

# **U.S. – Ukraine Relations in a Changing Security Environment**

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## **New Features of the Security Environment for the United States and Ukraine**

The events of September 11, 2001, have greatly changed the security environment and have set a distinct new security agenda for the United States. Although one could argue that these events did not warrant such a radical reorientation of U.S. foreign policy, to expect that this would not occur in the wake of the September 11 attacks is unrealistic. A nationwide consensus emerged on the necessity of implementing drastic measures and new strategies to avoid the recurrence of similar events. Given the nature of the administration in power then and now, predicting the future course of events was and remains relatively easy. Indeed, the U.S. reaction that followed the attacks came as no surprise to observers.

The only remaining superpower's resources were used for the purpose of fighting the "axis of evil" and engaging in the war on terrorism. Lacking any conceptual background, these campaigns were easily consumed by the American public and, initially, were not hard to explain to the international community. Through such actions, the administration has finally created the doctrine of preemption, which, although heavily criticized, at least appears to be a somewhat structured theoretical approach. As a result of these events, however, the formerly steady progress of the United States toward defining its role in the post-Cold War world has been halted. Washington has found a new global outlook for its interests in the world, and there is no sign of any strategic reassessment occurring in the near future.

What became a defining moment and a turning point for the United States was perceived differently by other states, who were stunned by the events, but were also puzzled by the possible consequences for themselves and by what lessons should be learned. No other power in the world reacted to these events in the same manner as the United States did. The global outlooks of other governments did not change in the same ways or to the same extent as that of the U.S. administration. Some found themselves relatively close to the U.S. position, while others were on opposite ends of the spectrum. As is known, even the staunchest U.S. allies did not fully support the United States.

These changes in the world situation certainly change much for both the United States and Ukraine. The world has become more fully globalized, and while the United States

largely has led this trend toward globalization, Ukraine has remained on the periphery, clearly suffering from a lack of vision for what its role should be in the process.

As a regional power, Ukraine has witnessed most of the changes in its security environment on a regional level. Major changes in Ukraine's security environment have included: NATO expansion, enlargement of the European Union, development of political and security mechanisms in the Black Sea region, a more assertive Russia, new developments in U.S.-Russian relations, and the decline of GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova). These changes have brought about profound differences in how the United States and Ukraine view their security agendas. These differences have caused problems in bilateral relations and the erosion of the so-called strategic partnership that had been created between them.

### **The Strategic Partnership: Did It Ever Really Exist? And What Can Be Achieved Now?**

U.S.-Ukrainian relations were formally upgraded to the level of a "strategic partnership" in 1996. This occurred in the midst of the most fruitful period of interaction between the two countries. A bilateral inter-governmental commission was formed and then followed in 1997 by the signing of the NATO-Ukraine Charter on a Distinctive Partnership as well as important treaties with Russia, Poland, and Romania. These agreements have helped Ukraine gain greater recognition in the international community and have cemented its Western choice and commitment to integration into the Euroatlantic community. Ukraine later began to implement a multi-dimensional foreign policy, but the Euroatlantic community was always seen as a priority.

Little was done to create a domestic basis for successful Euroatlantic integration, however. Ukraine continued to face many problems, including lack of reform in the economic sphere, absence of political liberalization, slow-growing civil society, and widespread corruption. These contradictory internal processes had a direct impact on Ukraine's foreign policy. A large gap has appeared between the successes in Ukraine's foreign policies and its failures in reforming domestic policies, which has undermined Ukraine's international standing, hindering it from forming a true strategic partnership with the United States among other things.

The strategic partnership was never much more than a kind of symbolic objective for bilateral relations, some sort of light at the end of tunnel that the partners should aim to achieve eventually. The main reason for declaring a strategic partnership was to emphasize the importance of working together. In reality, however, the two countries have lacked several essential elements of a strategic partnership. There is no shared vision of a strategic future; differing values and organizations that are moving slowly to promote coordination have also plagued U.S.-Ukraine efforts to build a viable strategic partnership. Ukraine was never in a position to be equal with the United States, and thus constantly delegated all initiative to its U.S. partners. Assuming that there was no real strategic partnership even back in the years of the most productive mutual collaboration, much more modest goals for the two countries to work toward together must be set.

## **U.S. Interests and Ukraine's Security**

The dynamic nature of U.S. perceptions of its role in the world and, specifically, in Eurasia, and Ukraine's hesitation to choose a foreign policy orientation are the two main reasons why the countries do not see eye to eye on the security environment in the region. Ukraine does have a very specific geopolitical position. However, unlike what many Ukrainians would expect, this position could bring more difficulties than advantages. The fact that Ukraine is located between various geopolitical zones or even, as some refer to them, civilizations, could be a great benefit to the country. At the same time, Ukraine's weak political system, its painful quest for identity, the opportunistic behavior by its leaders, the continuation of outdated assumptions regarding its role in the region, and the country's lack of experience in the international arena have could collectively cancel out any possible advantages it may have.

It is certainly not enough for Ukraine to claim the role of a bridge between East and West. Rather, this title must be earned by a set of policies that proves the necessity of working with and through Ukraine. Ukraine needed to perform a masterful balancing act between East and West with the eventual goal of moving westward. Although there were certain exceptions, including the above-mentioned period when Ukraine moved decisively westward while normalizing relations with Russia, Ukrainian leaders overall clearly have not been willing and/or capable of achieving such a feat.

U.S. security experts and foreign policy decisionmakers never took as a given the important role Ukraine could play in regional and U.S. security considerations. There was and remains a broad spectrum of ideas regarding Ukraine's security as viewed through U.S. interests. In very simplistic terms, there are three basic ways to think about the role of Ukraine in the global security environment: 1) Ukraine is important under certain circumstances and could be useful in constructing various regional security models (primarily to counterbalance Russia); 2) Ukraine is very important to regional security and thus to U.S. security; or 3) Ukraine is not important.

The United States largely followed the first approach during the first half of the 1990s (with the first few years of the decade being the exception). This was due partly to the fact that the Russian "success story" proved illusory and led to renewed U.S. views of Russia as a threat. Ukraine was thus seen as an essential element in preventing Russian domination in the region and a powerful tool in securing geopolitical pluralism in post-Soviet space. This theoretical line of thought was more characteristic of U.S. conservatives. There was a good chance that this approach would prove even more favorable with the current Bush administration, but Ukraine's failures and the events of September 11, 2001, have undermined this line of thinking. Ukraine's actions, which had little to do with security concerns, undermined its role and caused U.S.-Ukrainian rapprochement to be tactical rather than strategic.

The second approach was not very widely practiced, but it had an impact on policy for quite some time. The proponents of this approach see Ukraine as a cornerstone of regional security and as a vital player in ensuring U.S. interests in the area. Once again, policymakers stopped following this view of Ukraine primarily due to Kyiv's inability to take concrete steps in proving its significance to the United States.

This leaves the third approach, which is the most unfavorable for Ukraine. It is, however, precisely this approach that defines current U.S. policy toward Ukraine. Disappointment with Ukraine's actions has increased in recent years. Ukraine has been seen as relatively stable, and thus has not been seen as a country that urgently needs U.S. engagement. In addition, most human, financial, and organizational resources have been used for the war on terrorism, leaving countries such as Ukraine in the background.

## **Threats to Ukraine and the Role of the United States**

Ukraine faces a number of security threats. Internal threats are growing, and their urgency far exceeds that of threats posed by external factors. Domestic challenges are more acute than international ones; non-military challenges are more acute than military ones. Ukraine serves as a perfect example of how soft security issues could be dramatically more vital than those of the traditional hard security nature. This is not to say that Ukraine has no reason to worry about developments outside of its borders, but it is domestic problems that are causing the gravest challenges to the security, viability, and independence of Ukraine.

The United States has done enough to help Ukraine with both internal and external threats. By expanding NATO and cutting the "gray zone" to the immediate west of Ukraine, encouraging Kyiv's pro-European choice and carefully mediating its relations with Russia, Washington has assisted in creating a more favorable external security environment for Ukraine. The help provided for the purpose of advancing sorely needed economic reform and political liberalization was of utmost significance in helping Ukraine face some of its internal security threats. Much remains to be done in the future, but there is a clear willingness on the part of Washington to see that Ukraine is finally ready to help itself, meeting all of its security challenges in a responsible and systematic manner.

## **The Current Stage of the U.S.-Ukrainian Security Dialogue**

Currently, Ukraine poses a dilemma for U.S. security. The Bush administration has refused to take an openly negative stance toward the ruling regime in Kyiv and has no plans to impose sanctions of any kind. A passive, negative attitude toward Ukraine currently prevails, thus hurting bilateral cooperation, ending high-level contacts, and resulting in wait-and-see tactics. There is no sign of balanced engagement, which would involve a two-level dialogue with Ukraine, tougher rhetoric against the party of power, and constructive work with the rest of society. It appears that the current U.S. administration has neither the willingness nor the readiness to follow such a track. U.S. policymakers seem to lack any kind of desire to reassess U.S. foreign policy toward Ukraine, enjoying the luxury of delaying the implementation of any innovative initiatives toward the country. This policy fluctuates between the United States distancing itself from Ukraine and simply ignoring it. The United States has deliberately chosen not to be an active player in Ukrainian affairs. This is occurring at a time when Ukraine is facing yet another crucial moment in its brief post-Soviet history. Constructive and principled outside influence could make a clear difference in pre-election Ukraine. Whether new types of politicians will come to power in Ukraine—the kind of individuals who would

be aware of the country's security challenges and capable of confronting them in the most responsible manner—is currently being decided Alternatively, Ukraine could continue to muddle through crises, endangering not just only own future, but also U.S. interests.

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