

## ***Ukraine's Leader, Meeting Biden, Seeks Security Assurances After Afghan Pullout***

President Volodymyr Zelensky is expected to emphasize the important role Ukraine plays in containing Russia, aides to the Ukrainian leader said.



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MOSCOW — Unnerved by America's abrupt and chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, is expected to raise questions about U.S. security commitments when he meets President Biden on Wednesday, an adviser to the Ukrainian leader said.

The meeting was supposed to be an opportunity for the U.S. to demonstrate support for Ukraine, something Mr. Zelensky has been seeking since 2019, when his effort became entangled in former President Trump's first impeachment trial.

Now that the meeting is finally at hand, it comes in the wake of an event that has caused numerous American allies to question the firmness of Washington's support. And few nations are as reliant on U.S. backing as Ukraine, bogged down in a seven-year-old war with Russian-backed separatists and ever fearful of the Kremlin's intentions and foul play.

As vice-president, Mr. Biden was the Obama administration's point person on Ukraine and, though frequently frustrated with its endemic corruption, strongly supported the country's fight to remain independent from Russia. Analysts widely expect him to affirm that support to Mr. Zelensky.

For his part, the Ukrainian leader is expected to emphasize not only the value of American backing to Ukraine, but also his country's contributions to European security by containing Russia, another member of the Ukrainian delegation said.

"The situation in Afghanistan seems to indicate a realignment of U.S. global commitments, and President Zelensky wants to hear from President Biden where Ukraine fits in," Andrew Mac, the adviser to Mr. Zelensky, said in a telephone interview from Washington.

The chaotic withdrawal has sent jitters through nations as significant as Taiwan and Germany and groups as small as antiterrorism units in Iraq and Kurdish militias in eastern Syria, where U.S. troops are present now but without any long-term commitment.

Ukraine is billing itself as something of a security bargain for the U.S. No American soldiers are fighting side-by-side with the Ukrainian military against the Russian-backed separatists in the country's east. And U.S. financial assistance for Ukraine's military is far smaller than what was provided to Afghanistan.



Ukrainian soldiers at a front-line position north of Luhansk, in eastern Ukraine, in April. President Zelensky is seeking assurances of support in the conflict from the U.S. Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times

“We are very different from Afghanistan, and we would like to emphasize this,” said Tymofiy Mylovanov, an adviser to Mr. Zelensky’s chief of staff. “We are an independent country, not a failed state, and our military has managed to resist the Russians, not the Taliban.”

The tone would be that Ukraine does not “doubt at all your commitment to us,” Mr. Mylovanov said. “We won’t be in a position of asking. We will say, ‘This is what we can do together. Let’s do it.’”

Ukrainian leaders have for months been worried about mild responses from the Biden administration to what they see as deteriorating security in Eastern Europe.

Last spring, Russia deployed tanks and thousands of soldiers to Ukraine’s borders, ostensibly for exercises. Also in the spring, the Biden administration acquiesced to Germany’s requests that Russia be allowed to complete a natural gas pipeline, called Nord Stream 2, bypassing Ukraine, exposing the country to the risk of energy shut-offs.



Russian paratroopers during military exercises near the Ukrainian border in April. Mr. Zelensky is expected to emphasize Ukraine's important contribution to European security by containing Russia. Associated Press

And in less than two weeks, Russia and Belarus are expected to sign a treaty on closer integration that could position Russian troops on Ukraine's northwestern borders.

If that happens, Ukraine will be nearly encircled by Russian-controlled borders, from Belarus in the north, to Russia itself, and south to occupied Crimea and the separatist region of Transnistria in Moldova. Some Ukrainian analysts see a brewing crisis downplayed by the United States, not unlike the vulnerability of the U.S.-backed Afghan government.

"Ukraine is the largest liberal democracy in the former Soviet Union," said Mr. Mac. "Ukraine's security situation worsened in the last year. The hope is that the Biden administration will not treat Ukraine as a peripheral issue."

Ukraine has sought membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization but that seems to be off the table, for fear of provoking Russia.

Asked earlier this year if Ukraine would be admitted, Mr. Biden said "school's out." Now, Ukraine is called an Enhanced Opportunity Partner, a status that comes with no guarantees.

Russian officials have been quick to taunt Ukraine over the Afghan debacle. "Did the fact that Afghanistan has the status of a main U.S. ally outside of NATO save the ousted pro-American regime in Kabul?" said Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Russian Security Council. "A similar situation awaits those who are banking on America in Ukraine."

He suggested that Ukraine "is going to disintegrate and the White House at a certain moment won't even remember its supporters in Kyiv."

The question of America's reliability and commitment to its allies has been widely debated in political circles in Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, after the fall of Kabul.

"There's a feeling of disengagement of the Western world," Volodymyr Yermolenko, editor in chief of Ukraine World, said. America has pulled back from the Middle East and "there is fear it will leave Eastern Europe, too."

Volodymyr Ariev, a member of Ukraine's Parliament, said the worry was overblown.

"I think Washington should come with an explanation to its closest partners, with more assurances that the situation in Afghanistan has no implications for them," he said. For now, he said, Kyiv shouldn't worry. "We should not fail in our trust for our partners."