

President Biden Must Reaffirm U.S. Support for Ukraine in Meeting with President Zelenskyy

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

President Biden will meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on August 31 at the White House. This will be the first meeting between the two leaders.

It is in America's interest that Ukraine remains independent and sovereign, and that it maintains the ability to choose its own destiny without outside interference.

Biden should reaffirm U.S. advocacy for Ukraine's NATO membership, supply more weapons to Ukraine, and maintain sanctions pressure on the Nord Stream 2 project.

On September 1, President Joe Biden will meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House. This will be the first meeting between the two leaders. Ukraine has experienced Russian aggression over the past seven years and needs continued U.S. support.

To demonstrate to President Zelenskyy that the U.S. stands with Ukraine, President Biden should reaffirm the United States' advocacy for Ukraine's future membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), supply more weapons to Ukraine with fewer restrictions, maintain sanctions pressure on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, and buttress Ukraine during this especially risky time. The U.S. must also make its Nord Stream 2 position clear to the new German government that will be forming after the September 26 elections in Germany.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5210>

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Seven Years of Russian Aggression

Ukraine has suffered from Russian aggression for the past seven years and counting. Since 2014, almost 5 percent of Ukraine's landmass, and more than half of its coastline, have been under illegal Russian occupation in Crimea.

In eastern Ukraine today, Russia and Russian-backed separatists continue to propagate a war that has resulted in more than 14,000 lives lost¹ and 30,000 wounded.² The war has also inflicted heavy damage on the Ukrainian economy and has slowed down Ukraine's progress toward deepening ties with the transatlantic community. Within the past year, fighting has increased in the Donbas region. Between July 2020 and July 2021, 45 Ukrainian soldiers were killed and 163 were injured.³

Because the U.S. is only seven months into the Biden Administration, it remains to be seen how President Biden's policies toward Ukraine will materialize. When President Donald Trump was in office, his Administration oversaw sizeable weapons sales and aid-package grants to Ukraine. Between December 2017 and June 2020, the U.S. granted Ukraine more than \$687 million in aid and weaponry, including at least 360 Javelin anti-tank missiles, 47 Javelin launchers, and more than a dozen Mark VI patrol boats, plus snipers, ammunition, radar systems, and other gear.⁴

In March and April this year, Russia amassed military vehicles and tens of thousands of troops along Ukraine's border and in Crimea, allegedly to prepare for strategic exercises.⁵ Russia's troop numbers were estimated to be at more than 100,000.⁶ In late April, Russia announced it would be reducing its troop numbers around Ukraine,⁷ but, as of late June, Russia allegedly had only withdrawn "a few thousand troops" from its shared border with Ukraine.⁸

In the midst of Russia's aggressive actions in and surrounding Ukraine, it is important to remember the facts: Russia invaded Ukraine; Russia illegally occupies Crimea; Russia provoked and continues to support a separatist movement in eastern Ukraine that did not exist before 2014; and Russia is the aggressor, while Ukraine is the victim.

The Problems with Nord Stream 2

In President Biden and Zelenskyy's meeting, the topic of Nord Stream 2 is sure to arise.

With only 9 miles left to be laid, the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which runs from Russia to Germany, is expected to be completed within the next

month.⁹ It is a costly folly that is neither economically necessary nor geopolitically prudent. The efforts of the Trump Administration and Congress were remarkably successful in halting construction of the pipeline.

However, this past February, with President Biden newly in office and winter soon to recede, construction restarted on the pipeline, at the time with 46 miles remaining.¹⁰ In May, President Biden signaled acquiescence to the pipeline's competition by withdrawing sanctions against the operator Nord Stream 2 AG and its CEO, in a misguided effort to reset relations with Germany. Desperately searching for an off-ramp, the Biden Administration found one in July in the form of a U.S.–German agreement on measures, which purports to mitigate the negative impacts of the pipeline. The agreement, however, is merely a hollow diplomatic gesture that fails to provide the necessary tools to punish impending Russian aggression and energy coercion.

The agreement falls short, for instance, on assistance to those Eastern European countries that would be most affected by the pipeline's completion, especially Ukraine. Germany's promise to help to extend Russia's gas transit agreement with Ukraine is merely a promise to try. History has shown that no Russian assurances granted in negotiations can be trusted. Moscow will have little incentive to negotiate an extension, especially once Nord Stream 2 is up and running. The first half of 2021 already has seen a 12.7 percent year-over-year decline in gas transit via Ukraine.¹¹ This is just a taste of what is to come; in June, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that Ukraine will need to show "good will" to ensure the continuance of overland Russian gas transit.¹²

In addition, a planned German "green fund" for Ukraine (with "the stated aim of supporting Ukraine's energy transition, energy efficiency and energy security"¹³) even if fully funded, has no guarantee of success, nor is it clear that a Ukrainian energy transition is supported by Ukrainians themselves. Finally, the paltry sums promised by Germany to assist Ukraine's energy transition (\$175 million for the green fund, plus "the nomination of a special envoy to help Ukraine phase out coal with \$70 million of funding"¹⁴) pales in comparison to annual revenues of over \$2 billion in 2020 that Ukraine currently collects from transit fees, which will be placed in obvious jeopardy.¹⁵

Nevertheless, just because the physical pipeline is soon to be completed does not necessarily mean that it will ever become fully operational. The pipeline must still pass technical and regulatory certification,¹⁶ obtain insurance,¹⁷ and traverse a slew of impending legal challenges.¹⁸ The U.S. should continue to pursue policies relating to Nord Stream 2 that advance the U.S. national interest of ensuring that the pipeline never becomes fully operational, while supporting allies who would face the brunt of its impact.

Recommendations for the Biden Administration

In his meeting with President Zelenskyy, President Biden must reaffirm U.S. support for Ukraine. This support can be manifested in several ways. Specifically, President Biden should:

- **Reaffirm U.S. advocacy for Ukraine's future NATO membership.** President Biden should reassure President Zelenskyy that the United States will continue to advocate for an open-door policy for Ukraine, and that Russia does not have a veto right, including over any future Ukrainian membership.
- **Supply more weapons to Ukraine with fewer restrictions.** When Ukraine received its first Javelin anti-tank missiles in 2018, part of the agreement with the Trump Administration was that the missiles would remain in storage far away from the front lines until they become necessary.¹⁹ Every country has the right to self-defense. Weapons can be an effective part of a larger strategy for assisting Ukraine. As authorized by successive National Defense Authorization Acts, the U.S. should appropriate funds to increase its assistance to the Ukrainian military, including more anti-armor weapons, anti-aircraft weapons, and small arms with fewer, or more flexible, restrictions.
- **Maintain sanctions pressure on Nord Stream 2.** In August, the Biden Administration sanctioned a Russian insurer²⁰ working with Nord Stream 2 but kept in place waivers for Nord Stream 2 AG and its CEO. This new sanction against an insurer is a positive step, the continued waivers are not. It is imperative that the Administration keep sanctions pressure on entities taking part in any aspects of getting the pipeline ready for operations. The U.S. cannot stop the pipeline with one hand tied behind its back. Congress, for its part, should consider withdrawing the President's ability to issue national interest waivers for congressionally mandated Nord Stream 2 sanctions.
- **Make the U.S. position on Nord Stream 2 clear to the new German government.** The pipeline will not be fully operational before German federal elections are held on September 26. It remains unclear who will become the next chancellor and how long it will take for a new government to form. Regardless, the U.S. should make clear to the new chancellery that it views the pipeline as an unacceptable

geopolitical danger, and work with the new government to ensure that Nord Stream 2 never becomes operational. At a minimum, the U.S. must add some enforceable actions to a laughably weak Biden–Merkel agreement.²¹

- **Buttress Ukraine during an especially risky time.** The imminent completion of Nord Stream 2, coupled with a loss of global confidence in the U.S. following a disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, has left Ukraine in an especially imperiled position. The U.S. should encourage Germany to bolster its paltry pledges of support to Ukraine in the agreement, and work toward an agreed commitment of robust responses to the energy pressure on Ukraine, which is sure to come once Nord Stream 2 is up and running.

Conclusion

Modern Ukraine represents the idea in Europe that each country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path, decide with whom it has relations, and how and by whom it is governed. No outside actor (in this case Russia) should have a veto on membership or close relations with organizations like NATO. It is in America’s interest that Ukraine remains independent and sovereign, and that it maintains the ability to choose its own destiny without outside interference.

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