

# U.S.-Ukraine Relations

## The Long Road to Strategic Partnership

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The dissolution of the Soviet Union fifteen years ago took many in the United States by surprise. Whether or not the U.S. government ought to have been better prepared for this eventuality, U.S. decisionmakers had not done much thinking on how to deal with post-Soviet states before the actual disintegration occurred. In 1991, therefore, they were forced to start from scratch. The conceptual vacuum that followed was a protracted phenomenon. Not only had fifteen states appeared in place of a single one, this occurred against the backdrop of a changing global landscape. The search for a new global role for the United States had been launched, and the post-Soviet dimension of its foreign policy was merely one of many, and no longer the priority.

U.S. policy on Ukraine illustrates well the fluidity of U.S. thinking on foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Former president George H.W. Bush's August 1991 "Chicken Kiev" speech, cautioning Ukrainians against "suicidal nationalism" just a few weeks before Ukraine declared its independence, was the manifesto for his administration's policy toward the Soviet Union. The road to recognition of Ukraine's independence and the start of a full-scale bilateral relationship was, hence, not an easy one.

The United States was low on the list of those to recognize Ukraine in December 1991, but the recognition that came was unconditional. The first Bush administration committed itself to recognizing Ukraine, based on the fact that a majority of Ukrainian citizens voted in favor of independence. The idea of linking recognition of Ukraine's independence to the fate of the nuclear weapons then on Ukrainian soil was rejected, although Ukraine was expected to join the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) once it gained its independence (Ukraine ultimately signed the NPT only in 1994).

Further developments in U.S.-Ukrainian bilateral relations were not as optimistic. The United States was overwhelmingly focused on the nuclear arsenal Ukraine inherited from the Soviet Union. If there was one absolute priority for the United States during the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was to stabilize the situation of the former Soviet Union's nuclear weapons, which meant moving all of them to Russia. At the time, the Russian factor was beginning to play a very significant role in U.S. policy toward the region. Moscow was seen as the primary, if not only, party willing and capable of dealing with the problems of the post-Soviet space. "Russocentrism" was running high in U.S. policy, and the desires of the non-Russian newly independent states did not appear to matter that much. Whether or not there was any realistic alternative to this policy, Ukraine ended up a victim of this approach (even if the Ukrainian government did not necessarily want to keep the weapons in the first place).

U.S.-Ukrainian relations began to change for the better in 1993-1994. Disappointment with Russia's performance, the new U.S. administration's initiation of a strategic review of U.S. foreign policy, and the evolution of expert thinking about the post-Soviet space all contributed to this change. Many observers, notably Zbigniew Brzezinski, came to the conclusion that a "Russia first" policy, let alone a "Russia only" policy, served U.S. interests badly, and they called for more cooperation with Russia's post-Soviet neighbors, with a special position reserved for Ukraine.

There were many important outcomes of this shift. The dialogue on the nuclear issue continued in a more productive fashion, leading to a trilateral agreement between Ukraine, Russia, and the United States on nuclear energy and disarmament in January 1994. That cleared the road for collaboration in various other spheres. U.S. government officials declared 1994 the "year of Ukraine." It was hoped that Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma would deliver long-delayed and much-needed economic reform.

By the second half of the 1990s, U.S.-Ukrainian relations were running high, enjoying the most positive momentum in their history. In 1996, the high-level Kuchma-Gore Commission indicated the significance both sides saw in U.S.-Ukraine bilateral relations. The U.S.-Ukrainian relationship was then elevated to the level of a "strategic partnership." Though one might argue that a true strategic partnership was never fully established, the formal declaration of this partnership was a moment of great significance for Ukraine. In 1997, Ukraine signed important treaties with Russia, Poland, and Romania, and especially a Charter on a Distinctive Partnership with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Such agreements led Ukraine to play a more assertive international and regional role, and also had a major impact on its relations with the United States. With U.S. encouragement, Ukraine initiated the regional organization GUAM, participated in integrative undertakings in Central and Eastern Europe, and became one of the leaders within the Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).

The years 1999-2004 witnessed a significant turnaround in relations between United States and Ukraine. Initially, responsibility for this lay with the Ukrainian government, which was to blame for numerous wrongdoings, eventually producing a much more negative dialogue between Kyiv and Washington. The Kuchma regime ultimately deteriorated to such an extent that bilateral relations had to be almost frozen.

Then the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred. Before that day, no major shifts in policy on Ukraine were expected from the new U.S. administration. At the same time, while some members of the administration were unhappy with recent events in Ukraine, they were ready to stay engaged with Kyiv on numerous tracks. After September 11, however, everything that was not directly related to the war on terror, as Washington saw it, was downgraded in the list of U.S. foreign policy priorities. The entire post-Soviet space found itself in this category, with a few exceptions for countries that appeared to be able to help wage the new war.

Ukraine was unable to play an active role in the U.S. government's new foreign policy. Kyiv's attempt to get some attention and support (or, at least, indulgence for its wrongdoings) by sending troops to Kuwait at the start of the Iraq war was ineffective, overshadowed by the Kuchma government's ongoing undemocratic behavior, as well as reports that it had sold Kolchuga radar stations to Iraq (which, indeed, had some relation to Washington's new central front). Financial aid to Ukraine was frozen. At the same time, Ukraine continued to declare its European and Euro-Atlantic course (albeit doing miserably on both counts), at a time when U.S.-European relations had come under strain and neither the EU nor NATO could be seen as entirely pro-American organizations.

The Orange Revolution of 2004 changed much about U.S.-Ukrainian relations. While the notion that the United States played a decisive role in the revolution can be dismissed as typical conspiracy-mongering and anti-Western paranoia, there is no doubt that Washington's firm support of Ukraine's pro-democracy forces was instrumental in improving bilateral relations. Ukraine after the Orange Revolution appeared as a natural partner and friend of the United States, even as the latter found itself more deeply preoccupied in Iraq.

Unfortunately, the "Orange" Ukraine is no longer with us. What we now have is a post-Orange situation in a country whose leaders have failed to deliver greatly anticipated changes in the political, social, and economic realms. Ukraine's foreign policy in the last two years has been only slightly better than its domestic performance (primarily due to the good job done by the professionals executing this policy). However, even the best of Kyiv's international initiatives were undermined by the lack of a strong domestic foundation. This was, regrettably, very reminiscent of the late Kuchma years, when Ukraine found itself unable to move ahead decisively internationally as political liberalization stalled, economic reform did not proceed, and widespread corruption was not countered.

This new post-Orange Ukraine is not an easy partner for the United States to deal with. Americans are getting very mixed signals from Kyiv, and it is becoming more difficult to understand Ukraine's position on most issues. This complicates, if not hinders, the bilateral relationship, and we have begun to witness considerable "Ukraine fatigue." Some may argue that Ukraine has proved itself a hopeless case, regardless of who is in power and what Washington does vis-à-vis Kyiv. Others say there is no need to overdramatize the Ukrainian situation – that there is nothing really wrong with Ukraine, and that the legacy of the Orange Revolution lives on.

Neither of these attitudes leads to sustained U.S. engagement with Ukraine. The

truth, as it often does, lies somewhere in between. Ukraine is neither hopeless, nor a success. It is facing a decisive phase in its development, and as such, deserves and requires U.S. attention and help. It is still possible for Ukraine to one day be a prosperous and stable democracy, one which will truly be a strategic partner and friend of the United States.