

The Washington Post

Ukraine will lose only if MAGA Republicans cut off U.S. aid

by Max Boot

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In 1940 and 1941, America First isolationists argued that the United States should not help Britain resist the Nazi onslaught because it had no chance to prevail. “I have been forced to the conclusion that we cannot win this war for England, regardless of how much assistance we extend,” Charles Lindbergh said on April 23, 1941.

Today’s America Firsters are voicing a similar refrain when it comes to Ukraine. Sen. Tommy Tuberville (R-Ala.) said: “I haven’t voted for any money to go to Ukraine because I know they can’t win.” Former president Donald Trump chimed in: “You’re really up against a war machine in Russia. ... They defeated Hitler, they defeated Napoleon.” (This vaunted “war machine” lost the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War, World War I and the Soviet-Afghan war.) Many of these isolationists make it sound as though they are doing Ukraine a favor by hastening its defeat and occupation. “It doesn’t help the Ukrainian people,” Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah), said recently, “to prolong their suffering in this war.”

Just as the original America Firsters played into Adolf Hitler’s hands, so their ideological descendants play into Vladimir Putin’s. Dictators always want to convey a sense that their triumph is inevitable and that resistance is futile. Indeed, the MAGA Republicans sound indistinguishable from Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who said last year that Western aid deliveries “will not change anything” and “can only prolong the suffering of the Ukrainian people.”

Yet Ukraine has proved the naysayers wrong for more than two years and it can continue to do so as long as it receives aid from the United States. But if U.S. aid is cut off, as the MAGA Republicans demand, then their predictions of doom might become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It’s worth recalling that few analysts gave Ukraine any chance of successfully repelling the initial Russian onslaught which began on Feb. 24, 2022. The U.S. intelligence community feared that Kyiv could fall within 72 hours. Yet here we are 740 days later, as of Monday, and the Ukrainian state is, in many ways, stronger than it was before the war, with a far larger and more capable military, a more popular leader, and a far more united populace.

Ukrainian nationalism has been turbocharged by the Russian assault, and Ukrainians remain nearly unanimous in their desire to fight the invaders. In one recent poll, 89 percent of Ukrainians said they are still convinced they will win the war.

As I saw on a trip around the country last month, much of Ukraine continues to function remarkably well despite the war. In major cities, grocery store shelves are stocked, restaurants are packed and streets are full of traffic. There have been no major shortages of heat or electricity this winter despite Russian attacks. The blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea coast has been broken, with Russia's Black Sea Fleet losing roughly one-third of its ships. Ukrainian grain exports from Odessa are almost back to prewar volumes.

Putin's goal was to snuff out Ukraine's independence. So far, he has failed miserably. So, too, his gambit of cutting off Russian natural gas to Europe failed to cow the continent. The war has actually strengthened NATO, with Sweden and Finland joining the alliance and member states boosting their defense spending.

The Russians have managed to increase the amount of Ukrainian territory they control from 7 percent to 18 percent — but at frightful cost. The U.S. intelligence community estimates that Russia has lost more than 315,000 soldiers killed and wounded, its worst casualty figures since World War II. The Estonian intelligence service calculates that the Russians have lost “over 2,600 tanks, 5,100 armored personnel carriers and 600 self-propelled artillery units.” Two-thirds of Russia's prewar tank inventory has been destroyed.

The bad news is that, despite Western sanctions, Russia's economy continues to function, and it has been put on a wartime footing to churn out more weapons systems. But even so, Russia is expending munitions faster than it can manufacture them. The Kremlin has had to deplete Soviet-era stockpiles and buy artillery shells from North Korea and drones and missiles from Iran.

It's also dismaying that Putin's hold on power has not been shaken by the needless loss of so many soldiers in meat-grinder assaults. Indeed, following the deaths of mercenary leader Yevgeniy Prigozhin and opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the Russian dictator appears more firmly entrenched than ever.

The final bit of negative news is that the Russian military's combat performance has improved since the early days of the war. The Russian army has greatly increased its drone and electronic warfare capabilities, in particular. Ukraine's counteroffensive failed to break through heavily fortified Russian lines last year, and, in mid-February, the Russians took Avdiivka — their biggest victory since the fall of Bakhmut in May 2023.

The Russian success in Avdiivka was possible because, with U.S. aid already cut off, the Ukrainians are suffering from an acute shortage of artillery shells. If U.S. aid doesn't restart and ammunition shortages worsen, the Russians can break through

elsewhere along the 600-mile front and rain down air attacks on Ukrainian cities. That could eventually lead to Ukraine's defeat.

But if U.S. aid resumes, Ukraine could continue to hold out indefinitely, and Russia will find it extremely difficult to advance. As long as Russia cannot substantially expand its zone of occupation — and Ukraine remains a functioning, pro-Western state — I would consider that a victory for Ukraine. Ukraine might even be able to claw back more of its lost territory next year if the West provides more long-range-strike weapons (such as American-made ATACMS) to target Russian bases in Crimea. Ukraine should receive a boost when it takes delivery of its first F-16 fighter jets this summer.

Yes, Russia is a large country — much larger than Ukraine — but it does not have infinite stocks of men and materiel. Russia is most amply supplied with young men who could become cannon fodder, and Ukraine needs to increase its own conscription to keep pace. But, since mobilizing 300,000 fighters in the fall of 2022, Putin has been careful not to expand the draft for fear of popular pushback.

Jack Watling of the Royal United Services Institute in London, writing for Time magazine, notes that “Russia’s firepower dominance will potentially diminish” in 2025 as it runs low on ammunition stockpiles. In a similar vein, a senior Biden administration official told the New Yorker that “Russia can continue its current level of war expenditures into the spring of 2025, at which point it will run into trouble.” Meanwhile, the United States and Europe are expanding their defense production; next year, they might be able to produce twice as many artillery shells as Russia.

If those estimates are accurate, then Ukraine just has to survive this year before the tide might start to turn again. “Ukraine’s prospects are grim but hardly fatal,” retired Australian major general Mick Ryan told me. “There were multiple occasions when the allies faced such terrible prospects in World War II. They won not just through perseverance and production, but with an alliance strategy to defeat their enemy, not just defend against them. Such is Ukraine’s pathway to victory. Russia is a relatively weak bully — and very beatable. We just have to decide to do it.”

Whether Ukraine wins or loses will be decided not on the battlefield but in the House of Representatives, where a Senate-approved \$60 billion aid bill continues to languish. There is nothing inevitable about Ukraine’s defeat, any more than there was anything inevitable about Britain’s defeat in World War II. But, despite Ukraine’s impressive and inspirational record of resistance thus far, it can still lose this war if MAGA Republicans succeed in cutting off U.S. aid.

The Washington Post

Democracy is imperiled globally. Republicans are on the wrong side.

by Jennifer Rubin

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The refusal of House Republicans to fund aid for Ukraine, their insistence on pursuing a bogus impeachment scheme hatched by an indicted Russian FBI source in contact with Russian intelligence services and their unfailing loyalty to an anti-democratic demagogue infatuated with Russian President Vladimir Putin will further aggravate the existential threat facing democracy around the globe. MAGA Republicans' recent conduct will only hasten the dangerous trend toward authoritarianism spelled out in Freedom House's recent report "Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict." Sign up for the Prompt 2024 newsletter for opinions on the biggest questions in politics

"Global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year in 2023," Freedom House reported. "The breadth and depth of the deterioration were extensive. Political rights and civil liberties were diminished in 52 countries, while only 21 countries made improvements. Flawed elections and armed conflict contributed to the decline, endangering freedom and causing severe human suffering."

The threat from right-wing groups and ideologies rejecting democratic values such as diversity, the rule of law, free speech, equality and tolerance — the very same values the MAGA movement targets — are at the root of the worldwide phenomenon. "Almost everywhere, the downturn in rights was driven by attacks on pluralism — the peaceful coexistence of people with different political ideas, religions, or ethnic identities — that harmed elections and sowed violence," Freedom House observed. "These intensifying assaults on a core feature of democracy reinforce the urgent need to support the groups and individuals, including human rights defenders and journalists, who are on the front lines of the struggle for freedom worldwide."

The role of the United States in bolstering democracies, just as it did in World War II and the Cold War, has never been more critical. "As it has for decades, the United States can play a vital role in the expansion of global freedom," the report reiterated. "But much depends on whether the November 2024 presidential election reinforces or weakens America's democratic values, processes, and institutions, along with its will to uphold the cause of democracy around the world."

The United States remains vulnerable at home, where "harassment and intimidation of federal, state, and local politicians, election administrators, and judges pose a serious challenge to the conduct of November's presidential election." Moreover, still

“haunted by the January 2021 attack on the Capitol and related court cases, Americans are heading into a decisive election starkly divided, with some questioning the very utility of fundamental democratic institutions.”

As the world’s only true superpower, the only country that can summon a global alliance and the historic exemplar of democratic values, the United States must take the lead in defending democracies against internal and external threats. If “governments, donors, and the private sector” do not “deepen their solidarity with front-line allies, hold dictators accountable for rights abuses and corruption, and invest in democratic institutions at home and abroad,” democracy will continue its downward trajectory, the report said. If the United States sacrifices “core principles for the sake of illusory short-term interests,” then we will lose a “global order in which democratic norms prevail” and that “deliver liberty, prosperity, and security — for those living now and for future generations.”

Military defense of democracies continues to be an essential part of protecting our alliances facing aggression from authoritarian regimes such as “the Kremlin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine [that] continued for a second year, further degrading basic rights in occupied areas and prompting more intense repression in Russia itself.” But the question remains if the United States has the will to do so.

We recently witnessed how perilously close the United States is to frittering away our democratic leadership in the world. When the Republican presidential front-runner espouses fondness for fascist ideas and displays a determination to destroy NATO, and his minions rely on Russian-hatched conspiracies to impeach a president and seem willing to let Ukraine go under, we can imagine the threats to democracy here and abroad reaching the point of no return.

Rep. Mikie Sherrill (D-N.J.), a nine-year veteran of the Navy and three-term congresswoman who recently returned from the Munich Conference, expressed to me her dismay at Republicans’ irresponsibility in defending democracy at a critical moment. She pointed at four-times-indicted former president Donald Trump and his party for “undermining and walking away from our alliances.”

She explained, “The rules-based order benefits not just the U.S. but other countries,” yet Republicans “want to blow up the system.” Republicans seem not to care that we depend on an alliance of democratic allies to do everything from protecting the seaways to confronting China’s aggression, she noted. She said there is a military phrase: “We never fight alone.” And yet we will find ourselves isolated, vulnerable and saddled with higher defense costs if Republicans persist in enabling Putin and destroying our democratic alliances.

“We are at an inflection point,” Sherrill said, echoing the Freedom House report and speaking with obvious emotion. “I cannot accept that the country I have given my life to, the country [for which] I cannot count the number of oaths I have taken, the country I have fought for, I cannot accept that we cannot stand with Ukraine.”

And yet if Republicans have their way — denying Ukraine a lifeline, doing the bidding of Putin internationally and lifting a Putin pawn to the U.S. presidency — democracy’s backsliding will become an avalanche. Imagine if the only country capable of reinforcing the rules-based order and preventing tyrannical regimes from overwhelming vulnerable countries stood with the authoritarians. Under such circumstances, democracy in the United States and around the world would be unlikely to survive.

It’s hard to quibble with the argument that the upcoming election is the most important in our history and in the history of Western democracies. The world will be watching.

Wall Street Journal

The Dire Cost of Dithering on Ukraine

Unless the West comes through with military aid, leaders will face a choice between protecting soldiers and cities.

by Jillian Kay Melchior

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Three factors will determine the outcome of the war in Ukraine: manpower, money and materiel. Ukraine is providing the first, but the second and third are in short supply.

Last weekend, as Congress dithered over whether to provide aid, Russia captured Avdiivka, a city in Donetsk. In an interview four days before the city fell, Maj. Gen. Vadym Skibitsky, spokesman for the head of Ukraine's military intelligence, said: "Just in the last 24 hours, 54 bombs, 500 kilograms each, have been thrown on Avdiivka."

"Artillery is still the god of war," says Oleksii Bezhevets, a Defense Ministry adviser. Gen. Skibitsky says that Russia's "advantage in ammo is very significant at the moment," with a ratio as high as 15 to 1 at some parts of the front. He estimates that Russia manufactured some two million rounds of ammunition last year, will increase its output this year, and has received 1.5 million rounds from North Korea since September.

The European Union promised to provide Ukraine one million rounds by March, but said in January that it would deliver only about half of them on time. "Already in the spring or early summer we will be very much at a disadvantage in this artillery-rounds situation," Gen. Skibitsky says. Ukraine has made brilliant use of drones to offset its ammunition shortfall, but limitations on their range and payload make them an imperfect substitute for artillery.

The country's air defense is also dwindling. Ukrainians have sometimes used machine guns to shoot down Iranian-made Shahed drones, and with U.S. help they have employed "Frankenstein" air defenses—old Soviet air-to-air missiles launched from the ground. But it would take five to 10 years for Ukraine to build its own air-defense systems.

The U.S. has provided Ukraine with \$47.4 billion in military aid, compared with a collective \$35.2 billion from the European Union, according to the Kiel Institute, a German think tank. But Republican complaints that Europe isn't pulling its weight miss the mark. Add in nonmilitary aid, and the EU's commitment is \$158 billion, against only \$113.1 billion from the U.S.

Almost all military aid is in kind—weapons, other equipment and training—and most cash grants and loans are restricted to civilian use. Thus all revenue the Ukrainian government brings in—from taxes, borrowing and sales of state-owned assets—goes to the military. In 2023 Ukraine spent more than \$48 billion on defense and security, nearly as much as France’s 2021 military budget.

Ukraine’s needs this year will continue to grow. In December commanders suggested mobilizing as many as 500,000 more soldiers, which would cost more than \$8.4 billion, says Roksolana Pidlasa, chairman of the parliamentary Budget Committee. The Defense Ministry also wants to increase spending on military hardware by nearly \$12.5 billion, she says. Ukraine is trying to increase its capacity to manufacture weapons, especially those with the lowest “cost to kill,” says Strategic Industries Minister Alexandr Kamyshin.

The economy hasn’t recovered from the hit the invasion delivered: Gross domestic product in 2023 was nearly 20% smaller than in 2021. Exports declined after Russia gained control of some key ports and blockaded the Black Sea, although they’ve bounced back some since Ukraine drove Russia’s navy back.

Yaroslav Vinokurov, a reporter for Kyiv-based Economic Pravda, notes that mobilizing more working-age men will carry an opportunity cost: “If you take more people from the labor market, there’s less ability for businesses to work and grow and pay taxes.”

If Congress shrugs, the consequences could be dire. As Ukraine depletes its air defenses, it will increasingly be forced to choose between protecting troops at the front and shielding cities from Russian missile and drone attacks. Ukrainian determination to resist Russian subjugation is the only resource that remains in plentiful supply. That won’t be enough for victory.

Ms. Melchior is a member of the Journal’s editorial board.