



PROCEEDINGS

RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE: THREE YEARS ON

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: Three Years On” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on February 25, 2025. The symposium discussed the geopolitical consequences of Ukraine’s potential defeat and the implications for NATO; Russia’s political strategy and tactics; the role of nonprofit organizations in helping Ukraine; the anticipated impact of the Trump Administration’s policies on continued U.S. support to Ukraine; and the prospect of a negotiated outcome to the conflict.

David J. Trachtenberg

David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy and former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

Yesterday marked the third anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As I noted in my email invitation, although Russia retains control of Crimea and has taken control of territory in eastern Ukraine, initial Russian (and some Western) expectations that Ukraine would fall within a matter of days have proved profoundly wrong.

Despite Moscow’s escalatory threats (including nuclear), its use of North Korean troops and Iranian drones on the battlefield, and military support from China, Ukrainian forces have demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of massive Russian assaults.

While the provision of U.S. armaments and support from other NATO countries has been instrumental in blunting Russia’s brutal and illegal aggression, the future of U.S. military aid and assistance to Ukraine as a result of the change in U.S. administrations is under debate and remains to be seen.

Much has happened recently that bears directly on U.S. policy regarding Ukraine. President Trump has spoken with Vladimir Putin and is seeking to end the conflict through negotiations. European states and Ukraine have expressed dismay at being left out of the initial consultations that took place in Saudi Arabia and have stated that no acceptable agreement can be concluded without Ukraine’s participation. The tone of the dialogue between the United States, Ukraine, and Russia has shifted markedly, leading others to speculate about the enduring nature of America’s security commitments. European states are considering how to support Kyiv should American military assistance be curtailed. And yesterday, on the third anniversary of Russia’s full-scale aggression, the United States voted with Russia, North Korea, and Iran against a UN resolution condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine and supporting the return to Ukraine of territory captured by Russia.¹ In short, the political situation is exceedingly dynamic, to say the least.

¹ Karen DeYoung and John Hudson, “U.S. votes against U.N. resolution condemning Russia for Ukraine war,” *The Washington Post*, February 24, 2025, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/02/24/united-nations-ukraine-russia-trump/>.



Both Russia and Ukraine still appear miles apart on their conditions for ending the war. Although Ukraine has prevented Moscow from achieving its objective of completely eliminating Ukraine's independence, many Western analysts believe the longer the conflict continues, the harder it will be for Ukraine to regain lost territory. Russian forces today control roughly 20 percent of Ukraine. On Saturday night, Russia fired more than 260 drones at Ukraine, its most massive single day drone attack against Ukraine since the start of the war.²

Our discussion today will address the geopolitical consequences of Ukraine's potential defeat and the implications for NATO, as well as Russia's political strategy and tactics and the role of nonprofit organizations in helping Ukraine. America's allies and adversaries are watching closely what happens in Ukraine and weighing the impact of U.S. policy changes. Some NATO countries have suggested the deployment of national troops in Ukraine as part of security guarantees should any agreement be reached. Both Britain and France are said to be developing plans for a "reassurance force" of up to 30,000 troops that would guarantee Ukraine's security and seek to deter further Russian aggression.³

Where we are today is arguably the result of a U.S. policy toward Ukraine that can be characterized as one of creeping incrementalism. The United States has provided Ukraine with enough military assistance not to lose, but not enough to win. Incrementalism is never a strategy for victory. At best, it results in stalemate or frozen conflict, and at worst, it leads to defeat. It is understandable that Americans feel fatigued spending billions of dollars in support of an effort that has not produced a clear victory and want the Europeans to assume a greater burden for Europe's defense.

What happens now on the battlefield and at the negotiating table will provide lessons for the NATO alliance, for the credibility of U.S. security guarantees, for the willingness of adversaries—including China—to challenge U.S. and Western interests more forcefully, for Russia's international standing, and for the willingness of states that are not party to the conflict to cast their lots either with the United States and the West or with those who seek to overturn the existing world order at the West's expense. This is the backdrop for today's discussion.

² David Brennan, "Russia, Ukraine exchange major drone attacks on invasion anniversary," *ABC News*, February 24, 2025, available at <https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-ukraine-exchange-major-drone-attacks-invasion-anniversary/story?id=119115860>.

³ See John Paul Rathbone, Ben Hall, and Henry Foy, "France and UK plan air power-backed 'reassurance force' in postwar Ukraine," *Financial Times*, February 19, 2025, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/6dc1a080-babf-445a-9409-f18a835eabdc>. Also see Jill Lawless, "European troops, US support are part of an emerging plan for Ukraine. But it faces many hurdles," *The Washington Post*, February 21, 2025, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/02/21/ukraine-europe-security-force-us-backstop-nato/8833ff96-f012-11ef-bd80-8f2ac5c75a8a_story.html; Tim Zadorozhnyy, "Up to 30,000 European troops reportedly could be deployed to monitor Ukraine ceasefire, Washington Post reports," *The Kyiv Independent*, February 24, 2025, available at <https://kyivindependent.com/up-to-30-000-european-troops-may-be-reportedly-deployed-to-monitor-ukraine-ceasefire/>.

Luke Coffey***Luke Coffey is Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute.***

Regarding Ukraine, we need to get back to basics. Ukraine is the victim of Russia's aggression. Ukraine matters to the United States, and we have to do a better job communicating why to the American people. So far, we have failed in that task. The American people want to support Ukraine, so we have an advantage that we do not have to convince them. Most of the help Congress has provided, almost 80 percent, is spent in the United States, supporting the U.S. economy and jobs.

Ukraine matters to the United States, because Europe matters. Europe has a large economy. Russian President Vladimir Putin-caused instability is costing U.S. jobs because of our exports to Europe.

Russia is an adversary, and the People's Republic of China is observing the West's collective reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The conflict has given us the opportunity to learn what works on the battlefield and discover gaps in our own industrial base at the time when Americans are not fighting. That is a precious advantage and an enormous opportunity. Ukrainians have been extremely forthcoming in terms of sharing the lessons learned.

Michaela Dodge***Michaela Dodge is Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy.***

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on geopolitical consequences of Ukraine's potential defeat. It's been quite a week for Ukraine, and I am looking forward to this timely discussion. I am saying "looking forward," but news has not been great, and we are entering difficult times in alliance relations.

I wrote on this topic back in January to alert U.S. policymakers and the public to the interconnectedness of happenings in Ukraine to U.S. national interests. By the looks of it, the piece hasn't taken much within the administration.

Ukraine's defeat, or rather Russia's victory (somewhat loosely defined as whatever the Russians think is a victory), would seriously hamper U.S. extended deterrence and assurance, including in the Indo-Pacific. Since China has openly allied itself with Russia, strengthening deterrence in the Indo-Pacific lies in defeating Russia in Ukraine.

Should Ukraine lose, Russia's geopolitical center of gravity would move closer to Europe. So would hundreds of thousands battle-experienced soldiers. Russia would obtain additional resources in Ukraine to wage its campaign. It would create yet more space to continue its conflict against NATO members. The term hybrid warfare currently denoting Russia's hostile actions is rather conveniently used to obscure the necessity to counter them more seriously than we are currently doing.

What allies perceive as a lack of resolve to defeat an aggressor in Ukraine is already sending ripples of uncertainty and concern throughout the U.S. alliance system. To this audience, one does not have to spell out its importance or benefit to our security and prosperity. Regrettably, such an understanding is not widespread in today's America. This spells out a challenge that will outlive the current administration. We forgot that if we do not fight the aggressors abroad, they will attack us here—sooner or later. That is a daunting prospect for a mother of three young boys.

Among more immediate consequences of Ukraine's defeat would be massive immigration flows to Europe. Since February 2022, over 6.5 million people, mostly women and children, left Ukraine for Germany, Poland, or the Czech Republic. So far, they have been welcomed, even though their support is somewhat decreasing. But the refugee challenge would become much worse in the case of Ukraine's defeat, causing a strain on the social system in the near-term, when every single available Euro must go into Europe's armaments. Russia's disinformation is already trying to undermine governments that have so far strongly supported Ukraine.

No matter what happens in Ukraine, NATO members must increase their defense spending. Today's situation has exposed Europe's criminal negligence of its armed forces. There will be hell to pay for Europe if Ukraine loses against Russia. But even if it doesn't, NATO and Ukraine will need to arm to deter Russia's future aggression. Russia's defeat after the end of the Cold War bought us slightly less than two decades of peace in Europe. And back then Russia knew it was defeated.

Perhaps some of my colleagues are correct in saying that Russia, not even managing its campaign against Ukraine well, would not be a threat to NATO. I disagree in the long-term. Russia's war economy supported by China is going strong enough. If Ukraine loses, Russia will plunder all those resources President Trump is interested in. If the Russians expected the Ukrainians to welcome them, they certainly would not expect any NATO members to welcome them (perhaps with exception of Hungary and Slovakia). They would likely fight differently, and perhaps resort to battlefield nuclear weapons from the get go.

NATO is not prepared for such an eventuality.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems to have contributed to allies' doubts about whether staying without nuclear weapons is such a good idea after all. And I get it, the Budapest Memorandum was not a treaty, or a guarantee, and I suppose a lawyer could make the case that we have met all of our commitments under it. Nevertheless, the Ukrainians themselves are certainly regretting giving up nuclear weapons. The perception appears to be that America (and the UK) failed Ukraine. Today, fewer people are against U.S. nuclear weapons withdrawal in European countries that reportedly host them than prior to February 2022. Nuclear weapons have consistently high support among the South Korean public. And even in Japan, the leadership is quietly let it be known that the country could develop a nuclear weapon is less than six months.

Ukraine's defeat would be seen as a validation of the worst pro-authoritarian instincts within the West's polity. Think Hungary and Slovakia—but on crack. It would make Europe's cozying up to China yet worse, at the time when the United States is trying to build leverage

to counter its “pacing” challenge. Countering Russia would become more difficult. Building transatlantic relations would become more difficult. United we stand, divided we fall—and this is particularly true in today when our adversaries are gearing up for a large-scale conflict.

I wish this discussion was about what we do now that Ukraine has won. And I hope that such a discussion is in our future; the sooner, the better.

Thank you. I am looking forward to my colleagues’ remarks and to the discussion afterwards.

Marek Menkiszak

Marek Menkiszak is Head of the Russian Department at the Centre for Eastern Studies and a former faculty member of the Institute of International Relations at the University of Warsaw.

The ongoing negotiations between the United States, Russia, and Ukraine are not about peace from Russia’s perspective. The goal is subjugation of Ukraine within the reestablished Russia’s sphere of influence, the second is to create a security buffer zone in Central Europe and the third is to push U.S. influence, especially its military out of Europe.

Russia now increasingly thinks it can win by a combination of tactical victories on the battlefield and diplomacy. It plays hardball using soft language. Its goal is to get concessions without fundamentally changing its gains. Whoever is in a hurry must pay more, and the price for peace is Ukraine’s surrender.

Russia also hopes for a transatlantic rift, because that would make it easier to achieve the aforementioned goals. It wants to divide and rule Europe and set agenda for negotiations. We are at a juncture when it is easier to ascertain Russia’s goals than the Trump Administration’s goals.

Martin Kroupa

Martin Kroupa is Head of Regional Development at the Post Bellum Organization, a Czech educational nonprofit organization based in Prague that has been assisting Ukraine in its efforts.

My experience comes from a nonprofit background. I am a co-founder of a nonprofit Skupina D (Group D) that raises funding for drones for the Ukrainians Army.

Ukrainian society is not fatigued and still works a lot to support efforts to counter Russia. Russia is pushing and Ukraine is preparing for Russia’s next offensive. No one is seriously talking about a ceasefire with Russia; the Ukrainians still feel that the fight is over their

sovereignty. Those who are fighting in Ukraine do not want to stop, because they know it would condemn Ukraine to Russia's terror.

From the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries' perspective, it appears that the United States is getting weaker and cannot sustain the world order that has been conducive to globalization. The question we are asking is "What do we do now?". In this environment, the European countries are thinking about reintroducing conscriptions and increasing their defense budgets. Our nonprofit has also seen larger contributions from the public to support Ukraine's military's needs.

Hopefully, the changes will lead to stronger Europe, but what about the United States? It appears it is not as strong.

The Ukrainians are also currently against elections in wartime, even though Vladimir Zelenskyy's support is relatively low (yet still higher than Ukraine's previous politicians at a similar juncture in their tenures). For elections to be possible, Ukraine will have to be in peace (not just a ceasefire). One challenge is that currently, people in the military are not eligible to run in elections, yet these are the folks that enjoy the largest degree of support within the Ukrainian society right now.