POLICY MEMO

Winning in Ukraine Is Critically Important for Deterring a War in Taiwan

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Below are remarks by Hudson President and CEO John P. Walters during a debate over whether winning in Ukraine is important for deterring a war in Taiwan.

I support the judgment of the commander of United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), Admiral John Aquilino, who was recently asked by Senator Roger Wicker, “There’s some people who feel our support for Ukraine is taking away from our capability and credibility in the Indo-Pacific. . . . What do you say?”

Adm. Aquilino replied, “Senator I do not . . . I believe we have to do both to maintain the peace.”

Why is Adm. Aquilino correct in linking the defense of Taiwan and deterrence of Communist Chinese aggression to our support for Ukraine?

First, US victory in Ukraine is essential for generating support for Taiwan at home. Winning in Ukraine will help generate the domestic resolve to fight for Taiwan. If we pull back from Ukraine, however, the US will strengthen those isolationists who pit baby formula against defense spending.

Success creates a slipstream of confidence, which the country is currently lacking after our experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. A victory in Ukraine can restore confidence in our ability to win wars—at home and abroad.

After all, if the US winds down mere security assistance for Ukraine, a state we recognize, how can the public be expected to shed blood for Taiwan, which our policy considers part of China? It is most likely that isolationism would blossom and overwhelm all of us in the pro-Taiwan caucus.
The outcome in Ukraine will shape whether the US intervenes on behalf of Taiwan.

Second, US victory in Ukraine is crucial for winning the competition for allies. Last month Prime Minister Fumio Kishida became the first postwar Japanese prime minister to visit a war zone, traveling to Kyiv to denounce Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a “disgrace that undermines the foundations of the international legal order.”

Just weeks ago, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen arrived in New York City, where she told me and other Hudson guests that “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was a wake-up call to us all. . . . Authoritarianism does not cease in its belligerence against democracy.” Whatever the debate in DC, our key allies understand that there is a profound link between the war in Ukraine and the security of the Indo-Pacific region.

It is unwise to presume we know the situation of our allies better than they know it themselves.

Ukraine is seen as a test case of US commitment to allies and partners, not an irrelevant side theater. Forty-five of 50 US states export more to Europe than to China. When we are exporting, that means American jobs. The world knows Europe matters to the United States.

It is therefore crucial that the US demonstrates to the world that it is the strong horse in this conflict.

Through military assistance and intelligence support, the US has enabled Ukraine to crush huge parts of the vaunted Russian military without a single American firing a shot or being under fire.

US assistance to Ukraine has also shown the power of the US alliance network and its influence. The United States is a catalyzing force, and when it leads, it can coordinate massive economic sanctions and tens of billions of dollars in military assistance.

To continue the support for Ukraine by pushing Russia out of the country would very much impress allies and adversaries.

But if the US instead freezes the war with Vladimir Putin ensconced in Ukraine, third countries will calculate that the US has no staying power. “The US cannot even see things through in Europe,” they will calculate, “so how can they be counted upon to defend us?” This will spur hedging behavior—instead of strengthening alliances, we will weaken and risk fragmenting them.

Third, a Taiwan-only approach exposes the US to a Chinese leapfrogging strategy. A Taiwan-only defense allows China to supplant us in other critical regions of the world, from Europe to the Middle East, ultimately weakening the balance of power over Taiwan.

Take the Middle East. The Obama administration’s indifference to that region allowed Russia to reestablish itself in Syria in 2015, forcing Israeli prime ministers to go to Moscow to address their security needs. Today, Israel cannot offer meaningful support to Ukraine for fear of blowback in Syria.

In Europe, the choice we face is not between security in Europe or peace in the Indo-Pacific. It’s between security in both realms or security in neither. We can and need to choose both, as Adm. Aquilino said.

When Russia launched its large-scale invasion of Ukraine last year, the images of America’s disastrous defeat in Afghanistan were only five months old. Had Russia decisively and quickly defeated Ukraine so soon after our collapse in Afghanistan, the geopolitical consequences would have been grave. Europe would be in chaos, our allies would have questioned our
resolve, and our adversaries would have been emboldened to challenge us all over the world.

Europe also matters because several allied countries in Europe are world leaders in advanced technologies and scientific research and development, including for military applications. If the US pulls back, Europe will be less likely to support Washington economically, politically, and militarily. China would seize on Russia’s advance and America’s withdrawal to seek new ties with Europe.

Given how much of China’s economic model depends on technological transfer and theft, this may very well affect the economic balance between China and the US, which, in turn, would impact the military balance of power.

What about the military capabilities needed to support Ukraine and Taiwan? Helping Ukraine and defending Taiwan are profoundly different things. The war in Ukraine is not America’s war, but an American-supported war fought and executed by the Ukrainians. Yes, the US should do more; by equipping Ukraine to fight Russia like NATO would, the US could help bring the war to an end more quickly.

A war with the Chinese Communist Party to defend Taiwan must be an American war. Taiwan cannot defend itself alone and will require US weapons and tactics to prevail. The weapons that will win each war are fundamentally different. Ukraine needs long-range surface-to-surface missiles, air defenses, and tactical airpower to win. While Taiwan would benefit from those weapons, defending Taiwan demands state-of-the-art US capabilities in the air, sea, undersea, space, and cyberspace.

Ukraine needs indirect support. Taiwan’s defense requires the direct commitment of US forces.

Yes, both Ukraine and Taiwan have asked for Stingers, Javelins, HIMARS, and Harpoons. And Taiwan should get those weapons. But it is simply untrue that the 1,800 Stingers, 8,500 Javelins, one Patriot Battery, two Harpoons, or 31 Abram tanks sent to Ukraine will make or break the defense of Taiwan.

None of the key US assets needed to defend Taiwan have been allocated to Ukraine, and they will not be in the near future. Most of the weapons we have sent to Ukraine so far are US Army assets that would have limited use in a Taiwan war. Critical naval, air, space, and cyberspace resources remain with US forces and in US warehouses. They are not in Ukraine.

Lastly, we are strengthening deterrence. The US is actively stockpiling assets for a Taiwan war unimpeded—including with the rapid production and purchasing of munitions, basing adjustments, filling up and relocating fuel depots, alliance strengthening and interoperability exercises, and bringing NATO closer to US readiness for a Taiwan war. None of these is impacted negatively by the war in Ukraine. And, perhaps most critically, we are in advanced development, testing, and scaling of new warfighting technologies that can create great cost and effectiveness advantages for the US and help maintain deterrence.

We certainly have a challenging task. However, it does not help to catastrophize the threat.

Empirically, we should also see that the Russia-Ukraine War has united more of NATO and Europe—the unity of NATO has been greater since the war and our assistance began.

In addition, unity in the Indo-Pacific has been greater since the war and allied assistance began. This increases deterrence.

To pull back from Ukraine is really a kind of Dien Bien Phu logic. By not assisting the French in a critical strategic moment, the US assured decades of brutal conflict in the region, which cost it exponentially more. US policymakers
need to address the current challenge now rather than wait for a conflict that may develop in the future.

Saying that we should prioritize Taiwan over Ukraine is like arguing that a fire truck should be parked at a house down the street to guard against a fire breaking out in the future instead of knocking down the fire at the burning house. The prudent approach would be to fight the fire that’s raging while also helping the house down the street take steps to prevent a future fire.

Our performance in Ukraine is buying us time in Taiwan. We can choose a sequencing strategy. The success of the US in Ukraine is surely giving China’s leadership pause over how a Taiwan conflict might unfold. This is affording us time to address our own defense industrial base shortcomings, which the war in Ukraine revealed.

The Russia-Ukraine War has been and continues to be a “battle lab” where next-generation warfare is being developed and tested—from “decision-centric warfare,” to unmanned, autonomous, and attritable systems, to new displays of intelligence fusion. These developments change cost and effectiveness calculations in our favor, and they can dramatically increase deterrence against the CCP. We are testing and learning without American deaths. And, most of all, we are supporting a display of warfighting that can only challenge CCP military confidence. Or, in the words of the overused saying, “We can kill the chicken to scare the monkeys.”

Further, a US victory over Russia weakens China because the two are allies. Policymakers should understand that Russia and the CCP are intimately connected. Russia is the CCP’s junior partner on the global stage. Many of Russia and the CCP’s strategic goals overlap. Both want a weakened and divided Europe that they can exploit. Both want to weaken the transatlantic alliance so that the free world is divided and more vulnerable. Anything we do to weaken Russia diminishes the threat of the Russia-CCP alliance—that is, it weakens the CCP.

In a joint statement just weeks before the war started, Russia and China announced that they “oppose further enlargement of NATO” and called on the defensive alliance to “abandon its ideologized Cold War approaches.”

Our adversaries understand themselves to be engaged in a common fight. Several weeks ago, Chairman Xi Jinping told Putin while departing the Kremlin, “Right now there are changes—the likes of which we haven’t seen for 100 years—and we are the ones driving these changes together.” Putin responded, “I agree.”

What happens in Ukraine will impact what happens in the Indo-Pacific. If Russia is defeated or weakened in Ukraine, the CCP is weakened.

While there might not be joint Russian-Chinese military-planning cells in Beijing or Moscow, it would be naive in the extreme to think that the two countries do not have some sort of mutual security understanding in place. After all, since Russia shifted many of its forces involved with the invasion of Ukraine from its Eastern Military District, the number of Russian troops on or near the country’s border with China is at a historically low level. It’s safe to assume that Vladimir Putin would not have taken such a step without assurances from Beijing that Russia’s territorial integrity would be respected.

By defeating Russia in Ukraine, the US is defeating the CCP’s sole major ally on the world stage. This would send a chilling signal to any other countries considering allying with Beijing—it might be the single most powerful way to boost deterrence.

As noted above, the war in Ukraine is a massive live-fire military exercise teaching us critical lessons about warfare today and how to supply a partner country under attack from its neighbor. This is relevant for Taiwan.
The delays in weapons for Taiwan are unrelated to the war in Ukraine; Taiwan is supported through Foreign Military Sales, and Ukraine is receiving weapons via special drawdown authority or as excess defense articles (EDA).

Moreover, we were doing next to nothing in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for Taiwan before Russia’s full-scale invasion and continue to lag in FMF since the war began, even stripping a few billion dollars from the most recent Nation Defense Authorization Act. But Ukraine has been irrelevant to those decisions.

What we should be considering is providing Taiwan the same access to weapons as Ukraine via drawdown and EDA mechanisms, instead of using the delays in Taiwan shipments as an excuse to not support Ukraine.

To the extent Ukraine and Taiwan come into competition over military goods, the US should—as it is doing—shore up its defense industrial base rather than hoard resources in a strategic crisis of long-range significance.

Finally, the CCP threat is urgent and critical and is based on the channeling of economic power into imperialist military power. The US should consider immediate measures to attack key segments of the CCP’s economic and military power.

Congress already has before it the STAND with Taiwan Act—legislation crafted to be a threat should the CCP attack Taiwan. It is intended to be a deterrence measure. But given the threat the CCP has created, is it time to consider implementing some or all of those provisions to weaken the CCP now?

Specifically, the US should sanction members of the CCP and CCP-affiliated financial institutions and industrial sectors—start with entities and individuals involved, directly and indirectly, in the CCP’s nuclear and defense industrial complex. Prohibit US financial institutions from investing in CCP-affiliated entities. Prohibit the listing or trading of CCP-affiliated entities on US securities exchanges. Prohibit the import of certain goods mined, produced, or manufactured in the People’s Republic of China. In the larger picture, isn’t this what it means to face the strategic reality?

How should we respond to our defense needs in light of the ballooning budget deficit? The Biden administration and previous congressional majorities have spent trillions of dollars and programmed the spending of trillions more. This spending and the debt it creates threaten America and our economy in multiple ways.

Such spending and a variety of other programmed spending need to be stopped or reduced.

But the heart of the spending problem is not monies devoted to supporting Ukraine (or Taiwan). And the wasteful spending that has been attached to some of the Ukraine funding is, well, wasteful, but is dwarfed by the trillions at the heart of the problem.

Moreover, various amounts of unwise spending have been an unfortunate feature of every “must-pass” spending bill in Congress for years. Focusing on this with respect to Ukraine support seems a bit like saying, “I am shocked, shocked, that Congress is not efficient.” In other words, it seems an evasion from the actual spending problem, and it is simply dishonest to suggest that Ukraine spending is a unique or a special cause of waste—it is not. I also fear this straw man argument will be repeated regarding critical defense spending, including support for Taiwan. Responsible national leaders should burn this straw man down.

Let’s keep our eyes on the big picture and the full threat. It is now manifest that the CCP, Putin, and Iran are in an expanding alliance against America and our allies, probing
on multiple fronts. It seems more and more illogical to say that meeting the threat on one part of that front is inherently at odds with meeting the actual threat—this is a false distinction.

Further, the emphasis on not responding to the reality of this threat picture is a doctrine for serious strategic weakness—a vulnerability that invites exploitation by our enemies and makes it impossible to build an architecture of deterrence.

Let’s be clear, if the argument here is that we cannot meet—defeat or deter—one part of the threat (Putin) and the other (Xi), then that is a plan for our failure. Our enemies know how to keep pushing when they feel mush. The conclusion of the “either/or” analysis abandons deterrence and is a strategic blueprint for our defeat. Let’s rethink this.

Maybe the new cold war needs the vision of the man who won the old Cold War, a man who rebuilt deterrence—significantly with technological innovation—and critically weakened the peer adversary of his time. Of course, when candidly speaking about his strategy he did not talk about denial. He said, “We win, they lose.”

Some believe this is impossible in our present situation and even a dangerous way to think. But their position is strategically incoherent, unrealistic, and demoralizing. It is imprudent. It is bad policy.

We should also remember that what Xi and the CCP fear most are the people of China—the people the Communist tyranny must oppress every day. In fact, it is estimated that the CCP must spend more on internal security than on its imperialist military forces.

We need to remember that the people of China are a powerful ally in our struggle against the CCP. The example of President Ronald Reagan reminds us that we should speak directly to the people of China, recognize their aspirations, and let them know that we are allies in a common opposition to a genocidal oligarchy.

As in the time of President Reagan, some believe speaking this way is dangerous. They are powerful, and they are wrong. We need to fix our eyes on the “big picture,” as Hudson Institute founder Herman Kahn might say.

Today we need leadership with the capacity to see the full strategic situation, the courage to speak beyond conventional wisdom, and the persuasiveness to gain democratic consent.

And we—all of us—need to help and support such leadership.
About the Author

**John P. Walters** is president and chief executive officer of Hudson Institute.

From 2009 through 2020, Walters served as chief operating officer of Hudson, in which role he oversaw Hudson’s research staff and operations. He was appointed president and CEO in January 2021.

Walters also directs Hudson Institute Political Studies—an undergraduate summer fellowship program—and Hudson’s Center for Substance Abuse Policy Research. In addition, he was a member of the Independent Review Committee, hosted by Hudson Institute from 2019 to 2022 and established to advise the attorney general and Congress on the implementation of criminal justice reform under the First Step Act.

From December 2001 to January 2009, Walters was director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) and a cabinet member during the Bush administration. As the nation’s “drug czar,” Walters guided all aspects of federal drug policy and programs—supporting efforts that drove down teen drug use 25 percent, increased substance abuse treatment and screening in the healthcare system, and dramatically dropped the availability of cocaine and methamphetamine in the US.

From 1996 until 2001, Walters served as president of the Philanthropy Roundtable, a national association of charitable foundations and individual donors. His prior government service included work at ONDCP, at its founding in 1989 as chief of staff, and later as deputy director of supply reduction. He was assistant to the secretary and chief of staff at the US Department of Education during the Reagan administration. He also served in the Division of Education Programs at the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1982 to 1985.

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