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35°F

Wednesday, March 22nd 2023

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Kathleen Collins: Support Ukraine's victory out of moral necessity and for national security

A dictator's genocidal war for empire.



Ukrainian soldiers install an anti-tank missile systems 'Stugna' near Bakhmut, Donetsk region, Ukraine, Friday, March 17, 2023. (AP Photo/Roman Chop)

By [KATHLEEN COLLINS](#) |

March 21, 2023 at 6:21 p.m.

Defeating Russia in Ukraine is crucial. Morally, we must help end Putin's atrocities and genocidal aims and support Ukrainian sovereignty and democracy. Ukraine's victory is also vital to our national security. As increasing numbers of Americans are losing interest or wearying of inflation and the war's costs, President Biden and Republican leaders should unite in making the case for Ukraine to the American people.

Russia's war on Ukraine, the bloodiest in Europe in the post-World War Two era, is an unambiguous violation of international law. Putin is not only committing crimes against humanity but also pursuing genocidal ends: the mass murder of Ukrainians and the erasure of their identity as a people, as a bipartisan Senate resolution this February recognized. Putin's goals in Ukraine include the destruction of the Ukrainian nation, its language and its religion.

Russia is targeting entire cities, as it did Mariupol, for elimination.

Russia is using mass graves to hide the slaughtered, and it has denied civilian evacuation corridors, a practice eerily reminiscent of Stalin's starvation of Ukraine in the Holodomor.

Russia is kidnapping and deporting thousands of children, sending them for re-education as "Russians."

Russia is eradicating the Ukrainian language and history in the territories it already occupies, and obliterating cultural heritage sites.

Russia is systematically destroying schools with its missiles, so that millions of Ukrainian children are unable to attend lessons.

The Russian military has perpetrated thousands upon thousands of documented war crimes, including the use of torture and rape as weapons of war.

Russia's strikes on civilian targets continue unabated.

To date, over 8.1 million Ukrainians have become refugees, while Russian violence has internally displaced another 5.3 million. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians are believed to have perished.

Western educational institutions have taught generations of children about the rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany, the genocide against the Jews, and the unspeakable death toll and destruction wrought by a fascist regime during World War II. We said "never again." We built international institutions to uphold a liberal international order that protects human rights and sovereignty. Yet many in the West remain disinterested or turn a blind eye. Far worse, some Republican leaders, including Florida Gov. DeSantis, have cast the war as a limited territorial dispute, and prefer to focus on battling illegal immigration or "Wokeness." They portray Putin as benign, while Russia shakes the foundations of the rules-based international order that has protected sovereignty, democracy and free trade.

Bolstering this international order against Russia is essential for U.S. national security. Wrongly portrayed as a liberal concoction of the Biden administration, this order was primarily established after World War II to prevent a repetition of the two previous global conflicts that had decimated Europe. From its founding in 1949, NATO became the primary guarantor of a free, democratic and capitalist Europe; it prevented the return of fascism in Germany and countered the rapid expansion of Soviet communist power across East Europe in the wake of the Nazis' defeat.

NATO expansion, initiated by President Clinton and continued by President Bush, sought to guarantee the security and prosperity of those East Europeans we had abandoned in 1945 for fear of provoking Stalin. NATO expansion was also critical to enabling NATO's role in new peacekeeping and combat missions from Kosovo to Iraq and Afghanistan. A Russia victorious in Ukraine is a direct threat to NATO and the liberal international order that it protects, for Putin has brazenly stated his intention of rolling back NATO to its pre-1997 borders. By re-establishing its hegemonic "sphere of influence," Russia will again dominate its European neighbors.

Winning in Ukraine would embolden Russia. Its military, according to some experts, could revive within five years due to sanctions loopholes. That would put Georgia, 20 percent of whose territory was seized by Russia during its 2008 invasion, in renewed

peril. Two heavily manned Russian military bases illegally operate in occupied Georgia, in violation of the internationally facilitated deal to end the war. One base lies just 37 miles from Tbilisi and dangerously close to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that carries oil to the West. Moldova, whose new democratic government is forging a path to EU membership and has already been the victim of a Russian coup attempt, would also be at risk. In the longer term, the Baltics and Poland, Ukraine's most committed allies in this war, remain vulnerable to Russia's strike, especially if Russia perceives NATO's resolve to have weakened.

If Putin wins even a partial victory that gives him Crimea and divides the rest of Ukraine — a likely scenario with the decline of unified U.S.-led Western support — Russia will gain substantial control in the Black Sea. Russia will wield ongoing power over Ukraine's grain exports and the world's food supply as well as leverage over multiple hydrocarbon export routes to the West. Billions of dollars of Western investment in Ukraine would be jeopardized. So too would be the Ukrainian economy, one of the largest European markets, and a major EU trading partner.

Like the Afghanistan debacle, U.S. wavering in Ukraine will be noted by China; the repercussions for Taiwan, and geopolitical and economic consequences for the West, could be dire. The emergent authoritarian entente of China, Russia, and Iran would become a far greater threat than it is today. By instead aiding Ukraine's victory, through reinvigorating our defense industry, we will deter these other threats.

More than ever, this country's leaders need to assert moral clarity about the Russian dictatorship's genocidal war for empire, a war that is shaking the security of all the West.

Ronald Reagan boldly asserted a foreign policy of "peace through strength," and an unbending commitment to a free, democratic Europe. Reagan echoed the words of John F. Kennedy in Berlin in 1963, who also believed that freedom from Soviet Russian expansionism was deeply intertwined with our national security: "Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free ... We look forward to that day when ... this country and this great Continent of Europe (are joined) in a peaceful and hopeful globe."

We would do well to remember, as they did, that America's commitment to freedom is not a partisan issue.

Kathleen Collins, an expert on Russian and Eurasian politics, is an associate professor in the University of Minnesota Department of Political Science. She is author of "Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia" (Cambridge University Press) and "Politicizing Islam in Central Asia: From the Russian Revolution to the Afghan and Syrian Jihads" (Oxford University Press, to be published in April).

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