

Ian Brzezinski: "Ukraine has to keep on pressing on its case"

Senior Fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security on the way American political establishment sees Ukraine today, the stance of the Obama Administration on Russia and expectations of the NATO Summit in Warsaw



In mid-March, Ian Brzezinski, a Senior Fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security in Washington DC and Ambassador John Herbst from the Atlantic Council, who also served as Ambassador to Ukraine, testified before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, at a hearing focused on Ukraine two years after the Russian invasion. In his testimony, Ian Brzezinski focused on the US' strategy regarding Ukraine and Russia, and called for an increase of economic sanctions against Russia, an expansion of NATO's presence in Central and Eastern Europe, military assistance to Ukraine, more proactive public diplomacy and counteraction to Russia's information campaigns, as well as Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine. ***The Ukrainian Week*** spoke to him about the way American political establishment sees Ukraine today, the stance of the Obama Administration on Russia and Mr. Brzezinski's expectations of the NATO Summit in Warsaw.

How would you describe the perception of Ukraine in the US Senate today?

I think that the US Congress has a pretty realistic assessment of how much progress Ukraine has made and what challenges that remain. They are demanding more aggressive political and economic reform in Ukraine, particularly in realm of combating the country's still pervasive corruption. With that said, most members of Congress remain fundamentally optimistic about Ukraine and strongly believe that the West should be doing more to support Ukraine's aspirations to not only reform itself,

but to institutionalize itself in the Trans-Atlantic community of democracies.

You spoke about specific assistance for Ukraine at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing. What did you argue for specifically?

On the economic front, the international community and the West, including the EU and US, have been pretty generous in terms of providing financial assistance to Ukraine. Where I think our assistance is most lacking is in the military and security domains. The United States and some of its allies have provided useful training and mentorship at the tactical level and needed advice on how to reform Ukraine's defense establishment at the institutional level. But what the West has not done - and I think it's urgent - is to provide the lethal military equipment that the Ukrainian Armed Forces needs to better defend its country and more effectively deter further Russian aggression. This would include anti-tank weapons, air defense capabilities, systems to help increase the accuracy of the Ukrainian artillery among others. The provision of such equipment would make it a more expensive undertaking to invade further into Ukraine.

Is there political will to do that in the US?

What strikes me about Washington is that there is strong bipartisan consensus calling for exactly that. It's been reflected in statements by Republican and Democrat members the House and Senate; in legislation passed with universal consent in both the House of Representatives

and Senate. The problem is that bipartisan consensus has yet to include the executive branch.

Is there anything Ukraine can do to convince the executive branch, or is that impossible?

It just has to keep on pressing on its case. There has been some progress. We have seen a steady hardening of the Administration's position on Russia. Over the last two years, President Obama has steadily increased the rigor of the economic penalties he has imposed on Russia, the scale and quality of US security assistance to Ukraine, and vigor of US and NATO exercises and presence in Central Europe. The problem is that these increases still far short of what is needed to cause Russia to reverse its course.

While the Administration's stance on Russia has been hardening, cooperation with it is being established on Syria. Aren't these two mutually exclusive?

While I don't think there are plans to accommodate Russia in Ukraine in return for Russia's cooperation in Syria, it's something we should watch out for. But I don't think that will be the case. I think the Obama Administration has finally recognized that cooperation with Russia is going to be transactional at best. I haven't seen yet evidence that it's going to ratchet back its military or economic assistance to Ukraine, or economic sanctions on Russia, or the military actions that the US is leading to defend Europe against Russia. And you probably know about the European Reassurance Initiative, as well as the budget request for it in 2017 which will quadruple funding for that program.

Meanwhile, a divide looms between Baltic States, Poland on the one hand, and Western European NATO allies on the other. The former keep talking about the urgency of the Russian threat, while the latter seem to grow weary of this – especially as the refugee crisis unfolds. Do you see a similar reaction in the US?

I have my differences with the Obama Administration: they could be doing more to help buttress security in Ukraine, Poland and Baltic States. But I haven't seen evidence of it becoming softer on Russia. It was deeply committed to its reset policy and but after seven years it appears to recognize that it was a failed policy. The issue now is whether they will sufficiently ratchet up assistance to Ukraine, the sanctions on Russia and the military actions to levels necessary to really deter Russia over the remainder of the year and beyond.

What are your expectations of NATO Summit in Warsaw?

This Summit will be taking place in a context where the alliance is facing significant challenges on four fronts.

The first one is the eastern front with the invasion of Ukraine, continued occupation of Georgian territory, political and economic pressure on those countries, provocative military actions against NATO allies and partners, airspace and sea space violations of allied and partner territories, provocative snap exercises, and a steady buildup of Russia's military capabilities on its western frontier.

You also have the northern front driven by Russia. That features Moscow's militarization of the Arctic which is rich in resources but also in contested domains. If this issue is not addressed at the Warsaw summit, it will come up on NATO's agenda sooner or later.

To the south, we have chaos and violence in the Middle East and Northern Africa. A tragic manifestation of this is the migration of refugees who are fleeing those regions and flooding European territory.

And then NATO has to be global alliance, because in an age of globalization it can not be sole a regionally focused alliance.

Warsaw will probably focus on the eastern front and migration. It will be a challenge for the Alliance to balance those two because they have a centrifugal dynamic on it. The key challenge will be to ensure that all allies contribute to the actions approved at the Summit to address each of those fronts.

Second, the success of the Summit will be measured more than that of any other summit in the post-cold war era by how it marshals the assets it has on hand to address issues on both the eastern and southern front.

What I hope will come out of this is a decision to increase NATO's military operations in Central Europe, along its eastern frontier. I personally would like to see battalions with special force capabilities deployed to each of Baltic States, and one or two brigades with necessary enablers to Poland, some NATO reinforcement to US bases in Romania and Bulgaria. I cannot emphasize enough the

need for European to match if not exceed US contribution to these undertakings. In this regard, Warsaw promises to be an important test of transatlantic burden-sharing

It's striking to me that the USG plans to invest USD 3.4bn in the defense of Eastern Europe, but we have not seen any of that caliber coming from Germany, UK, Italy, Spain, France and others in Western Europe.

Equally important is what exercises NATO will undertake following or before NATO Summit, to demonstrate its ability to reinforce deployments in Central Europe in a way that's rapid and decisive. Even a brigade is not that significant of military capability if you are trying to push back the Russians which have divisions in its Western Military District. There has to be demonstrated readiness to reinforce those based assets in the Baltics, Poland, and Romania.

The third step that should be taken by NATO is to give more authority to its military commanders. They need greater freedom of action so that they can respond in real time to Russia's provocative military actions. I don't think we'll see much progress, in realm but I see it as a very real need. Right now, NATO commanders cannot move Allied forces in response to provocative Russian actions with getting permission first from NATO political authorities in Brussels. That's not is an effective way for the Alliance to operate in the current environment. In the days of Cold War, when the Soviet Union lined up against NATO, commanders didn't have to ask the North Atlantic Council permission to respond to provocations. They had guidance and operated decisively based on that guidance. The



political authorities trusted the judgment of their military commanders. We need to delegate that authority and trust back to the commanders if we want the Alliance to really effectively stand against Russian provocations and aggression.

Back to Ukraine's security – how are Minsk Accords perceived in the US today?

I'm very uncomfortable with a group of nations basically forcing a solution on Ukraine, particularly when it has done nothing wrong to warrant the occupation and seizure of its territory. To date the Minsk Agreement is a failed agreement. If it was being effectively enforced, today, all Russian forces would have withdrawn from eastern Ukraine and Kiev would be controlling all its borders along its eastern frontier. And that today is not the case. Instead, Russia still occupies part of Eastern Ukraine, reinforces its presence there more and more equipment, including heavy, arms and ammunition, and continues to coordinate the operation of those forces in Eastern Ukraine.

As to your question, it depends on who you talk to. When you talk to German and French diplomats, they believe it's as the only path to peace. Clearly, the Obama Administration believes it's a satisfactory one. A widespread sentiment found beyond the administration in Washington is disappointment is the failure of the west to enforce Russia's compliance with Minsk. If we were really serious about enforcing Minsk, even if it is an imperfect document, we would be increasing our sanctions against Russia for non-compliance. Moscow has yet to adhere to a single element of that agreement, and our failure has been

to not escalate our sanctions in response to such non-compliance. You would think that would be a obvious step to take after two years of occupation of Ukrainian territory by Russian forces.

*Barack Obama announced the European Reassurance Initiative in 2014. It was launched in 2015 as a \$1bn-worth one-year plan for urgent response to the Russian aggression. The funding requested by the Administration in the 2017 budget is \$3.4bn, compared to \$789mn for 2016.

