

The Russo-Ukraine War and the U.S. Grand Strategy

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The incoming Trump Administration has indicated its intention to push for a rapid resolution of the Russo-Ukraine War. The President-elect's approach, at least what is known of it, could either lead to decent enough or catastrophic results for Ukraine, European security, and for what we used to call the Free World. Underlying the immediate issues regarding how to address the war are deeper questions about U.S. interests in Ukraine and how (and whether) Ukraine fits into U.S. grand strategy. This is the focus of the paper.

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The Biden Administration and U.S. European Allies have made the case for supporting Ukraine on the grounds that Russia's war against Ukraine threatens European and transatlantic security, violating the larger principles necessary to maintain a "rules-based international order."¹

THE REPUBLICAN DIVIDE OVER UKRAINE

Both the team around President-elect Donald J. Trump and Republicans more generally seem divided over whether to support Ukraine—and if so, to what extent. In April 2024, after prolonged debate, Congress approved a bill to resume U.S. foreign assistance to Ukraine. Along with 210 Democrats, 101 Republicans voted in favor of the measure, including the Speaker of the U.S.

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House of Representatives, Mike Johnson (R-Louisiana), whose support for the bill was critical. Speaker Johnson has maintained his support for Ukraine, which he demonstrated in a powerful speech last June at the Hudson Institute.² Other senior Republicans have done similarly. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, for instance, made a case for supporting Ukraine in the *Wall Street Journal*.³ In his article, he also criticized the Biden Administration for deciding too slowly to provide sophisticated weapons to Ukraine, and then for imposing restrictions on Ukraine's use of those weapons against targets inside Russia.⁴ Outgoing Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee Mike McCaul (R-Texas) gave a robust presentation in support of Ukraine at the Atlantic Council on 21 November 2004.⁵

Speaker Johnson, Secretary Pompeo, and Chairman McCaul have made the case that support for Ukraine is in the best interest of the United States—a stance that largely parallels that of the Biden Administration. Their criticism, however, is that the Biden Administration is acting without sufficient speed or resolve. This critique is shared by some Democrats, independent foreign policy specialists, and some European governments.⁶ These judgments of the Biden Administration's policy on Ukraine primarily target its implementation. They are not, however, a fundamental challenge to the Administration's stated objective of helping Ukraine prevail, nor to its underlying premise that Ukraine's survival as an independent country (hopefully within its 1991 borders) is important to U.S. security.

Other Republicans, however, oppose U.S. support for Ukraine. One hundred twelve members of the GOP voted against the April 2024 measure resuming assistance for Ukraine.⁷ Senator Marco Rubio (R-Florida), the Trump nominee for Secretary of State, did the same.⁸ Arguments among Republicans against (or skeptical of) U.S. assistance to Ukraine vary. For instance, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Elbridge Colby—who is to be nominated as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy—consistently argues that the principal U.S. adversary is China, not Russia, suggesting that supporting Ukraine imposes too expensive a burden on limited U.S. resources, especially as China strengthens.⁹

Former Senator and current Vice President-elect J.D. Vance (R-Ohio) has also opposed U.S. support for Ukraine. He voted against the April 2024 measure to resume assistance to the country, arguing that resources expended to defend Ukraine would be wasted in the face of Russia's inevitable victory.¹⁰ Since first becoming the Republican candidate for Vice President, Vance has argued that the United States should not fight on behalf of "abstractions" such as a "rules-based international order," but should limit its strategic objectives to defending the U.S.

homeland.¹¹ In these arguments, Senator Vance represents a view widely held by some contemporary Republican circles. In fact, the 2024 GOP Platform defines U.S. national security strategy in narrow terms—namely, “protecting the American homeland.” Their definition omits mention of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine as well as broader values such as defense of a rules-based international order, the transatlantic community, or democracies threatened by authoritarian intimidation.¹²

In contrast, President-elect Donald J. Trump has expressed inconsistent views regarding U.S. support of Ukraine. In a social media post days before the April Congressional vote to resume U.S. assistance to Ukraine, he wrote that “Ukrainian

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Survival and Strength” is in the best interest of the United States.¹³ However, he has also expressed skepticism about large-scale U.S. support for Ukraine and claimed that he could settle the Russo-Ukraine War “in 24 hours” or even as President-elect.¹⁴

Lieutenant General Keith Kellogg—previously the National Security Advisor for former Vice President Mike Pence and Executive Director at the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), recently named as Trump’s Special Envoy for Ukraine and Russia—has outlined the incoming Administration’s approach to quickly push Ukraine and Russia into negotiations.¹⁵ This would involve threatening to withhold weapons from Ukraine if its government does not agree to rapid negotiations and, simultaneously, threatening Russia with supplying more weapons to Ukraine if the Kremlin does not agree to hasty (though unspecified) compromise.¹⁶ Kellogg’s proposed negotiations suggest an aim of freezing the Russo-Ukraine war roughly along existing front lines; they include a sweetener to Russia in the form of a guarantee that Ukraine will never join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). General Kellogg’s more recent statements wisely do not include a promise to keep Ukraine out of NATO. Senator Vance seemed to draw from the Kellogg plan when he called both for an end to the Russo-Ukraine war on the current front line, and for barring Ukraine from joining NATO or any other “Allied institutions.”¹⁷ Negotiations on these terms could be a big win for the Kremlin. As critics have pointed out, without

greater commitment from the United States and Europe to Ukraine's security, Ukraine would be left rump, unprotected and exposed to further Russian aggression at a time of the Kremlin's choosing.¹⁸ Vance did, however, add that Ukraine would have to be strengthened to prevent future Russian aggression, indicating a possible opening for a more sustainable end to the conflict under the Trump Administration.

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This view, however, is not restricted to the Trump-aligned world or the broader political right. Just after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, when I served as the U.S. Department of State Sanctions Coordinator, I conversed with a senior NSC official on the margins of a meeting about the U.S. government's response to the invasion. The official told me, "Dan, you know that we don't have any real security interests in Ukraine," and expressed a preference to "just cauterize the wound." In other words, the official's predilection was to allow Russia to maintain control over the Ukrainian territories of Crimea and part of the Donbas that it had then seized. The Obama Administration did not ultimately accept the view that the United States had no security interests in Ukraine. However, the willingness to shrug at a war of territorial aggression is not confined to one part of the political spectrum.

THE ROOTS OF DIVISION OVER UKRAINE POLICY

Pro-Ukraine Republicans, such as Speaker Johnson, Secretary Pompeo, or Chair-

man McCaul subscribe to the Reaganite tradition of a resolute U.S. commitment to resisting aggression—especially from the Kremlin—and advancing freedom.

Conversely, the views of Republican opponents of U.S. assistance to Ukraine appear rooted in another long-standing U.S. strategic tradition, sometimes called isolationism, but perhaps better understood as the Jacksonian tradition. Renowned historian Walter Russell Mead defines the Jacksonian tradition as the pursuit of narrowly defined, concrete interests of the nation-state of the U.S. people, whose chief business lies at home rather than in association with a “universal mission.”¹⁹ In this view, support for Ukraine is not a core U.S. interest and therefore not worth serious effort. Ukraine has few unique resources, it is not physically close to the United States, and the claim that Russia’s invasion is a violation of a “rules-based international order” does not constitute a serious national interest, but mere rhetoric separated from concrete U.S. security priorities.

This Jacksonian view can lead to a “spheres-of-influence” basis for U.S. strategy. According to a crude spheres-of-influence logic, Ukraine belongs in Russia’s sphere. Russia’s determination to achieve and maintain dominance over Ukraine is greater than the United States’ and Europe’s collective desire to see Ukraine free. Furthermore, because Russia’s military and economy is more powerful than Ukraine’s, Ukrainian resistance, even with U.S. and European support, is futile. Therefore, the argument posed by skeptics of support for Ukraine is that the sooner the conflict ends, the better for U.S. security. Expending limited resources on helping Ukraine defend its national independence and existence should not be a serious U.S. objective.

These arguments need to be taken seriously.

WHY DOES UKRAINE MATTER TO THE UNITED STATES?

One practical argument for supporting Ukraine is that if Russia wins the war, Putin will not stop at Ukraine. Instead, he will use the momentum of victory to move against other vulnerable European countries, such as Moldova, which is weak, outside NATO, and was part of the Soviet Union from 1940 until 1991. Indeed, some skeptics might not care about Moldova, but the threat does not stop there. Russia could also act against NATO members, such as the Baltic states or Finland. To inflict this aggression, Russia could use tactics of intimidation, small-scale military attacks, and large-scale sabotage. These strategies would test NATO’s willingness to respond, and, depending on the result, inform further Russian escalation. Failure to react against Russia’s attacks on NATO members

would mark the effective end of the Atlantic Alliance and deal a crippling blow to the U.S. global standing, including in Asia. More specifically, U.S. failure to resist Russia's aggression in Europe would have consequences for dealing with Chinese aggression in Asia, which is why U.S. Asian allies, including South Korea and Japan, have expressed support for Ukraine.²⁰

Both during and following the Washington NATO Summit in June 2024, President Biden argued that Russia could extend its aggression should it succeed in Ukraine.²¹ Vice President Harris did the same in her debate with President-elect Trump. That argument holds water. Russian propaganda has suggested that the Kremlin's territorial ambitions extend past Ukraine, even accusing the Baltic countries (once part of the Russian Empire and later illegally annexed by the Soviet Union) of oppressing their ethnic-Russian minorities, echoing similar accusations leveled against Ukraine before the full invasion in 2022.²² Countering a Russian attack against a NATO country, either full-scale or in the form of limited incursions, could require the use of Allied and U.S. military assets against Russian forces. These scenarios would be far more costly and dangerous than preventing such attacks in the first place by helping Ukraine stop Russian aggression without the use of U.S. or Allied troops. To generalize, one problem with embracing spheres of influence as an organizing principle of international relations is that, based on centuries of experience, great powers are never satisfied with the extent of their sphere. This may be the case with Russia.

Another practical argument in favor of U.S. support for Ukraine is that Ukraine has a reasonable chance of stopping the Russian advance. Their prospects will strengthen especially if the United States and Europe increase their support and remove caveats on Ukraine's use of weapons to attack legitimate Russian military targets, including inside Russia.

While this war, like every war, has its uncertainties, certain elements of the current battle are known. (1) Russia is seeking to advance on land (especially in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region) with some success but significant losses.²³ (2) Russia is conducting effective strategic strikes against Ukrainian electricity and other infrastructure.²⁴ (3) Ukraine is conducting effective strategic strikes of its own against Russian targets, especially in the Black Sea and Crimea, which are likely to continue and potentially increase in effectiveness. This is especially true after the United States, Britain, and France decided to lift restrictions on Ukraine's use of longer-range rocket systems such as ATACMS and Storm Shadows.²⁵ (4) In a surprise offensive in early August, Ukrainian forces seized over 400 square miles of Russia's Kursk region, routing poorly prepared Russian troops. A Russian counterattack in Kursk Province has begun, but at the time of

writing this article, Ukraine remains in possession of around half of the territory they seized, despite Russia's use of North Korean forces there.²⁶

These developments could put Ukraine in a relatively stronger military position, especially if Russia's economy suffers additional stresses due to war expenditures and the cumulative impact of sanctions, export restrictions, and other economic measures, such as restrictions on Russian oil and gas sales.²⁷ This is not to suggest that Ukrainian victory is inevitable or even that Ukraine can liberate all of its territory. While the Russian land offensive against Kharkiv in early 2024 was a costly failure, Russian ground forces could still make gains in the Donbas region, and Russian strategic strikes could damage and further exhaust Ukrainian forces and civilian morale.²⁸ Nevertheless, relative Ukrainian success is possible, and Western assistance could make a critical difference. Poland has devoted considerable resources to analyzing the course of the Russo-Ukraine War (as have other states neighboring Russia whose lives may depend on Russian intentions and capabilities). The Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, a former Defense Minister, has publicly stated that Russia could find it difficult to continue the war after two more years.²⁹

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deal a major blow to one of the U.S. principal rivals, all without engaging U.S. forces. This would mark a significant benefit to U.S. interests.

WHAT IS THE U.S. "GRAND STRATEGY"?

Beyond the risks of a Ukrainian loss and the reasonable prospect of advancing U.S. interests through a relative Ukrainian success, a more profound strategic argument exists in favor of support for Ukraine. It lies behind the ungainly, oft-cited but less-often examined slogan of defending "the rules-based international order." This phrase refers to a lot of strategic thinking: from its emergence as a world power at the end of the nineteenth century, the United States opposed spheres of influence and the closed European empires of the era. Instead, the United States, emerging from the American Civil War with unmatched indus-

trial strength, came to favor an open world without empires, ordered instead by rules that would serve U.S. business interests. That way, the new Republic and the world could advance together. With abundant self-confidence, the crafters of this strategy assumed that U.S. ingenuity would prevail on a fair playing field and that the widespread adoption of U.S. values would follow. This was a canny assessment that the United States could shape much of the world in its own democratic image and get rich in the process.

Unlike the imperialist systems, the United States hoped to supplant its new grand strategy followed a positive-sum approach: U.S. prosperity and success would both grow with and depend on the prosperity and success of other countries. This approach—something new for great powers—was articulated in part by former Secretary of State John Hay through his Open Door policy. This policy launched in 1899 and 1900 and opposed the European carve-up of China.³⁰ It was fleshed out by President Woodrow Wilson in his “14 Points” speech to Congress in January 1918, and expressed again by President Franklin Roosevelt in the “Atlantic Charter” of 1941, which was issued with Winston Churchill.³¹ The policy, which one might call a “Free World strategy,” was implemented as a cornerstone of the post-1945 order that President Harry Truman helped establish. While this was not a U.S. invention (Immanuel Kant had made the case for perpetual peace between republics), the United States was the first country with the confidence—or arrogance—to try to put it into practice.

This U.S. grand strategy, or Free World strategy, was, and remains, neither clueless “idealism” nor empty posturing, but rather a considerable achievement and success. Notwithstanding the many inconsistencies, hypocrisies, and

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blunders in U.S. foreign policy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (a long list that includes the Vietnam and Iraq Wars), the international order that the United States built and championed after

1945 delivered Europe its longest period of general peace since Roman times, as well as decades of global prosperity around the world. That is a far better track record than that exhibited by the world from 1914 to 1945.

U.S. Free World strategy has many detractors. Some come from the venerable schools of Realism or Restraint, like Stephen Walt or George Beebe, and

others from the Trump-aligned world, like Elbridge Colby.³² They generally argue that the strategy is simply too ambitious, an overextension of commitments at a time of limited resources, and that a strategy rooted in abstract universal values is a luxury beyond U.S. means. Their view—espoused by J.D. Vance, and which aligns with Trump’s inclination toward value-free and transactional (deal-making) unilateralism as antecedents in U.S. history—is specifically observed in the Jacksonian tradition outlined by Walter Russell Mead. However, the Free World strategy also has deep antecedents in U.S. history. As such, support for a Free World order can be characterized as derived from the nature and origins of the United States as a nation.

Unlike Russia, China, or most European powers, the United States is not an ethno-state with identity rooted in shared blood. Instead, as Lincoln said, the United States “is a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”³³ Becoming a U.S. citizen can be seen as an act of belief in the nation’s principles and promise. That sentiment was true of the immigrants I grew up around or met later in life—tempest-tossed refugees from Europe like Madeleine Albright, Zbigniew Brzezinski, or my Ukrainian village-born in-laws. As Abraham Lincoln argued in 1858, immigrants who may share no blood with the U.S. citizens who preceded them discover the U.S. foundational statement from the Declaration of Independence—that all are created equal. They find then “that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that declaration, and so they are.”³⁴

In his acceptance speech at the 2024 Republican National Convention, however, J.D. Vance expressed a subtly different take on U.S. identity: “America was indeed founded on brilliant ideas...But America is not just an idea...It is a nation...People will not fight for abstractions, but they will fight for their home.” In describing home, Senator Vance movingly depicted the cemetery in eastern Kentucky where generations of his family lie buried, calling those buried there “those people...that American nation that we all love.”³⁵ In doing so, Vance gets close to defining the U.S. nation as one created through common blood and soil, not abstract ideas. This stands in contrast to Lincoln’s definition of the United States as grounded in an “abstract truth [of the Declaration of Independence] applicable to all men and all times...a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.”³⁶ The rebirth of the United States that Lincoln wrought through war and emancipation maintains that the nation’s principles are universal or, one might say, global in their reach.

The American Civil War and Reconstruction sought to re-establish the

nation, at least in theory, based on the values of universal human equality rather than as the White Man's Republic of the Confederacy. Though that effort failed in many ways, it had consequences. Beginning with the following generation, the sense of U.S. national identity derived through universal, abstract values informed how the United States brought its newfound power to the world. This idea that the U.S. nation is founded on principles applicable to all, for all time, is the foundation of this U.S. grand strategy. Because the United States itself was created on a principle of equality with universal application, the United States cannot easily dispense with such a principle in its conduct with the rest of the world.

No strategy, even one with roots as deep as the U.S. Free World strategy, can guarantee against mistakes in its application. Strategic principles have little to say about overcoming specific obstacles or making the right choices in the face of various doubts. The Truman Administration is lauded today for strategic foresight. However, it was condemned in its time as the Soviet Union took over Central and Eastern Europe, communists triumphed in China, and Stalin developed atomic weapons.³⁷ During the Cold War, in the name of its Free World strategy, the United States successfully defended South Korea against Soviet-supported North Korean aggression. However, it then (unwisely) sought total victory, consequently triggering Chinese military intervention and two more years of bloody fighting. In Vietnam, the United States failed to secure even South Vietnam from communist takeover in 1975. Shaken by the debacle in Vietnam, the Nixon Administration sought out regional strongmen as bulwarks against communism.³⁸ The United States found one such ally in the Shah of Iran, whom it supported even as Iranian civil society turned against him. This faulty partnership led to unfortunate consequences that plague U.S. foreign policy to this day. By the 1970s, accumulated mistakes by Republican and Democratic Administrations alike and setbacks, both real and perceived, seemed to point toward U.S. failure in the Cold War.

Yet the U.S. Free World strategy eventually achieved success 45 years after the Cold War began. President Jimmy Carter and his chief strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski pivoted to support for human rights and democracy, especially in Soviet-dominated areas of Europe where dissident movements were gaining strength in the 1970s.³⁹ President Ronald Reagan pushed that oppositional mission forward, seeking not merely to manage relations with the USSR as Nixon and Kissinger had attempted, but to prevail. The United States was hardly alone, acting with democratic allies in Europe and Asia who came to accept many of the precepts of the U.S. Free World strategy.

The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 was triggered by patriotic and democratic resistance movements throughout Soviet-controlled Europe. This effort was supported by the United States, especially in Poland, whose national cause was similarly woven together with the larger objective of global democracy. Poland's great opposition movement of solidarity derived its strength from a combination of abstract principles like democracy and efforts to gain national freedom and sovereignty.⁴⁰ It was this democratic and patriotic wave, which started in Poland and spread across Central and Eastern Europe, that helped take down the Soviet Empire.⁴¹ As it turned out, "abstract principles" such as democracy did count for a lot toward the successful end of the Cold War.

UKRAINE'S PLACE IN U.S. GRAND STRATEGY


One generation later, in similar fashion, Ukraine's fight for survival combines national patriotism with democracy. While ethnic nationalism is a part of the Ukrainian political tradition, the Ukrainian political culture that has crystalized since the 2014 Russian invasion is multi-ethnic and multi-religious in nature.

Ukraine's cause of national survival, sovereignty, and democracy fits the precepts of the U.S. Free World strategy. Most Ukrainians say they are fighting to escape a rapacious Russia bent on restoring its empire. Once ambivalent, after Russia's big invasion in 2022, an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians now want to join NATO and the European Union as a gateway to the larger European and free world community that the United States has supported and still leads. Ukrainians appear to accept the foundational principles of individual rights and human equality.⁴² However, it is important to acknowledge that Ukraine's government has its strengths and weaknesses, marred by corruption and oligarchic power. Many Ukrainians say privately that they will support the government while the war is in progress, but afterwards, they will insist on deepening Ukraine's democracy and addressing the corruption and cronyism that plague Ukraine even as it fights for its life.⁴³ Notwithstanding the work-in-progress status of its democratic transformation, Ukraine's survival would advance U.S. interests against Putin's ambition to restore the Russian Empire through violence and intimidation. Its success would demonstrate that a nation and international system established on the principle of universally applicable equality, enshrined through law rather than despotism, can prevail. Ukraine's success would demonstrate that the U.S. grand strategy is not a luxury of idealism but rather has appeal with broad reach.

Realism in foreign affairs is critical as an operational principle. Doing the

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right thing for the right reasons may not be possible if the means are inadequate to achieve the aims. Advocating principles without the power to achieve them risks becoming mere sloganeering. However, elevating power without principles risks degenerating into power worship. The Russo-Ukraine war may end with Ukrainian victory, or there may be a muddled and messy provisional outcome. Support for Ukraine from the United States, Europe, and other Free World powers can make a critical difference.

Regardless of what the battle leads to, and of the difficult choices and unpleasant provisional arrangements that may be considered, it is critical that the United States, Europe, and the Free World remain committed to their larger strategy and long-term objectives, remembering that the Ukrainian cause is indeed their own as well. To advance their ultimately inseparable interests and values, the Free World and the United States should perform their duty as they understand it. 

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