

7-17-2023

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Recommended Citation

Sasongkojati, Hiu and Subono, Nur Iman (2023) "Liberal Principles, Realist Actions: U.S. Foreign Assistance in the War in Ukraine," *Journal of Strategic and Global Studies*: Vol. 6: No. 2, Article 4.

DOI: 10.7454/jsgs.v6i2.1122

Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/jsgs/vol6/iss2/4>

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Liberal Principles, Realist Actions: U.S. Foreign Assistance in the War in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to a concerted international effort, with the United States at the forefront, to provide assistance in the form of weaponry and logistical support to the embattled country. While no soldiers are deployed to the front line in an official capacity, the U.S. has provided aid through many security assistance programs dating back to 2014 without becoming an active participant in the conflict, drawing parallels between Ukrainian defense and American national interests. There is a realist element to this approach by maximizing U.S. interests against Russia with minimal loss of life, but there is also a liberal element by the invocation of moral arguments in order to maintain voter approval to continue providing aid. The paper explores this hypothesis on the simultaneous, but distinctive, use of realist and liberal approaches in U.S. military aid to Ukraine by examining publicly available data on U.S. foreign assistance and survey results. The analysis contributes to a renewed understanding of U.S. foreign policy in the contemporary era and its response to national security threats without the immediate use of kinetic military action, in addition to furthering the literature on public opinion and foreign aid.

Keywords: U.S. foreign assistance, public opinion, war in Ukraine, national security, foreign policy

1. Introduction

The War in Ukraine, which started from the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and the oblasts of Luhansk and Donetsk in 2014, has developed into an open conflict in early 2022. It involved not just the two countries, but also Belarus, allied to Russia, and the United States and NATO member states that support Ukraine. U.S. officials have painted the Russian invasion as “unjustified” and would bring a “catastrophic” loss of life and widespread suffering. Worldwide, the invasion has attracted condemnation from the international community as a gross violation of sovereignty, though those in favor of imposing sanctions and other punishment towards Russia and its officials remain varied. Analysts view Russian aggression as a major security threat and considered it the manifestation of a renewed geopolitical rivalry between major world powers since the 9/11 attacks on U.S. soil (Bond, 2014; Masters, 2023).

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Prior to the “special military operation” on February 24, 2022, and thereafter, President Putin and his cadre of officials justified the operation by invoking the threat of fascism in Ukraine, employing words such as “nazis” and accusations of genocide by Ukrainian security forces against the Russian ethnic population. Claims are made that Ukraine is developing biological weapons in discreet labs around the country, going as far as calling for a meeting in the United Nations to discuss the allegations. Seemingly in anticipation of a potential pushback by European countries, it asserts that “Western aggression” through the expansion of NATO member states in countries neighbouring Russia justifies any efforts to defend Russian sovereignty. The Russian public, in return, seem to have largely backed Putin’s efforts to take over Ukraine by force. Countering Russian claims, U.S. officials made public the country’s support for Ukraine, imposing sanctions to individuals and government institutions aside from providing military aid. Additionally, the defence of Ukraine has been likened to defending liberal values such as democracy and human rights, raising the stakes by introducing moral arguments against Russian aggression.

While U.S. intelligence have predicted that a Russian invasion of Ukraine was ‘very likely’, the general public was caught by surprise when Russia launched its “special operation” in late February 2022. Almost immediately, U.S. and European governments signaled their support of Ukraine by promising to send logistical, communication, and armaments, falling short of deploying soldiers on the ground. Later on, it developed into plans to send more advanced weaponry to supplement Ukraine’s numerical disadvantage to Russian troops. U.S. President Joe Biden continually addresses partner concerns in order to secure the resources needed by Ukraine. At the same time, President Biden has regularly addressed congress and the general public that support for Ukraine is a necessary endeavour and assures that the defence of Ukraine aligns with American interests. As the U.S. is not an active participant in the war, this shows that the U.S. engages in a two-pronged approach to its policy on Ukraine: the realist act of providing assistance without engaging in kinetic warfare, and the act of maintaining domestic support by referring to the protection of liberal norms and values that underpin American interests. As we will see in the following sections, domestic support is a crucial factor to maintain in order for the U.S. to continue supporting Ukraine.

This paper aims to provide an explanation for the behaviour of the United States in openly engaging in a warfare-by-proxy against Russian aggression in Ukraine using liberal principles to maintain domestic support for their assistance to Ukraine. We propose two

reasons as to why this is a significant development in the study of U.S. foreign policy. One, this represents an unprecedented step in the U.S. publicly acknowledging their involvement in a foreign conflict, going out of its way to the point of announcing Russian troop movements using intelligence assets for months prior to the invasion and sending armaments. Two, Washington's maintenance of domestic public support for its continued assistance towards Ukraine employs moral arguments supporting the defense of liberal values—democracy, human rights, and globalization—which comes at a crucial time when Americans remain critical of the fallout from the retreat from Afghanistan and declining overall support of the nation's involvement in foreign affairs amidst low confidence in the economy.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly consensus on public opinion as an indicator of domestic support for foreign policy has moved away from the “Almond-Lippman” stance that the public has rational and consistent views on foreign policy with consequences for policymakers (Aldrich et al., 2006) to a more granular view on the roles of media institutions (Baum and Potter, 2008; Heinrich et al., 2017), partisan politics and cue taking by elites (Gries, 2016; Cavari and Freedman, 2019), and peer group preferences (Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017). Public opinion has also been correlated with the start of a foreign aid program (Heinrich et al., 2018) and the use of sanctions to placate demand for action amidst international crises (McLean and Whang, 2014). Different foreign policy acts can induce different responses from voters depending on its local impact—policies that bestow local benefits reduces opposition to democracy promotion abroad, while punitive acts such as sanctions that produce local costs reduces indifference (to foreign policy) and increases opposition to further action (Christiansen et al., 2019). Additionally, domestic politics have been shown to correlate with aid policy by how presidential administrations would become less likely to pursue bilateralism when faced with a divided government (Kersting and Kilby, 2021).

Typically, foreign aid is situated within an internationalist order as symbolic domination—the use of symbols (i.e., gifts) to reinforce a liberal social hierarchy—usually placing the donor's national self-interests first and foremost (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Hattori, 2001). A “threefold set of rights” underpin the foundations of liberalism, which are freedom from arbitrary authority, democracy, and individual rights (Smith et al., 2016). Therefore, a liberal understanding of donor self-interests focuses on the centrality of these sets of rights upon its aid policy. However, self-imposed obligations to promote liberal values aside, the actual

deployment of aid is determined through a realist lens; in the context of foreign aid, realism describes the use of aid as a function to promote security and economic interests, becoming strategic in nature (Bearce and Tirone, 2010; Bermeo, 2017). Nevertheless, the act of war—which is inherently realist—individual citizen beliefs and values can influence the public acceptance of war and support for defense spending (Eichenberg and Stoll, 2017). While the literature on public opinion and foreign aid remains scarce, it is known that voter awareness on aid expenditures (in “good” or “bad” times) can restrict the availability of opportunities for governments to pursue their own objectives (Abbott and Jones, 2021) and that government responsiveness is important to maintain public opinion for aid as a contested foreign policy (Dasandi et al., 2022).

In this paper, we establish an understanding of a specific configuration of overt military aid in connection to domestic public opinion, which remains poorly understood in the literature. In the background, U.S. public opinion is shaped by a liberal view of geopolitics while the state remains realist in its approach to aid. We understand that cue-taking and media framing can direct public opinion to become more favorable of a particular foreign policy, but American voters will nevertheless try to relate to the policy with their lived experiences. Lastly, we see that donor interests in foreign aid, while typically framed as part of international politics, are rooted in its foreign policy doctrine, and that public opinion can have great influence upon U.S. consistency in pursuing its interests abroad.

3. Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative approach utilizing primary and secondary sources to describe U.S. foreign policy and the allocation of foreign assistance in the form of military aid. The primary sources refer to publicly available datasets and aggregate data collected from official reports released annually, which are laid out in tables (if the data covers more than one subject) or figures (if the data covers only one subject and is meant to convey patterns). The secondary sources refer to press releases or reports of survey results whose data are not immediately accessible by the authors. This study explores three categories of research: one, the motives and strategic interests of the U.S. in its support towards Ukraine; two, the use of the liberal approach to maintaining public opinion in supporting Ukraine; and three, the provision of military aid to Ukraine. The study covers two periods: the 2014-2022 period of passive support and the post-2022 period of non-belligerence, but no distinction is made in the organization of the paper outside of mentioning the year in the text.

4. Results

4.1. Motives and Strategic Interests

The motives and strategic interests of the U.S. in the war in Ukraine are documented in official publications and numerous policy analyses. Vice President Kamala Harris, in an interview with DoD News on February 18, 2023, have outlined several motives behind U.S. involvement that revolve around upholding “international rules and norms”, and “for as long as it takes”. These include the right for nations to peacefully exist, that no nation can violate the sovereignty of another, and the preservation of inalienable human rights. These principles are also stated in the website for the Department of State, which contains a special section on Ukraine, quoting Secretary Anthony J. Blinken in that the U.S. has a “clear way forward” amidst uncertainty—to support and help Ukraine defend itself and to “hold Russia accountable”. Throughout the page, there are multiple mentions of security tied to human rights and how it benefits the international community at large.

To better assess the realist perspective of the state, it is useful to identify the strategic interests behind the aid policy. All signs point to the defeat of Russia as America’s primary strategic interest in the region, coupled with President Biden’s stated goal of regime change in Russia which was later rescinded (Goldman, 2023). Cordesman (2022) lays out two strategic benefits that U.S. support towards Ukraine has generated that justifies the costs thus far. The first is that it allows the U.S. to gain a strategic leverage against Russia as the war cripples its warfighting capability with an immense cost to its economy. Second, it increases trust and confidence among strategic partners and shows that an alliance with the U.S. really works. With the U.S. also embroiled in another strategic competition with China, the overt use of military aid for Ukraine sends a strong message to the world: it deters current adversaries from following the same path of aggression, limiting their options to challenge American strength, whilst removing any doubts that suggest the U.S. is a declining power.

4.2. Public Opinion on Aid

In the domestic sphere, U.S. policymakers have voiced the same arguments in defense of liberalism for aid towards Ukraine, but the public is not unanimous in their approval. For starters, while a survey by Pew Research Institute in 2021 shows that the majority of voters

believe in liberalism, it is not readily translated to support a foreign country on the basis of upholding liberal values. As shown in Figure 1 below, an ever-increasing share of U.S. citizens since March 2022 say that the U.S. gives too much support to Ukraine, the largest of which are among Republicans (Rep/Lean Rep.) and shared among Democrats (Dem/Lean Dem.) to a lesser amount. In the same period, the share of voters who say the amount of aid is ‘about right’ or ‘not enough’ has gradually decreased.

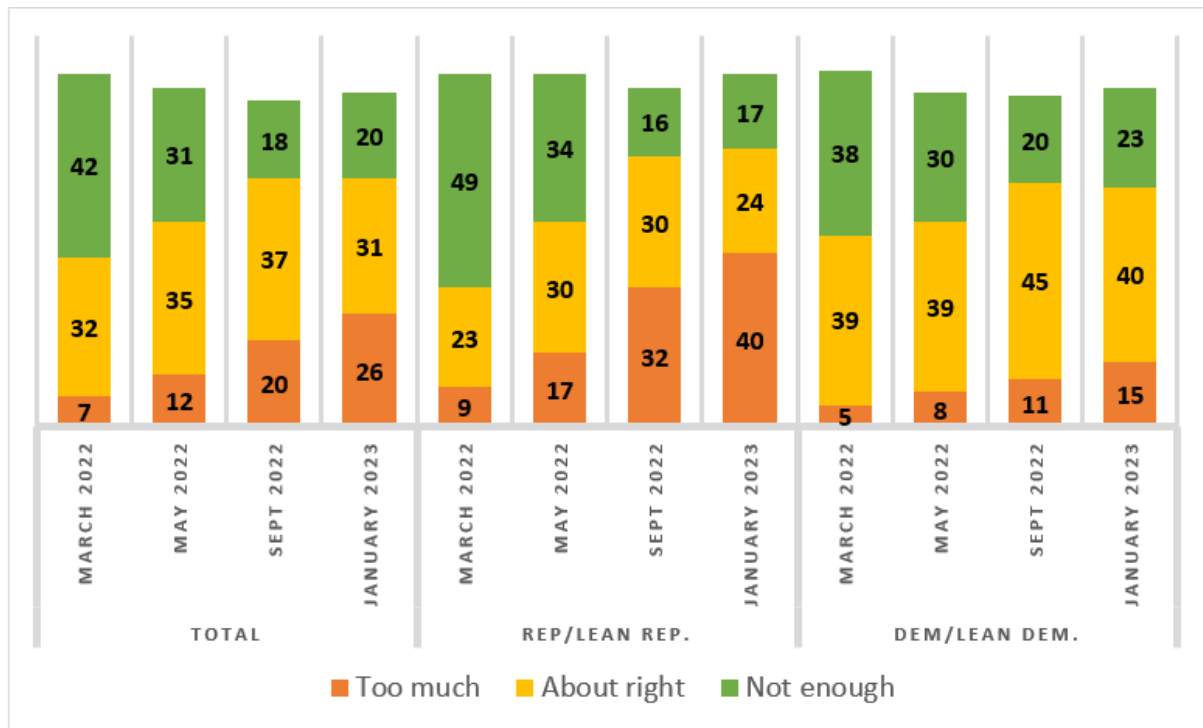


Figure 1. Survey of U.S. adults in Jan. 18-24, 2023, on the amount of aid to Ukraine. Survey conducted by Pew Research Center (Dunn, 2023).

Public attitudes towards aid will need to be understood through the context of domestic politics. Beginning in 2021, the U.S. have provided military aid to Ukraine amidst public concerns of a weakening domestic economy marked by high inflation. This has largely informed public attitudes towards aid which is seen as less of a priority over domestic issues. Then, since 2014, American politics have become increasingly polarized which affect how voters process cue-taking from governing elites. Threats of an impending recession have loomed over Americans and entered the political sphere; in an October 2022 interview, current speaker of the House and GOP congressman Kevin McCarthy warned that Americans would view aid to Ukraine as a “blank check” that would become increasingly unpopular

given the current economic climate. Indeed, while aid towards Ukraine remain a bipartisan effort, the figure above shows that the largest share of those opposed to more aid are Republicans, which are more likely to contest the politics of a sitting Democratic president. Partisan division of the current aid policy and the threat of derailment towards foreign are likely why U.S. commitments to Ukraine are made at a time when both the executive and legislature are held by the governing Democratic party, where a near majority of Democrats have supported the president's policy since the beginning of Russia's invasion.

In an effort to stave off pessimism, the same message of defending liberalism is also communicated to the general public in the form of 'cues' that inform voters that supporting Ukraine is as necessary as keeping America safe from threats. These cues typically frame U.S. aid as a positive force in the conflict that keeps Ukraine from being overrun by Russian forces. In his State of the Union address on February 7, 2023, aired from the capitol to a nationwide audience, President Biden seemingly invites the general public to think of the Russian invasion as a "test" of American resolve and principles, to which victory is deemed inevitable given a united support for Ukraine. Focusing specifically on communicating American might and leadership in times of crisis, it tries to evoke a feeling among Americans that Cohen and Gentile (2023) see as a 'dislike' of 'losing', which they consider necessary to maintain seeing that Russia is increasingly relying on a strategy of protraction with the hope that Western countries will eventually lose interest in the conflict.

4.3. Military Aid to Ukraine

U.S. support towards Ukraine began very early in 2014 after Russia moved to occupy the Crimean Peninsula and Russian-backed mercenaries took control of the oblasts of Luhansk and Donetsk. The historical basis for U.S. security assistance is the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, whereas the act to provide additional assistance to Ukraine and impose sanctions on the Russian Federation is authorized in P.L. 113-272 titled "Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014". Depending on the agencies involved, various terms can be used, including security force assistance, partner capacity build up, security sector assistance, and military assistance. In the paper, we use the term military aid to broadly encompass all such activities. The U.S. has used various military aid programs and accounts to help build the defense capabilities of Ukraine's armed forces since 2014. Based on a Feb. 3, 2023 press release by the Department of State, these include Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA), Foreign Military Financing

(FMF), International Military Education and Training (IMET), Excess Defense Articles (EDA), and conventional joint exercises, to name a few.

U.S. assistance under the Obama administration (See White House (2016) for an overview of U.S. non-military assistance to Ukraine since 2014) did not begin exclusively with military aid, which was a small portion of an overall effort to reform Ukrainian institutions and combatting corruption. Nevertheless, in the wake of the Russian occupation, the U.S. had started working to build the capacity of the Ukrainian Armed Forces as shown in Figure 2 to deter future incursions into the country in the form of additional military training and funding. As shown in the figures below, the number of Ukrainian trainees and total dollar value of U.S. security assistance to Ukraine have increased from 2014 thereafter. The data on foreign military training is collected from the Foreign Military Training and the DoD Engagement of Activities of Interest Reports (FMTR) which covers foreign armed forces but generally excludes police forces. Meanwhile, the data on security sector assistance is an aggregate of all U.S. programs, either in the form of obligations, allocations, or expenditures, funded by the Department of State and the Department of Defense. Both sets of data are obtained from the Security Assistance Monitor dataset maintained by the Center for International Policy (CIP).

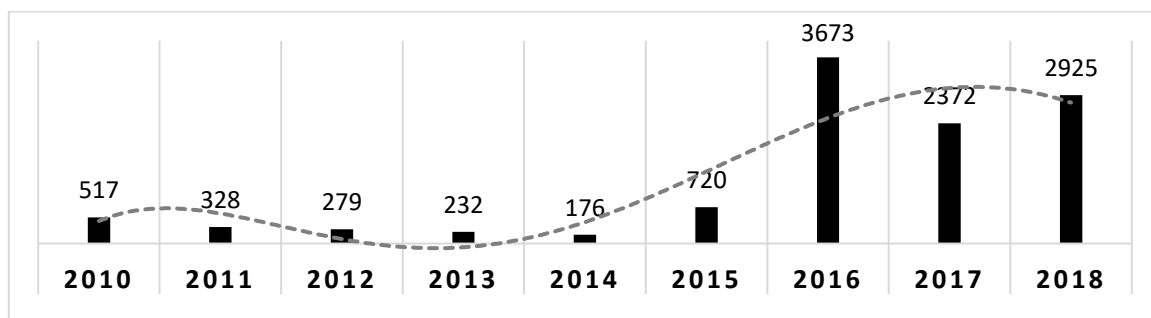


Figure 2. U.S. assistance to Ukraine via foreign military training in number of trainees, Calendar Year 2010-2018 (Security Assistance Monitor, 2023).

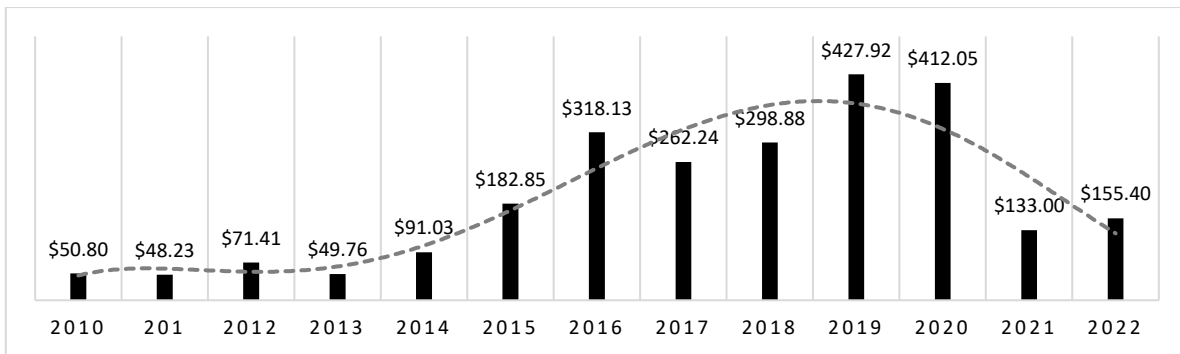


Figure 3. U.S. assistance to Ukraine via security sector assistance in total dollar value per million dollars, FY2010-2022 (Security Assistance Monitor, 2023).

In Figure 3, the total dollar value security sector assistance rose from 2014 to an all-time high in 2019, but then declined dramatically for FY2021 and FY2022. This can be explained by a change in how Washington allocates funds for Ukraine starting in 2021 through the drawdown of defense articles. According to the DSCA handbook for Foreign Assistance Act (FAA), this is a tool for presidents to use in securing additional funds in a speedy manner without first seeking additional legislative authority or budgetary appropriations. Under Section 506(a)(1) the president has the authority to direct the drawdown of defense articles from the DoD, related defense services, and military education and training, with an aggregate value not to exceed \$100 million per fiscal year. Congress progressively increased this cap to \$11 billion for FY2022, signed under P.L. 117-128 titled “Additional Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act” for 2022 and continued in 2023 under P.L. 117-180.(See H.R. 7691 on Additional Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2022) Beginning in late 2021, the U.S. started to focus less on assisting in reforms in favor of building Ukrainian military capacity. Throughout FY2021-FY2023, President Biden has made 30 drawdowns for the defense of Ukraine, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Presidential Drawdowns for Ukraine in millions of dollars, FY2021-FY2023

#	Date of authorization	Value	#	Date of authorization	Value
1	August 27, 2021	60.0	16	July 22, 2022	175.0
2	December 28, 2021	200.0	17	August 1, 2022	550.0
3	February 25, 2022	350.0	18	August 8, 2022	1,000.0
4	March 12, 2022	200.0	19	August 19, 2022	775.0
5	March 16, 2022	800.0	20	September 8, 2022	675.0
6	April 5, 2022	100.0	21	September 15, 2022	600.0
7	April 13, 2022	800.0	22	October 4, 2022	625.0

#	Date of authorization	Value	#	Date of authorization	Value
8	April 21, 2022	800.0	23	October 14, 2022	720.0
9	May 6, 2022	150.0	24	October 28, 2022	275.0
10	May 19, 2022	100.0	25	November 10, 2022	400.0
11	June 1, 2022	700.0	26	November 23, 2022	400.0
12	June 15, 2022	350.0	27	December 9, 2022	275.0
13	June 23, 2022	450.0	28	December 21, 2022	1,000.0
14	July 1, 2022	50.0	29	January 6, 2023	2,850.0
15	July 8, 2022	400.0	30	January 19, 2023	2,500.0

Source: The Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine, updated on January 26, 2023, based on press releases by Department of State and Department of Defense from August 2021 to January 2023 (Arabia, Bowen & Welt, 2023).

Furthermore, the expansion of the executive vis-à-vis the legislative roles in FY2021 and FY2022 compared to prior years marks a transition from ambivalence to belligerence prior to the 2022 invasion. However, the urgency implied through the use of drawdowns has not translated to a total override of executive function upon legislative authority; indeed, as shown in Table 2, President Biden continues to consult with policymakers on passing new appropriations for FMF and USAI through the legislature that could serve to dampen any criticisms that might influence public opinion.

Table 2. Select accounts of U.S. security assistance to Ukraine in millions of dollars, FY2016-FY2023

	FY16	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23
Foreign Military Financing (FMF)	85.0	99.0	95.0	115.0	115.0	115.0	1,547.0 (obl.)	-
Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI)	226.5	148.6	195.5	214.8	256.7	275.7	6,300.0 (obl.)	1,250.0 (obl.) out of 12,000.0 (appr. ⁵)

Sources: State Department congressional budget justifications and Department of Defense (DoD) budget requests in P.L. 117-103, P.L. 117-128, P.L. 117-180, and H.R. 2617 (United States 117th Congress, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d).

The abbreviations obl refers to obligations, meaning a proposed amount of commitments in the budget that legally binds the government for delivery of goods and services in a fiscal year, whereas appr refers to appropriations, meaning the amount of spending authorized by congress in a given fiscal year.

The data on military aid can be surmised in three points. One, that U.S. military aid to Ukraine has begun since 2014 and has picked up pace leading to and after the start of the invasion in 2022. Two, presidential drawdowns have been used since 2021 in lieu of ‘regular’ security assistance programs so that aid can be provided without lengthy legislative approval. Three, there is no indication of a slowing down of U.S. aid as Washington continues to push for billions of dollars in a quarterly basis for Ukraine.

5. Discussion

We see that the U.S. is engaged in two fronts to maintain the flow of aid to Ukraine: the fight to maintain public approval for aid and ensuring that Ukraine survives to continue promoting American strategic interests in the conflict. The survey data in Figure 1 shows that the number of Americans who approve of more aid is in decline, while data on military aid show that Washington has increased the lower bound of aid—from a low of \$50 million in drawdowns on July 1, 2022 to a new low of \$275 million in October 28 and December 9 the same year—that shows a commitment to deliver more aid for Ukraine. Furthermore, as the data does not show a decline in U.S. support towards Ukraine, we expect these numbers to increase in the coming months.

On converging the liberal values behind aid and the pursuit of realist goals, attempts to justify aid towards Ukraine on the basis of democracy, human rights, and sovereignty might attract the goodwill of key allies and partners, but falls short to convince more Americans to continue giving approval. A feeling of resentment due to lack of confidence in the economy may lead Americans to demand more in terms of benefits from providing aid and will not stand for what they see as altruistic behavior from the government. This could be why the government has been responsive towards the shift in public opinion by framing the conflict as a test of American might, that it stands to gain plenty from a Ukrainian victory in its war against Russia. In this case, attempts to appeal to American exceptionalism may be a path that Washington is taking to prevent voter pushbacks of funding a foreign war.

One thing worthy of note is that, public opinions aside, the president and congress remains in lockstep to pass more aid to Ukraine. This is an important point to make as the Democrats lost their majority in the House to Republicans after the midterm election in November 2022, but it has yet to prevent congress from appropriating more funds for Ukraine against those congressmen and women who oppose aid. While the results in this paper do not suggest a

connection between legislative behavior and public attitudes, the literature shows that policymakers in congress, as agents capable of manipulating public acceptance of war through mass media, have as much sway on public opinion as the executive leadership when a contested foreign policy is at stake.

6. Conclusion

The War in Ukraine is different from previous U.S. security engagements abroad—those on the ground are Ukrainian nationals, not American soldiers, utilizing U.S.-made weaponry and training that provides local benefits to American industries and services. It has been presented as the protection of the liberal order, pitting democracy and human rights against the antagonistic portrayal of Russia’s authoritarian aggression. As of February 2022, there is no clear end in sight for a conflict that has engulfed more than 200,000 in casualties, which could certainly affect public attitudes for prolonged funding and aid. This paper shows that the U.S. is actively trying to maintain public approval to continue providing aid for Ukraine by appealing to values of justice and human rights, in addition to a sense of exceptionalism that would result from a united American public. Aiming for a total defeat of Russia, it should not be expected that the U.S. will slow down the provision of aid as the war progresses, and our data suggests that Washington might prefer to overcome voter concerns instead of reducing its commitments in Ukraine.

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