

ANALYSIS

Ukrainians Worry Biden Will Ditch Them Next

The White House meeting is a chance to repair a damaged relationship.

By Vladislav Davidzon, a writer, journalist, and artist who has reported extensively from Ukraine.

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The Sept. 1 White House summit between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and U.S. President Joe Biden offers a tremendous opportunity for U.S. diplomacy. It promises to be both a symbolically and substantively important meeting the Ukrainian president has spent the last two and a half years pleading for. It also comes after the Biden administration's decision to side with Berlin over Kyiv and forego further sanctions against the building of the Russian Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The pipeline remains a serious issue for Ukrainians and will likely face serious opposition in the U.S. Congress. But the issue foremost on the minds of many people in Kyiv is the Afghan withdrawal and what it signals for Ukraine's future security relationship with the United States.

Biden was elected with the understanding he represented a return from the erratic and transactional isolationism of former U.S. President Donald Trump to a more mature and considered foreign policy. He was widely considered to be an experienced and wise foreign-policy hand who would split the difference between political moderation and the use of U.S. power in the world.

However, the botched Afghanistan withdrawal is an early and perhaps critical foreign-policy failure. The natural question the withdrawal's unsentimental calculus creates for allies heavily dependent on U.S. security is whether Afghanistan is unique or if commitments to similarly embattled allies may also be abandoned.

This is a particularly fraught question in Kyiv, where there are fears the White House may be stripping away secondary peripheral national commitments to

allies to minimize friction with Russia while concentrating instead on its rivalry with a rising China.

And on Ukraine, Biden has been signaling a dovish position that is in direct contradiction with his statements during the 2020 presidential election and during his tenure as vice president. Skeptics of Washington's commitment to Ukraine also point to the recent one-on-one summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the about-face on Nord Stream 2, and a relatively weak NATO statement in response to Ukrainian calls to join NATO.

Support inside Ukraine for joining NATO is at record highs. Yet Washington has been unwilling to pursue the matter in response to opposition from Paris and Berlin, which see giving such commitments to Kyiv as a provocation to Moscow. It has even refrained from pressing for a membership action plan for Ukraine, which carries no assurances of eventual membership. Ukraine is, of course, still a long way off in technical capacity, and joining the alliance would require the resolution of parts of its territory currently occupied by Moscow.

The upcoming meeting between Biden and Zelensky will see the latter requesting more substantive security guarantees as well as "snapback" sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline if Moscow ceases to transit gas to Europe through Ukrainian territory (thus depriving Ukraine of critically needed transit fees). The Ukrainians also hope to receive a supplementary \$100 million in military aid that was proffered and later withdrawn, even as tens of thousands of Russian troops remain amassed along the Ukrainian border.

One prickly aspect of this new skepticism is the effect it is having on anti-corruption work in Kyiv. The United States has maintained a close focus on corporate governance and anti-corruption in Ukraine for years, and the anti-corruption process has been a core policy objective. For many Ukrainian activists, including stalwart anti-corruption fighters and reformers, this is perceived as a way for Washington to shift the agenda and conversation away from Kyiv's security concerns, the overwhelming worry for the country, and toward the issues the Washington team is comfortable with.

On Aug. 27, a group of 51 respected reformers, parliamentarians, and civil society activists issued an open letter to Biden, declaring his "administration's decision to indulge Germany on Nord Stream 2" undermined its efforts to "rally the democratic world against authoritarianism and global corruption."

Washington's response has been that Ukraine has not been doing nearly enough to fulfill its reform agenda.

Part of this background is an ongoing controversy over the corporate governance of the Naftogaz Ukrainian gas company. The previous reformist CEO, Andriy Kobolyev, was sacked by Ukraine's Cabinet of Ministers—the de jure owner of the state company—rather than its supervisory board, and the whole process was carried out utilizing legal loopholes. The United States insisted his dismissal represented a violation of international best practices. However, Naftogaz and its defenders said Kobolyev presided over an out-of-control board of directors that oversaw massive losses to the Ukrainian state in 2020 while also discreetly paying the former top manager and other executives tens of millions of dollars in bonuses over a year-and-a-half period.

Both the new CEO, Yuriy Vitrenko, as much as the previous one have solid reputations as competent reformers, and whatever the merits of each—I have personally spent time with both and respect them as serious, well-intentioned, and competent managers—the linkage of the issue to the wider claim that Ukraine has failed to fulfill its anti-corruption commitments has caused disquiet. To some activists in Kyiv, the critique seems to be a convenient way of avoiding discussing Nord Stream 2 and Ukraine's defense needs, and it represents an unfair repetition of the obsession with Kyiv's failings.

“For the people of Ukraine, security is crucially important, and several thousand have already died defending our sovereignty,” said Daria Kaleniuk, a signatory to the open letter and executive director of the Anti-Corruption Action Center. “The exhaustive list of specific reform targets would have to lead Ukraine to NATO membership, which would represent the most powerful boost for the Ukrainian reform process. If the State Department was serious about helping Ukraine in fighting corruption and supporting the rule of law, the reforms that are needed for the anti-corruption struggle would be part of a map toward NATO.”

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a highly placed U.S. State Department official denied the existence of any linkage between security considerations and the anti-corruption fight. But the moralistic tone of Washington's lecturing still rankles many Ukrainians. The country's record is surely not perfect, but it is doubtless true they have made consistent and notable efforts in the anti-corruption process over the last seven years. These include nationalizing and

restoring PrivatBank to profitability, which Ukrainian authorities allege engaged in corrupt practices; purging the economy of so-called zombie banks; creating an open and transparent bidding process on government contracts; passing stringent asset decelerations for members of the government; and creating a new specialized anti-corruption court whose judges are screened by nongovernmental organizations and Western referees.

The Ukrainians clearly have a long way to go, yet it is equally true they have made measured progress on both reform and transparency.

Biden's language around the Afghanistan withdrawal—blaming the Afghans for failing to fight for themselves—has also caused disquiet in a country that has fiercely resisted foreign aggression. To be sure, in stark contrast to Afghanistan, the Ukrainian state functions and possesses an organized and capable military of its own—one that has fought Russian-backed forces to a standstill.

However, anxieties about U.S. commitment remain. The meeting with Zelensky will thus represent a litmus test of whether the Biden administration will continue to prioritize previous U.S. commitments to Kyiv or if Ukrainians have a real reason to be concerned.

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