

Hello: I'm Vanessa Corwin

And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Trump's war with Iran has taken center stage globally in the news cycle, relegating the war between Russia and Ukraine to the background. Yet, these wars are connected. With us today is Professor Alexander Motyl, Ukraine and Russia expert at Rutgers University, to shed some light on this complex situation. Welcome, Alex, thanks so much for being with us today.

AM: Thank you for having me. As always, it's a great pleasure.

VC: So, Alex, let's just dive right in. We have a lot to cover today. To start us off, could you give us a brief overview of how the wars in Ukraine and Iran are connected. I mean, are they separate conflicts or are they part of some bigger worldwide scheme?

AM: It's probably the latter. It's a little too soon to tell with any degree of certainty. We'll let the historians' figure this out. But with the end of the cold war, with Trump's decision to upend the security architecture, his pursuit of a kind of ruthless policy regarding, well, ruthless foreign policy, all that bears Vladimir Putin's approach to foreign policy as well. And in effect, both of them are adopting the approach of might makes right and in that particular sense both of these wars are instances of, let's call them overriding. Imperial powers or pretenders to imperial status trying to impose their will on smaller countries. At this point I'm not suggesting that Ukrainians are like the Iranians other than the fact that they've been attacked by Putin but clearly when it comes to ethical issues, the regime in Iran is detestable, and the regime, the so called regime in Kyiv is actually quite nice, but that having been said, in effect, both Trump and Putin are flexing their muscles and trying to impose their vision of the world on these two countries, rightly or wrongly. Both have also underestimated the degree to which their opponents are actually resilient, powerful and perhaps even legitimate. Clearly Putin thought the war would be over in three days and he'd be welcomed in Kiyv. That turned out to be a crass over expectation. We're in the fifth year of the war and he's no closer to achieving his goals than he was then. And so too, Trump, presumably influenced by the ease with which he was able to kidnap Maduro in Venezuela, figured that, throw a few bombs on the Iranians and that would be that. As it turned out that is not that, it's anything but that and just as now Putin is stuck in a quagmire that's lasted for five years so too it's quite possible that Mr. Trump will be stuck in a quagmire of his own making as well. And of course, who knows what will happen during the presidential elections. But this mess that he created will certainly be part of his administration for the next two and a half years. And in all likelihood will affect whoever happens to succeed him.

VC: So how do you see the Iran war changing the dynamic between Russia and Ukraine?

AM: Well, what it's done, but only up to a certain degree, again one... many of the people who focus on this have said well, the price of oil has gone up from something like \$65 a barrel, I think the latest estimate is as high as \$102, \$110, \$115. And, of course Russia, being an oil exporter, is benefiting greatly from this. So, in that sense the two conflicts are very much intimately related. At the same time, the Ukrainians have been very, very, very effective in destroying the energy infrastructure of Russia. So, Putin's windfall, which was expected to be in the billions of dollars, is roughly half of what he was expecting. But that said, it's not quite as impressive as people thought, again thanks to the Ukrainians' effective use of drones and drone warfare.

KK: How is the Iran war affecting the flow of United States weapons to Ukraine? I thought they stopped.

AM: Well, effectively they stopped if you look at the statistics of the administration, has provided I think 1% of which the Biden administration provided, which is to say zero. That said, there is a program conceived together with the Europeans whereby, the Americans supposedly sell weapons to the Europeans who then give the weapons to the Ukrainians at very reasonable rates or perhaps even for free. The problem with that is that it all depends on US willingness to sell weapons. And in a normal world the United States would have a lot of weapons to sell and could make a nice profit. And do the right thing. Heaven forbid we should speak in those terms when it comes to Trump. The amount of missiles, Tomahawk missiles, Cruise missiles, Patriot missiles expended on the Iran war has by far exceeded the total amount that was given by the United States to Ukraine. And now the United States is supposedly suffering from a potential armament shortage which again, thanks to Mr. Trump, he's not only made Ukraine more vulnerable, he's not only failed to achieve his goals in Iran, he's arguably made the United States more vulnerable. Again, there's no immediate threat, thank God. But the whole point of having weapons in reserve is to have weapons in reserve just in case something happens. So that of course means, it's not as if the United States under Trump is interested in giving weapons to the Ukrainians but it may affect and probably will affect the ability of the Europeans to buy weapons from the Americans.

KK: It's terrible to hear that the United States is running out of critical weapons. This is the United States! But that's basically what you're saying.

AM: Yeah, this is Trump's major achievement in the Iran war. He hasn't defeated the regime. He has in a way defeated the United States. And again, I'm not an expert on armaments. I'm told that it takes a long time to produce the requisite number of Patriot missiles. It's not like building a drone which the Ukrainians can do in their garage. It'll take a while, a number of years. How many, I don't know, for the United State to catch up. Why not learn from the Ukrainians and develop far cheaper ways, far easier ways to develop armaments. And as you know the Ukrainians actually made an offer to the United States a half a year ago. They are willing to share their technical knowledge in the making of drones. And the US said thanks but no thanks, which is totally idiotic.

VC: That's crazy. Now speaking of drones, we know that Russia used Iranian drones earlier in the war. Now has the US war with Iran changed this? Russia, I believe is producing their own drones, is that right?

AM: Yes, the Russians are producing more than enough. They're no longer dependent on the Iranians and at this point my guess is not only are the Russians less interested but the Iranians would also be less interested. They need the weapons for their own needs. But the fact is that we focus on the enormous strides that the Ukrainians have made in developing drones and that's absolutely justified. But we tend often to ignore the fact that Russia is effectively playing catch-up but doing so in a very effective manner. They are catching up so the Ukrainians always have to be one step ahead but it's not as if the Russians are far behind in the dust.

KK: One of my least favorite words is deal. (laughter). It's been reported that Trump is working on a deal in which Ukraine would provide military technology. Is that really off the charts now, it's not going to happen?

AM: Well, it could happen. With Trump anything is possible. So, it's conceivable that something along these lines may now be in the works. I did read a few days ago that apparently the United States has sent some soldiers-how many is not clear-to Ukraine to pick up battle field experience in using drones. They won't be fighting. They'll be observing and learning. That's interesting, and symbolically important even though it hasn't gotten any press. But the fact is that officially there will be American soldiers in Ukraine which is probably going to give Putin sleepless nights, as well it should. But how many... they could be doing this a year and a half ago or two years ago. I suppose better late than never but there's still the question of how many and what their roles will be.

VC: Do you think Ukraine is rethinking its battlefield strategies because of events in Iran?

AM: I think events in Iran, the war in Iran has reinforced the Ukrainian view that what they're doing is the right thing. The United States still has this image of war being fought by big tanks, big ships, big cars, big weapons, big rockets, and obviously it's not as if those things have become irrelevant altogether but that having been said the Ukrainians have demonstrated that cheaply produced drones, and you know, one of their drones costs 3,4, 5 thousand dollars which is nothing compared to what the budget is in the Pentagon. But they've shown that these drones-and of course the Russians have shown this too, by the way-they've shown that the future is drone warfare. A \$4,000 drone can destroy a ten-million-dollar tank. Just do the math. One doesn't have to be an Einstein to recognize the fact that the future is with the drones. Now how will it develop? At this point no one quite knows. But what the Ukrainians have begun doing, apparently it quite effectively, is developing ground drones and ground robots which thus far have been used primarily for delivering supplies to front line troops and for taking wounded soldiers back to behind the lines. But there was apparently an incident two or three weeks ago where a whole bunch of Ukrainian ground robots defeated a Russian unit. Some of the Russians even surrendered to the robots.

VC/KK: Wow. Why didn't we hear about this?

AM: Right. This is big. I don't know if this is a one-off. I'm sure the Ukrainians are planning to do this more often. But it's obviously big because it suggests that the future, will involve mechanized robots on the battlefield.

VC: Now moving on to the economic effects of these wars. So, we know that rising oil prices is one of the biggest global consequences of this Iranian war. Russia is making money by selling their oil. The strait of Hormuz is blocked and there's little chance of resolution to this war, there's an unstable cease-fire, and it's been reported that Russia is sending military and commercial goods to Iran using the Caspian Sea. So, does sending these resources to Iran affect Russia's ability to fund their conflict with Ukraine?

AM: Probably not. Maybe to some degree but I can't imagine that Putin would harm his war efforts at home to help the Iranians. But that said, he is supplying the Iranians with some parts, with some technology, these are the sorts of things that the Russians probably have in abundance and he's making a statement more than anything else. If the United States thinks they could defeat Iran easily, well, now that you've globalized the war and actually included the entire world in the consequences of that war, here's a taste of your own medicine. I don't think it's going to make any significant difference in the ability of the Iranians to fight back. On the other hand, it probably will affect their feelings about their position, vis a vis Trump. It's been argued, and I think correctly, that the Iranians now feel that they hold the cards, the proverbial cards.

VC: I agree. I agree with that. They've got the Strait.

AM: They've got the Strait. They still have the Strait. The world economy is suffering immensely. So too are the Americans. Maybe less in the economy overall but certainly when you go to the gas pump Americans are paying \$1.50 more than they were paying a few weeks ago and that's not likely to change any time soon.

KK: Do the higher energy prices also affect Ukraine? And we know it affects the allies, correct?

AM: Well, you know, Ukraine has been battered by the Russians, its energy infrastructure. It's been living in a kind of lifeline of support, minimal use of energy for the last two or three years. The Ukrainians are affected in the same way everybody else is affected. But are they going to be as affected as the Europeans and other countries? Probably not, simply because the Ukrainians have already been experiencing such turmoil vis a vis the energy.

KK: Why did we hear about blackouts in Russia if they have access to energy?

AM: Oh, well, that's partly because some parts of the country have access to more energy than other parts, those that are deemed politically energy from one thing, critical or important, so that's partly a political decision. It also suggests that the Ukrainian targeting of infrastructure is having an effect and it's forcing the Kremlin to decide which regions it prefers to other regions. It's probably a function of corruption-why am I saying probably, it's definitely a function of corruption. One has to start with the assumption that everything in Russia transpires in a corrupt fashion. So, somebody's probably...

VC: Yeah, we wouldn't know anything about that, right?

AM: What, corruption? How did that... in Casablanca, right? You mean money and corruption in Casablanca?

VC: So, on the diplomatic front now, do you think the current situation plays into Putin's strategy of outlasting Western support for Ukraine and Trump's indecisiveness and inability to resolve the Iranian conflict, does Russia have an advantage because of that?

AM: Not really. Aside from the fact that the energy windfall isn't quite as large as they were hoping. But remember the Russians are losing something like 35,000 soldiers every single month which is just about as much if not more than they're recruiting per month. You can't sustain that. It's just not going to work. So, the Russians are at best caught in a stalemate on the front and at worst they're losing. And they don't know what to do. They've been deploying more drones and so on to little effect over the past two months. The Ukrainians have actually gained a little more territory than they lost. Ukrainians have always been losing some territory in bits and pieces. Over the last two months now that's changed. Now the Russians are losing territory. Again, very minimally. But even so this may portend something in the future.

KK: You said before that some troops are heading towards Ukraine just to watch and learn. Does that mean the Americans don't have this capacity for drones?

AM: That technology obviously exists also [in] the United States. We're talking about bigger drones that have a payload as much as several kilograms of weaponry, significant bombs of various kinds. We're talking about drones that can intercept drones, we're talking about drones that can be fired long distance as well as shorter distances. The technology appears to be extremely sophisticated and is rapidly changing in order to keep up with the demands of the times. So, at the end of the day whenever this war ends the two countries in the world with the best drone capacities will be Ukraine and Russia.

VC: Now how about peace talks to end the Ukraine war. What's happening with that, if anything?

AM: It's not going anywhere. It wasn't going anywhere from the get-go, to be honest. Somehow the notion that a peace could be arranged ... I won't even mention the 24 hours, but that a peace could be arranged quickly and easily by sending two real estate guys to Moscow (KK: Exactly!) The very notion that this is even conceivable is just absurd. I believe when the United States negotiated to end the war in Vietnam it took something like six or seven years. The negotiations on limitations on Iran's use of nuclear weaponry and energy under Barak Obama, those too lasted for seven or eight years. These things take time. Maybe not eight years but certainly two or three. Certainly one. Besides, in each of those instances, or in past instances, in negotiations, both sides send seasoned diplomats who know what the game is like (VC/KK: Exactly), who understand the opponent, know the history, the culture, the politics, maybe even the language and who are in a position to judge whether they are getting a good deal or not, and instead Trump sends his son-in-law and his buddy, both of whom have no experience negotiating with tough negotiators, know nothing about international relations, know nothing about Russia, know nothing about Ukraine. How could you possibly

expect anything from a bunch of clowns? With a bunch of clowns, we're talking about a non-starter that has remained a non-starter, is still a non-starter and will continue to be so as long as Witkoff and Kushner and Trump have anything to say about it.

VC: Yeah, I love your term for Witkoff. I think in another one of our podcasts you called him Witless Witkoff.

AM: Oh yes, good lord! The guy didn't even know the names of the provinces he was hoping to donate to Russia. How can you do that? It would be like being a real estate agent in New York and thinking that the price of real estate on 5th Avenue and 80th Street is the lowest in the city. (laughter) To go into negotiations with that kind of knowledge (KK: There you go) you are likely to be taken for a ride.

KK: You would think they'd wake up by now and see.

AM: You would think. But the problem is everything depends on Trump and everybody else is just a yes man or a yes woman. Trump is absolutely persuaded that he is God's gift to mankind.

KK: Oh, can I tell you something that I just heard on the news a little while ago. The first thing that Trump did after leaving China, on his social media, said, "China has a ballroom, and we're gonna have a ballroom.

AM: Oh my God.

KK: I swear to God, that's what he said. I can't believe it.

AM: I know.

VC: I know, that's insane. And then also, I believe it was yesterday, Trump was on Fox News and he said that Xi told him, oh yeah, we'd love to help you open the Strait of Hormuz, and we're not going to give Iran any military equipment. Now, do you believe this?

AM: Not for a second. They will try to open the Straits, of course, but the question is, on whose terms? I can't imagine the Chinese saying they will agree absolutely with everything that Chairman Trump has to say. The Chinese are always, you listen to their statements about the Russia-Ukrainian war, or any other conflict and they're always anodyne. They say things like "We support peace" and "We support international law." Of course. The only thing they failed to mention, is apple pie and mom. Basically, that's the position they take. Which is the appropriate position if you look at it from their point of view. Let the Americans stew. Let the Americans pay the price of their stupidity and we will simply express our willingness to help out. And at some point, that willingness may be translated to reality but at that point the United States will be begging for help.

KK: Now let me ask you something. Trump ripped up the Obama peace thing with Iran. The straits were open, Iran promised they would not do any nuclear weapons and... is that not true? He hates him so much he just tore that all up.

AM: He just tore it up. They signed the deal. Every expert that I've read says it was a pretty good deal. It came short of forbidding the development of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons but it delays things by 10 or 15 or 20 years, it cut back significantly on their ability to develop certain kinds of uranium and was by any measure a step forward, it certainly wasn't a step backward.

VC: And they were willing to allow outside inspections, were they not?

AM: Of course. Instead, Trump comes in and rips it up and says this isn't gonna work. This is simply agreeing to Iran's terms. And now we're back... and now we're in this position. The irony is sweet. And it would be sweeter if it weren't for the tragedy of so many people being killed. But now he's forced essentially to adopt a deal that is likely to be worse than Obama's. (VC: Oh yes. No question about that). Of course he'll spin it as an enormous victory (VC: Oh, of course). And his MAGA supporters will say, you see, we told you so. He is Jesus Christ. (KK: Or a very Jesus-like doctor). Right.

VC: A doctor who wears weird costumes.

AM: And has light emanating from... (VC/KK: Right!) My physician has the same light; it turns on and off... what the technology can do! (laughter)

VC: Amazing, isn't it? So, is there any scenario you can think of where this conflict might benefit Ukraine? And does anybody benefit from these wars? Who benefits more,

AM: You mean the Iran war? (VC: From both wars)

AM: Well, the Iran war certainly doesn't benefit Ukraine. But it doesn't necessarily harm it either. At least not excessively. The Ukrainians produce 90% of their own weaponry. They have said that western European intelligence is not quite as good as American intelligence but probably close enough. So, in effect, they can certainly live without America. Zelensky has recently made that very clear. And that's one of the positive results of this whole brouhaha, that the Ukrainians have been forced to adopt measures that increase their sense of independence, give them greater room to maneuver. And the same of course is true for the Europeans. They've been forced to take their own security more seriously, which is a good thing. The war in Ukraine, obviously, the death and the destruction is obviously no good for anybody. And as you know, I think it was yesterday that the Russians fired a whole bunch of missiles on Kyiv. They killed 24 people. I don't think Kyiv or any other city has had that many losses in a single night. So obviously that's bad. But abstracting from that fact that hundreds of thousands of people are suffering or have suffered or been killed or are in difficult economic or physical straits which Ukraine has benefited from, and this is not inconsequential, it's developed a stronger state. Zelensky has anchored the position of president. He's been doing a good job, he's been criticized, probably justifiably but nevertheless he's been doing a good job. So, Ukrainians can now actively claim to have a more or less functioning, effective state administration. They certainly have a very effective army, and armed forces in general, and the war, for better or for worse, has also consolidated the people

around the Ukrainian national identity. And that's not just true of ethnic Ukrainians. It's also true of Jewish Ukrainians, Hungarian Ukrainians, Russian-speaking Ukrainians. Basically, everybody who considers Ukraine to be their homeland, has pretty much rallied in support of their country, supporting Zelensky and so on. So, at the end of the day, Ukraine is likely to come out of this with a stronger political system which is good, because that's the prerequisite of any kind of significant economic reforms. It will be able to defend itself militarily which is absolutely imperative because you can't rely on the Americans or for that matter the Europeans. And finally, they'll come out with a bona fide nation that is likely to be diverse and pretty tolerant of diversity. It begins to sound like a pretty livable place that will stand in stark contrast to whatever remains of Russia because it's not going to have as effective a state administration. Their army has been battered, and its sense of identity has gotten a little stronger in some sectors but has also gotten weaker in others. Then again, one has to keep in mind all this is transpiring as hundreds of thousands are being killed and billions have fled so that's obviously the very, very bad news.

KK: I have to ask. Is it true that Putin was hiding in a bunker?

AM: He does appear to have appeared at the Victory Day parade on May 9th. (KK: Right) Other than that it's said, there have been credible reports that he has been hiding in a bunker in South Russia off the Black Sea coast. He's been avoiding his bunkers in other parts of the country. He apparently doesn't permit anyone with a cell phone to be within close proximity of him because he believes that they could be used (VC: They can be tracked). So, he's become decidedly paranoid, perhaps rightly so. The interesting question is paranoid because of what? On the one hand he may be fearful that the Ukrainians now have this fairly sophisticated drone capacity, might be out to get him. That's probably true but thus far as we know they haven't really tried. Maybe they're hatching a plot. The other possibility which to my mind is as plausible or even more plausible, at this particular point in time, is that Putin is fearful of his own people. You know, when you're a tyrant sooner or later you lock yourself up in your fortress. And there are significant indications within the last few weeks that a growing number of formerly very patriotic, very pro-Putin Russians, public officials, military bloggers, people like that, they've started saying that the war is lost, that Putin is a war criminal. One guy even wrote that he should be taken to Nuremberg.

VC: This is a Russian who wrote this?

AM: These are all Russians in Russia. Russians in Russia. Because outside of Russia they are always cursing him out but it's easy to do that when you're sipping a beer in Berlin. These are people who actually live in the country. Evidently, they are not afraid and that's very important. And they've been extremely critical. And when you add up that picture with the dismal performance at the Victory Day parade, the fact that Putin is obviously hiding from somebody and add that to the fact that people in the government are increasingly voicing their concern about the dismal state of the economy. And everybody knows that the only solution to the dismal state of the economy is ending the war. But you can't quite say that so they kind of hem and haw but the bottom line is you have to end the war but who's stopping them from ending the war? Mr. Putin. Any critique of the economy is ultimately a critique of Mr. Putin.

KK: That's not far away from what's happening here. I mean to end the war in Iran it's up to Trump.

AM: It's up to Trump. And both of them, we talked about parallels before, the other parallel is both of them are trapped in a trap of their own making. This is of course the delicious irony. Alas, people are dying. Both are now in this position where extricating yourself is extremely difficult. And extricating yourself with some degree of honor, some sense of victory, is even more difficult. How do you do that, and not provoke a rebellion within your own ranks? Now again, my guess is that Putin is in greater trouble than Trump. I don't think that Putin has 30% of the population supporting him as diehards. But certainly, both men are trapped in traps of their own making.

VC: Just recently we learned that the Saudis and the Emiratis actually did launch attacks on Iran which sounds like escalation to me. So, what happens if this war escalates and drags on and on and on? What are the consequences for Ukraine and Russia?

AM: Well, the consequences for Ukraine and Russia if the war continues, we could imagine a continued projection of energy windfall resources for the Russians. What will probably happen is that the attention of many parts of the world will be focused completely on the Middle East and the Ukraine war with Russia will go to the back burner. That's already happened, that's not necessarily a bad thing for Ukraine because it forces them to adopt a position of their own, strengthen their own military, navigate amongst the various players, search for alliances which Zelensky has done very effectively. He's signed all sorts of deals with the Arab states; he's working on deals with the Europeans. He's smart. He's doing what he's supposed to be doing. So, in principle it might mean very little for Ukraine perse. Now that having been said, depending on how the war in the Middle East evolves, there may be a sudden need on various sides for advanced drone technology in which case I'm sure the Russians and the Ukrainians will be proposing what they have and the Ukrainians, and the Russians obviously, but certainly the Ukrainians could probably make a bundle in the process. The war in the Middle East, the most obvious consequence will be twofold. Aside from the fact that Iranians will die which is probably the most important one. But increasingly the likelihood of American soldiers being deployed and killed will grow exponentially. Sooner or later this kind of stalemate can't continue unless you find an off-ramp, and so far, Trump hasn't found it but if he escalates and the Iranians escalate and everybody starts escalating the military will have to go in and at that point the casualties suffered by the Americans will rise enormously. And of course, the world economy will continue to be in the toilet. At this point in time the markets are expecting, are hoping that energy prices will at some point fall. But if after a year, we're still in the same position as we are today or alternatively if things have gotten significantly worse, and the Saudis, and the Emirates, and the Israelis and Hamas and Hezbollah and a whole bunch of other players are involved in what amounts to a regional world war then in a way all bets are off. (VC: absolutely) You know, the tragedy of all this is that it's so completely unnecessary. There was no need whatsoever to invade, especially after Trump declared several months ago that he obliterated the nuclear capacities. And the same is true of Putin. He could have exerted pressure on the Ukrainians by all sorts of economic, political and other measures. There was no need for him to start a regional war that he's likely to lose.

VC: So, in the future, going forward, Alex, so what should we be paying attention to in the next few months to better understand where this whole business is going?

AM: The key here, and this reflects my own interests, is to pay attention to Putin's standing amongst Russian elites. I believe strongly that Putin is far weaker than he makes himself out to be and we may be approaching the point where he is so weak that he may be replaced. And then of course Mr. Trump. The difference being that when Putin says something he usually means it and sticks to his guns and in Trump's case, we have no idea what he means when he says something. So, we're forced to pay attention even though it seems like a waste of time most of the time. And just as with Putin we should be on the lookout for dissident voices, statements by official opposition by officials criticizing Putin directly or indirectly. We need to pay the same attention here to the Marjorie Greenes, the Tucker Carlsons, people who still may be ethically challenged, to put it mildly but at least appear to have seen the light on some particularly important issues. And if they continue multiplying this could have significant impact and obviously, you mention the next six months, the November elections are critical.

VC: As usual, thank you for your insights.

AM: Well, thank you very much.

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