

The US and Ukraine: A Partnership-in-Action

THE TRUMP-ZELENSKY INDIGNITY FAILED TO DERAIL BILATERAL COOPERATION

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 626

November 2019

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Relations between the United States and Ukraine have never been as intense and multi-faceted as they are now. Since 2014, the amount of attention that Washington has been dedicating to Kyiv – the scale of their interaction – has become unprecedentedly high. This is based primarily on the understanding that U.S. interests are at stake in Ukraine. In helping Kyiv, the United States upholds a liberal international order with democratic systems that it has helped nourish and protect over many decades. For its own purposes and on behalf of its allies, the United States has stood up to an insurgent, emerging threat in Europe/Eurasia: the assertive and aggressive foreign policy of the Russian Federation. In this context, Ukrainian-U.S. relations are vital, even though their strategic partnership experienced a major test by way of the recent presidential phone call whistleblower scandal.

Despite the political briarpatch that has ensnared the new reformist Ukrainian government and President Donald Trump’s fitful administration, the US-Ukraine relationship appears to be on solid footing. This commitment to Ukraine’s better future can be seen, among other statements, from an October 2019 U.S. Department of State fact sheet that [states](#) the United States “attaches great importance to the success of Ukraine,” “does not recognize Russia’s attempted annexation of Crimea,” and “aims to support the development of a secure, democratic, prosperous, and free Ukraine, fully integrated into the Euro-Atlantic community.” Even though the U.S. president appears to have developed some [downbeat](#) feelings about Ukraine – even recently quipping that he might join President Vladimir Putin for Russia’s May Day parade – American aid and weaponry continue to be provided to Kyiv. For his part, President Volodymyr Zelensky has escaped the erupting scandal largely unscathed and returned to [focusing](#) on pressing domestic reforms.

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From Poroshenko to Zelensky

Zelensky's landslide election win in the presidential elections this year opened a new chapter in contemporary Ukrainian history, and for enhanced U.S.-Ukrainian relations. Zelensky's meteoric rise to power took everyone by surprise, both in Ukraine and abroad (including, apparently, the new president himself). Little [was known](#) about his personal ideas or policy inclinations. His statements on the Donbas conflict and communications with Putin were met with various reactions, and it remains unclear if he can offer new approaches and momentum for conflict resolution. He seems bent on moving the Normandy process forward and has proposed de-confliction steps along the contact line that involves Ukrainian troops withdrawing from their positions at several points.

It is often said that "the retinue makes the king" – that a ruler's inner circle of companions and advisors has an outsize impact on a leader's policies. This is especially true in the case of Zelensky, who has scant political experience. The choice of Andriy Bohdan to head the Office of the President was met with some concern, specifically at the U.S. State Department, and also by former U.S. Special Representative Kurt Volker. Nevertheless, Bogdan was appointed to the position in a move that shows Kyiv's independence from Washington while also providing a small test of Washington's clout with the new Ukrainian administration. The main concern about Bohdan seems to emanate from the fact that he is a loyalist and confidant of Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi. Ideally Ukraine should move toward undermining oligarchs' excessive influence, or, at least, creating some sort of balance between them. Zelensky's connections to Kolomoyskyi were a [topic of interest](#) throughout his presidential campaign and remain so to this day. Ukrainian citizens and their Western partners have openly hoped that the results of the recent election would undercut the influence of the Ukrainian oligarchs in all domestic spheres, and certainly not reinforce the power of just one of them.

Not only did Zelensky win the election with confidence, Ukrainian parliamentary elections brought a very impressive positive result for Zelensky's political party, Servant of the People, which [obtained](#) an outright majority with 252 seats. With this political edge, the young president was granted the opportunity to dominate both the executive and legislative bodies of power, which should translate to a clear mandate for (positive) change. The United States was cautiously optimistic about this new chance for Ukraine to move forward with reforms. However, if anything has been learned from previous maneuverings in Kyiv, it is that Ukraine has had its fair share of windows-of-opportunity and has usually squandered them.

On the side of the United States, a discrepancy exists between Trump's attention and statements on one hand, and U.S. government policies on the other. Trump has hardly mentioned Ukraine in his public declarations since he became president. He has, however, made numerous referrals to Russia and Putin, most of them of a positive nature. Trump is apparently still eager to reach some sort of a deal or bargain with Putin, perhaps a new

kind of “reset,” but it hasn’t been clear if and how Ukraine might feature in any of his plans... until this past summer.

The plan that came to light was an attempt by Trump’s entourage to revive conspiracy theories involving Ukraine, the 2016 U.S. election, presidential candidate Joe Biden, and his son. The president’s attorney, Rudy Giuliani, seemed to be curating that effort, and, regrettably, some on the Ukrainian side played into it, most notably former Prosecutor General Yuriy Lutsenko. The scandal brought to the fore a discrepancy between the established course of U.S. actions toward Ukraine and the actions of Trump’s subordinates.

Ukraine found itself in the center of a political whirlwind directly involving all branches of the U.S. government. Ukraine became the object in a U.S. political and constitutional crisis. This is an unenviable position for Ukraine to be in and the blame lies with the White House leadership. It appears that Trump opted for back channels to apply pressure on Zelensky in order to receive personal political benefits as he heads into his own re-election campaign. As leverage, it looks like Trump delayed meeting with Zelensky and even withheld \$391 million worth of security assistance to Ukraine. Luckily for Ukraine, the Trump team’s adventurist actions became public knowledge, after which the aid was released.

Together and Alone, to Protect and Reform

There are numerous avenues through which the United States provides assistance to Ukraine. Primarily, the country steadily receives a sizable amount of U.S. financial assistance directed at aiding its defense capabilities. This reflects a bipartisan consensus in the U.S. Congress on the need to help Ukraine in this particular realm. In fact, Ukraine has been one of those rare cases where members of Congress tend to offer bipartisan support. One can say that Congress drives America’s “Ukraine policy.” The line of funding is a secure lifeline for Ukraine; Kyiv is stretched when it comes to its budgetary opportunities to fund its war effort. U.S. assistance in this sphere, which has now exceeded \$1 billion, is no small token contribution.

One path of this assistance is the transfer of weapons. There has been a protracted discussion within the U.S. military and political circles as to the issue of sending lethal weapons to Ukraine. The Obama administration was opposed to this, arguing that such a step would mean [crossing](#) a red line in relations with Russia and might lead to the escalation of a Russian military campaign against Ukraine. The Trump administration [decided](#) that lethal weapons should be sent to Ukraine, leading to the delivery of U.S. anti-tank Javelin weapons. Preparations for more lethal weapons to be sent to Ukraine are apparently underway. This might include more Javelins but also other weapons and military systems, including some small boats to compensate for Ukraine’s naval vulnerability. The logic of such assistance is, as it was before, to help Ukraine withstand

aggression from Russia and its proxies on Ukrainian territory. Assistance from Washington has never been about enabling Ukraine to recapture the Donbas or Crimea by force.

While most American attention was previously paid to the situation at the contact line in the Donbas and therefore to the preparedness of Ukrainian army, a focus now is also on the Ukrainian navy. This was triggered by the Russian attack on Ukrainian ships outside of the Kerch straits in late November 2018. This episode introduced much urgency to the problem of Ukraine's maritime vulnerability. U.S. navy vessels (joined by other NATO members' vessels) have been making frequent calls to the Black Sea and the port of Odessa ever since then. Elevated discussions about how best to help Ukraine deal with this led to some of the funding in the last package of security assistance to be earmarked for addressing maritime threats. In the meantime, U.S. military instructors remain present in Ukraine training its land forces.

Despite not being part of the Minsk or Normandy formats, the United States is involved in attempts to halt hostilities in the Donbas through high-level discussions. Early on, former Secretary of State John Kerry took part in multilateral meetings on conflict resolution in Geneva, but that was the first and the last time U.S. diplomats were part of a collective Donbas conflict-settlement effort. There have been some reports of Trump being interested in becoming involved in conflict negotiations, but this has not materialized. Volker, however, has been very much involved in discussing the options and setting the narrative regarding the situation in the Donbas. Most importantly, he has called out occurrences honestly, addressing the situation as Russia's aggression and not as a Ukrainian civil war. He has maintained the U.S. presence in many policy debates, served as an important link between Washington and Kyiv, and successfully mounted pressure on Moscow to reassess its position vis-a-vis the Donbas. Regrettably, Volker became entangled in Trump's pressurized outreach to Kyiv, which made him one of the first casualties in the ongoing Congressional impeachment inquiry of the White House's push for the Ukrainian leadership to deliver political benefits to Trump. Another casualty was career diplomat and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch, who testified that she felt there was a "[concerted campaign](#)" against her when she was suddenly removed from her post. (For an overview of the scandal and the people involved, see the [timeline](#) at Talking Points Memo.)

While most of the effort has been directed at addressing the dire issue of ongoing bloodshed in the Donbas, the issue of the Crimean annexation has not slipped below the radar. This was clearly manifested in the "Crimea declaration" issued by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo on July 14, 2018. While recognizing that, perhaps, there are no quick solutions and that re-integration of Crimea into Ukraine might take time (as it once did with the restoration of independence for the three former Soviet Baltic republics) the principled position of the United States [has been made](#) very clear.

The common idiom “it takes two to tango” is an axiom for any bilateral relations. It certainly holds true for relations between the United States and Ukraine. These relations are not a one-way game. The United States is often in the driver’s seat, as befits the world’s leading superpower. However, the ball is often on the Ukrainian side of the court because much often depends on what happens in the country. In this regard, it is helpful to acknowledge that Ukraine has two battlegrounds. One is the actual frontline of warfighting in the Donbas. The other battleground relates to the progress of Ukrainian domestic reforms, particularly its fight against rampant corruption and its attempt to improve the living standards of its citizens.

Washington’s relations with former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko were positive for the most part. The United States recognized and supported Poroshenko after the difficult election in the spring of 2014. Poroshenko presided over a program of change and reform—Ukraine changed more than it did in the many years prior to 2014—although problems persisted and more could have been done to push Ukraine in the reform direction. Some reforms were unfulfilled and unfinished, and others were implemented in sporadic, non-systemic ways. Overall progress has not been questioned, but his final score in improving the country has not been as high as Ukraine’s Western partners would have preferred. In other words, it was not about the direction of change, but about the quality and scale of progress—not so much about the character of change, but about the pace. Indeed, toward the end of Poroshenko’s term, reform momentum was lost. It was time for a new face in Ukraine who could kick-start the reform process anew, while showing Moscow that fair elections could occur in the post-Soviet space.

Conclusion

Although the Trump-Zelensky debacle festers onward in the halls of the U.S. government, it has generally subsided and is no longer a crisis in Ukraine. Even at this point, it may have reinforced the notion that the U.S. Congress, foreign policy establishment, military and intelligence community, mainstream media, and large segments of experts and the public, are determined to keep support for Ukraine unwavering. The large bump in the road (quid pro quo?) that Trump placed on Ukraine and its new president may have solidified a wider consensus on backing Ukraine’s territorial integrity and movements toward European standards and NATO interoperability. From the Ukrainian side, an unexpected Washington-Kyiv stress test was encountered, surmounted, and relations with a critically important ally and partner resumed.