

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: We're officially into the Trump presidency, and US and Allied support for Ukraine is in jeopardy. The war in Gaza, and the US elections, have dominated the news cycles. To provide an update, Professor Alexander Motyl, Ukraine and Russia expert at Rutgers University, joins us today. Welcome Alex, thank you for being with us.

AM: Thank you for having me. It's always a pleasure.

VC: So, on January 9, the Biden administration announced its last military aid package for Ukraine which includes a presidential drawdown authority package estimated at 500 million dollars. And this will provide Ukraine with capabilities such as missiles for air defense, air to ground munitions, equipment to support Ukraine's use of the F-16s. So, what does this mean for Ukraine and can the Trump administration kill this package?

AM: Well, it's welcome. Any assistance is always welcome but it's unfortunately somewhat typical of the Biden administration, too little too late. Biden waits until the waning moments of his presidency to up the ante and provide a little more assistance that should have been done months if not years ago. That said, better late than never. As to President Trump, the fear was that he was going to cut off aid based on his rhetoric during the campaign, it looked like he had no sympathy for Ukraine whatsoever. And he held a very derogatory attitude towards President Zelensky. But since the election, remarkably enough, he, as well as a number of his advisors have made a number of comments that suggest that they've gotten religion. So, Trump recently criticized Putin. He accused him of destroying Russia and he said explicitly that Zelensky wants a peace deal, Putin doesn't, and unless Putin changes his mind, he's going to be imposing significant sanctions as well as tariffs on all possible Russian products. That suggests, for what it's worth, that Trump's attitude toward Ukraine and Russia, and to the potential for peace negotiations may have changed. The question is, will this stay as is or will he change his mind once again? As you know he's mercurial and he's unpredictable. And it's conceivable that he might. That said, there is ground for optimism at least for the Ukrainian point of view. This is the first time that Trump and his colleagues have openly, expressly said that they effectively think Russia should be defeated and Ukraine should gain some kind of victory in order for peace negotiations to take place. That's a big step forward. And it will commit Trump to some degree. He can always change his mind in three days, he begins to look like a flake. That doesn't help his image. So at least for the foreseeable future this is likely to be something resembling a policy attitude if not indeed a concrete policy.

VC: Again, but let's say, as you say, Trump is very mercurial. So, could he kill this package if he so decided?

AM: Oh, of course. He could easily kill it but at this point it looks unlikely that that would be the case. But as I said, we don't know because it's Trump. But it does look unlikely. A few weeks ago, or a few days ago, I might have been more pessimistic but given what he said things look semi-good.

KK: Now tell me, Alex, what is the Ukraine Defense Contact Group? Who are the members and what is their function? And will they continue to get together with this administration?

AM: Ah, well, the last question is the big one. This is a group that was established a few years ago in Ramstein, Germany and it incorporates something like 50 to 60 countries that have committed to supplying Ukraine with financial and weapons assistance and the point of the group is to determine what Ukraine needs, who supplies it, to coordinate in other words. And it's been useful. It's not exactly a game changer but it's been useful. Any kind of outside assistance is useful for Ukraine. As to whether Trump will continue acting within that, possibly yes in the sense that it's an opportunity for him to grandstand and insist that Europeans carry a bigger burden, possibly no, inasmuch as he has his own plans as to how to end the war and that particular group doesn't seem to play any role in those plans but since we don't know exactly what those plans are, who knows? So, the answer is sort of yes and sort of no.

KK: Biden was supposed to attend a meeting of this group but had to cancel because of the California fires. Do you think that impacts the situation at all?

AM: On the group?

KK: Yeah.

AM: Well, it's always good to have a president because it gives more oomph to his appearance or her appearance but I don't think it made much of a difference in terms of the deliberations or the *raison d'être* of the group.

VC: Speaking of solutions, Trump's incoming envoy for Ukraine and Russia, Keith Kellogg, told Fox News that he hopes to have, and I quote, a solvable solution between the two sides within Trump's first hundred days. Do you see this happening, and if so, what would that solution look like?

AM: Well, it's better than Trump's original claim that he would solve the problem in 24 hours. (KK: I forgot about that). A hundred days is three months. That's at least much more realistic. It's conceivable. It all depends on what Trump decides. This has always been the case. The war could have easily been ended any time during the last three years if the west in general and the United States in particular had really provided Ukraine with the military hardware needed to prevail. And Biden was always a little wishy washy. He wanted Ukraine to win but he didn't want Russia to lose. If Trump decided that he's willing to let Russia lose and ramps up the assistance to Ukraine while at the same time imposing tariffs and sanctions, more tariffs and more sanctions on Russia, then it's conceivable that Russia will be pressed against the wall and might cry uncle. One of the reasons why it's possible is, well, two reasons. One is that the situation on the front is actually going very badly for the Russians. They're losing 1500 soldiers a day. They've already lost over 800,000 and there's just no way that you can interpret that as being a victorious war. At the same time, in terms of the territories that the Russians have grabbed over the last half year, it's roughly equivalent to Long Island. Which on the one hand is a lot, I guess, but compared to the size of Ukraine it's about half a percentage point. Which is not a lot. And when you consider the cost, the Russians are bearing, 800,000 dead and wounded (VC: Yes) then you begin to wonder.

And another point that makes Russia very vulnerable to the potential of sanctions and tariffs is that the Russian economy is very, very weak, headed for catastrophe. It's only recently that Western analysts have discovered that – I've known that for at least half a year, not because I'm so smart but because I've been listening to Russian economists who have been pointing to the statistics, showing television clips of Russian official economists complaining about the condition of the economy. So, this has been a known secret for at least six months. It's only now that it's seeping into the discourse in the West. But when you add all that up you've got Russia which is actually far weaker than Putin claims it is and Trump seems to recognize that Putin is destroying Russia. If Trump were to decide to really put the pressure on Putin that could make a big difference.

VC: So, what about these North Korean troops that are bolstering the Russian army? They have such a population advantage over Ukraine. Are they having trouble recruiting troops for the front? Is that why they had to bring in these North Korean troops?

AM: Well, that's the answer to your question. Two years ago, they started emptying prisons and offering criminals, really high-level criminals, the opportunity to be pardoned if they went to the front. Most of them, I believe the percentage of them were killed or seriously wounded is something like 90%. So, the Russians have been scraping the bottom of the barrel for a while and the fact that the North Koreans are now helping out is obviously indicative of Russian weakness. It's clearly not indicative of Russian strength. It would be the equivalent of the United States calling on Canada for assistance in fighting some war. The troops themselves, the numbers vary somewhere between 10 and 12,000. They appear to have lost 3 to 4,000 within a month and a half which is a very high attrition rate, but that's because they are being used as front-line advances so the Russians are cleverly exploiting them as cannon fodder. But according to some of the reports I read, they are apparently well-trained and fanatically committed to Kim Jung Un. So, they have a high level of I guess morale or ideological persuasion.

VC: I understand also that Ukraine is having manpower issues as well. Is that right?

AM: That's true too. The average age of Ukrainian soldiers is somewhere in the mid to low 40s and they appear to have lost... We don't know for sure, but Zelensky I believe claims that the number of Ukrainians who died is about 35,000. That seems very low but it's conceivable that it's correct. But they are at the point where they need additional soldiers. There's also a problem with desertion. It appears to be centered on the number of, only on a number of areas on the front line where the Russians are pressing the hardest. But there are reliable reports that soldiers have deserted, so there's talk of extending the draft age down to 18. I believe it's 25 and above. And there is resistance partly because these are the boys who are the future of the country. Many of them occupy positions of some importance within the economy. They are the ones who are IT experts. At this point the Ukrainians are resisting. As the war drags on for more than half a year, or a year, they may need to lower the draft age.

KK: With that said, how is the morale among the Ukrainian troops and the people of Ukraine?

AM: Well, clearly those soldiers who deserted or refused to sign up after being drafted, and there seem to be a fair number of those, are clearly suffering from morale, but based on reports provided by journalists who have been to the front lines, it seems that soldiers on the front lines still have a high level of morale. So, it's a little bit

of both. But in general, they're still committed. The same is true for the population. The number of people who believe that Ukraine should continue the war until it regains all its territory remains very high. They're determined to pursue the war. They are unwilling to accept the halfhearted peace. So that's still high. It's obviously lower than it was three years ago, or two years ago because the wear and tear of the occupation, impact on infrastructure, the lack of heat and electricity, gets people down, of course.

KK: You had mentioned when we spoke to you a while ago about the winters in Ukraine to be prepared for that, how difficult it is for the people and the soldiers.

AM: And the soldiers, exactly. I did read a report recently that apparently much of the energy infrastructure, the plants that provide electricity, the Ukrainians have been very adept at quickly repairing them. So, the Russians knock it out, within a few days or weeks, most of it seems to be back on line. Again, the person who wrote this is someone I trust, he's a journalist. So that seems to suggest that things aren't quite as bad as they were envisioned a year ago. But one would need to know more about this to say it with complete certainty.

KK: What about the European allies? Are they still strongly supporting Ukraine?

AM: In general, yes. The countries that are weakest on that score are Hungary and Slovakia. Their prime ministers, Mr. Orban and Mr. Fico are both supporters of Putin. But the Baltic states, Poland, are very enthusiastic, very supportive. The Finns, the Scandinavians, more generally are supportive. The French and the British are supportive. Just recently Zelensky signed a 100-year pact with Great Britain, a mutual cooperation pact in which the Brits said they would help, they would provide Ukraine with a minimum of 3.5 million—I forget whether it's dollars or pounds—a year, but a lot of money plus training, ammunition and so on. Things are okay on that front. Likewise in Germany where, Germany has been very supportive. It's kind of backtracked a bit in recent months, but the person who is likely to win the election slated a few weeks from today is very much a strong Ukraine supporter so it looks like Germany will get back on track as well.

KK: Glad to hear that about the Allies, especially the UK for funding because, we talked about this earlier, Trump was asked by a reporter, will you cut the funding for Ukraine. He just babbled; he didn't answer. (AM: Yeah.). That's what scares me. What Biden has done, he might just say, I'm done, I'm cutting it.

AM: That's conceivable. Again, with him you just don't know. And until the statements he made after being elected, I would have said unfortunately, you're absolutely right. But now he, Rubio, and the general who's been appointed the intermediary for the war, they've all been making positive noises. They all sound like genuine statesmen as opposed to just fly-by-night policy makers. So, at this point I'm a little hopeful.

VC: Well, this is encouraging (AM: Yeah), a small bright spot there. So, what about China, how do they fit into this picture?

AM: Well, the Chinese, apparently, they do provide some military assistance in the form of technical parts and they're clearly on Russia's side. In effect, they want Russia to win. They certainly don't want Russia to lose because that would destabilize the entire Asian/Eurasian land mass. But they've been very standoffish, when you consider what the North Koreans have done, provided hundreds of thousands of shells, tens of thousands of

soldiers, they are potentially promising more soldiers sometime in the summer. When you consider the size of North Korea and compare it to the size and resources of China... China's basically been involved in getting a free ride. They've been paying far less than market rates for Russian oil and gas. Again, they're driving a hard bargain. They know that the Russians need to sell. They refuse to deal in Rubles, they insist on hard currency and most recently after Biden imposed sanctions on Russia's ghost fleet-this is a series of about 200 tankers, they're kind of semi-registered, semi-unregistered. They're usually old tankers that shouldn't normally be used any more. The Russians are using them to bypass the sanctions on oil. Biden imposed sanctions on those tankers which made them extremely expensive to utilize because insurance companies are now unwilling to provide insurance. And lo and behold, tens of scores of tankers, are anchored off the coast of China. The Chinese aren't taking them. They're abiding by the sanctions because they know that if they violate them that would have negative consequences for their relations with the United States. So, at the end of the day, they're kind of fair-weather friends. A genuine ally would be doing what North Korea is doing. Instead, the Chinese seem to be enriching themselves at Russia's cost.

VC: Do you think that Trump will ask Zelensky to agree to a cease fire and how do you think Zelensky might respond to that?

KK: And what would that be? What could he possibly bring forth to Zelensky that he would agree to it?

AM: Everybody kind of agrees, in the Biden camp as well as people in the Trump camp, as well as independent analysts that if Ukraine were to agree to a cease fire... well first of all, simply agreeing to a cease fire is kind of interesting but not really very interesting because the really interesting part comes afterwards. Just freezing the contact line, the line of division, doesn't mean that the war is over. Quite the opposite, it could actually enable Russia to lick its wounds and increase its armaments. But whatever the solution is, whether it's a cease fire or whether Ukraine gets to keep most of the occupied territories, some of the occupied territories, there are any number of variants that are possible here. What Ukraine insists on is being secure. In other words, yeah, peace, sure, Zelensky has hinted a making territorial concessions. Not formally giving away, but just kind of temporarily agreeing that we're not going to try to reconquer these territories militarily. So, the key issue is what security guarantees does Ukraine have? And there are basically three answers to that. One is it becomes a member of NATO. Two is, it gets security guarantees along the lines of Israel. So basically, that means that the United States, it could be the French and the Brits, I guess, and possibly the Germans, conceivably, but it would have to be a serious commitment. You wouldn't just say sure, we'll support you, you really need to be able to put some boots on the ground. And finally, building up Ukraine's own capacity to deter a potential second Russian invasion. And of course, those three are complimentary. There's no reason why Ukraine couldn't be in NATO, have security guarantees and of course ultimately the most important one would of course be its own capacity to defend itself. Because in the final analysis, as nice as NATO is, as nice as it is to have security guarantees, when push comes to shove, can you really trust your own friend, ah, maybe yes, maybe no, but you can certainly trust your own armed forces.

KK: I was going to ask you about NATO because the last turnaround with Trump he wanted to get us out of NATO. God knows if he wants to do it again. How would that affect Ukraine?

AM: Well, I think it's an unlikely scenario, Trump leaving NATO. But if he did it would obviously weaken NATO and at least for a certain period of time, really terrify the Europeans who would have to start spending a significantly larger amount of money on defense. It would cause confusion; it would lower the capacity to resist Russian aggression. It might actually invite a Russian invasion of the Baltic states and Poland. So overall, the Ukrainians would be able to hold on, hold out for a significant period of time. They've got Europe's strongest army. But that said, it would be a disastrous move. Less so for Ukraine although obviously it would have negative consequences but mostly for Europe and NATO in general. My own sense is that Trump is using NATO in order to pressure the Europeans to spend more money on defense. And he's saying things like if you don't spend 5% of your GDP, we won't defend you in case the Russians invade. Frankly, he's got a point, because the Europeans are richer than America, and they're spending, I mean most of the countries in Europe are spending about 1, 1.5% of their GDP even though they all agreed a few years ago to be spending 2, 2.5%. And Trump has a point when he says they're getting a free ride. But it would make no sense for him to leave NATO. It makes a lot of sense for him to blackmail NATO. But to do that you're got to be in NATO.

KK: Would Putin accept Ukraine as a sovereign state?

AM: Putin, no. He may be forced to live with it so if the US and Ukraine and the West pressure him he may have to accept the inevitable simply because it's the inevitable and we're pressuring him to do so. But he himself, in his heart of hearts, won't ever accept it. He's been so explicit in his rejection of Ukraine and Ukrainians as a separate state and nation. And he's essentially staked his entire career on the war. More than his career, his life, his image, the way he's remembered by history. So, for both his personal ideological reasons as well as for these tactical political reasons he just can't suddenly shift gears and say oh, sure. And besides, if people were to do that, people would start asking, Russians in Russia, so why exactly did we lose a million soldiers? To do what?

VC: Yeah, because they're not getting the real story, right, Russia is controlling very much what the Russian people hear on their media.

AM: Exactly. But at some point, you've got to figure, with 800,000 casualties you've got to figure that even Russians can see the crippled soldiers on the streets. And then there's inflation, which is beginning to approach hyperinflation. There's a shortage of products. All these things are beginning to affect Ivan Q. Public.

KK: And if Trump puts these sanctions on top of that, that's really going to hit home for them.

AM: That could be the turning point. Again, it's hard to say but it certainly could be.

KK: It just interests me that he was so in love with Putin and now all of a sudden there's a turnaround. And maybe it's because he realizes that Russia is not as strong and he only deals with strong people.

AM: That may very well be it. The question is how did he learn that Russia isn't strong because that was evident two or three years ago. I've been told that he doesn't read so if that's true then either he heard it on Fox News which is unlikely because they are kind of pro-Russian, or someone told him. Who that someone could be I have no idea.

VC: Well Alex, this is always a pleasure to get your analysis of this very volatile and changeable situation, try to clarify things for us.

31:35 AM: It's always a pleasure.

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