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The Donald Trump Factor and US-Ukrainian Relations (2017-2020): From Strategic Friendship to Cold Partnership

This article analyses the dynamics of relations between Ukraine and the United States under the presidency of Donald Trump, covering the approaches of the parties to bilateral cooperation, key events and issues. It describes in detail the main features of Washington's policy towards Ukraine during this period, the factors that shaped it and the reasons for any contradictions involved. It is noted that the course of the Trump administration's foreign policy towards Ukraine has been shaped by three factors: strong pressure from Congress, contradictions between the president and his foreign policy team, and public suspicions of collusion between Trump's entourage and the Kremlin in the 2016 US presidential election, which was accompanied by a bitter domestic political struggle. With no room for manoeuvre in such circumstances, the Trump administration chose the safest course of action – to continue the policy of the Obama administration with certain tactical changes designed to demonstrate a more decisive stance than its predecessor. These involved a significant increase in economic and military assistance to Ukraine, including the provision of lethal weapons and the appointment of Kurt Volker as US Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations. Based on extensive empirical evidence, this paper also highlights the progress made and achievements with regard to cooperation in four areas that made up the Ukrainian-US relations agenda during the period covered: political dialogue, security, energy projects and the fight against corruption. The author shows that the contradictory nature of US policy towards Ukraine under Trump comprised a combination of a significant increase in military assistance and a decrease in the intensity of high-level political contacts.

Keywords

US-Ukraine relations; strategic partnership; conflict in Donbas; Trump administration; US military aid; Crimean Declaration.

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Introduction

In the US presidential election this autumn, like 2020 and 2016, the Republican Party will be represented by businessman and former President Donald Trump. High approval ratings in the opinion polls make it likely that the Republican billionaire will return to the White House. His previous presidency, during which he attempted to break with the principles of US foreign policy that had evolved over the past half-century, was a real test for Europe, NATO and the transatlantic relationship.

Ukraine occupies a special place in this context. Unfortunately, the Ukrainian issue has gradually moved out of the realm of exclusively US geopolitical strategy in Eurasia or US-Russian relations in the past decade and unwittingly become part of US domestic politics. Both during the 2016 presidential election and Trump's first impeachment at the end of 2019, Ukraine was the cause of most of Trump's problems and shaped his personal dislike for country.

At the same time, his contradictory statements on relations with NATO and the war in Ukraine in the current election campaign, as well as his desire to build a foreign policy opposite to Biden's against the backdrop of continued Russian aggression, have caused serious concern both in Europe in general and in Ukraine. As a research goal, it is therefore a scientifically relevant and practically useful task to analyse and identify the specifics and positions of the parties, plus the logic and trends in Ukrainian-US relations during Trump's term of office and the influence of his personal attitude towards Ukraine on them. This will provide a deeper understanding of the possible scope of US policy towards Ukraine and Europe in the event of Trump's return to power, as well as his foreign-policy thinking as a representative of the isolationist wing of the Republican Party.

The structure of the text is as follows: the first two sections describe the significance of the chosen topic and its relevance to the current context, the purpose and objectives of the research, the sources used for it, and the methodology. The article then presents the results of the political analysis of the dynamics of Ukrainian-US relations under Trump's presidency, including the circumstances of their formation, the interests and approaches of both sides, the personal attitude of the 45th US President to Ukraine, and the main areas of bilateral cooperation. The conclusions highlight the main findings of the analysis of Ukrainian-US relations during this period and provide answers to the research questions posed.

1. Materials and methods

Since 2014, Ukrainian and foreign researchers have shown a significant increase in interest in the topic of Ukrainian-US relations. Ukraine, which has never previously been a country at the centre of foreign policy priorities of the United States, has become the subject of constant attention from US scholars and politicians. This research is based on academic articles, analytical materials, statements and interviews with diplomats, as well as information from publications in the media.

Most scholars traditionally view and analyse US-Ukrainian relations through the prism of US-Russian relations. As Oleg Kondratenko notes, Ukraine has been important to the US establishment since the proclamation of its independence not so much in its own right, but in the context of relations with Russia (Kondratenko, 2020). Ruth Deyermond cites Ukraine's geopolitical position pushing Washington to use it as a tool for managing relations with Moscow, which gave rise to the region's US-Ukraine-Russia trilateral structure that has been followed by all US administrations since the collapse of the USSR (Deyermond, 2023).

On the other hand, a second group of researchers mainly in Ukraine analyses Ukrainian-US relations in the context of US policy in Central and Eastern Europe, and seeks to place them in the Euro-Atlantic space and regional order. Victoria Mykhtunenko stresses that since the presidency of George W. Bush, the United States has sought to integrate Ukraine as closely as possible into the Central European region to strengthen regional security and its position within it. Under Trump, these considerations have also taken on an economic dimension, as Ukrainian gas storage facilities and pipelines could be used to expand US liquefied natural gas exports in Europe (Mykhtunenko, 2022).

Among works on similar topics, it is worth mentioning the papers of Ukrainian researchers Kravchenko (2020), Dubovyk (2019) and Zhygailo (2019). Their common feature is to note the contradictory nature of Washington's policy towards Ukraine and the strong influence of Congress on the position of the Trump administration. Among foreign scholars, attention is worth drawing to the works of Deyermond (2023), Rolf (2021), Malyarenko and Wolff (2018), and Ülgül (2020). In particular, Deyermond believes that the main reason for the contradictions in US policy towards Ukraine and Russia

during this period is the lack of a clear strategy and ideological basis in Trump's foreign policy. US researchers Malyarenko and Wolff analysed the positions of Ukraine, Russia and the US in the Donbas conflict through the prism of rent-seeking behaviour, concluding that the Trump administration did not consider a political settlement of the conflict realistic and sought to maintain the status quo between the parties.

The article also draws on interviews with former Ukrainian ambassadors to the US Valeriy Chaly and Volodymyr Yelchenko, who provided valuable empirical data and insights.

In this context, our contribution to the study of this issue is to identify the main factors, areas of cooperation and trends in Ukrainian-US relations during Trump's term in office, as well as the impact of the US domestic political situation on relations with Ukraine.

To achieve this goal, it is necessary to answer three key research questions:

- To what extent has the Trump administration's policy towards Ukraine been unfavourable or disloyal compared to that of the Obama administration?
- Was Washington's policy during the Trump period coherent and consistent, and what factors had an influence on its formulation?
- Has US political and military support for Ukraine waned amid the Trump administration's controversial attempts to reach out to the Kremlin?

The theoretical approach that seems to us most effective for analysing US-Ukrainian relations is the concept of 'offshore balancing' within the framework of neo-realism. Analysing relations between Ukraine and the US through the lens of neo-realism means viewing them as relations between states with different capabilities and statuses in the international system. The US is a global power that seeks to contain Russia's revisionist ambitions and strengthen its influence in Europe. From this perspective, Ukraine is seen as a middleweight state important for deterring Russia and ensuring stability in Central and Eastern Europe. In its relations with Ukraine, the US is trying on the one hand to expand bilateral cooperation, and on the other hand not to upset the balance of power in the Donbas conflict and avoid direct confrontation with Russia. Ukraine's geographical location make it a natural counterbalance to Russia. Within the neo-realist paradigm, Ukraine's desire to develop partnerships with the US, especially

in the security and energy sectors, is a means of strengthening its independence and defence capabilities in the face of Russia's imperialist encroachment.

According to the concept of offshore balancing, the United States, as the world's most influential power, uses its regional allies and partners to deter potentially hostile states and maintain its leadership in the international arena. This strategy is based on coordinating the actions of allies and partners in the region, building up their defence capabilities and exerting diplomatic pressure on geopolitical rivals. In practice, this is reflected in the building of pro-US regional partnerships to remotely deter hostile countries. This allows Washington to maintain a favourable balance of power in key geopolitical regions and avoid the costs of large-scale military deployments.

The methodological basis of this work is general scientific and special research methods, allowing Ukrainian-US relations to be analysed from the perspective of multidimensionality and systematicity. The main methods used are a systemic approach, historical and comparative methods, content analysis and situational analysis. In particular, the systemic approach is to consider the bilateral relations between Ukraine and the US as a set of positions, interests and mutual influences of the parties, including internal and external factors, areas of cooperation and contradictions, which are structured and in dynamic interaction with each other and the broader international context. At the same time, these relations have certain tendencies, logics, institutional forms and limits.

The use of the historical-comparative method in the context of the dynamics of interstate relations makes it possible to determine the current state of these relations, the trajectory of their development and the degree of continuity in relation to different historical periods, as well as identify unresolved problems and new approaches. Comparing the approaches of the Obama and Trump administrations to building relations with Ukraine after 2014 and the behaviour of the Ukrainian authorities allows us to elucidate the direction of Washington's actions under Trump, the similarities and differences in the two presidents' approaches to the situation in Ukraine and the conflict in Donbas, and changes in the scope of US political and military support.

The use of qualitative content analysis in the evaluation of media publications, statements and interviews of diplomats and politicians, as well as the Crimean Declaration of 2018, allows us to obtain additional 'hidden' information about specific aspects of Ukrainian-US relations,

such as their atmosphere and tone, and the mismatch between political rhetoric and the priorities of the parties. Situational analysis allows us to identify and understand the circumstances, interests, considerations and goals of the parties, as well as the internal discussions of the US and Ukrainian authorities that underpinned the adoption of key decisions on bilateral cooperation. This study also uses statistical methods (in the analysis of bilateral trade and the volume of US aid) and an issue-based approach.

2. Results

The presidential election of 2016 became a landmark in the modern history of the United States. In conditions of enormous political polarisation and an irreconcilable struggle, the election was won by a non-systemic candidate, billionaire Donald Trump, who ran for the Republican Party. During the election campaign, in the sphere of foreign policy he promised to destroy the terrorist group ISIS, take a tough line on Iran and Cuba, withdraw most US troops from the Middle East, increase support for Israel, renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and trade relations with the EU, withdraw from the Paris climate agreement, force European NATO countries to fulfil their financial obligations, and make China pay for unfair economic competition.

In general, Trump's election programme and rhetoric reflected a radically different vision of the role of the United States and its foreign policy in the world than that of his predecessors. At its core was a mixture of ideas of isolationism, neoconservatism, realism and business logic, including rejection of interventionism, emphasis on national sovereignty and economic interests, greater reliance on unilateralism and the reduction of US international commitments, the securing of US leadership through military dominance, a sceptical attitude towards alliances, especially NATO, selective participation in international affairs, and a shift away from the policy of promoting democracy abroad.

The foreign policy practice of the Trump administration was characterised by economic egoism, a perception of international politics as a market for business deals, a tough style and a distrust of traditional diplomacy. The logical result of this approach was the chaotic and unpredictable foreign policy of the 45th US president,

exacerbated by pressure from Congress and personnel problems (Rolf, 2021, p. 668).

Trump's victory in the US presidential elections had a profound impact on Washington's approach to Kyiv, starting a rather controversial stage in bilateral relations. The contradictory attitude of the new US administration, and of Trump personally, towards Ukraine had a number of reasons.

First, during the election campaign, Democrat Hillary Clinton was the undisputed favourite of the Ukrainian authorities as a consistent supporter of the country and a harsh critic of Russia. As a result, Ukrainian leaders almost openly supported the Democratic candidate. In contrast, the foreign policy of the Republican candidate was built on the principles of economic nationalism, scepticism about the global role of the United States and transatlantic unity. His approach to foreign policy was to reduce international commitments and aid to allies, and concentrate on the country's domestic – mostly economic – problems. His foreign policy vision also included building stable relations with China and Russia. On key issues such as military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, the conflict in Syria, and the containment of China and North Korea's nuclear programme, the Republican candidate took a much harder line than Obama and Hillary Clinton. At the same time, Trump never mentioned Russian aggression and the annexation of Crimea during the election campaign, which suggested that these issues would not be important to his administration.

Second, during Trump's presidency, Ukraine-US relations were constantly affected by the negative trail associated with the 2016 election campaign. In August 2016, the US media reported that political consultant Paul Manafort, who headed Trump's campaign headquarters, received more than \$12.7 million from Ukraine's Party of Regions between 2007 and 2012, as well as collaborating with pro-Russian oligarchs and, after the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovich's authoritarian regime, advising the pro-Russian party Opposition Bloc in Ukraine's 2014 parliamentary elections. Moreover, Trump's adviser received money for his services as a political consultant in Ukraine illegally and was forced to resign as a result of the scandal. Trump's entourage reasonably believed that the Ukrainian government – or at least part of it – and the US embassy in Kyiv, which was under the influence of the Democrats, were involved in the leak of sensitive information during the election. As became known later (2019) at hearings in the House of Representatives, Trump was personally very

negative in his attitude towards Ukraine, believing that “the Ukrainian government during the election played on the side of the Democrats and sought his defeat” (Kravchenko, 2020, p. 663).

Third, Trump’s sporadic statements about his readiness for a “grand bargain” with Russia, as well as the White House and State Department’s attempts to find common ground with Moscow on problematic issues such as Syria, Iran, North Korea and nuclear weapons, also served as an unfavourable backdrop for Ukrainian-US relations. In addition, after Trump’s victory, Congress and the FBI continued for two years to investigate the ‘Russian’ ties of his campaign headquarters and the Kremlin’s support for the campaign.

Between 2017 and 2020, Ukrainian-US relations underwent significant changes related to the Trump administration’s developing course in international affairs. First of all, they became more pragmatic and tougher compared with the earlier period, characterised by a cooling, a formal partnership rhetoric and a narrowing of the agenda. Ukraine was not among the Trump administration’s foreign policy priorities, with the Middle East, Southeast Asia and deterring Russia in Eurasia becoming the main focus of the US at the time. Against this background, US relations with Europe deteriorated. Trump repeatedly made trade claims against European countries sceptically evaluated US commitments to NATO and the EU, and did not coordinate the most important decisions on international issues with European leaders. As a result, his presidency was marked by a weakening of transatlantic unity.

Trump considered the situation in Ukraine exclusively through the prism of relations with the Russian Federation, which he was trying to improve at the beginning of his term. Despite all his hesitations and flirtations with Russia, Trump has repeatedly stated in public that the Ukrainian region of Crimea was illegally annexed. Meanwhile the military conflict in Donbas was in his eyes a European security problem that had little relationship with US interests. In 2017, the US tried to shift responsibility for its settlement to France and Germany, but failed (Chekalenko, 2017, p. 125).

At the same time, to protect itself under pressure from Congress and accusations of links to Russia, the Trump team declared its full support for Ukraine. This led to a significant increase in US military aid and the provision of lethal weapons to Kyiv. In autumn 2017, despite contradictory statements from the White House, official US policy towards Ukraine became clear: a continuation of the previous

administration's policy but with some changes.

The new goals of US policy towards Ukraine finally became crystallised at the end of 2017, when Washington moved from attempts to reach an understanding with the Kremlin to systemic deterrence. These goals were to preserve political stability in Ukraine and its pro-Western course, as well as to freeze the conflict in Donbas, given that Moscow was unwilling to make any concessions. The United States also used its political influence as a major ally to force Ukrainian leaders to follow a set domestic policy course.

Under Trump, bilateral relations between Washington and Kyiv were extremely unpredictable, and the tone of contact changed from friendly to formal and diplomatic. This situation reflected the negative attitude of Trump and his entourage towards Ukraine due to the Manafort scandal. It is difficult to speak of a unified US foreign policy towards Ukraine at the time, with disagreements between the president, his advisers, government agencies and Congress becoming a characteristic feature of US foreign policy. Congress, the national security advisor and the Pentagon shared a common position on supporting Ukraine and deterring Russia. President Trump, while publicly supporting Ukraine, sought to open a dialogue with Moscow and was ready to make political concessions. The US State Department manoeuvred between the positions of various influential groups in Washington, trying both to maintain a line in support of Ukraine and please the president. As US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson referenced in 2017, the main goal of the Trump administration's policy towards Russia was to "prevent a state of insurmountable disagreement" (Taim, 2024, p. 18).

On the other hand, Ukraine enjoyed stable bipartisan support within the US elite, with a Ukrainian lobby active in Washington. The Congressional Ukrainian Caucus in the House of Representatives was the largest of the Eastern European caucuses and comprised more than 40 representatives, notably including speaker Nancy Pelosi (Kondratenko, 2020). The Senate Ukraine Caucus united 16 senators and focused on the priority areas of: 1) strengthening military aid to Ukraine; 2) supporting reforms and technical assistance; 3) cybersecurity initiatives; 4) strengthening Ukrainian energy independence; 5) support for the granting of Tomos (Decree of the Patriarch of Constantinople on official recognition) to the Kyiv metropolis. It was largely due to the position of Congress, which the White House was forced to take into account, that Ukraine retained geopolitical attention and increased

support from the United States.

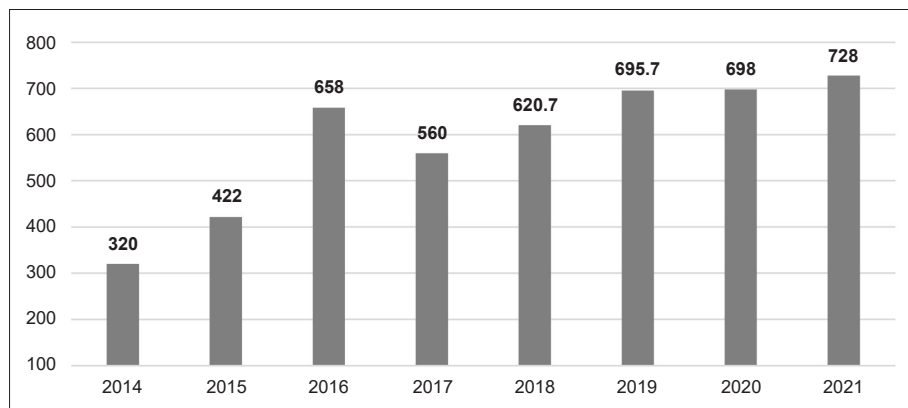
The Trump administration took off value-based glasses on its partnership with Kyiv. In its eyes, Ukraine was a corrupt, oligarchic country with a fragile political situation and weak state institutions. However, the level of bilateral relations achieved after 2014 and the presence of a pro-Western regime in Kyiv had strategic value to American geopolitics. The new administration in Washington inherited two 'alliance dilemmas' that needed resolving: first, how to increase US-Ukrainian cooperation without destroying opportunities for dialogue with Russia on existing international issues; and second, how to increase military and political support for Ukraine, but in a way that did not involve what was considered a secondary issue in the form of the Donbas conflict and avoid providing security guarantees for Kyiv.

Between 2014 and June 2021, the United States provided over \$4.6 billion in aid to Ukraine, of which \$2.5 billion was military aid. However, the amount of aid granted under Obama and Trump differed significantly: the Democratic administration allocated a total of \$1.4 billion to Ukraine between 2014 and 2016, compared with approximately \$2.6 billion under the Republican administration from 2017 to 2020 (Fig. 1). Comparing security assistance, the difference was even more pronounced – \$630 million under Obama versus \$1.34 billion under Trump (Ivasechko & Lopushanskyi, 2023).

The Trump administration moved away from a policy of supporting a wide range of reforms in Ukraine because of questionable results and regression in some areas, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Prosecutor's Office and courts. From mid-2017, the US government cut funding for assistance programmes in the areas of civil-society development, political reforms, the environment and healthcare. However, under pressure from Congress, the Trump administration continued a policy of diplomatic, economic and military support for Ukraine and consistently increased the amount of aid. For the Trump administration, the issue of aid to Ukraine and relations with the country became a card in the internal political struggle. The United States allocated \$560 million in aid to Ukraine in 2017, \$620.7 million in 2018, \$695.7 million in 2019, and \$698 million in 2020. A \$728 million aid package for Ukraine was also included in the 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act signed into law in December 2020 (Chaly, 2019; Yelchenko, 2021). Between 2016 and 2021, Ukraine was consistently among the top -10 largest recipients of US economic and military aid.

In terms of formal indicators, the Trump administration has thus de facto proved to be one of the most pro-Ukrainian in the history of bilateral relations.

Figure 1: Dynamics of US aid to Ukraine from 2014 to 2021, \$ million



Sources: Valeriy Chaly, 2019; Volodymyr Yelchenko, 2021.

Under Trump, US technical assistance to Ukraine focused on the ministries of defence (in terms of institutional reforms in line with NATO standards), energy (support for the launch of electricity and gas markets) and finance (customs and fiscal reform) in areas in which changes were easier to record and feel. The US was not involved in the implementation of reforms in Ukraine at an institutional level like the EU, but helped with the framework of individual projects.

Ukrainian-US relations during this period were marked by a narrowing of the strategic agenda. While previously shaped by six areas – political dialogue, security, support for reforms, energy, the fight against corruption, and support for democracy – after 2016, the list was reduced to four: political dialogue, security, energy and the fight against corruption. Although the Republican administration continued to discuss the need for reforms and the strengthening of democratic institutions, the reality was that it did not appear very concerned about these issues. The main themes of bilateral relations became security assistance and cooperation in the energy sector.

In the realm of international affairs, the Trump administration was not a supporter of value-oriented policy, thus considering programmes to support democracy- and civil-society-related institutions abroad

as secondary, and reducing their funding (Haar & Krebs, 2021). In the case of Ukraine, the new administration in Washington was also suspicious of the pool of NGOs and activists that had received grants and support from the US Embassy during Obama's tenure. As a result, the regularity of contact with civil society representatives in Ukraine decreased under Trump.

In similar fashion to the situation during Obama's presidency, matters relating to trade and economic cooperation between the countries were not a priority in this period. Over the course of four years, trade between Ukraine and the United States increased by only \$700 million, from \$3.35 billion (2017) to \$4.05 billion (2020). Washington consistently had a positive balance, with US exports to Ukraine three times higher than the other way around. Yet considering the volume of bilateral trade, the two countries did not consider each other to be important economic partners. In terms of Ukraine's structure of foreign trade, the US share was 3.4% (\$4.05 billion), compared with the EU's 40.7% (\$48 billion) and China's 13% (\$15.4 billion). In the list of trading partners of the US, Ukraine was in 67th place with a share of less than 0.1% (Dubovyk, 2019).

Meanwhile, Ukraine's exports to the United States have not exceeded \$1 billion in recent years. The basis of this trade comprises ferrous metals and their products, IT services and food products, which collectively account for 80% of exports. Ukraine practically does not supply the US with high-tech products, energy resources, strategic materials or modern weapons that could make Washington interested in Ukraine as an important partner and promote the strengthening of bilateral relations.

2.1. Political dialogue

Between 2017 and 2020, the intensity of bilateral contacts decreased between the countries, reflecting change in Washington's attitude towards Ukraine. Although both sides continued to actively talk about strategic partnership, there was a clear weakening of contact in terms of high-level meetings and diplomatic support from the medium to high level. Both the frequency of contact and the status level of US officials who visited Kyiv decreased over this period.

During those years, Ukraine was visited by a number of US officials – twice by secretaries of state (Rex Tillerson in 2017 and Mike

Pompeo in 2020) and twice by Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, as well as by Secretary of Defence James Mattis, National Security Advisor John Bolton, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Wess Mitchell, Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Tina Kaidanow, and numerous congressional delegations. However, most of these visits were not aimed at solving practical tasks, but instead demonstrating political support for Ukraine or timed to coincide with national celebrations. Neither Trump nor Vice-President Mike Pence visited Kyiv during their terms in office. In this way, the focus of US foreign policy on Ukraine significantly decreased during this period, whereas, in parallel, Washington maintained close relations with other countries in Central and Eastern Europe. For instance, Trump visited Poland in 2017, and Pence went to Poland, Hungary, Georgia and Estonia, while Speaker of the House Paul Ryan visited Poland and the Czech Republic (Ülgül, 2020).

At the same time, amid accusations of loyalty to Russia, the Trump administration took an unconventional step: in July 2017, the US Department of State appointed a special representative for Ukraine, with the aim of demonstrating the importance of matters there to the new administration. The person appointed was Kurt Volker, an experienced diplomat who held the position for more than two years. His resignation in September 2019 was caused by the scandal surrounding Trump's political pressure on Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy to launch an investigation against his election rival, Biden, and Biden's son, Hunter.

Volker oversaw US policy towards Ukraine at the State Department because other senior officials in the administration were unwilling to do so. During the two-plus years of his tenure, he visited Ukraine 11 times and established contact with all of Kyiv's influential political groups. The US diplomat also held talks with Russian presidential aide Vladislav Surkov on the settlement of the Donbas conflict.

On the Ukrainian side, diplomatic visits and contacts became more frequent as the Poroshenko administration sought to establish working relations with the new US administration and smooth out the unpleasant fallout from the 2016 election.

From 2017 to 2018, President Petro Poroshenko met with Trump three times in brief formal encounters – first, during his visit to the US in June 2017, and then twice during his participation in the annual sessions of the UN General Assembly. Prime Minister Volodymyr

Groysman did not visit the US during Trump's term, while Andriy Parubiy, chairman of Ukrainian parliament the Verkhovna Rada, visited the country twice, in 2017 and 2018. There, he met with Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, as well as heads of committees, senators and representatives of the State Department.

On 20-21 June 2017, President Poroshenko paid a working visit to the United States, where he met with all the key representatives of the new administration in Washington – President Trump, Vice-President Pence, Secretary of State Tillerson, Secretary of Defence Mattis, Secretary of Energy Perry, Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross and Speaker of the House Ryan. During the meetings, US officials expressed support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and promised to increase military aid. The parties also discussed details of the agreement on Ukraine's purchase of US coal.

Formally, in terms of the level of meetings and content, Poroshenko's US visit did not differ from his previous one in 2014, but the political atmosphere was completely different. Moreover, Trump's meeting with Poroshenko took place before his meeting with Vladimir Putin on 7 July. These circumstances therefore give reason to believe that Trump used his meeting with the Ukrainian president as a means to refute accusations in domestic politics that the Kremlin supported him in the election.

As in the previous period the public rhetoric of the Ukrainian and US authorities differed significantly. The Ukrainian leadership continued to stress the importance of US assistance in various areas and the strategic partnership status of relations with Washington. In its statements, the Trump administration used the term "strategic dialogue" and refrained from making any commitments. Against this backdrop, the White House took several diplomatic initiatives to demonstrate its support for Ukraine and the positive dynamics of the bilateral relationship.

In 2018, under the initiative of the United States, the Strategic Partnership Commission resumed its work at the level of foreign ministers. On 16 November, foreign ministers Pavlo Klimkin and Mike Pompeo held a plenary meeting of the Commission in Trump.

On 25 July that year, the State Department had, meanwhile, released the Crimea Declaration (US Department of State, 2018), in which the Trump administration reaffirmed US non-recognition of Russia's annexation of the peninsula and announced a long-term policy of non-recognition of forcibly seized territory. On the one hand,

this document clearly signalled the US position on Russia's attempts to legalise the annexation, while on the other hand, by formulating a legal position on the Crimean issue, the US de facto placed it outside the US-Russian discussion on a wide range of international issues.

Since late 2017, against the backdrop of failed attempts to reach an understanding with Russia, US diplomacy has also changed the definition of the separatist quasi-republics in Donbas (the so-called Luhansk People's Republic and Donetsk People's Republic) in public discourse from the neutral term "territories not controlled by the Ukrainian government" to "territories occupied by Russia".

Like its predecessors, the Trump administration has never officially considered the conflict in Donbas as internal, believing it to have been inspired by Moscow. Since 2018, instead of calling on both sides to exercise restraint, Washington has therefore begun to call directly on Moscow to withdraw Russian forces from Donbas and abolish the pseudo-republics. At the same time, between 2018 and 2020, the Trump administration continued to officially advocate for the implementation of the Minsk agreements, arguing that these were the last documents in which Russia recognised the territorial integrity of Ukraine – excluding the occupied Crimea (Malyarenko & Wolff, 2018). In reality, however, Washington did not believe that Moscow would fulfil its commitments under the agreements and considered a prolonged freeze in the conflict to be the best scenario.

An unexpected problem in bilateral relations between Ukraine and the United States was the situation surrounding Motor Sich, an aerospace equipment manufacturer based in Zaporizhzhya that specialises in the development and production of engines for helicopters, uncrewed aerial vehicles, other aircraft and missile systems. In June 2019, it was revealed that the owners of the strategic enterprise had previously reached an agreement to sell it to two Chinese companies – Skyrizon Aircraft Holdings and Xinwei Group. The United States strongly opposed the deal, with Washington believing it could strengthen China's military capabilities through the aviation technology involved. The Trump administration therefore began putting pressure on the Ukrainian leadership to block the deal.

To this end, US National Security Advisor John Bolton visited Kyiv on 23-24 August. As well as attending the country's Independence Day celebrations, the US representative met with Ukrainian security officials. The main topic of discussion in the meeting was the situation with Motor Sich. Under pressure from the US, the Ukrainian authorities

initially blocked the deal and, in January 2021, President Zelenskyy enacted the NSDC's (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine) decision to impose three-year sanctions on Chinese investors in Motor Sich, complicating Ukraine-China relations.

During Trump's term, the role and political weight of the US Embassy in Kyiv significantly decreased. The situation was complicated by the fact that then-ambassador Marie Yovanovitch, who was appointed in May 2016, was a Democratic appointee. President Trump's entourage suspected the ambassador of organising the leak of sensitive information about Manafort's activities in Ukraine, with Trump seeking her resignation from the start of his term.

Ukrainian leaders quickly realised that the US ambassador did not have political support in Washington and began to ignore her recommendations, communicate with special representative Volker instead or seek contacts in the Trump administration. The situation ended with Yovanovitch's scandalous dismissal from the diplomatic service in May 2019. As a result of a combination of circumstances, the influence of the US Embassy, as well as the US itself, on political processes in Ukraine significantly weakened after 2017.

As mentioned earlier, the volume of US military aid to Ukraine increased significantly under Trump, rising from \$262 million in 2017 to \$269 million in 2018 and \$398 million in 2019, and totalling \$283 million in 2020 (Two billion in 8 years, 2021). However, the general logic of the US in this area has remained constant, with the country supplying the types of weapons and equipment that the Ukrainian government could not produce or purchase in the short term, yet were needed to deter Russian aggression.

From 2014 to 2020, US provided military assistance to Ukraine through more than 10 international programmes, but more than three-quarters of the funds, equipment and machinery were channelled through two programmes – \$1.35 billion under the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) and \$720 million under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) programme.

Washington also continued to provide Kyiv with expert assistance in developing reforms for the defence and security sector. Amid this strategy, US officials began to place more emphasis on reform of the defence industry, considering it more important than transferrals of equipment (Ukrainian National Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017). A group of US advisers worked at the Ministry of Defence (MoD) of Ukraine, consulting the military leadership on issues relating to

institutional reform of the ministry and the Armed Forces, including strategic planning, military education and medicine, and management structure. Under the Trump administration, the level of advisory assistance for security has increased. In particular, the number of US advisers at the MoD doubled between 2017 and 2020, numbering 16 in early 2021.

From 2017 to 2018, Washington-based think tank the Jamestown Foundation developed a concept for the Ukrainian Navy to build a 'mosquito fleet' to deter Russian aggression in the Black and Azov seas, with its representatives becoming regular guests at the Lviv and Kyiv security forums.

In January 2018, a US representative, Anthony Teter, was appointed to the Supervisory Board of state company Ukroboronprom under the quota of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, tasked with advising its management team on corporatisation and development strategy. He retained his position after President Zelenskyy came to power.

In February 2019, at the request of the Ukrainian leadership, the United States sent a group of experts from the Institute for Defense Analyses headed by Donald Winter, the US senior advisor on the reform of the Ukrainian defence industry and former secretary of the US Navy. His responsibilities included reform of the country's military-industrial complex, including duties relating to the transformation of Ukroboronprom, military aid and Kyiv's purchases of US weapons.

In addition, the Defence Reform Advisory Board (DRAB) was established as an advisory body under Ukraine's Ministry of Defence in September 2016. This included the heads of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces, as well as senior strategic advisors from the US, Canada, the UK, Poland, Germany and Lithuania. The United States delegated retired general John Abizaid to the DRAB, where he headed the group of strategic advisors to the MoD and served on the board until November 2018 – when he was replaced by retired lieutenant general Keith Dayton.

However, the main difference between the Trump administration and its Democratic predecessors in this regard was the change in approach to military assistance. The Republicans dismissed concerns that providing lethal weapons to Ukraine would provoke Russia to escalate its military actions in Donbas. On 22 December 2017, the White House announced a decision to lift the embargo on the supply of lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine. Following this, in March 2018,

the United States supplied Ukraine with 37 FGM-148 Javelin anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) launchers and 210 missiles for \$47 million. In total, between 2017 and 2020, the US transferred two batches of Javelin ATGMs to the Ukrainian Armed Forces in military aid, with a second at a cost of \$39 million, and sold one batch under a contract with the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence.

US military assistance also increased significantly in terms of nomenclature between 2017 and 2020. As well as Javelin ATGMs, it included counter-battery radars, anti-mortar radars, sniper rifles, Harris radios, automated force-management systems, Humvee light armoured vehicles, equipment for divers, demining and cybersecurity, spare vehicle parts, ammunition, night-vision devices, thermal imagers) and medical equipment.

In 2019, the United States handed over two Island-class patrol boats to Kyiv. The Ukrainian MoD also received permits to purchase batches of Barrett M107A1 sniper rifles and grenade launchers from US companies. In July 2020, the Trump administration approved the potential sale of 16 Mark VI combat boats worth \$600 million to Ukraine, six to be transferred to Kyiv as military aid and with the Ukrainian government able to purchase the rest at its own expense. All of this allowed Trump to declare in an interview that “I’m the one who gave Ukraine offensive weapons and anti-tank systems. Obama didn’t. He sent pillows and blankets” (Deyermond, 2023).

During the Trump administration, Ukrainian-US cooperation in the field of joint military exercises has developed at a consistently high level. In 2017, 2,500 military personnel from 15 countries took part in Rapid Trident land exercises at the International Peacekeeping and Security Centre at the Yavoriv training base, rising to more than 2,200 personnel from 14 countries in 2018 and 3,700 from 14 countries in 2019. In 2020, meanwhile, more than 4,000 military personnel from nine countries took part in exercises. Speaking at the opening ceremony for the international exercises in Yavoriv, President Zelenskyy noted that the annual Rapid Trident exercise is an important step towards Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration (President’s Press office, 2020).

In parallel, the traditional Ukrainian-American Sea Breeze exercises were held annually in the south of Ukraine and in the Black Sea. More than 3,000 military personnel and 31 ships from 16 countries took part in 2017, compared with 2,700 military personnel and 29 ships from 19 countries in 2018, and more than 3,000 military personnel and 32 ships from 19 countries in 2019. Over 2,000 troops and 23 ships from

nine countries participated in Sea Breeze in 2020, but the exercise was limited to the maritime phase due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Cybersecurity has, meanwhile, become a new area of military-technical cooperation. Since 2014, both Ukraine and the United States have been subjected to regular cyberattacks by Russian hackers, who have attacked government information systems, critical infrastructure facilities and banking institutions. That led to the first Ukrainian-US interagency consultations on cybersecurity being held in Kyiv in September 2017. In turn, the United States began providing assistance to Ukraine to strengthen the cyber capabilities of its government agencies (Begma, Shemayev & Radov, 2019). Second and third rounds of consultations were held in 2018 and 2020. Between 2017 and 2020, the US government allocated up to \$20 million in total to Ukraine for cybersecurity projects, including the training of Ukrainian specialists, advisors and equipment for the counre's Cyber Threat Response Centre.

2.2. Cooperation in the energy sector

Promoting US energy interests has become one of the priorities of Trump's foreign policy. In the framework of Ukrainian-US relations, joint projects in the energy sector have traditionally included the supply of fuel to nuclear power plants, as well as promising gas and oil production projects. Under Obama, the construction of a spent-fuel storage facility in the Chernobyl zone in the form of ISF-2 was added to the list.

Meanwhile, the Poroshenko administration began to look for ways to improve relations with the Trump team to smooth over its support for Democrat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election. Having recognised the new president's business-oriented approach to foreign policy, the Ukrainian authorities offered the United States favourable economic contracts to interest Washington.

The first such initiative involved the purchase of US coal from Pennsylvania, which led to the first meeting between Poroshenko and Trump in June 2017. During the meeting, the presidents made an agreement on purchasing anthracite coal for Ukrainian thermal power plants and also discussed the possible supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Ukraine via the Polish LNG terminal in Świnoujście.

In August of that year, Ukrainian state-owned company

Centrenergó signed a commercial contract with US firm Xcoal Energy & Resources for the supply of 700,000 tonnes of coal. Given the logistics of supplies, the cost of US coal was higher than the market price, but the move comprised a political deal to improve bilateral relations.

The second business initiative was the purchase of a batch of locomotives from the United States to renew Ukraine's own fleet. In February 2018, state-owned company Ukrzaliznytsia and US company General Electric Transportation signed a framework agreement involving the purchase and repair of diesel locomotives worth \$1 billion. The first stage involved a contract to supply 30 TE33AS diesel locomotives to Ukraine, with a contract value of \$140 million. These were delivered by February 2019, and this marked the end of the cooperation (Zhygailo, 2019).

Like its predecessors, the Trump administration supported the construction of the spent-fuel storage facility, in which US company Holtec International was involved. Under the terms of the agreement, the company was to supply specialised equipment and 94 spent-fuel storage casks, as well as transfer technologies for their manufacture once the repository was operational. The cost of the project was \$410 million, of which \$250 million was to be raised with the help of a US financial institution and the rest provided by Ukrainian company Energoatom. In September 2017, the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and Bank of America Merrill Lynch approved a \$250 million loan for this strategic project. Construction work on ISF-2 began in November 2017, with the first stage of the storage facility completed in December 2020. In May 2021, the first batch of spent fuel arrived at the complex for storage.

The Trump administration also tried to encourage Kyiv to buy liquefied natural gas, which the US began supplying to Europe in 2016. In this context, the governments discussed options for supplying 1 bcm of gas through the LNG terminal in Poland, which opened in 2015. Another option was to create a gas hub for US LNG in Ukraine. Under this option, the US would pump 6-8 bcm of gas per year through the Polish LNG terminal into Ukrainian storage facilities and then deliver it to EU countries through the country's gas transmission system (Mykhtunenko, 2022, p. 32).

In August 2019, Ukraine, Poland and the United States signed a memorandum on trilateral energy cooperation in Warsaw, providing for the establishment of liquefied natural gas supplies to Ukraine via Poland. In May 2020, the Ukrainian government signed a memorandum

with US company Louisiana Natural Gas Exports to explore the possibility of sourcing LNG supplies from the United States.

At the same time, these documents were mainly declarative in nature and the negotiations that took place from 2019 to 2020 did not yield any practical results. On the other hand, against the backdrop of increasing US gas supplies to Poland, the option of supplying it to Ukraine remained promising.

Between 2017 and 2019, several US energy companies were interested in working in Ukraine. Frontera Resources, which was lobbied by John Herbst, former US ambassador to Kyiv, considered gas production in the western part of the Black Sea shelf in the Odessa region, while Texas-based Longfellow Energy, which was lobbied by US Secretary of Energy Rick Perry, was interested in oil and gas fields in the Poltava region.

2.3. Fight against corruption

While the Republican administration reduced its focus on issues such as supporting reforms and strengthening democracy in Ukraine, the fight against corruption remained a priority on the bilateral agenda. Funding for virtually all technical assistance projects, with the exception of military aid, has been linked to progress in key areas, including the fight against corruption.

Despite distrust of Artem Sytnyk, director of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine, who was suspected by Trump's aides of involvement in the Manafort scandal, the US government continued to provide political and technical support to the Bureau.

The Republicans, however, had a different approach to the Democrats on the issue of fighting corruption. During Obama's presidency, a liberal-democratic philosophy dominated in this area, according to which corruption had a negative impact on democratic institutions and the efficiency of public administration in Ukraine, slowing down the pace of reforms. Republicans, meanwhile, viewed this issue through the lens of the concept of *realpolitik*. Given the close links between the Ukrainian elite and oligarchs, and the high level of corruption, anti-corruption investigations into government officials and parliamentarians were an effective tool to pressure the authorities to 'push through' certain decisions or to discredit disloyal politicians. At the same time, the US was sceptical about overcoming

corrupt practices in Ukrainian politics. In particular, Secretary of State Tillerson noted in 2017, “what is the point of fighting for the body of the Ukrainian state, particularly in the east, if its soul is being eaten away by corruption?” (Böller & Herr, 2019).

Since mid-2019, Ukrainian-US relations have been in deep crisis. As the 2020 US presidential election approached, Trump’s team did not even hide the fact that they were looking for dirt on their main rival, Joe Biden. In July 2019, President Trump tried to freeze the allocation of military aid to Kyiv while demanding that Ukraine’s new president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, initiate an investigation into Biden’s son Hunter.

Hunter Biden was a member of the board of Ukrainian gas company Burisma, receiving up to \$4 million during 2014-2019. He was invited to join the company by its owner, Mykola Zlochevsky, who served as ecology minister during Yanukovych’s presidency. After the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, Zlochevsky had problems with the new government. Trump’s entourage believed that Hunter Biden’s lucrative position at Burisma was a manifestation of political corruption, comprising a payment for solving the company’s problems by his father, who was then US vice-president. During a telephone conversation with Trump, Zelenskyy promised to see what could be done, but the Ukrainian law-enforcement agencies did not open an investigation in the end.

After the media learned in September 2019 of Trump’s attempts to freeze military aid to Ukraine, the ‘Ukraine-gate’ scandal erupted in the United States. At this time, Volker, the special representative for Ukraine negotiations, resigned, and the House of Representatives began impeachment proceedings for pressurising Ukraine. A telephone conversation with Ukrainian leader Zelenskyy resulted in Trump becoming the fourth US president to be impeached. He was accused of trying to exchange military assistance to Kyiv with a political favour involving organising investigations against the Biden family for his own private interests.

As a result of the scandal, contacts with Ukraine became toxic for US politicians and bilateral relations were put on hold. Neither a new US ambassador to Kyiv nor a new special representative of the State Department for Ukraine negotiations was appointed. Bilateral relations remained in this state for a year and a half, during which there was only a symbolic visit by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Kyiv in January 2020 aimed at demonstrating support for Ukraine.

It was not until early 2021, when the Biden administration came to power, that Ukrainian-US relations began to thaw.

Conclusion

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election marked the beginning of a new, tense and controversial phase in US-Ukraine relations. The 45th US president never had a very favourable stance towards Ukraine during his term in office, with the reasons for his negative attitude including the Ukrainian leadership's support for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, the disclosure of politically sensitive information about the Party of Regions' 'black book' during the election campaign – which led to the resignation of campaign manager Paul Manafort – and Trump's intention to normalise relations with Russia.

At the same time, public suspicions and investigations into collusion between Trump's entourage and the Kremlin left the new president with little room for manoeuvre, with any concessions to Moscow or pressure on Kyiv being politically explosive. In these circumstances,

Trump took a moderate position, at least publicly, in supporting Ukraine in its opposition to Russian aggression.

As a result of a combination of Trump's personal grievances, the personnel chaos in the new administration and political expediency, US policy towards Ukraine became controversial during this period. At the end of 2017, the Trump administration's policy course towards Ukraine was finally formed, comprising a continuation of the previous administration's policy with some changes.

It should be noted that US policy towards Ukraine during Trump's presidency was neither coherent nor consistent. Its formation was influenced by congressional pressure, confrontations within the administration and the domestic political context. Throughout his term, Trump, who advocated a more isolationist foreign policy and was sceptical about Ukraine, was constantly at odds with key government security officials who belonged to the hawkish Republicans and supported the global role of the US in the world.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration faced strong pressure from Congress. In the first half of Trump's term, the Republicans had a majority in the House of Representatives, but it was made up mostly

of moderates who argued for more support for Ukraine. After the 2018 congressional elections, the Democrats gained control of both houses, increasing pressure on the White House on this issue. Between 2017 and 2020, Ukraine thus enjoyed stable bipartisan support, with the position of Congress one of the main drivers of increased support for Ukraine.

Following the general stance of the Obama administration, Washington under Trump broadened the scope of support for Ukraine in an effort to demonstrate decisiveness, as well as a difference from its Democratic predecessors. Such practical steps included increased sanctions pressure on Russia, the appointment of Kurt Volker as the US State Department's Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations, increased economic and military assistance to Ukraine, and the provision of lethal weapons such as Javelin ATGMs. These steps, without changing the situation in the Donbas conflict, allowed Trump to demonstrate a decisive position against the background of Obama's cautious policy.

During Trump's term, US aid to Ukraine increased significantly, totalling \$2.6 billion between 2017-2020 compared to \$1.4 billion from 2014 to 2016 – and in the case of military aid, it doubled. The main recipients of US aid were the ministries of defence and energy, as well as financial institutions. At the same time, support for economic reforms and democracy in Ukraine declined during this period, reflecting the Trump administration's abandonment of the policy of promoting democracy abroad.

At the same time, the contradictory nature of US policy towards Ukraine manifested itself in the fact that against the backdrop of increased military assistance to Kyiv and official rhetoric about partnerships, the intensity of political dialogue between the two countries decreased and the agenda of bilateral relations narrowed to four areas: political dialogue, security, energy and the fight against corruption. Neither President Trump nor Vice- President Mike Pence visited Kyiv during their terms in office, differing significantly from the situation with regard to neighbouring Central and Eastern European countries.

The main reason for the contradictory nature of US policy towards Ukraine during Trump's term and its unpredictability in the backdrop of his potential victory in the 2024 elections appears to be that the formally favourable policy towards Kyiv was not based on US national interests or strategic considerations, but on the political

situation and Trump's personal interests, which are characterised by volatility. An illustrative example was the situation with regard to his first impeachment in late 2019, when Trump tried to use the freezing of military aid as a leverage against new Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy to get dirt on his election rival. At the time, the Zelenskyy administration adopted a restrained position of non-interference in US domestic affairs, but bilateral relations were de facto put on hold until the change of power in the White House in early 2021.

Yet Trump still has a deep-rooted hostility towards Ukraine. If he wins the US presidential election in November 2024, his policy towards Ukraine during his second term looks set to be even more unpredictable. His campaign statements and foreign policy worldview oscillate between selective internationalism and interactive isolationism. The geopolitical vision of Trump and his advisors is based firstly on the stance that the main threat to the United States and the international order is China. In this context, the idea is that the focus should be on countering Beijing's growing influence, especially in East Asia, while the war in Ukraine is a drain on US resources and attention, and should be brought to an end as soon as possible. Secondly, the vision is based on the stance that as Ukraine's survival as an independent state is, according to Trump, more important to Europe than to the United States, European countries should provide more financial and economic support, and take chief responsibility for deterring Russia in the future. Thirdly, Trump considers the Biden administration's stance on the war in Ukraine as a weak, failed policy, and has declared his desire to show strength when he comes to power.

At the same time, a number of circumstances have emerged during the war that Trump is unlikely to be able to ignore. Cutting off aid to Ukraine and forcing it to start negotiations on a ceasefire would seriously damage US strategic interests not only in Europe but also in other regions of the world, including the Indo-Pacific, where the struggle between the United States and China is unfolding. It should also be borne in mind that Congress has earmarked more than

\$185 billion for Ukraine aid programmes between 2022 and 2024. Both strategic considerations and the business logic to which Trump is committed look set to push him towards trying to convert these costs into strengthening geopolitical influence in Central and Eastern Europe, while creating lucrative contracts for US companies and political dividends for himself. Ultimately, Republicans in Congress are split almost in two on the subject of aid to Ukraine. As isolationists,

are advocating for the cessation of assistance to Kyiv, while the party's neoconservative wing is taking a hawkish position by actively advocating for more help.

Taking all this into account, we can identify three possible scenarios for Trump's future policy on the war in Ukraine in the event of a second presidency:

1. A 'peace at any cost' scenario envisages the termination of military assistance to Ukraine and the initiation of ceasefire negotiations, as well as pressure on European countries to take similar steps. This could result in a freeze in the war along the front line, a de facto loss of the occupied territories by Kyiv, and possible easing of economic sanctions against Russia. In return, Ukraine may receive a new security agreement with the United States and generous annual military aid as compensation.

2. A 'peace through force' scenario envisages the adoption of a new, and most likely reduced, aid package for Ukraine, the expansion of the range of weapons provided to Kyiv and the lifting of all restrictions on their use, and the toughening of sanctions against Russia. In the short term, the result could be to increase Russian casualties in Ukraine and force Putin to enter into fair negotiations.

3. A 'hard realistic deal' scenario envisages a moderate option that would include the reduction of aid to Ukraine, the lifting of restrictions on the use of US weapons and, at the same time, the initiation of peace talks between the parties under US mediation. The contours of a compromise agreement would include a return to the 2022 positions of the parties, the preservation of Russian control over the occupied Crimea and Donbas regions, possible demilitarisation of Crimea, and a moratorium on Ukraine's accession to NATO. In return, the United States would guarantee long-term military support to Kyiv.

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