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President Poroshenko's Visit Is an Opportunity to Reaffirm U.S. Commitment to Ukraine

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Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko will reportedly visit Washington, DC, next week, and President Donald Trump should take the opportunity to meet with him. It would be the leaders' first meeting since President Trump's inauguration and would enable the U.S. President to express support for Ukraine.

Ukraine's Crimean peninsula was invaded by Russia in 2014 and has been occupied since. Russia has also provoked and now supports a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine that did not exist prior to 2014. In this situation, Russia is the aggressor, and Ukraine is the victim. The Ukrainian soldiers fighting against Russia in eastern Ukraine serve on the frontline of freedom in Europe. If Russia is allowed to prevail in Ukraine, the notion of national sovereignty and the future security of the transatlantic community will be placed into doubt.

The U.S. should maintain the economic sanctions against Russia that were put in place in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, and it should expand them if necessary. In addition, the U.S. should continue providing military training programs and advanced weaponry to the Ukrainians, as well as helping Ukraine to uproot entrenched corruption and cronyism within its economy and government.

Russian Aggression

When Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych failed to sign an association agreement with the European Union in 2013, months of street demonstrations led to his ouster in early 2014. Russia responded by violating Ukraine's territorial integrity, sending troops that, aided by pro-Russian local militia, have occupied the Crimean peninsula under the pretext of "protecting Russian people." This led to Russia's eventual annexation of Crimea.

In eastern Ukraine, Russia and Russian-backed separatists continue to propagate a war that has resulted in more than 10,000 lives lost, 23,000 wounded, and an internally displaced population of almost 1.8 million people. This conflict has inflicted heavy damage on the Ukrainian economy and has slowed Ukraine's progress toward deepening ties in the transatlantic community.

Ukraine is in the midst of a national struggle that will determine its future geopolitical orientation: the West or Moscow. Modern Ukraine represents the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path and to decide with whom it has relations and how and by whom it is governed. No outside actor, such as Russia, should have a veto on membership or block closer relations with organizations like the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The outcome of this struggle will have long-term implications for the transatlantic community and the notion of national sovereignty. In many ways, the future viability of the transatlantic community will be decided in the Donbas, the region in eastern Ukraine where the fighting has been taking place.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4720>

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America's Interests

It is in America's interest that Ukraine remains independent and sovereign and maintains the ability to choose its own destiny without outside interference. President Trump should meet with President Poroshenko next week in Washington, and in that meeting, he should:

1. Show solidarity with the Ukrainian people and take a realistic approach toward Russia. Many of America's European allies are wondering what the new Administration's policies will be regarding Ukraine. President Trump should offer America's public support to the people of Ukraine during this difficult period and state clearly that Ukraine's territorial integrity includes Crimea and the separatists-controlled region in the Donbas. He should make clear that Russia's irredentist behavior cannot go unchecked.

As President Trump learned recently in Syria, as long as Vladimir Putin remains in power, Russia will not be a credible partner for the U.S. The Trump Administration should learn from the mistakes of the Obama Administration and deal with Russia from a position of strength and realism.

2. Make a clear commitment to continue Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia. Russia continues to occupy Crimea and to violate the terms of the Minsk II agreement. As long as Russia violates Ukrainian sovereignty, the U.S. should continue economic sanctions against those who are responsible. The current sanctions on Russia are linked only to Ukraine and the progress, or lack thereof, taking place there. Russian policymakers likely will try to parlay Russia's increasingly important role in Syria into a reduction in sanctions and legitimization of Russia's control of Crimea. The U.S. should resist these efforts, making clear to Russia that U.S. policy toward Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine will be based on Russia's actions there, not held hostage to promises of helpful behavior elsewhere.

3. Continue and improve U.S. military support to Ukraine and provide lethal weapons. Every country has the right to self-defense. Weapons can be an effective part of a larger strategy for assisting Ukraine. As authorized by the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act, the U.S. should appropriate funds to increase its assistance to the Ukrainian military to include anti-armor weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, and small arms.

The U.S. has provided nonlethal support to Ukraine since 2014 in the form of cold-weather gear, military rations, radios, counter-battery radars, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). While such support is welcome, the U.S. needs to improve the quality of equipment provided, especially in terms of secure communications and more capable UAVs.

Finally, the U.S. should continue joint exercises with Ukrainian forces. U.S.-led and NATO-led training exercises in western Ukraine have helped create a professional and capable Ukrainian military. This is in America's long-term interest. Any planned joint training exercises between the U.S., NATO, and Ukraine should continue, and more training opportunities should be considered.

4. Provide public support for Ukraine's political, social, and economic reforms. In many ways, the problems of political and economic corruption pose a longer term threat to Ukraine than Russian soldiers. While the U.S. is limited in what it can directly do to help Ukraine fight corruption, it is important that the U.S. supports Kyiv on the path to reform. Tackling corruption and building a vibrant, free economy to attract foreign direct investment will go a long way toward securing Ukraine's future.

The U.S. should also work to assist Ukraine in successful implementation of judicial reform. An honest, nonpolitical judiciary that carries out the law impartially will greatly assist in stabilizing Ukraine's economy, attracting investment, and rooting out corruption. The U.S. must be honest about Ukraine's progress and its setbacks and focus on Kyiv's achievements in fighting corruption, not on unrealistic expectations.

These reforms will take time—especially considering they are being carried out while a war is being fought for national survival. While the work of reform is far from over in Ukraine and in many cases has just begun, U.S. policymakers should not play into Russian propaganda about Ukraine being a failed state by focusing only on the negative. The U.S. should hold Ukraine to account where it is failing and praise Ukraine for the strides it has made in tackling entrenched economic and political challenges.

An Opportunity for President Trump

Russia and many of America's European allies will be watching President Poroshenko's visit very closely. A meeting between President Trump and President

Poroshenko would send a clear message of strength and U.S. commitment to Ukraine. While Ukraine's future rests primarily on the shoulders of the Ukrainians themselves, U.S. leadership is vital to counteracting Russian aggression and supporting reform in the country.

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