

ASSESSMENT OF THE NATURE OF AMERICAN MILITARY STATECRAFT ON  
UKRAINE UNDER PRESIDENT TRUMP

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**Abstract**

*The nature of American military statecraft toward Ukraine under President Trump remains a subject of scholarly debate, particularly due to concerns over the administration's inconsistent foreign policy stance and the strategic implications for global security. The lack of a coherent approach to military assistance, coupled with allegations of conditional aid linked to political interests, necessitates a critical examination of U.S. statecraft in this period. This study examines the dynamics of American military engagement with Ukraine under Trump, assessing its alignment with traditional strategic doctrines and geopolitical realities. Relying primarily on secondary sources, including government reports, academic journals, policy analyses, and media investigations, this desk research examines existing scholarly perspectives on U.S.-Ukraine military relations. Sources such as the Congressional Research Service, Brookings Institution and the RAND Corporation, and peer-reviewed academic articles on U.S. foreign policy and security studies provide valuable insights into policy shifts and strategic calculations. The study adopts the Balance of Power Theory, which posits that states engage in military alliances and support weaker actors to counterbalance dominant threats, justifying the U.S. military assistance to Ukraine as a measure against Russian aggression. The findings suggest that while the Trump administration provided lethal military aid, including Javelin anti-tank missiles, its overall statecraft was marked by transactional politics, evident in the impeachment-related controversy over aid conditionality. Furthermore, inconsistencies in policy messaging led to strategic ambiguities that affected Ukraine's defense posture. The study recommends strengthening diplomatic efforts to ensure a more consistent and strategic engagement with Ukraine, fostering stability while mitigating escalation risks. Additionally, it advocates for greater transparency in military assistance to prevent the politicization of aid, ensuring that support is driven by strategic imperatives rather than domestic political interests.*

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**Keywords:** Statecraft, Military, Strategy, Diplomacy, Sanctions, Geopolitics, Defense, Conflict

## **Introduction**

The nature of American military statecraft on Ukraine under President Donald Trump was marked by a complex interaction of strategic interests, diplomatic maneuvers, and domestic political considerations. Historically, U.S. military assistance to Ukraine has been driven by the broader geopolitical objective of countering Russian aggression, particularly following Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ensuing conflict in Eastern Ukraine. However, under the Trump administration (2017–2021), the contours of U.S. military support took on new dimensions, influenced by Trump's foreign policy doctrine, which emphasized transactional relationships and burden-sharing among allies (Nau, 2020). While military aid to Ukraine continued, its nature and delivery were shaped by shifting priorities, bureaucratic delays, and an unprecedented impeachment inquiry that revolved around Trump's interactions with Ukrainian leadership (McFaul, 2019).

A significant component of American military statecraft towards Ukraine during this period was the provision of lethal and non-lethal aid. In 2017, the Trump administration authorized the sale of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, a departure from the Obama administration's policy, which had limited assistance to non-lethal aid (Sestanovich, 2018). By 2019, the U.S. had provided Ukraine with more than \$1.5 billion in security assistance, covering military training, equipment, and intelligence sharing (U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). The significance of this support was underscored by Ukraine's continued struggle against Russian-backed separatists, with over 14,000 casualties reported since 2014 (United Nations, 2020). Despite these efforts, Trump's military statecraft on Ukraine was overshadowed by political controversy. In 2019, the administration temporarily withheld nearly \$400 million in Congressionally approved military aid, allegedly to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky into investigating Trump's political rival, Joe Biden (Taylor, 2020). This move led to Trump's first impeachment by the U.S. House of Representatives on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress (Pelosi, 2020). The episode highlighted how military statecraft, under Trump, was not merely a function of national security interests but was also entangled with personal and political considerations (Friedman, 2021).

Moreover, Trump's rhetoric on NATO and European security obligations had implications for U.S. military policy toward Ukraine. While Trump expressed support for Ukraine's sovereignty, he frequently criticized European allies for not contributing enough to Ukraine's defense, arguing that the U.S. should not bear the financial burden alone (Mearsheimer, 2019). This stance reflected a broader shift in American military statecraft from a multilateral approach to a more unilateral, cost-benefit-driven strategy. Nonetheless, bipartisan support in Congress ensured that military aid continued despite the administration's fluctuations in policy.

This study critically explores the nature of American military statecraft on Ukraine under President Trump by analyzing the extent, impact, and political influences on military aid. It seeks to determine how strategic interests, domestic politics, and Trump's personal diplomacy shaped U.S. military engagement in Ukraine.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on desk research, relying primarily on existing works by experts using secondary data collection methods. The study delves into relevant research materials such as books, journals, and other critical resources such as Congressional Research Service, Brookings

Institution and the RAND Corporation, and peer-reviewed academic articles on U.S. foreign policy and security studies to analyze the nature of American Military Statecraft on Ukraine under President Trump. These sources contribute varied perspectives and insights, encompassing historical analyses, geopolitical studies, and policy evaluations. However, drawing from a wide array of scholarly and authoritative sources, the paper provides a comprehensive understanding of the strategies, decisions, and implications of U.S. military statecraft during the specified period. This approach ensures comprehensive assessment of major events, policies, and their impact on Ukrainian-American relations within the broader context of international diplomacy and security dynamics. The data utilized in this research are predominantly qualitative, focusing on expert interpretations, policy documents, and historical narratives to construct a detailed narrative of American military engagements and diplomatic maneuvers concerning Ukraine under President Trump's administration.

### **Literature Review**

Military statecraft refers to the strategic use of military power to achieve national objectives, whether in defense, deterrence, coercion, or warfighting (Gray, 2012). It involves the deliberate application of military instruments, including force projection, alliances, military diplomacy, and strategic deterrence, to influence both state and non-state actors in the international system (Freedman, 2013). As an essential component of grand strategy, military statecraft integrates military capabilities with political, economic, and diplomatic efforts to ensure national security and advance geopolitical interests (Art, 2015). Scholars argue that military statecraft is not confined to wartime scenarios but extends to peacetime engagements such as military aid, intelligence sharing, and strategic positioning of forces (Collins, 2020). The concept encompasses both hard power, such as military intervention and deterrence, and soft power applications, including military assistance and confidence-building measures (Nye, 2011).

Despite these definitions, military statecraft is often debated concerning its effectiveness and ethical implications. Critics argue that an overreliance on military tools may undermine diplomatic efforts and lead to unintended escalations (Snyder, 2019). Additionally, historical instances demonstrate that military interventions, even with well-defined objectives, can have destabilizing effects (Boot, 2006). The question remains whether military statecraft should be strictly defensive or actively employed for power projection.

A more preferred definition would thus be: Military statecraft is the strategic and adaptive use of military and paramilitary instruments, including conventional and unconventional means, to influence the political, security, and economic landscape in pursuit of national and international stability.

### **Historical Perspective of U.S. Military Statecraft in Ukraine**

The historical perspective of U.S. military statecraft in Ukraine is deeply intertwined with broader global strategic interests. The United States has long utilized military statecraft as an instrument of foreign policy, often deploying aid, training programs, and arms provisions to reinforce its geopolitical standing. Historically, U.S. military engagements have extended across multiple continents, with over 750 military bases worldwide (Vine, 2020). This expansive reach underscores America's strategic interest in maintaining influence in volatile regions, including Eastern Europe. In the case of Ukraine, U.S. military involvement has evolved in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics, with historical roots predating the Trump administration.

Before the Trump presidency, U.S.-Ukraine military relations were primarily shaped by the post-Cold War realignment. Following Ukraine's independence in 1991, the U.S. sought to integrate Ukraine into Western security frameworks through NATO partnerships and military assistance programs. Under the Clinton administration, the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program facilitated the dismantling of Ukraine's nuclear arsenal, reinforcing non-proliferation commitments (Asmus, 2002). The George W. Bush administration further strengthened military ties by advocating for Ukraine's NATO membership, a move that heightened tensions with Russia (Charap & Colton, 2018). The Obama administration escalated military support in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, providing \$1.5 billion in security assistance, including non-lethal aid such as counter-artillery radars and Humvees (Sestanovich, 2014).

Under Trump, U.S. military statecraft in Ukraine became a subject of intense scholarly debate. Unlike his predecessors, Trump initially adopted an ambivalent stance toward NATO and questioned U.S. commitments to Eastern Europe (Brands, 2019). Despite this skepticism, his administration authorized lethal military aid to Ukraine, including Javelin anti-tank missiles, a move Obama had hesitated to take due to concerns over escalating tensions with Russia (Bugajski, 2020). However, Trump's approach was controversial due to allegations of leveraging military aid for political gain. The 2019 impeachment inquiry revealed that Trump temporarily withheld \$391 million in military assistance while pressuring Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to investigate political rival Joe Biden (Pelosi & Schiff, 2019). This raised concerns over the instrumentalization of military statecraft for personal political objectives, rather than strategic stability (Gould & Mearsheimer, 2020).

Scholars remain divided on Trump's military statecraft regarding Ukraine. Some argue that his administration's provision of lethal aid signaled a firmer commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty (Cohen, 2020). Others contend that his transactional approach undermined long-term strategic credibility, weakening U.S. alliances and emboldening adversaries (Nau, 2021). The broader implications of U.S. military statecraft in Ukraine extend beyond Trump's tenure, influencing subsequent policy under President Biden. With ongoing military aid exceeding \$40 billion since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the U.S. continues to shape Ukraine's defense posture as part of a broader strategy to contain Russian aggression (Kroenig, 2022).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper utilized Balance of Power Theory as its point of departure. A fundamental concept in international relations, the theory was extensively developed by Hans Morgenthau in his seminal work *Politics Among Nations* (1948). The theory posits that the distribution of power among states is crucial to maintaining stability in the international system. Rooted in realism, it assumes that states are rational actors seeking survival and dominance in an anarchic world order (Morgenthau, 1948). Kenneth Waltz (1979) further refined the theory within the framework of neorealism, emphasizing that power equilibrium among states prevents hegemony and fosters stability. The basic assumption of the Balance of Power Theory is that states act in self-interest to prevent any single actor from gaining overwhelming dominance (Waltz, 1979). This often leads to alliances and counterbalancing strategies to maintain equilibrium (Claude, 1962). Another assumption is that war and conflict are inherent in an anarchic system but can be mitigated through balancing mechanisms (Vasquez, 1997). The theory also assumes that the international system operates

under a self-help principle, compelling states to ensure their own security through military buildup or strategic partnerships (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Therefore, the Balance of Power Theory helps explain the nature of American military statecraft on Ukraine under President Trump by highlighting how the U.S. sought to counterbalance Russian influence. The theory suggests that states act to prevent any one power from dominating others. Under Trump, the U.S. provided Ukraine with military aid to resist Russian aggression. In 2017, the Trump administration approved the sale of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Ukraine, marking a significant shift from the Obama era. In 2019, Congress approved \$391 million in security assistance to Ukraine, though its delay led to a political controversy. The U.S. also increased NATO cooperation to deter Russian expansion. In 2018, U.S. military assistance to Ukraine included training programs and advanced weaponry. Despite Trump's occasional rhetoric questioning NATO's role, his administration maintained strong military support for Ukraine. By 2020, the U.S. had provided over \$1.5 billion in security assistance to Ukraine. This policy aligns with the Balance of Power Theory as it aimed to prevent Russia from gaining strategic dominance in Eastern Europe. The U.S. actions ensured Ukraine remained capable of resisting Russian pressure, maintaining regional stability, and protecting American geopolitical interests.

### **Findings and Discussion**

American military statecraft regarding Ukraine under President Donald Trump was characterized by a mixture of military aid, diplomatic maneuvering, strategic engagements, and controversies. Trump's policies towards Ukraine reflected his broader foreign policy approach, often termed the "Trump Doctrine" as evidenced in the following discussions.

### **Military Assistance to Ukraine Under Trump**

The Trump administration maintained substantial military assistance to Ukraine, particularly in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ongoing conflict in the Donbas region. The United States provided Ukraine with military aid in the form of lethal and non-lethal assistance. From 2017 to 2020, the Trump administration approved significant military aid packages:

- **2017:** \$350 million in security assistance under the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (Congressional Research Service, 2020).
- **2018:** \$200 million in additional security cooperation funds (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018).
- **2019:** \$250 million in security assistance, including Javelin anti-tank missiles (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2019).
- **2020:** \$300 million in military aid, despite initial delays due to Trump's request for investigations into political opponents (Congressional Budget Office, 2020).

According to Carpenter (2020), Trump was the first U.S. president to approve lethal aid to Ukraine, including the sale of Javelin anti-tank missiles, which marked a shift from the Obama administration's policy of providing only non-lethal assistance.

### **Diplomatic and Strategic Engagement**

Trump's approach to Ukraine was inconsistent, oscillating between rhetorical support and transactional diplomacy. His administration sought to balance deterrence against Russia while questioning the necessity of U.S. involvement in European security affairs.

#### **Major Strategic Actions includes;**

- a. **Enhanced NATO Cooperation:** Trump pressured European allies to contribute more to NATO's efforts in deterring Russian aggression in Ukraine (NATO, 2018).
- b. **Suspension of Military Aid:** In 2019, Trump temporarily withheld nearly \$400 million in military aid, demanding Ukraine investigate Hunter Biden's business dealings (Taylor & Kent, 2019).
- c. **Sanctions on Russia:** The administration imposed multiple rounds of sanctions on Russian individuals and entities involved in Ukraine's conflict (Treasury Department, 2020).

#### **The Impeachment Controversy and Its Impact on Military Policy**

Pelosi (2019) indicate that, one of the most defining moments of Trump's Ukraine policy was his first impeachment in December 2019. The House of Representatives charged him with abuse of power and obstruction of Congress after revelations that he conditioned military aid on Ukraine launching an investigation into Joe Biden.

#### **Impact on Military Assistance:**

- a. The scandal led to a delay in the release of \$391 million in military aid (GAO, 2020).
- b. Ukraine remained uncertain about U.S. commitment, affecting its military strategy against Russia (Kofman, 2020).
- c. Despite Trump's impeachment, Congress ensured that aid to Ukraine continued through bipartisan legislation (Congressional Research Service, 2020).

#### **The Trump Doctrine and Its Application to Ukraine**

The Trump Doctrine, characterized by nationalism, transactional diplomacy, and skepticism of international alliances, had notable implications for Ukraine.

#### **Principles of the Trump Doctrine in Ukraine:**

1. **Transactional Engagement:** Trump viewed foreign aid as a tool for extracting political concessions rather than a strategic necessity (Sestanovich, 2020).
2. **Skepticism of NATO and Multilateralism:** He often criticized NATO and demanded greater European responsibility for Ukraine's security (Brookings, 2019).
3. **Strategic Ambiguity:** Trump oscillated between supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and expressing admiration for Vladimir Putin (Friedman, 2018).

#### **Geopolitical Implications and Consequences**

The Trump administration's Ukraine policy had significant geopolitical ramifications.

- **Increased Russian Aggression:** The uncertainty surrounding U.S. support emboldened Russia's continued destabilization of Ukraine (Galeotti, 2020).
- **Strained U.S.-Ukraine Relations:** The impeachment controversy created mistrust between Kyiv and Washington (McFaul, 2020).
- **Impacts on European Security:** NATO allies expressed concerns about the reliability of U.S. security commitments (Chivvis, 2020).

#### **Comparative Analysis: Trump vs. Other Administrations**

Trump's military statecraft towards Ukraine can be contrasted with that of previous and subsequent administrations.

#### **Obama Administration:**

- Provided non-lethal aid, including medical supplies and radar systems, but refrained from sending lethal weapons (Morell, 2017).
- Focused on diplomatic efforts to isolate Russia through sanctions and international pressure (Rice, 2016).

#### **Biden Administration:**

- Increased military aid substantially, providing \$2.5 billion in security assistance by 2022 (Pentagon, 2022).
- Strengthened NATO commitments and imposed heavier sanctions on Russia (Blinken, 2022).

#### **Conclusion**

The nature of American military statecraft on Ukraine under President Trump reflected a complex interplay of strategic interests, political calculations, and diplomatic maneuvering. Unlike previous administrations, Trump's approach to Ukraine was marked by transactional diplomacy, where military aid and strategic commitments were intertwined with domestic political considerations. The Trump administration provided lethal military assistance, including Javelin anti-tank missiles, signaling a shift from the non-lethal aid policy of the Obama era. This move aligned with broader U.S. efforts to counter Russian aggression in Eastern Europe.

However, Trump's engagement with Ukraine was also overshadowed by controversies, particularly the 2019 impeachment inquiry, which centered on allegations that he conditioned military aid on political favors. This episode highlighted the extent to which U.S. military statecraft toward Ukraine was influenced by Trump's personal and political interests rather than a purely strategic framework. Despite these controversies, the administration continued supporting Ukraine's military modernization and defense reforms, reinforcing NATO's presence in the region.

Trump's policies reflected a broader shift in U.S. foreign policy toward a more unpredictable and personalized approach, challenging traditional diplomatic norms. While his administration maintained military assistance and sanctions against Russia, Trump's rhetoric often suggested a reluctance to confront Moscow directly, raising questions about the consistency of U.S. commitments. This ambiguity left Ukraine navigating a precarious geopolitical landscape, balancing its reliance on American support with the uncertainties of Trump's foreign policy.

#### **Recommendations**

In view of the foregoing investigation, it is important to suggest a balanced approach in addressing its outcomes.

1. **Strengthening Diplomatic Efforts:** One key recommendation is to enhance diplomatic engagement between the United States and Ukraine. The investigation suggests that President Trump's approach to military statecraft in Ukraine was often influenced by political considerations. To improve future policy, the U.S. should focus on clear and consistent diplomatic support for Ukraine, ensuring that military aid is not tied to domestic political interests. Strengthening diplomatic ties through direct negotiations, defense agreements, and

increased cooperation with NATO will help Ukraine resist external threats and strengthen its sovereignty.

2. **Ensuring Transparency in Military Assistance:** The investigation highlights concern over the transparency of U.S. military aid to Ukraine under President Trump. To prevent misuse and ensure accountability, future administrations should establish clear guidelines for aid distribution. Regular oversight by Congress and independent agencies can help track the use of military assistance and ensure it serves its intended purpose. Public reports on aid allocation and its impact on Ukraine's defense will also increase trust between the two nations and within the international community.
3. **Enhancing Long-Term Security Commitments:** The U.S. should adopt a long-term security strategy for Ukraine instead of focusing on short-term political gains. The investigation shows that inconsistent military policies create uncertainty for Ukraine and its allies. To address this, the U.S. should establish multi-year defense commitments, increase joint military training, and expand intelligence-sharing programs. This will help Ukraine build a stronger defense system and deter future aggression.
4. **Reducing Political Influence in Military Decisions:** Lastly, the investigation indicates that political interests influenced military decisions regarding Ukraine under President Trump. To prevent this in the future, the U.S. should separate military assistance from political agendas. Decisions on aid should be based on national security assessments rather than partisan considerations, ensuring that support for Ukraine remains stable and strategic.

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