

A Conversation with Ambassador Maire Yovanovitch on the Future of Ukraine and Great Power Competition

Phillip Meng and Casper Pei-Shen Suen

with questions by Jingyi Pan and Wendi Zhou

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Ambassador (ret.) Marie Yovanovitch is a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Nonresident Fellow at Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy. Previously, she served as the U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine (2016-2019), the Republic of Armenia (2008-2011) and the Kyrgyz Republic (2005-2008). This interview has been edited for clarity.

Jackson School Journal: Thank you so much for speaking with us. Our upcoming issue includes research papers on post-conflict reconciliation, military justice, and Russian kleptocracy: what we think to be relevant issues right now. For our conversation today, we wanted to start with your views on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. What does a just conclusion to the Russian invasion of Ukraine look like? And what does it take to get there?

Yovanovitch: Well, a just conclusion—which is different, obviously, from a conclusion—would have a sovereign, independent Ukraine that is in charge of not only its internal governance, but also its foreign policy decisions about partnerships and alliances. That would be within the international borders of Ukraine, which includes Crimea, and eastern parts of the Donbas that Russia took illegally in the 2014-2015 time period.

And then there's the question of security guarantees, which I think is something that the international community is going to have to grapple with because we don't want to be in the exact same place that we were in 10 years ago. We saw that in 2014-2015, Russia and Ukraine, with the help of Germany and France, signed the so-called Minsk accords—two agreements that allegedly brought a ceasefire, but which wasn't actually a ceasefire. Russia didn't implement any of its commitments. Ukraine implemented some of theirs, but neither side was really satisfied.

And here we are, in 2023, after a year of Russia's second brutal war against Ukraine. So I think a just peace, a just conclusion, would provide security guarantees to ensure that Ukraine and the international community is not in this position again. And the word just is what I'm thinking about, because justice is an important concept. I think there needs to be accountability for the war crimes that Russia has perpetrated against the Ukrainian people.

As towns and cities and villages have been liberated from Russian domain, the Ukrainian people and the international community have seen the crimes that have been perpetrated, whether it is torture, rape, or taking children—not just adults, but children as well—to be sent to Russia for adoption in Russia. Some of them are very, very young. These are children who, unless they are brought back fairly soon to Ukraine, are not going to remember that they're Ukrainian. They're not going to remember the Ukrainian language or culture, they're not going to remember their families. But there are people who are waiting in Ukraine for them who love them. It is a terrible thing. And I think there needs to be some justice brought to Ukraine and to the individual victims and their families, it is important for that country in order to move forward. I think it is important for Russia too, as Russians move forward in the post-conflict world, because the Russian people need to understand that what Russia has done in their name is wrong. It is against the international order, and you don't get away with it if you perpetrate those kinds of crimes. We all understand that.

There will be accountability, and the ICC, with its most recent decision to try to hold Vladimir Putin accountable, is sending a really strong message to the Russians and to the world. And so that actually gave me some hope that Putin and others will be held accountable. It's important for Russia's future development that Russian citizens say we don't want to be that kind of country, we want a different kind of country. And you know, maybe that's optimistic and naive. But if they're not held accountable, they're going to think, well, I guess it's okay.

And then the third part of this is sending it out as a signal to other dictators who are watching this, they're watching to see if Russia is successful. They're watching to see whether the West is pulling together and ready to defend democracy, ready to defend its values, ready to defend its interests and its allies. And if Russia is successful in its bid to take over

Ukraine, those countries are going to think “we can do this too,” because the West is not ready to defend its own values.

Jackson School Journal: Ambassador, you mentioned the importance of international security guarantees for Ukraine—but that might run into a growing concern that a lot of publics in the West are becoming less supportive of Ukraine. There is recent Chicago Council survey data that nearly half of the American public now wants Ukraine to settle for peace. How do we build support for Ukraine in what looks to be a protracted conflict?

Yovanovitch: You framed it as a lot of publics, but I would note that in Europe there’s a lot of support for Ukraine. First of all they are geographically closer. Secondly, the memory of World War Two is also fresher. There’s a memory of what that sort of war entails that I think is stronger than it is here in the United States.

And so support in Europe is still quite strong. There are three reasons for that—one, because Ukraine is successful. Secondly, because of robust American leadership, which countries weren’t necessarily expecting to see. And thirdly, because the war is bringing the far right and the far left together on the political spectrum and people like that there’s more unity. And of course the further east you go—the Scandinavians, the Baltics—the stronger that support is.

But in the US, you’re right that over time there has been less support. People wonder how long this is going to take. What is the price for Ukrainians, in terms of the heavy losses that they’re taking and the destruction to their country, but also in the amount of resources we are providing? How much more, and how much longer? This is exactly what Vladimir Putin is counting on—that the West, and particularly the United States, is going to lose its focus and then he can move forward in Ukraine. I think it would be a strategic defeat for the West if that is allowed to happen. So one of the things that is going to be important is Ukraine’s spring offensive. And hopefully Ukraine will be successful, because success breeds success. Americans like success, just like European countries do.

I think the Biden administration has done an amazing job of providing support to Ukraine. A year ago, I don’t think I would have ever predicted the amount of military equipment that is being sent to Ukraine, the types of military equipment that are being sent, and how quickly it is being sent there. So across the board, I think that the Biden administration has performed not only a kind of a policy leap, but also a logistical miracle in getting all of this equipment into a war zone. That said, it’s not enough, and it’s not fast enough.

I think that slogan that gave me so much hope—“We’re in it for as long as it takes”—now has to be adapted to: “We are with Ukraine, to provide as much as they need as quickly as they need it, so that Ukraine can win.” The winning part is important. It’s obviously important to Ukraine, because this is an existential struggle. Russia has made it clear that it does not consider them a real people, that they don’t have a real language, they don’t have a culture, they don’t have a country. So if the Ukrainians stop fighting, they face two choices. Either they are Russified and start identifying as Russian or they are killed. Neither of those are options that the Ukrainian people want. So they have to continue to fight.

Jackson School Journal: Of course, American aid is intended to help Ukraine defend itself against Russia’s invasion, and the U.S. has certainly led a robust international response. But for the U.S. and other countries, what is at stake here, beyond the security of Ukraine? What message does the U.S. response send?

Yovanovitch: This war is about Russia expanding its empire, about Putin personally sealing his legacy as the heir to Peter the Great. If Russia is successful in doing that in Ukraine, Russia will continue on. And how do we know that? We know that because you just need to look at what Russia has done over the last 20 years. It grabbed two parts of Georgia’s territory in 2008, and the international community criticized but took no action, not a single sanction. Then in 2014 and 2015, when Crimea and parts of the Donbas were taken, we were stronger in terms of our reaction, both in terms of sanctions and providing assistance. But it was not enough, because Russia was able to withstand it. Russia kept a low volume war going on, shall we say. Although, three or four Ukrainians died every week—that’s not a low volume to those families. It was soldiers being killed, but it was also civilians that were living along the front line and were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And then Russia waited for a strategic window—apparently, that was February 2022—and they did it again. If you look at those actions, if you look at Putin’s writings, if you look at what he has said, it is clear that he will keep on going if he’s successful.

And it is also clear that other dictators will learn that same lesson, that if you can wait out the West, you can just do what you want. If you are big enough, if you are strong enough, you can take another country’s territory. And that makes all of us, including the United States, less secure and less prosperous. Look at what happened with Ukraine and global grain exports. So we will be less prosperous and we will be less free because it’s a three-legged stool, the economy, politics and liberties, and security. They all reinforce each other—or not. And so this is also about the future of the United States and the world that we live in.

And I know that sounds like a big statement, but I actually believe it to be true.

We have lived under the rules that were established after World War Two, when we said never again, we can't repeat that. And the Soviet Union came to the table too, helped to create the UN, all the principles that are laid out in the UN Charter of sovereignty, self-determination, respect for borders. I'm not saying that we have always lived up to those ideals, and I'm not saying that the international system is a perfect system—it clearly needs reform. And there are a lot of people thinking about how we can better adapt the international system, which is not just the UN, but institutions, regulations, agreements and treaties. And it's also our expectations—our values are the things that we have come to expect from sovereign nations. All of that together makes up the international order. We need to work on making that order one that is more representative of the world we have today, as opposed to the world we had in 1945. We also have new challenges that, to be better able to address them, [the international order] needs to be more flexible, more nimble, more effective. And so don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that the international order is perfect. But I am saying let's not throw it out completely until we have something that can replace it. Because that system has kept not just the US, but the world, more secure, more free, and more prosperous than at any other time in human history. So I think that if Russia, country-by-country, starts pulling the bricks out of that international system, all of us are affected. I would just go back to Volodymyr Zelensky, who often encapsulates a thought better than anybody else—he addressed Congress last December. And he said, American assistance is not charity. This is an investment in your security, in global security. And I think that's exactly right.

Jackson School Journal: Defending that international order has been a priority of the Biden Administration. What are your thoughts on their framing of American foreign policy as a contest between democracies and autocracies?

Yovanovitch: I happen to believe that that is true. And I think that it is very resonant with some countries, some peoples. In other parts of the world, maybe it isn't as effective an argument. But I do think that every country has an interest in the UN principles of self-determination, inviolability of borders, of sovereignty. Whether you are in Africa, in Asia, in South America, Latin America, or Europe, these are principles that are important to every country. And so what happens with Ukraine and Russia will have resonance and will have an effect all over the world.

Jackson School Journal: Our last question relates to great

power competition. Some are worried that the war in Ukraine signals a new era of hostility between the great powers—a second Cold War, if you will. Certainly, tensions between the US and China in the Taiwan Strait have escalated since the beginning of Russia's invasion. What are the primary takeaways from the war in Ukraine in terms of deterring great power conflict?

Yovanovitch: The thing about diplomacy and foreign policy is that it's an art, not a science. We can learn a lot from the histories of countries, we can learn a lot by studying the cultures of China, Russia, and other countries around the world. But like I said, it's an art, it's not a science—we're not making widgets where you'll have the same outcome if you put in the same input. So I think one has to be very careful about calibrating policy.

But the bottom line is—I just talked about Georgia and Crimea—is that this administration, and the Obama administration before it, was very careful about not wanting to provoke Russia. And my view when I was in the Foreign Service, and now that I'm retired from the Foreign Service, is what could be more provocative than a country invading another sovereign country? I mean, who is the provocateur here? It's certainly not Ukraine, Ukraine was trying to defend itself. And if we are helping a country defend itself, how can that be provocative? The other country is attacking. So I think it is good that we have responsible leaders who are carefully weighing all of these decisions, because they are big decisions, and we don't want to get it wrong. But I think that it is important to realize that, in my opinion at least, part of the reason we are where we are with the second invasion of Ukraine is that Putin thought he could get away with it. He thought that the West was weak. Angela Merkel had left the scene, and it looked like there'd be a far-right president coming up in France. The US had just presided over a pretty disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan. And I think Putin made an assessment that the Biden administration would not be able to rally, and rally Europe behind it. All of that turned out to be wrong. But I think that, as we've moved forward, the Biden administration has been very concerned about not crossing any of Putin's red lines, but we don't actually know what those red lines are. And frankly, I am of the view that maybe Putin himself doesn't know what the red lines are, because he has staked out red lines all along. And yet, we've managed to cross them and there has been very little response, if any. And so I think it's important that we not self-deter. I think it's important that we be strong in our response, so that we don't leave countries like Russia thinking, "well, they did nothing with Georgia, they did nothing with Crimea, I can invade."

And I think Putin was a little bit surprised by the robust

response, both from the Ukrainians as well as the international community. And so I think what we can learn from that is don't self-deter, because when we self-deter we're sort of negotiating with ourselves. Is this what Putin is thinking? We don't know what he's thinking. And we do need to be mindful, we need to be deliberate, we need to be careful in our communications. But I think it's important that we not self-deter. And it's clear to me that in some ways it is more dangerous for the US to take the self-deterring stance rather than the strong stance. Weaker responses engender their own responses. So it's better to be strong and upfront about what our response is going to be, and then follow it up with action. And I think that's what we're seeing in Ukraine. And I think that's the message that we need to take forward. But as President Biden has said numerous times, strong nations don't bluff. So if we say something, we'd better be ready to back it up.

Jackson School Journal: Thank you so much for your time. We deeply appreciate it.

Yovanovitch: Okay, great. Thank you very much.