

Opinion: The U.S. and Ukraine need to reboot their relationship. Here's how they can do it.

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In the global struggle between democracy and dictatorship, and the fight for a peaceful Europe, Ukraine is on the front lines — not unlike West Germany during the Cold War. During the 20th century, the United States had to demonstrate extraordinary resolve in defending the democracy and security of our friends in West Berlin and West Germany from Soviet aggression. The same is now required in a divided Ukraine.

As President Biden prepares for his meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky, on Aug. 30, he would do well to keep this in mind. Especially after the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan, there will be little hope for Biden's proclaimed democracy agenda and his democracy summits planned for this year and next if Ukraine's democratic experiment falters. Its success will empower small-D democrats across the region and the world. Its failure will be a boon to Russian President Vladimir Putin and his autocratic allies from Minsk to Beijing.

After the tumultuous years of the Trump era, when the U.S. president was impeached for trying to leverage aid for Ukraine in return for help in his reelection campaign, some policymakers aspire merely for a return to normal for U.S.-Ukraine relations. But normal is not enough. Still at war with Russia, which has occupied large parts of its territory, Ukraine faces abnormal threats to its sovereignty and democracy. Biden and Zelensky should acknowledge these extraordinary circumstances and then build a special and joint commitment to tackling them.

On defense, the leaders need to recast their security relations as mutually beneficial. Ukraine's 200,000-strong active soldiers, several hundreds of tanks and armed vehicles, and robust intelligence presence help to deter Putin's belligerent actions against Europe more effectively than most NATO allies. Since 2014, Ukrainians have been fighting directly against Putin and his proxies. Biden should celebrate Ukraine as a critical security partner in Europe and announce major new military assistance, enhancing what U.S. officials quietly maintained during the Trump years. This package should focus on defensive weapons, including more antitank Javelins as well as upgraded radars to increase their effectiveness.

Biden and Zelensky should also discuss the peace process for eastern Ukraine, including perhaps formal U.S. involvement in the moribund Normandy process between Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine. But self-defense for Ukraine must be the focus right now.

In return, Zelensky should stop asking — for now — to sign a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP). MAPs do not

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MAR-LIKE PLAN. Perhaps with other NATO leaders on the team, this nongovernmental group could monitor Ukraine's progress toward meeting NATO's requirements.

On democracy, Zelensky and Biden also need a fresh approach. U.S. officials must stop lecturing the Ukrainians so publicly on corruption. Of course, fighting corruption must remain central; aid conditionality should be strengthened. But talking more broadly about our shared commitment to deepening Ukrainian *democracy* makes for a better public message — especially because anytime Biden mentions “corruption” and “Ukraine” in the same sentence, his opponents will add “Hunter Biden.” Given U.S. struggles with preserving democracy at home, a humbler tone also is appropriate.

When the aperture of this discussion is widened from anti-corruption to democracy more broadly, there is some good news from Ukraine. The government has passed a historic law on land reform. It has put in place sweeping e-governance reforms. Parliament has implemented new gambling regulations, passed a new bill recognizing ethnic minority groups as “indigenous peoples of Ukraine,” and is moving ahead with a major judicial reform package that has won endorsement from the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe. The authorities have carried out positive personnel changes in the prosecutor general’s office and made considerable progress on the National Agency of Corruption Prevention.

Ukraine continues to hold free, fair and competitive elections. It maintains a vibrant civil society, and enjoys more competition among private media companies (even if the oligarchs own too many of them) than any other post-Soviet country other than the Baltics.

After initial hesitation, Zelensky himself is acting more forcefully. His decision to ban pro-Russia television networks, and to charge their owner and Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk with treason, was a daring act that needs U.S. support. The same is true with his moves against oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, who was the main financial backer of his presidential campaign. These imperfect yet visible efforts to roll back oligarchic power need encouragement.

Biden and Zelensky could build on this progress by announcing a new bilateral commission to deepen democratic and market reforms that could draw on civil society and the private sector in both countries. This initiative would expand U.S. involvement in the democratic and market reform agenda.

The two presidents could also create a high-level panel of nongovernmental leaders — such as former International Monetary Fund official David Lipton, former Ukrainian finance minister Natalie Jeresko, political scientist Francis Fukuyama, and former Estonian president Toomas Ilves — to press the case for reforms through a combination of ideas generation, cheerleading and tough love.

Ukraine is not a normal country today. The Russian threat to European security and democracy is not normal. Especially given his deep commitment to Ukraine in the past, Biden should use his meeting with Zelensky next week to begin to create an extraordinary relationship with Ukraine.

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