

POLITICS

The U.S. Gives Military Aid to Corrupt Countries All the Time

Military assistance deserves more scrutiny in many cases. Ukraine is nowhere near the most important.

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A Ukrainian soldier rides with a Javelin anti-tank missile during a military parade. (GLEB GARANICH / REUTERS)

If you take Donald Trump at face value about his now-infamous phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, which occurred shortly after he mysteriously stopped military aid meant for Ukraine, he was only concerned about sending millions to a country known for corruption. It was just a coincidence that he named his political rival's son, Hunter Biden.

He raised an important issue, albeit for ends that congressional Democrats consider impeachable. Military and other security-assistance aid eats up about a third of the U.S. foreign-aid budget, which itself has been a target of Trump's ire. And it has a spotty record—both in achieving stated American goals when it's offered, and in forcing better behavior when it's withheld.

This is partly because of the conditions that can lead to U.S. military aid in the first place. The notoriously corrupt governments of Iraq and Afghanistan, which have received tens of billions of dollars to build up their security forces over more than a decade, are just the most expensive examples. After all, as the military analyst Stephen Biddle and co-authors put it in a recent paper: “The U.S. rarely gives [security assistance] to Switzerland or Canada because they don’t need it; the states that need it are rarely governed as effectively as Switzerland or Canada.”

Ukraine does suffer from corruption, but it’s by no means the worst offender among the recipients of American largesse. The research group Security Assistance Monitor noted in a report last fall that some two-thirds of the countries receiving U.S. counterterrorism aid, or 24 of 36 countries examined, “posed serious corruption risks.” In Ukraine’s case, the Obama White House hesitated to provide military aid—and avoided providing lethal aid altogether—for other reasons, fearing that doing so would provoke Russia and worsen the conflict.

[Read: Volodymyr Zelensky plays himself]

After Barack Obama left, Trump announced, and Congress approved, a plan to provide anti-tank missiles as well, something both military and diplomatic officials had recommended. Joseph Dunford, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in congressional testimony in the fall of 2017 that “Ukraine needed additional capabilities to protect their sovereignty” from Russia, which was supporting an insurgency in the eastern half of the country and had already seized the Crimean Peninsula. To the extent corruption was a concern at the time, it did not take precedence over the determination to try to stop Russian tanks.

The Pentagon specifically said Ukraine was making progress tackling corruption in a letter to Congress this spring, two months before Trump suspended aid and then raised the corruption issue in the phone call with Ukraine’s president, during which he asked for an investigation into Joe Biden’s son. The letter from the Defense Department, which NPR first reported, certified that “the government of Ukraine has taken substantial actions to make defense institutional reforms for the purposes of decreasing corruption,” among other things.

[Read: What happened in Ukraine?]

But other countries' experiences have demonstrated how aid itself can fuel corruption, even indirectly by freeing up more of the host government's resources to distribute bribes. Or it can create perverse incentives. A weak government in a country getting massive amounts of military aid has reason to fear the development of a strong and professional military; see: Egypt's Mohamed Morsi.

And security assistance can simply fail entirely—especially when corruption is endemic. This was the case in Iraq in 2014, which Transparency International has called “one of the most spectacular defeats of the 21st century [in which] 25,000 Iraqi soldiers and police were dispersed by just 1,300 ISIS fighters in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul.” One key factor: Then–Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki prized loyalty over competence in the promotion of senior officers, some of whom preferred stealing public funds to training a competent fighting force.

So it stands to reason that the U.S. should be able to withhold military aid—either to try to force better behavior, or simply to stop wasting taxpayer money on something that's not working. It's not especially rare—historically, presidents and lawmakers have done this for all kinds of reasons. In 1982, President Ronald Reagan did it to Israel, stopping the sale of cluster bombs to the country for six years after Congress found Israel had used them against civilians in Lebanon. The George W. Bush administration once suspended military aid to 35 countries simultaneously when they refused to guarantee U.S. immunity in potential cases at the recently formed International Criminal Court. (Much of this money has since been reinstated, particularly for NATO and major non-NATO allies.) There's a law that bans assistance to human-rights abusers, though it applies to military units, not to entire countries. It was this law, for instance, that Trump's State Department invoked in 2017 when declaring Burmese units involved in abuses against Rohingya Muslims to be ineligible for military aid.

[Read: Why John Kerry gave \$250 million to Egypt]

But presidents have also historically gone to absurd lengths to avoid suspending military aid to entire countries when the aid is seen as advancing a key national-security interest. The U.S. continued to provide security assistance to Pakistan during the Obama administration despite the country's failure to meet American demands to stop supporting terrorist groups and combat the Taliban. (The Trump administration suspended military aid to Pakistan this year, however.) In Egypt,

following the overthrow of the elected President Morsi, the Obama administration temporarily suspended delivery to Egypt of some weapons systems, but famously declined to describe what had happened as a “coup,” for fear of triggering the aid restrictions such a designation might entail.

Elias Yousif, a program and research associate at Security Assistance Monitor, says such suspensions may happen far more than the public realizes, as Congress and the executive branch tussle over aid packages and approvals. When the disputes are severe, they can spill out into the open. For instance, the White House and Congress have argued repeatedly this year over military support to the Saudi campaign in Yemen; Congress supported cutting off aid on the grounds that the U.S. was becoming complicit in a humanitarian catastrophe, but the White House kept providing the aid anyway.

U.S. foreign policy relies a great deal on giving military aid, in the form of arms sales and training foreign forces, in an effort to advance security interests without committing large forces overseas. The public should be scrutinizing where it’s going and what ends it’s achieving—and at what cost. But in the Ukraine instance, the bigger question now is whether, in the course of a phone call, the president dangled \$400 million not in the American interest, but in his own.

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