine received its first Javelin anti-tank missiles in 2018, part of the agreement with the Trump Administration was that the missiles would remain in storage far away from the front lines until they become necessary.⁷ Every country has the right to self-defense. Weapons can be an effective part of a larger strategy for assisting Ukraine. As authorized by successive National Defense Authorization Acts, the U.S. should appropriate funds to increase its assistance to the Ukrainian military, including more anti-armor weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, and small arms with fewer, or more flexible, restrictions.
- **Help Ukraine to improve its maritime capabilities.** The right to self-defense does not stop at the shoreline. A strong Ukrainian navy is in America's interest. The U.S. can help to fund and speed up research to get Ukraine's domestically produced Neptune anti-ship missile in operation faster. In addition, the U.S. should consider appropriate off-the-shelf options for anti-ship-missile platforms for Ukraine. The U.S. should also help to improve Ukraine's maritime security by providing improved radar and appropriate surveillance capabilities, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Finally, the U.S. should consider ways to increase the number of ships it can provide to Ukraine, such as three Cyclone-class patrol ships retired from active service in February this year.⁸
- **Improve the quality of nonlethal support to Ukraine.** The U.S. has provided nonlethal support to Ukraine since 2014 in the form of cold-weather gear, military rations, radios, counter-battery radars, and UAVs. While such support is welcome, the U.S. needs to improve the quality of equipment provided, especially in terms of secure communications and more capable UAVs.

U.S. Leadership Needed

While the success of Ukraine will rest in large part on the shoulders of Ukrainians themselves, U.S. leadership is essential for counteracting Russian aggression and supporting reform of Ukraine's government. The new Biden Administration and the U.S. Congress should not hesitate to provide support to Ukraine. Furthermore, because of the deep interconnectivity of the Black Sea region, U.S. support for Ukraine indirectly supports Georgia, which is under constant pressure and threat from Russia. The U.S. should

seize the opportunity to move quickly and robustly to reaffirm American commitment and support to the people of Ukraine. In turn, this will make both America and its allies safer.

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Endnotes

1. While there are many non-security-related issues with which the U.S. should help Ukraine (such as economic reforms, the fight against corruption, and an independent judiciary), the scope of this *Issue Brief* is narrowly focused on the defense and security aspects of the U.S.–Ukraine relationship.
2. “Death Toll Up to 13,000 in Ukraine Conflict, Says UN Rights Office,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 26, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/death-toll-up-to-13-000-in-ukraine-conflict-says-un-rights-office/29791647.html> (accessed April 1, 2021).
3. Although much fighting has taken place along the cease-fire line, resulting in hundreds of deaths since the agreement went into force, the front lines have not changed significantly. For all intents and purposes, the war in the Donbas is a frozen conflict.
4. These numbers calculated based on data from Bosphorus Naval News, <https://turkishnavy.net/> (accessed April 2, 2021).
5. U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa/U.S. Sixth Fleet Public Affairs, “Ships of the Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group Enter the Black Sea,” March 20, 2021, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2544472/ships-of-the-eisenhower-carrier-strike-group-enter-the-black-sea/> (accessed April 2, 2021).
6. Davis Winkie, “Rapid Trident 20 Exercise Kicks Off in Ukraine with Fewer US Troops Than Last Year,” *Army Times*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/2020/09/14/rapid-trident-20-exercise-kicks-off-in-ukraine-with-fewer-us-troops-than-last-year/> (accessed on April 1, 2021).
7. Nolan Peterson, “Ukrainian Troops Weigh in on the Value of U.S. Military Aid,” *Coffee or Die*, June 25, 2020, <https://coffeordie.com/us-military-aid-ukraine/> (accessed on April 1, 2021).
8. Richard R. Burgess, “Navy Begins Retirement of Cyclone-Class Patrol Ships Without Replacement,” *Seapower*, February 19, 2021, <https://seapowermagazine.org/navy-begins-retirement-of-cyclone-class-patrol-ships-without-replacement/#:~:text=The%20three%20PCs%20being%20retired,%20Zephyr%20and%20Tornado%20respectively> (accessed April 2, 2021).