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U.S. faces critical policy choices in its support of Ukraine

Former ambassador to Ukraine presents at Naples Council on World Affairs

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One of the greatest privileges of my membership in the Naples Council on World Affairs is the opportunity to attend their Distinguished Speakers lecture series. The Council is a non-profit, non-partisan organization whose mission is to educate, inspire and engage our community on critical global issues. Although I have on occasion, in my classroom, referred somewhat tongue-in-cheek to “experts” as “someone from out-of-town with slides,” the speakers the Council bring to us are genuine card-carrying experts — academics, policy practitioners, diplomats, international businessmen and women.

An example is a recent presentation by William B. Taylor, the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine from 2006 to 2009. Now a vice president for Russia and Europe at the U.S. Institute for Peace, Ambassador Taylor brought a wealth of experience and understanding of the situation in Ukraine to enlighten the Council’s membership. I’m not summarizing his remarks, I will adopt his framework for analysis in hope of adding some value to his talk.

Ambassador Taylor divided his lecture into three sections: the current situation in Ukraine; the policy environment in Washington, DC; and, why these policy choices matter to Americans.

The situation on the battlefield. Ambassador Taylor and I have a few things in common. We are service academy graduates, Vietnam veterans, and have both studied and lectured about warfare. We agree that wars are relatively easy to get into and far more difficult to leave. American military officers today, and surely those fighting on both sides in Ukraine, refer to Prussian theorist and soldier Carl von Clausewitz’s “fog and friction” of war. Vladimir Putin told his troops to pack uniforms for a victory parade. Volodymyr Zelensky expected significant territorial gains in a counteroffensive. Neither happened.

Despite technological advances in the instruments of modern warfare — the battlefield in Ukraine is replete with drones, electronic warfare and guided munitions — the trench warfare in Ukraine

more closely resembles World War I than might have been forecast by proponents of a “revolution in military affairs.” Thus, the military confrontation has been described as a stalemate — with neither side willing to cede territory nor capable of breaking through the other’s defenses.

The war continues at great cost, with estimates of casualties on each side estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands. Ambassador Taylor inquired, “Is the conflict doomed to deadlock?” Political and military experts conclude that, unless one side has a position of advantage on the battlefield to be carried to the negotiating table, peace plans remain in the category of “wishful thinking.”

The environment in Washington, DC. Last October, the Biden administration submitted to the Congress a sort of “omnibus” foreign policy funding bill totaling \$106 billion, including \$60 billion in military and humanitarian aid for Ukraine, and lesser amounts for military aid to Israel, border security, humanitarian assistance, and countering China. But this proposed allocation of resources landed with a thud in the U.S. House of Representatives where the tumultuous situation on the southern U.S. border has become a *cause célèbre* in a presidential election year.

Arguably, placing funding for Ukraine and the border in the same bill was an error, as these separate issues should be debated on their own merits. With this linkage, efforts are now underway to achieve policy changes in border security in exchange for the \$45 billion needed to replenish Ukrainian stockpiles of munitions and weapons. Such aid, including U.S. intelligence capabilities, is needed to enable a future breakthrough in their counteroffensive against Russian troops in the east. At the least, it can stave off Russia achieving an upper hand on the battlefield that could be translated to a diplomatic victory. The old adage that “politics stops at the water’s edge” has been set aside.

Why these choices matter. Ambassador Taylor made the point that the Russian invasion of Ukraine threatens the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a state, undermining the prevailing world order.

However, the issue, and the test for the United States in its future foreign and defense policy, is larger than that. In a recent issue, *The Economist* made the case that the international security environment is at “an inflection point” as the U.S. grapples with Iran’s use of militant proxies in the Middle East, Russian aggression in Ukraine, and Chinese threats to invade Taiwan. Reinvigorating the role of the U.S. as a superpower, employing its considerable military, economic, and diplomatic heft, is essential, the newspaper argues, in maintaining international order and adapting “to a more complex and threatening world.”

Thus, the willingness of the U.S. to support Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression goes well beyond the forward edge of battle in that conflict. I suspect that Ambassador Taylor, and much of the membership of the Naples Council on World Affairs, will agree.

Robert P. Haffa, Jr, a retired Air Force Colonel, has been a member of the Naples Council on World Affairs since 2014, and leads one of its weekly roundtables in the Great Decisions program. He holds a B.S in International Affairs from the U.S. Air Force Academy, an M.A. in Political Science from Georgetown University, and a Ph.D. in Political Science from MIT. He has taught courses in American foreign and defense policy at the Air Force Academy and at Georgetown, and teaches an online graduate class in American defense policy for Johns Hopkins University.