

**RC** THE RĪGA  
CONFERENCE

Latvian Transatlantic Organisation

2021



**POLICY BRIEF**

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**THE US-UKRAINE  
RELATIONS UNDER  
THE NEW ADMINISTRATION:  
WHAT TO EXPECT?**

Ramina Shut  
Oksana Manchulenko

# **THE RĪGA CONFERENCE**

## **POLICY BRIEF**

2021

## **The Rīga Conference Policy Briefs Introductory Remarks**

Dear the Rīga Conference Participants, Dear Readers,

In 2021, international relations have still been sailing in troubled waters, and further answers have been sought to issues related to the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on global development.

This year, on the one hand, existing triggers have augmented: rapid developments and power shift in Afghanistan with potentially global consequences; Russia's escalation of tension and sabre-rattling at the Ukrainian border; increasing confrontation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority; and an irresponsible behaviour by the Belarusian regime. On the other hand, also the issues long in the focus of international agenda have retained their urgency: competition among global and regional powers; increasing risks to international rule of law and democratic values; climate change; the diverse faces of the migration challenge; the ever-increasing role of new technologies in tackling foreign policy matters; and the fight against disinformation.

It still calls for a responsible and broad-based approach on the part of the international community to achieve results conducive to global development and security. The further implementation of the European Green Deal policy and the NATO reflection process 2030 have been significant contribution to this end.

International processes are growing increasingly sophisticated and intricate, when alongside a classical approach to diplomacy foreign policy makers and implementers are expected to come up with swift, unconventional and creative, while at the same time sustainable and effective solutions. They demonstrate the need for a more inclusive approach that results

in even more governmental and non-governmental actors being engaged in foreign policy.

I wish the readers of the Rīga Conference Policy Briefs to continue enriching their insights and knowledge of regional and global foreign policy processes and be active in generating new ideas on their path towards that goal.

**Edgars Rinkēvičs**

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia



## Rīga Conference Policy Briefs Introductory Remarks

“Peace” is defined as “a period in which there is no war”<sup>1</sup> or “freedom from disturbance; tranquility”<sup>2</sup>. Like before, this year, globally, there were neither. While there have been breakthroughs in combating the COVID pandemic with vaccination roll-out and major economic stimuli from governments, the virus is continuing to disturb our daily lives. The war in Eastern Ukraine is still ongoing as Ukraine battles for its’ territorial integrity, while in Georgia the same fight has become a frozen conflict. The hybrid warfare is maturing and becoming more complex as demonstrated by Lukashenko’s regime in hijacking the Ryanair flight, as well as in orchestrating the recent breaches of Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish borders by brutally using innocent, misled people as hybrid warfare tools. There is little tranquility in our societies. Dis-information continued to be a troublesome weapon throughout the year and it has fueled further divisions among people with anti-vaccination campaigns being the most prominent theme. The attack on the U.S. Capitol in the beginning of the year, the rise of conspiracy theories and populism are clear symptoms of confused, scared and/or angry people.

Existing security challenges, such as Russia’s opportunism and constant military build-up, uncertainty of terrorism threats boosted by the Taliban take-over in Afghanistan, unpredictable climate cataclysms, together with emerging challenges related to advancements in technology and supply chain vulnerabilities will only add to this unrest, this state in-between peace and war.

As a result, demand for security will continue to increase. And Western democracies must be able to deliver. Winston Churchill once famously said:

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Languages

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

“Never let a good crisis go to waste”. Thus, we must learn the lessons and act decisively to ensure security – to ensure that our democracies are prepared and capable to overcome whatever might come our way. To ensure that our societies feel safe and become more resilient in the face of ever evolving challenges. In this endeavor Western democracies need to do more and together to achieve true peace.

Open discussion, exchange of knowledge and ideas can certainly help to seek answers on how to do it better and I believe this year’s Riga Conference will be a valuable opportunity to do so.

**Artis Pabriks**

Minister of Defence of the Republic of Latvia



**THE US-UKRAINE RELATIONS  
UNDER THE NEW ADMINISTRATION:  
WHAT TO EXPECT?**

Ramina Shut  
Oksana Manchulenko

## INTRODUCTION

The United States is a global superpower and its influence is far from underestimated. Even without abusing the democratic system, the President retains an important role as the highest political spokesman of the American nation and the main individual player on the international stage. For this reason, the United States (US) elections are a long and burdensome process. Unsurprisingly, all elections come with surprises. The candidates and the issues they were discussing will have far reaching effects, not just for American public policy but policy throughout the world. To put it shortly, the US presidential elections have a global impact. They tend to shape international relations, as highlighted by Michael Armacost in his book “Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections.”<sup>1</sup>

This policy brief will analyze how the statements of the newly elected President of the US – Joseph Biden – impact the international community and define his foreign policy agenda for the upcoming years. The analysis will be split into a prognosis for the US-Ukraine bilateral relations, including discussion of key issues in the strategic partnership: democracy, restoration of territorial integrity, military aid, US-Russia relations and restoration of alliances to tackle the modern challenges together.

As of today, the Presidential campaign in the US has ended and the inauguration of the newly elected President has already taken place. The new President is now facing not only ongoing conflicts all over the world, but the divide of his own nation – which has grown unnoticed for the last decades. Despite the US election almost always being a matter of internal business,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Armacost, *Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 304



the happenings of the US, as a global leader, is on the political agenda of every other country in the world. That is why it is important to understand the global impact of the Presidential campaign, and how it affects the international security environment. As Armacost states, US presidential elections unfold in a gigantic echo chamber. Candidates generally speak to domestic constituencies as if outsiders were not listening in. Rhetoric directed at American voters can have an unfortunate – even toxic – impact abroad as contenders pander to local prejudices, express disdain for foreign leaders, and volunteer gratuitous and often uncharitable judgments about the institutions and policies of particular foreign countries.

No country's elections are observed by foreigners with more attentiveness and nervousness than that of the US. For countries that enjoy the support of powerful voting blocs in the US, these elections offer golden opportunities to entice new commitments or solicit new subventions from Washington.<sup>2</sup> Ukraine is one of those countries enjoying the US's continuous support in its security policy and reforms at large. What should be expected from the new administration with regard to US-Ukraine relations?

## **UKRAINE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL INTERESTS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

A country's internal and external strategy depend on the distribution of priorities and its national interests. The multifaceted and complex nature of this problem has brought together many experts and scholars to develop a concept that is more relevant to today's challenges and realities, answering the following questions: What are the national interests of the US? What are the national interests today and what will they be tomorrow?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Armacost, *Ballots, Bullets, and Bargains: American Foreign Policy and Presidential Elections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 304

<sup>3</sup> Oksana Manchulenko, "Ukraine's Place in the Context of the United States Concept of National Interests" scientific conference in Lviv, (May, 2015): [http://international.lnu.edu.ua/wpcontent/uploads/2015/06/USA\\_in\\_modern\\_world\\_Lviv\\_15.05.15-Volume-II.pdf](http://international.lnu.edu.ua/wpcontent/uploads/2015/06/USA_in_modern_world_Lviv_15.05.15-Volume-II.pdf), pp. 80-86

For government institutions, this is a fundamental issue and a foundation for any political analysis. The Report of the Commission on American National Interests, authored by Bob Blackwell and Graham Allison, provides a thorough description.<sup>4</sup> It is this developed hierarchy of national interests that provides the coordinates for actions for decades to come. Thus, the Commission divided the interests into 4 categories.

The main idea is that US interests are a hierarchy, divided into different categories: vital, very important, important, and secondary. The Commission emphasized that vital interests should be taken in the context of Webster's dictionary, "vital" meaning "essential to the existence or continuation of something."<sup>5</sup>

Vital interests include: 1) preventing, deterring and mitigating the threat of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, or attacking the United States / its forces abroad; 2) ensuring the survival of American allies and their active cooperation with the United States in shaping an international system in which it can prosper; 3) preventing the emergence of hostile great powers or incapable states on American borders; 4) ensuring the viability and stability of major global systems (trade, financial markets, energy supply and the environment); 5) the creation of productive relations that are consistent with American national interests, with peoples who could become strategic adversaries, China and Russia.<sup>6</sup>

Very important interests – interests whose violation may partially jeopardize the ability of the US government to protect and enhance the well-being of Americans in a free and secure country. The Commission has identified 11 such interests, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the emergence of a regional hegemon, state terrorism and the peaceful settlement of conflicts. Thus, important interests cover a wider range of issues that are important to the United States.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Allison G. A Report from The Commission on America's National Interests / G. Allison, R. Blackwill., 2000, p. 55

<sup>5</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vital>

<sup>6</sup> Graham Allison, Robert Blackwell "A Report from The Commission on America's National Interests", 2000, p. 5

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Important national interests – the conditions that in case of violation, will have significant negative consequences for the US government’s ability to preserve and enhance the well-being of Americans as a free nation. These include the economic divide, the security of US hostages, and the spread of freedom and democracy.<sup>8</sup>

Secondary national interests are important and desirable conditions but have little direct impact on the ability of the US government to maintain and enhance the well-being of Americans. These include: 1) balancing bilateral trade deficits; 2) the spread of democracy; 3) preservation of the territorial integrity or political Constitution of other states throughout the world; 4) increase in exports of certain sectors of the economy.<sup>9</sup>

After analyzing this concept, we came to the conclusion that determining the place of Ukraine in terms of the above hierarchy is very relevant, as the US is the most powerful and influential state, which, given its influence on the international environment and international actors, directly affects Ukraine’s relations with other leading states.

To substantiate Ukraine’s place in terms of the hierarchy of national interests, it is necessary to turn to leading US experts and politicians. According to Damon Wilson, Executive Vice President of the Atlantic Council at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “President Putin today poses a direct threat to American interests and values. His war in Ukraine and his efforts to split our allies are aimed at destroying the post-Cold War order... If we cannot stop Putin in Ukraine, we will face a series of conflicts and crises in the coming months and years.”<sup>10</sup>

Vital interests in the concept of hierarchy are at stake. The correctness of this comparison is again proved by D. Wilson, arguing that “Putin can succeed in creating a new dividing line in Europe. By creating new facts, he violates old

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<sup>8</sup> Graham Allison, Robert Blackwell “A Report from The Commission on America’s National Interests”, 2000, p. 7

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8

<sup>10</sup> Damon Wilson “A Transatlantic Strategy to Deter Putin’s Aggression 2015”, [http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/030415\\_Wilson\\_Testimony.pdf](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/030415_Wilson_Testimony.pdf)

notions, which becomes an acceptable result in European diplomacy aimed at ending violence. In time, Europe will be obliged to accept reconciled Russia, not to test its strength. As history shows, this is a dangerous formula."<sup>11</sup>

**Comparing other conflicts all over the world, where the US are partially or physically involved with the situation in Ukraine should be considered inexpedient and incorrect, as the immediate threats to the United States from e.g. Islamic militants simplify the situation by eliminating problems of analysis and hidden motives, demonstrating the main enemy.** The conflict in Ukraine has hidden aspects, obscured by the civil crisis and the anti-terrorist operation, which is complicated by misinterpretation of threats and dangers, so the developed strategy will be ineffective due to the mismatch between analytical data and the immediate threat.

Retired US General Wesley Clark believes that the latest challenges, such as cyber instability, climate problems and financial system fluctuations, and terrorism, include current conflicts that will become more difficult to resolve if the US fails to help Ukraine confront with Russia.<sup>12</sup> First of all, the main problem is not the destruction of Ukraine's independence by Moscow, but the demonstration for the whole of Eastern Europe of the futility of the NATO umbrella in a region that Russia defines as strategic. That is why the threat to Europe, as the main ally of the United States in resolving many crises and conflicts, is directly related to very important interests, namely, "promoting the well-being of American allies and friends and protecting them from external aggression."<sup>13</sup>

Another aspect is the possibility of a threat from Russia to several states at once without a process of long-term internal mobilization, as evidenced by the reform of the Russian Armed Forces and its conceptual documents. Thus,

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<sup>11</sup> Damon Wilson "A Transatlantic Strategy to Deter Putin's Aggression 2015", [http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/030415\\_Wilson\\_Testimony.pdf](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/030415_Wilson_Testimony.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> James Rupert "General Wesley Clark: America's Global Strategy Begins With Ukraine", Atlantic Council, October 10, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/general-wesley-clark-americas-global-strategy-begins-with-ukraine>

<sup>13</sup> Graham Allison, Robert Blackwell "A Report from The Commission on America's National Interests", 2000, p. 6

the West is wasting time for an effective response that is directly in line with the vital interests of the US in producing productive relations consistent with American national interests, with nations that could become strategic adversaries, China and Russia, and the latter's growing military threat will not contribute to the establishment of such relations, especially given that Europe is a friend and ally of America and such actions are also not in the interests of the US.

Analyzing the concept of the US hierarchy of interests presented by scholars and experts, it can be argued that

**“ Ukraine should be part of the US strategy,  
as it is an integral part of security and stability in the region  
and Europe at large.**

## **THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN 2020**

In order to analyze the effects of the new Biden Administration on the landscape of US-Ukraine relations, we must first examine the geo-political position, and subsequently the state of US-Ukraine relations, which Biden inherits from the previous and radically different Trump administration. The Trump-Ukraine relationship is a tumultuous one, getting off to a rocky start even before Trump took his seat in the Oval office. In 2016, then still candidate Trump found himself caught in speculations regarding his commitment to opposing the Russian attack on Ukraine. Questions regarding his attitude towards Russia would hang over Trump's presidency, hurting ties with Ukraine and establishing a general precedent of disrupting the previously friendly relationship between the two countries for Trump.

This unwelcome involvement in the US election was the climax to an awkward period in US-Ukrainian relations that began during the previous campaign in 2016 amid speculation regarding then-candidate Donald Trump's commitment to opposing the Russian attack on Ukraine. Lingering questions

over Trump's attitude towards Russia would go on to cast a shadow over his entire presidency, with Ukraine ties also suffering as a consequence.<sup>14</sup>

Once sworn into his post, President Trump stayed true to the rumors and speculations that surrounded his campaign. In his four years as President, Trump showed little interest in maintaining relations with Ukraine and consistently refused to criticize Vladimir Putin, who has run more than six years of a low-intensity war on Ukraine. This approach towards Ukraine was not for a lack of effort on Washington's part, however, with policy during the Trump administration continuing to provide military and political support to Kyiv, going as far as strengthening the already established Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia and taking further measures in order to increase US and NATO military presence on Ukraine's western border. It was Trump, who seemed largely disinterested in following through with his administration's policy, led to what can be seen as a rift in Washington's approach to Kyiv, with policy being passed in support of Ukraine but led by a President who isn't committed to implementing it. Beyond that, Trump showed no interest in the country and consistently refused to criticize Vladimir Putin, who has placed Ukraine in over six years of frozen conflict.<sup>15</sup>

The Biden presidency is set to restore balance to Washington's approach to Kyiv, closing the gap between the President and the policy put forth by his administration. It is this alignment on policy that will bring back a predictability that allowed US-Ukraine relations to flourish in the past by not subjecting US policy to the President's personal agenda.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike the previous tenant of the White House, there were no lingering speculations or inconsistencies regarding Biden's stance on Russia during (or after) his campaign. Biden has always made his position clear, and it is the strength of his position on these matters that will bring consistency back to

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Dickinson, "What can Ukraine expect from a Biden Presidency", Atlantic Council, November 14, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/what-can-ukraine-expect-from-a-biden-presidency/>

<sup>15</sup> Steven Pifer, "The Biden presidency and Ukraine", Brookings Institution, January 28, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/28/the-biden-presidency-and-ukraine/>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Washington and the relationship between the US and Ukraine. Still candidate, Biden had this to say about his intentions on Ukraine's Independence Day:

“As President, I will make it clear to the Kremlin that it must end its aggression toward and occupation of Ukraine. A Biden-Harris administration will ensure that Ukraine gets the economic and military support that it needs, including lethal weapons, while urging Ukraine to pursue the essential reforms that are vital to its success. Together, we will work toward the celebration of Ukraine's Independence Day as a peaceful, whole, sovereign, democratic, and prosperous country.”<sup>17</sup>

While, admittedly, campaign promises are not vastly different from the policy proposed by the Trump administration, the difference between the two is pivotal, and that difference isn't in what is said, but in who is saying it. The difference is in a candidate not shrouded in controversial ties to the Kremlin. Instead, it is a President that echoes Washington's long-standing support for Kyiv, not his own personal vendettas. He represents an administration willing to provide the tools necessary to ensure Ukraine's security and long-term prosperity. The difference is in a President, who is willing to make his position regarding the long-standing friendship between the US and Ukraine clear.

## **THE STATE OF AFFAIRS OF US AND UKRAINE RELATIONS**

To assess the future prospects of US-Ukraine relations under the new administration it is necessary to look at the present state of bilateral relations.

Intensification of cooperation with the United States took place against the background of the unfolding military conflict on the territory of Ukraine in

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<sup>17</sup> Joe Biden, “Statement by Vice President Joe Biden on Ukraine's Independence Day”, <https://joebiden.com/2020/08/24/statement-by-vice-president-joe-biden-on-ukraines-independence-day/>

2014. On one hand, we should emphasize the tremendous effort and initiative of Ukrainian leadership on this path. On the other hand, the US has begun and continues to pay more attention to the Ukrainian issue in connection with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, and have now made Russia one of the main threats to the US security.

Even back in 2014 Steven Pifer articulated: “The US government’s response has been organized along three vectors: (1) bolster the Ukrainian government; (2) reassure NATO allies unnerved by Moscow’s aggressive behavior; and (3) penalize Russia with the objective of promoting a change in Russian policy.”<sup>18</sup> One must notice that these three vectors are still on the table. However, a separate item should be highlighted, which is cooperation in the framework of security and defense, including in the areas related to financial and technical assistance, joint exercises, non-lethal weapons, etc.

**Among state donors, only the US provides security assistance to the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) in the format of International Technical Assistance; other countries use, for the most part, the Humanitarian Aid pathway.**<sup>19</sup> The US provides security assistance through numerous US programs, including: Foreign Military Financing (FMF); Export Control and Related Border Security Program (EXBS); International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE); Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR); International Military Education and Training (IMET); Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI); and others.<sup>20</sup> These security cooperation programs are made possible by Ukraine’s continued progress on key defense institutional and anti-corruption reforms. Over the past year, Ukraine has taken considerable steps to: strengthen civilian control of the military; reform military command and control structures; transition to a Western-style human resources management system; introduce measures to promote increased

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<sup>18</sup> Steven Pifer, “Ukraine, Russia and the U.S. Policy Response”, Brookings Institution, June 5, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/ukraine-russia-and-the-u-s-policy-response/>

<sup>19</sup> The Independent Defence Anti-Corruption Committee/Nezalezhny Antikorupciynii Komitet z pytan oborony (NAKO), “Making the System Work. Enhancing Security Assistance for Ukraine”, 2017, <https://nako.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Making-the-system-work-1.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*



transparency and competition in defense procurement and the defense industrial sector; and tighten internal controls to reduce corruption.<sup>21</sup>

The thorough research of official documents has proven that Russia's invasion of Ukraine boosted the levels of annual assistance to Ukraine. It includes military, non-military and humanitarian aid as evidenced further. Nonmilitary and non-humanitarian development aid totaled an average of \$320 million a year from fiscal year (FY) 2015 to FY2018. In addition, the US provided three \$1 billion loan guarantees to Ukraine from 2014 to 2016. For FY2019, Congress appropriated \$327.8 million in nonmilitary aid. The President's FY2020 nonmilitary aid request for Ukraine was \$198.6 million, and the House Appropriations Committee recommended \$327.8 million.<sup>22</sup>

The US military assistance to Ukraine is substantial, e.g. in June 2019, the Department of Defense stated that the US had provided \$1.5 billion in total security (mostly military) assistance since the Ukraine conflict began in 2014 (on average, about \$300 million a year).<sup>23</sup> US military assistance to Ukraine has included, in part, foreign military financing (which reached \$115 million in FY2019), as well as emergency and reprogrammed aid during FY2014 and FY2015.<sup>24</sup>

US military assistance also includes the Department of Defense-managed Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which Congress established in FY2016. From FY2016 to FY2019, Congress appropriated \$850 million for this initiative. FY2020 appropriations, as passed by the House (H.R. 2740), would provide another \$250 million. FY2019 funds for military assistance, which had not been obligated by the start of September 2019, were released in mid-September 2019 after some Members of Congress expressed concern about authority for this funding potentially expiring at the end of the fiscal year.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> DOD Announces \$250M to Ukraine, June 11, 2020, <https://ua.usembassy.gov/dod-announces-250m-to-ukraine-2/>

<sup>22</sup> Cory Welt, "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy", September 19, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45008/7>

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), "DOD Announces \$250M to Ukraine," press release, June 18, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Cory Welt, "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy", September 19, 2019, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45008/7>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

In June 2019, according to the Department of Defense the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative's FY2019 allocation of \$250 million provided:

“provide equipment to support ongoing training programs and operational needs, including capabilities to enhance: maritime situational awareness and operations as part of ongoing U.S. efforts to increase support for Ukraine’s Navy and Naval Infantry; the defensive capacity and survivability of Ukraine’s Land and Special Operations Forces through the provision of sniper rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and counter-artillery radars; command and control; electronic warfare detection and secure communications; military mobility; night vision; and, military medical treatment.”<sup>26</sup>

The Trump administration has provided major defensive lethal weaponry to Ukraine. During the Obama Administration, arguments against the provision of lethal assistance centered on Russia’s ability and willingness to steadily escalate the conflict in response. In August 2017, then-US Secretary of Defense James Mattis said in Kyiv that the Trump administration was “actively reviewing” the question of lethal assistance.<sup>27</sup> In 2018, the State Department approved a foreign military sale of 210 Javelin portable anti-tank missiles, as well as launchers, associated equipment, and training, at a total estimated cost of \$47 million. According to media reports, the missiles are stored away from the frontline.<sup>28</sup>

To conclude, **the assistance of the US to Ukraine has significantly increased after the Russian aggression in 2014 and continues to grow in different aspects: from military to nonmilitary, as well as humanitarian aid.** The US continue to be a committed ally and supporter of Ukrainian sovereignty, reforms, and economy growth.

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<sup>26</sup> Cory Welt, “Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy”, September 19, 2019, <https://csrreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45008/7>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

## WHAT CAN BE EXPECTED FROM THE JOSEPH BIDEN PRESIDENCY?



**Ukraine considers the US to be its main ally and strategic partner.**

To understand how the bilateral relations will develop and possibly evolve under the new Administration, one must answer the following questions: will the current Administration of Ukraine show its willingness to become a partner of the new American administration? Should the bilateral agenda be adjusted and what the key issues should be? What will be the American strategy on Russia? Thorough examination of these questions will provide the answer on what Ukraine should expect from the new American administration.

One of the issues of Ukraine's concern is conflict in Donbas. The US has enough political leverage to foster diplomatic solution-based crisis management in the region. As Michael Carpenter states: "I think it would make more sense for Ukraine to raise the issue of involving the United States in this format in the framework of the Normandy meetings, for example, at the level of foreign ministers or their deputies, or at the level of national security advisers. But not in the person of a special representative as an annex or an observer, but somewhere at the level of the Secretary of State or his deputy, or a national security adviser, who would have his place according to the word of negotiations. That he was not allegedly separated from the rest of the negotiators."<sup>29</sup>

For Ukraine in the context of bilateral relations with the US, the policy of the latter towards Russia is of great importance. Even if the US Grand strategy remained unchanged under several presidencies, there have been notable attempts to introduce diplomatic innovations such as the silver lining called "reset or restart" of the American actions towards Russia. According

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<sup>29</sup> Dr. Michael Carpenter, "Pro-Russian web is getting bigger in Ukraine and it complicates the efforts on Donbas", Kyiv Security Forum, January 27, 2021, <https://ksf.openukraine.org/ua/news/1964-prorosijnsykmerezha-v-ukrajini-staje-dedali-shirshoju-i-ce-uskladnyuje-diplomatichni-zusillya-shhodo-donbasumajkl-karpenter>

to the statements made by President Joseph Biden during the elections campaign, there were no indications that the new US Administration will not “reset” relations with Russia.

Prominent expert on Russia’s affairs Alina Polyakova warned about possible failures if similar actions would be put in place. She argues that “this is the first time the US administration has done this since the Cold War. There have been many similar reboots, albeit under different names. None of them worked, as the painful experience shows, and Ukrainians are aware of this like no other.”<sup>30</sup>

The experts remind that that the new US administration should pay more attention to Ukraine: “Obviously, when it comes to Ukraine, Belarus, the belt of democracy between NATO and Russia, it would be very desirable for the new administration to pay more attention to this region,”<sup>31</sup> as support to democracy and democratic transformation of states and societies has been one of the guiding principles of its foreign policy. However, in the last four years democratization was not on the top of list, and **the new Administration has a unique opportunity to reanimate assistance to democratic movements in Russia, as well as in Ukraine and Belarus and other parts of the region.**

Future support to a wide range of reforms will be the foundation of the US policy toward Ukraine under the new President Joseph Biden. There are several reasons for such an attitude. President Joseph Biden has a deep knowledge of Ukraine. He was a key figure in shaping Ukraine’s policy when serving as Vice President of the United States. During the Obama administration Biden had a tougher stance on decisions regarding Moscow, even though the President was reluctant to do so: “For example, I don’t think I’m going to reveal a secret, he advocated giving the Javelins to Ukraine when he was vice president. But his boss didn’t want that. So I think we will see a more active policy of supporting Ukraine than it was under Obama”<sup>32</sup>. Unlike President

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<sup>30</sup> Dr. Alina Polyakova, “Russia shouldn’t expect “reset policy” from Biden”, Kyiv Security Forum, January 27, 2021, <https://ksf.openukraine.org/ua/news/1960-rosiji-ne-var-to-chehati-vid-bajdena-politiki-perezavantazhennyaprezident-cepta>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> John Herbst, “Diplomat elaborated on how Biden helped Ukraine to get Javelins”, Kyiv Security Forum, January 27, 2021, <https://ksf.openukraine.org/ua/news/1961-diplomat-rozpoviv-jak-bajden-dopomagav-ukrajini-otrimati-dzhevelini>

Donald Trump who was indifferent to reforms in Ukraine and politicized the Ukrainian question, Joseph Biden demonstrated his commitment to follow the implementation of reforms.

The crucial element for the successful cooperation between Ukraine and the US under the new administration is the reciprocity of the values, vision and strategy. These parts will make Ukraine a reliable partner for the US. Even though Ukraine remains a committed ally and partner of the US, the current Ukrainian administration demonstrates some differences in terms of the key elements mentioned above. Because of these differences, Ukraine may lose the window of opportunity that opened with the election of a new US President. Therefore, the Biden administration will have to determine the nature of relations with the US for Ukraine and use an instrument that can be effective – an open public dialogue with the Ukrainian authorities and civil society clearly pointing out the problems Ukraine is facing under current leadership. Among the main priorities of cooperation with the United States, the following should be included: joint opposition to Russian aggression against Ukraine, providing Ukraine with a NATO Membership Action Plan, joining the Three Seas Initiative and economic cooperation between the two countries. To ensure that the both parties are collaborating on implementation of those priorities, Ukraine itself must play a more active role. Many challenging global and domestic issues will not allow the United States administration to focus exclusively on Ukraine.

Ukrainian actions can include making every effort not only to declare itself a “democratic hub” in the region but prove it by commitment to initiated reforms. These efforts can be implemented together with Moldova and possibly Georgia, to initiate a regional summit of democracies before it is organized globally by Joe Biden. After all, what is happening in Belarus and Russia, Ukraine, with its free elections and peaceful protests, can claim recognition of such a role.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Alyona Getmanchuk, “Between Obama and Trump: what will form the foreign policy of the United States and its position towards Ukraine”, European Pravda, February 4, 2021, <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/articles /2021/02/4/7119399/>

One of the key aspects of the US-Ukraine relations is Russian aggression in Ukraine. There is no other way to approach this issue than by making clear that Russia must pay a higher price for its aggression in Donbas and annexation of Crimea. It is very important to stress that Ukraine is already receiving positive signals from the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his first phone call with the Ukrainian counterpart, emphasizing that sanctions against Russia for its aggression in Donbas and Crimea should remain in place until Moscow fully fulfills its obligations under the peace settlement.<sup>34</sup> Most likely they will work in tandem with the capitals of European countries, provide additional arguments in favor of additional sanctions, for example, in the event of any escalation of Russia's military action in Ukraine. It would be easier for the new US Administration to help Ukraine force Russia to pay a higher price by providing Ukraine with weapons systems. "Javelins" are no longer an issue, they are provided. The US also provides high-speed patrol boats "Mark-6." It would be worth providing more of them. Harpoon anti-ship missiles, as well as air defense equipment. Hopefully Congress and the new administration will consider the possibility of significantly increasing the military assistance to Ukraine, because this is important not only for the security of Ukraine, but also for the security of the region and the United States itself. If Russia has to pay for its aggression against Ukraine, it will have less ability to resort to aggression elsewhere.

**“ The fundamental issue in the framework of Russian aggression against Ukraine must be the inclusion of the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity and independence into the agenda of bilateral relations between Ukraine and the US.**

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<sup>34</sup> Dmytro Kuleba and Antony Blinken discussed strengthening the strategic partnership between Ukraine and the United States, MFA, published on February 2, 2021, <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/dmitro-kuleba-ta-entoni-blinken-obgovorili-zmichnennya-strategichnogo-partnerstva-ukrayini-ta-ssha>

The US Secretary of State assured unwavering support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of our state.<sup>35</sup>

Another part of US-Ukraine relations is Ukraine's NATO membership. In order to achieve this goal support is needed by many member states and especially by the US. Former prime-minister of Ukraine Arseniy Yatsenyuk expressed confidence that the new US administration would protect and support Ukraine, as it did during the Obama-Biden administration. He quoted a historic speech by then-Vice President Biden in the Verkhovna Rada in 2015, when he said that the US will not recognize the sphere of influence of any country, and sovereign states have the right to their own decisions and choice of alliances.<sup>36</sup> This is a very clear sign that the US under the Biden administration will do everything possible to ensure that Ukraine receives MAP for NATO.

In the last speech delivered at the State Department Joseph Biden stressed out that:

“...we will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again, not to meet yesterday's challenges, but today's and tomorrow's. American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy.

We must meet the new moment – accelerating global challenges – from the pandemic to the climate crisis to nuclear proliferation – challenging the will only to be solved by nations working together and in common. We can't do it alone.

That must be this – we must start with diplomacy rooted in America's most cherished democratic values: defending freedom,

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<sup>35</sup> Dmytro Kuleba and Antony Blinken discussed strengthening the strategic partnership between Ukraine and the United States, MFA, published on February 2, 2021, [https://mfa.gov.ua/news/dmitro-kuleba-ta-entoni-blinken-obgovorili-zmichennya-strategichnogo-partnerstva-ukrayini-ta-ssha](https://mfa.gov.ua/news/dmitro-kuleba-ta-antoni-blinken-obgovorili-zmichennya-strategichnogo-partnerstva-ukrayini-ta-ssha)


<sup>36</sup> Arseniy Yatsenyuk, “With the U.S. support we can become a NATO member. This is a historical mission”, Kyiv Security Forum, January 27, 2021, <https://ksf.openukraine.org/ua/news/1959-iz-pidtrimkoju-ssha-mi-mozhemo-stati-chlenami-nato-ce-istorichna-misijaarsenij-jacenyuk-pid-chas-diskusiji-kbf>

championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity.”<sup>37</sup>

This is a strong signal that coincides with the Ukrainian hope that the new administration will restore a strong alliance between the United States and the European Union and will not allow Russia to undermine the unity between two long-standing traditional allies and thus to compromise the foundation of democracy on the both sides of the Atlantic.

## CONCLUSION

There are two conclusions that can be drawn. One is more academic, deriving from analysis of campaign promises, political history and proposed policy, which leads to the conclusion that the current administration will most likely fortify bilateral relations between Ukraine and the US by enforcing a much less lenient stance against Russian aggression and affording Ukraine and its border states greater support and democratic direction. The other is a more pragmatic conclusion, that the support of the US has always been there. Through ups and downs, through better times and worse, and even through what few would argue was the single worst Presidential term in the history of US-Ukraine relations – Washington still had Kyiv’s best interest in mind.

 **The real conclusion, one that has a chance of accomplishing something, is that when Ukraine is ready to change, it seems Washington will be there.**

A conclusion that echoes the words of the man whose inauguration spurred the writing of this very article.

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<sup>37</sup> Joseph Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World”, The White House, February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>



“But for Ukraine to continue to make progress and to keep the support of the international community you have to do more as well.”<sup>38</sup>

Except, he was not President then, or President elect, or even Presidential Candidate for that matter. He was Vice-President Biden, and the year was 2015 with two years left on the Obama term, long before anyone could imagine that the man from the Apprentice would have nuclear launch codes. Ukraine seems to have used the Trump administration as an excuse for complacency, even though the truth seems to be somewhere in the middle. Trump being largely dismissive of Ukraine is no excuse for not addressing the issues that the man we now rest hopes on told us about six years ago. Little has changed for Ukraine since, and little will in the future if the plan for NATO membership and EU integration starts and ends with waiting for the right President to take US office. Spurring Ukraine into action is not to dismiss Trump’s glaring incompetence regarding Russian aggression nor is it denying how much having the right person in office can help. If what we have been waiting for is a President ready and willing to take an assertive stance against Russian, it appears Ukraine can rest easy. Very early on, President Biden took the road not traveled in the almost-four years of Trump’s presidency. He made his thoughts about the Kremlin and his readiness to act very clear when he had this to say:

“At the same time, I made it clear to President Putin, in a manner very different from my predecessor, that the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions – interfering with our elections, cyber attacks, poisoning its citizens – are over. We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people. And we will be more effective in dealing with Russia when we work in coalition and coordination with other like-minded partners.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Biden, “Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden to the Ukrainian Rada”, The White House, December 5, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/09/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-ukrainian-rada>

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World”, The White House, February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>

If the issue has been a dismissive President with a rabbit-hole of Russian affiliation, then now is the time for our proverbial Alice to wake up from that dream. Washington is and has been there, the Biden administration is ready, and the President's hand is extended. It is time for Ukraine to also be there, to be ready, and to find the person that will fly to Washington, and finally shake the man's hand.

During the upcoming months we will observe Washington's new actions towards Russia, bilateral relations with Ukraine and its European allies. Considering the whole-in-one approach of the new administration there may be a more systematic implementation of existing sanctions, or even adoption of new ones: limited to personal sanctions or more painful new sectoral sanctions.

THE LATVIAN TRANSATLANTIC ORGANISATION  
(LATO) IN ACTION

## LATO

LATO is a non-governmental organisation established in 2000. Its aims are to inform the public about NATO and Latvia's membership in the Alliance, to organise informative public events about Latvian and Euro-Atlantic security issues, to promote partnerships with other countries, to lay the foundations for Latvia's international role as a member of NATO, and to foster the international community's understanding of Latvia's foreign and security policy aims. During the past 20 years, LATO has numerous achievements to be proud of. LATO organises the most influential security conference in the Baltic Sea region: The Rīga Conference facilitates discussion about issues affecting the transatlantic community and annually gathers international experts in foreign affairs and security/defence matters, policy makers, journalists, and business representatives. LATO promotes policy relevant research on topics such as gender equality, peace and security, resilience in the borderland, and the subjective perception of security. A series of various initiatives intended for increasing the interest of Latvian, Baltic and European youth in security related issues have been put in motion, including an annual future leader's forum and masterclasses for young political leaders. LATO's most recent project is the Secure Baltics platform, which serves as an information hub for those who are eager to join the debate on international security.

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## SECURE BALTICS

LATO has launched a new internet platform SecureBaltics ([www.securebaltics.eu](http://www.securebaltics.eu)). The site gathers different materials – policy briefs, discussions, interviews, studies, educational materials – created in the framework of the Rīga Conference, as well as work from our partners. It is a stable platform that the Rīga Conference community can rely on and use as a credible source of information in the region.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of the platform is to collect the know-how that is generated by the excellent minds gathered at the Rīga Conference on an annual basis. The Rīga Conference gathers regional and international experts in foreign policy and defence, academics, journalists, and business representatives by promoting the discussions on issues affecting the transatlantic community. It has been growing in influence since its inception in 2006.

Every year, for two days the National Library of Latvia is the centre of the most important regional discussions on security issues. However, it is not enough to engage in these discussions only once a year. Therefore, LATO developed SecureBaltics as a practical tool which can encourage the use of any resources and materials that have been produced as part of the Rīga Conference or its follow-up events.

## **Reach**

The platform tries to provide materials in both, English and Latvian, in order to reach multiple audiences. It is intended for the traditional Rīga Conference community of opinion leaders and experts in foreign policy and defence matters as well as any other interested parties that could benefit from the generated materials such as high school teachers looking for study materials.

## **Vision**

LATO hopes that SecureBaltics will become the go-to hub for resource associated with defence and security issues in the Baltics within the next few years.

## **Materials**

The platform SecureBaltics provides resources:

- For all interested parties, including expert community, in the form of interviews, policy briefs, commentaries on topical issues
- For teachers and lecturers in the form of study materials and tests that can be included in academic curriculum
- For students in the form of lectures and study materials, as well as interactive study materials through games.

## **Partners**

The SecureBaltics portal is supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia and the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia.

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