Walking towards Democracy:

Taiwan and Ukraine after the U.S. Presidential Election



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By **Kolas Yotaka**

"Good morning!"

On a dry December morning in Cambridge, I took the shuttle to the Harvard Kennedy School building. As I was getting off the bus, I suddenly heard a voice with a strong Eastern European accent behind me on the right: "Good morning." I turned around to see a tall man, at least six feet, wearing a short black winter coat and carrying a bag over his left shoulder. It was the Army commander who had introduced himself in class the day before—the one who said he had been assigned by his superiors to leave the battlefield in Ukraine to take this course in the United States.

I recalled that during the introductions, he hadn't been very expressive. He smiled slightly when the teachers and students made jokes in class, but not much more than that. After traveling to different countries over the years, I've noticed that people from colder regions often have a reserved demeanor. Given that he was an officer coming from an active war zone, it was easy to see why he didn't smile much and seemed preoccupied.

"Good morning. How are you?" I asked.

That's how our conversation started. He didn't share his name right away, so I didn't ask. He chose his words carefully. He and the other Ukrainian students seemed eager to talk to me, probably because I was from Taiwan. Later, he mentioned that if I needed to refer to him, I could call him Volodymyr, and I agreed. But I knew Volodymyr wasn't his real name. It's a common male name in Slavic languages, though it has different spellings in different countries. Interestingly, it's not only Vladimir Putin's name but also Volodymyr Zelenskyy's. The only difference is their last names.

When I met Volodymyr at the end of 2024, several significant events were unfolding on the world stage. First, the November 2024 U.S. presidential election saw Trump winning dramatically, raising concerns that he might halt support for Ukraine. Then, on December 3, South Korean President Yun Seok-yeol unexpectedly declared martial law, a dramatic move that was swiftly reversed by the National Assembly. On December 8, Syria's rebel army, after more than a decade of civil war since the 2011 Arab Spring protests, finally captured the capital, Damascus, overthrowing Bashar al-Assad's government, a strong ally of Russia and Iran. Assad fled the country and was confirmed to have sought political asylum in Moscow.

Meanwhile, in France, President Macron made headlines by using the inauguration of the newly reconstructed Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris as backdrop for a joint meeting with U.S. president-elect Trump and Ukrainian President Zelensky. During this event, Trump, who had yet to be sworn in, shook hands with Zelensky in front of the gathered global media. The handshake sparked speculation that the long-running conflict in Ukraine, now over two years old and exhausting both sides, might finally be approaching a resolution. The moment suggested that the possibility of peace talks was increasing, leading to questions about whether the Trump administration might actively encourage Ukraine to accept Russia's terms for negotiations.

Presidential elections in the United States have repercussions that reach far beyond its borders. This reality, whether one likes it or not, cannot be overlooked.

In the current geopolitical climate, when viewing Asia through the lens of U.S. national interests, countering China emerges as America's top priority. Yet, Taiwan, alongside Korea and Japan, is regarded as "weak," despite their pro-American stances—an assessment that presents significant concerns for Washington. The phrase "the government is small but the opposition is big" is apt here: the ruling parties in these nations have seen their parliamentary power diminish, undermining their ability to effectively steer national defense policies. This reality creates an opening for political factions that are less amenable to U.S. interests.

As we reflect on the outcomes of the recent elections, an urgent question arises: what lies ahead? The path forward must lead us toward strengthening democracy.

I told Volodymyr that I was writing a guest column and occasional special reports for the Taiwanese magazine *People Fish Poetry and Life,* and I asked if he would be open to a conversation. I wanted readers in Taiwan to understand his perspective on the situations in Ukraine, Taiwan, and the United States.

"Yes!" he replied without hesitation. "Taiwanese people need to know everything about Ukraine."

Volodymyr, an upper-middle-rank commander in the Ukrainian military, agreed to the interview but mentioned he couldn't use his real name. Being an active officer, revealing his identity could put him at risk of becoming a target for the Russians.

I suggest using the name Volodymyr. This is the name of my friend and comrade. He was an officer and died in 2022 during our mission in southern Ukraine, where I was his commander. A missile hit the basement where Volodymyr and another comrade, Artem, were. Both of them died. Another soldier and I retrieved their bodies.

His choice to call himself Volodymyr meant a lot.

Volodymyr was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine, and a street in Zaporizhzhia was named after him.

After the real Volodymyr's death, the "Volodymyr" in front of me kept going back to the front lines, always proud of his fallen comrades. He carried with him a sense of responsibility and a heavy mental burden, his thoughts always on the battlefield. Still, he had to take his superiors' orders and fly to the U.S. to study. When he had a chance to talk to outsiders about the world's focus on the Ukrainian War, he wanted to honor his fellow soldiers who gave their lives.

"What's your name?" Volodymyr asked me.

"Kolas," I replied.

He burst out laughing. Ukraine is known as the breadbasket of Europe, he said, and "Kolas," written in Ukrainian as "Колос," means kernels of wheat, which is an important staple crop.

"Very important food!" Volodymyr said. My name is the golden color on the lower half of the Ukrainian flag. We both laughed at the coincidence.

One of us is from Taiwan and the other from Ukraine. Our countries are both facing serious challenges. In this special report, I want to share firsthand observations about Ukraine, Taiwan, and how a U.S. election could affect countries like ours, through the eyes of a Ukrainian military officer.

Kolas Yotaka

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A Stroll Along Kennedy Street:

A Conversation Between Volodymyr and Kolas

By **Kolas Yotaka**

The air was sharp and dry, it was a chilly December day. The temperature sat around zero degrees Celsius, but there was no snow and the Charles River flowed freely beside us. As we walked alongside the dark green waters, from Soldiers Field Road to the Harvard campus, I was briefly distracted by my buzzing phone. A New York Times alert flashed on the screen: "43,000 Ukrainian Soldiers Killed Since Russia Invaded, Zelensky Says" The article went on to report that over 230,000 people had suffered serious injuries throughout the country. I continued my walk with Volodymyr, the weight of the news hanging between us.

The Kindling of War

"Over one million people from both sides have died since February 2022, and my country is under daily missile and bomb attacks, my family spends nights in a basement without heating or electricity," he said.

In the fog of war, accurate casualty figures are often elusive, as each side tends to downplay its losses while amplifying those of the enemy. Current estimates from the U.S. military indicate that the actual toll on Ukrainian soldiers may be nearing 70,000. But whether we talk about 43,000, 70,000, or

even a million, those of us who are left cannot possibly assign a value to these numbers. We cannot reduce the brutality of war to simple statistics. Each figure represents a human life, each loss a profound tragedy that resonates through families and communities—and lingers long after the news cycles have moved on.

"In more than 10 years of war, I have seen a lot. Bravery, cowardice, incredible courage, betrayal, and death—so much death."

Many outside Ukraine believe the war started in 2022, but Volodymyr, speaking with the authority of a combat veteran, says that the conflict started eight years earlier.



"I have been involved in the war since 2014, when Russian troops seized parts of our territory (Crimea, Donbas, and Luhansk regions)."

Now 38, Volodymyr first joined as a cadet at 28. His superiors saw his sharp intellect and quick reflexes, directing him into special forces training where he developed skills with various weapons. Before the war, he was a kickboxer. When the fighting erupted in southern Ukraine, he felt an urgent call to action, volunteering to join the military. When I asked him about his motivations—about whether his family tried to dissuade him–he said that his family were simple folks, but when the war began he was overcome with the feeling that fight for his country would be his future.

For Putin, Ukraine was the heart of the former Soviet Union, and the cradle of the Russian Empire. Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991 was, in his view, the final blow to the Soviet Union, contributing to its gradual dissolution. He views modern Ukraine as an artificial construct, a nation that has never truly existed as a separate entity. Between February and March of 2014, Russia launched a campaign to annex Crimea, using its occupation to deploy cyber armies, spread disinformation, and utilize proxies to establish a government on the peninsula. They initiated a referendum to advocate for Crimea's integration into a "unified" federation with Russia. Putin's hyper-nationalist historical views underpin his belief that Ukraine is inseparable from Russia. He sees Ukraine as having been a part of the Russian Empire for over a thousand years, sharing the same culture, language, religion, and history. He is convinced that Lenin and Stalin made a grave mistake in supporting Ukraine's independence within the Soviet framework.

He views much of Ukraine's territory as a gift from the old Soviet regime, and is convinced that any assertion of Ukrainian sovereignty stems from foreign meddling. From Putin's perspective, Ukraine's rejection of Russian influence is in fact a "coup," which calls for "defensive actions." He claims Russia's aggression is a response to NATO's support for Ukraine, framing it as a noble struggle against "neo-Nazis" to "defend human rights," and so on.

What the Russian leader asserts about Ukraine closely mirrors the rhetoric used by Xi Jinping regarding Taiwan. Putin openly shared his belief in Pan-Slavic ethnic nationalism during an interview with former Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson, who backed Trump in the 2024 presidential election. Putin embodies the archetype of a narcissistic leader—self-appointed as an imperial big brother—who selectively interprets history to suit his narrative. He is obsessed with nationalist pride and the borders of his domain.

- Russia labels Ukrainians as "Nazis," while China refers to Taiwanese as "separatists."
- Moscow insists that Ukraine is an "indivisible" part of its territory, Beijing argues that Taiwan is an "inalienable" part of China.
- Russia decries Ukraine's independence as a "coup," while China characterizes Taiwan's as "secession".
- Russia claims that "foreign forces" are inciting Ukraine to resist, while China states that "foreign forces" are meddling in the Taiwan Strait.

But modern nations won't give up their sovereignty and clearly defined borders for a return to how things were in an imagined distant past. Revisionist leaders like Putin and Xi struggle with the reality of a geopolitical landscape that has irrevocably changed, and as countries assert their independence from Russia and China, conflict has emerged.

Volodymyr, serving as a field commander, has fought every day since 2014. When a soldier is killed in action, he has to hold back his grief and make the visit to the fallen soldier's family to inform them about the funeral.

"I've witnessed the deaths of comrades. It's an unbearable feeling to inform a mother or wife that their loved one is gone. In my unit, this responsibility falls to the commander."

What goes through his mind when it's time to return to the battlefield?

"Saying goodbye to my family, knowing I might never see my wife again or hug my 9-year-old daughter. Watching them leave while I turn back with tears to fight the enemy causing so much pain. This sadness eventually turns into hatred for the enemy, which fuels the resolve to fight."

Hearing a kind and polite man casually use the word "hatred" caught me off-guard. For a moment I didn't know how to respond, I couldn't nod or shake my head. I was quiet and just looked at him for a few seconds. In a world where war becomes routine, love and hate becomes routine as well. I remembered that in 2022, after a month of conflict, President Zelensky spoke about "hate" during an interview with American media:

"War is a choice, but it is a difficult choice. You feel hatred for the enemy constantly, for the enemy that has taken your life and your daily routine. Still, you have to suppress that hatred. You know who your enemy is, but you must also resist according to the rules of war, and that means keeping your humanity."

As human beings, if we are honest, we must embrace all our emotions; war can be fueled by either hate or love.



"I've also seen incredible acts of heroism that will one day fill books and inspire films. Ordinary soldiers, civilians, and even children contribute to our fight. For example, an 11-year-old girl from Zaporizhzhia, who used to compete in checkers tournaments, now plays games outside a supermarket, donating her earnings to the military—around $2,000 Hryvnia monthly (50USD). There are countless stories like hers."

War and Knowledge

As we walked from John F. Kennedy Street to Eliot Street, the gray sky mirrored the cold air around us. I pulled my scarf tighter and rummaged through my bag for a woolen hat to cover my ears. Volodymyr, used to the harsh winters of Ukraine, seemed unaffected. Harvard's campus bustled with life, students making their way on foot and bike, classes were in full swing. But as we kept walking, he mentioned that he felt uneasy being there, enjoying the peaceful surroundings of a prestigious American university while his brothers were fighting the war. I could sense the conflict within him; the guilt he felt for enjoying these moments of safety and calm. I couldn't help but ask, if your mind is so focused on the survival of your comrades and your country, why would you want to leave the battlefield, even temporarily, to come to the United States?

"Without knowledge and technology, we can't survive in this war."

In 2022, Volodymyr was wounded in action, struck in the back by a bomb fragment. He lifted the edge of his black sweater to reveal a long scar, about 20 centimeters long and 2 centimeters wide, running along the left side of his lower back. He said he had recovered well, but felt a weight in his chest when he thought about his fellow soldiers. He said he went along with his commander's request to take some time off the battlefield to further his studies, he knew a more important mission lay ahead.

"At the beginning of the war, Russian troops advanced deep into our territory, coming as close as 15-20 kilometers from our capital. We managed to destroy a significant amount of their equipment and forces, push them back, and preserve our statehood. However, after the euphoria of initial success, the war turned into a protracted conflict.

Analyzing the situation, we realized this war would not be quick—it's not a sprint but a long and grueling marathon. Our command decided to invest in continuous education, innovation, and tools necessary for victory. This applies to both individual soldiers and the development of weapons, technologies, and equipment. That's how I ended up here."

Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran have formed an alliance to provide weapons and military support in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, Ukraine heavily relies on assistance from the United States and NATO. It feels like World War III.

"World War III has already begun. This is acknowledged by President Zelensky and former Commander-in-Chief Zaluzhny. This war is no longer just between Russia and Ukraine; it involves Belarus, North Korea, China, the U.S., the U.K., France, Poland, and many others."

The involvement of multiple countries makes the war more complex.

"Your enemies don't think logically, the way they think doesn't make sense"

In modern warfare, precision weapons have become essential, with lethal automatic weapons and drones driven by artificial intelligence proving to be among the deadliest. Yet, beyond these technologies, Volodymyr is increasingly worried about the possibility of Russia resorting to nuclear weapons; the capabilities these advancements provide are deeply concerning.

According to Foreign Policy in 2022, despite the ethical concerns about their use, Russia, Israel, South Korea, and Turkey have already deployed weapons with automated capabilities. Meanwhile, Australia, the United Kingdom, China, and the United States are heavily investing in their development, as these lethal automated weapons continue to advance in size and effectiveness. This is no longer a scenario from science fiction; it is a reality in today's battlefields. Russia, for example, has introduced AI-powered Kalashnikov ZALA Kub-BLA drones and loitering munition in Ukraine, while Ukraine uses Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones with similar automated features. Foreign Policy notes that these weapons differ from traditional drones because they can self-navigate and select targets. While human operators still have the final decision on strikes, warfare technology is increasingly moving toward greater automation.

The ramifications of such technology are profound; not only do these weapons challenge conventional management, but they also exacerbate the potential for mass violence. When paired with facial recognition technologies, automated systems can be weaponized for political assassinations and ethnic cleansing. In my conversation with Volodymyr, he spent almost half the time expressing his concerns about advanced weapons systems and his determination to learn more about them.

"We can win the war only through technology and active defense tactics. Ukraine cannot match Russia's size and resources, so we have to fight asymmetrically. The war has revolutionized military science, with cheap, effective drones playing a key role. Airborne, ground, and naval drones have proven safer and more effective.

From a moral perspective, war is fundamentally wrong. However, if the purpose of war is to achieve peace, then the principles of avoiding excessive force, protecting civilians, and respecting prisoners represent essential guidelines that countries must adhere to during times of conflict.

"I often use an analogy to explain our motivation. Imagine someone breaks into your house, kills your dog, assaults your family, and ties you up. Would you need any additional motivation to fight back? This is not just a hypothetical; such atrocities happened in Bucha, Makariv, and Irpin."

In war, each side believes their cause is just.

"Ukrainian history is full of courage and resilience, and we will fight not only because we have no choice but because we are right."

Our course wasn't finished yet, but Volodymyr already had a clear idea of what lay ahead for him.

"In the summer of 2022, I was injured. Physically, I feel fine now, but morally, not so much. I came here from the battlefield, where my unit remains, and I will return to them after this conference."

War and the World

As Putin launched his assault on Ukraine in 2022, global media flocked to the scene. Since the beginning, the Ukrainian army saw the press as allies, hoping to highlight Russia's brutality and spread their story. However, this collaboration was not without strain. Volodymyr was tasked with guiding foreign journalists through the war zone, and saw it as a valuable opportunity, but sometimes the focus of reporters troubled him. He worried that in their pursuit of sensational stories, they might inadvertently exposed vulnerabilities.

"I took reporters to the site of an attack only a week after a lot of people had died there."

Volodymyr was uncomfortable with the media and foreign politicians coming to visit cemeteries and the families of fallen soldiers. Some came to see orphans, some were academics doing research, others just wanted to find a place to eat good Ukrainian food. He said it sometimes felt like war tourism.

Are Ukraine's national interests aligned with those of other countries? David Sanger, a senior political reporter for The New York Times, addresses this question in his recently published book, New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West. The book opens with a thorough examination of the situation.

In February 2022, the war in Ukraine erupted, but concerns had already been brewing. As early as the third week of October 2021, a classified document warning that Russia was preparing to attack, circulated in the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department. By December 2021, U.S. intelligence satellites had spotted Russian troops amassed along the Ukrainian border, accompanied by an unusual presence of blood banks for transfusions and military equipment from Russia's ally, Belarus. This was four months before Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin seemed poised to take the whole of Ukraine.

After reading his book, I had the chance to meet Sanger on the Harvard campus. I told him I admired his work, particularly his ability to provide consistent reporting during his time at the White House. He has covered the presidency from Clinton through Trump, who is now about to start a second term. As the chief Washington correspondent for The New York Times, he has interviewed presidents from both parties, balancing firm viewpoints with thorough sourcing.

In New Cold Wars, Sanger details how, shortly after Biden took office, the U.S. gathered intelligence about Russia's planned invasion of Ukraine. This information came from large-scale interceptions of Russian communications, effective infiltration of their network systems, and CIA-developed informants. However, during Biden's first year, Putin's unusual activities went largely unnoticed. The administration was preoccupied with the Capitol Hill insurrection on January 6, triggered by Trump's refusal to accept the election results. Concerned with domestic economic issues and the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, according to Sanger, the Biden administration did not have the bandwidth to fully address the possibility of a Russian attack on Ukraine. Meanwhile, Putin bided his time and showed no signs of impatience toward Ukraine, leaving the United States unprepared for the invasion.

The Putin depicted in The New Cold War closely resembles Xi Jinping. For instance, Putin views himself as a modern-day "Peter the Great", much like Xi identifies with Emperor Wu of Han. Putin has long argued that Ukraine is not a sovereign nation but part of the Russian Empire, while Xi claims that Taiwan is an inseparable part of Chinese history.

Putin frames the act of invading other countries as "reclaiming" lost territory, whereas Xi describes efforts toward Hong Kong and Taiwan as reclaiming "historical rights." Their attitudes towards Ukraine and Taiwan align closely. Before launching its invasion of Ukraine, Russia denied any intention of going to war, labeling its military deployments as exercises, normalizing intimidation and threats. Ukraine and Taiwan are in similar situations, and the stance the U.S. takes has a direct impact on their current state and future outcomes.

Over the past two years, it's been noted that the Biden administration didn't actively push for Ukraine's NATO membership after the war started and was unable to send weapons and planes quickly enough. This has sparked discussions about whether the U.S. will continue to provide military aid to Ukraine or aid Taiwan in the event of a crisis. U.S. support for Ukraine also became a partisan issue in the recent presidential election.

"What do you expect from the new U.S. president, Donald Trump?" I asked.

"The U.S. has been a model for Ukraine. Under Trump's administration, we received critical weapons that helped us repel Russian advances in early 2022. The U.S. now faces two choices:

1. Change course and risk a crumbling Europe, Middle East, and Taiwan.

2. Support Ukraine, uphold international law, and ensure the survival of democratic nations."

Volodymyr and I continued walking through the first floor of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, heading down the stairs and past the restaurant, where the smell of coffee filled the air. The room was getting busier and warmer, so I took off my hat and gloves. But our conversation kept going as we walked and discussed NATO.

Recently, NATO's new Secretary General, Mark Rutte, met with President-elect Trump and pointed out that if peace talks regarding Ukraine end up favoring Russia, North Korea, and Iran, it could embolden China's Xi Jinping to take more aggressive steps against Taiwan. Over the past two years, NATO's reluctance to offer Ukraine membership has adversely affected its efforts in the war.

"NATO's current tactics are outdated. Ukraine is at the forefront of 21st-century warfare with advancements in drones, situational awareness, and network-centric operations. NATO should learn from Ukraine's experience to prepare for future challenges."

Volodymyr believes that war erodes our humanity, yet the world continues to turn a blind eye to Russia's cruelty.

"I've seen the world's injustice—the indifference to clear crimes against humanity. When Russians deport hundreds of our children, and leaders of international organizations, instead of holding Putin accountable, socialize with him at international events."

Volodymyr's Happy Reading List

• Andrei "Orlusha" Orlov
◎Writings by the Ukranian author

• The Hero with a Thousand Faces
◎by Joseph Campbell

• The Craft of Intelligence
◎by Allen Dulles

• Eastern Front: A History of the First World War
◎by Nick Lloyd

• The Girl in the Mist
◎by Donato Carrisi

• Isaac and the Undertaker's Daughter
◎by Steve Stern

• Jew Süss
◎by Lion Feuchtwanger

• Brave New World
◎by Aldous Huxley

War and Humanity

As we entered the cafeteria for breakfast, the atmosphere lightened. I gathered my share of pineapple, cantaloupe, scrambled eggs, and hot tea, while Volodymyr joined the international group of students in our class, chatting over coffee like any other young man. They discussed the topics of the day—from Syria to martial law in South Korea. We ate, drank, read, and talked. It reminded me that despite our differences, we are all just human beings.

"What worries you the most?" I asked.

"I'm deeply concerned about international support. As a commander, the state of my unit, its equipment, logistics, and technological advancements are critical. Ukraine cannot finance this alone. Any pause in Western support could have devastating consequences."

"What do are you afraid of?"

"I fear the world's division and lack of understanding that "foreign problems" don't exist when it comes to war and crimes against humanity."

"What makes you angry?"

"What angers me most is the lack of progress—in all aspects. Before joining the military, I was an athlete and understood that stagnation leads to decline. The same applies to a country at war. I am frustrated by the indifference of some who fail to grasp the scale of our tragedy. Some politicians might need to visit our military cemeteries or attend the funerals of children to understand."

Suddenly I thought, *"I don't want to make him feel worse. I'm asking too many heavy questions. Let's change the subject."*

"What brings you joy?" I asked with a smile.

"What brings me joy is my family, simple pleasures like books, films, music, and a cup of coffee with loved ones. These small things become priceless after experiencing war."

War and Taiwan

As we were about to head to the classroom, with class time approaching, I topped off my lemonade while Volodymyr filled his cup with coffee.

"Do you think Taiwan is like Ukraine?" I asked.

Volodymyr thought for a moment before responding.

"While I don't know much about Taiwan's history, I see many similarities between our situations. Both of us depend on the United States, face threats from neighboring powers, and have to consider our technological strengths. I believe our two countries should collaborate, combining Ukraine's combat experience with Taiwan's tech capabilities."

"What advice would you give to the people of Taiwan?"

"Stay prepared, remain united, and never underestimate the threat from your neighbors. Strengthen your defenses and build alliances with other nations to protect your freedom and sovereignty."

Volodymyr's Happy Watching List

•Mad Ballerina
•Hunt for the Fox
•Every Sunday
•Lenin's Testament
•All Coincidences Are Not Accidental
•Lee Miller
•Give a Sign
•The Lives of Others
•The Diplomat
•The Ron Clark Story
•Wonderful
•No Way Back
•Moses (Netflix)
•Charlie Wilson's War (Tom Hanks)

Commander Volodymyr's advice to the people of Taiwan:

●Personal Defense: We concluded that if our country had a law allowing firearms, some incidents might have been avoided on an individual safety level. A significant portion of the civilian population should possess a sufficient level of firearm handling skills. This way, it could act as if a “third branch of the armed forces” (1. Army, 2. Police and National Guard, 3. Citizens).

●First Aid Skills: In the early days of the war, many civilians suffered because they lacked even basic first aid skills. Right now, you have time to address this. I recommend implementing multi-level training for your population: basic lessons for children in schools, more advanced ones in universities, and comprehensive training for government employees.

●Prepare Civilian Facilities: In challenging times, civilian institutions need to understand how they will reorganize to support the military and what specific products or services they will provide.

●Training and Exercises: The military is always fighting, even during training. Exercises intimidate your enemy. China regularly conducts drills near your borders, training themselves and intimidating you. In turn, you must also analyze their exercises and develop tactics and tools to destroy their forces in case they decide to attack.

What If America's National Interest Is Different From Ours?

After winning the election, Donald Trump announced his intentions, citing U.S. national security interests, to "take back" the Panama Canal and "buy" Greenland. These positions clearly conflict with the national interests of Panama and Denmark.

Are the national interests of the United States aligned with those of Taiwan? When they are, what should Taiwan do? When they are not, how should we handle it?

By **Kolas Yotaka**

"It's crucial for us that the United States is our main ally. Without their support, we would have a hard time—a really hard time. We constantly monitor the situation in the U.S. because we worry about mixed messages. If there's a shift in the political landscape in Congress, it could seriously impact the support for Ukraine." (Ukrainian President Zelensky, 2022)

A month into the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with sirens ringing out in Kyiv and photos of the fallen hanging in the plaza in front of St. Sofia Cathedral, Zelensky purposefully chose to give an interview to an American media outlet. His goal was to convey a crucial message to the American people: we are fighting for you, and U.S. support for Ukraine must not waver.

Given the threat posed by hostile neighbors, Ukraine's need for U.S. assistance is just as vital as Taiwan's reliance on American support. With the results of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, former President Donald Trump will return to office. This time, Trump's public stance on Ukraine and

Taiwan is different from what it was during his first term. He has stated that he will cut aid to Ukraine and will not send troops to defend Taiwan.

President-elect Donald Trump made several references to Taiwan during his campaign, and most of his remarks did not sit well with the Taiwanese public. The troubling comments stood in sharp contrast to the perception that Taiwanese people had of him during his first term. Whether he was saying that *“Taiwan stole our chip business,” suggesting that “Taiwan should pay for defense,” or failing to clearly state whether he would defend Taiwan if China sent troops there—only mentioning that the U.S. would impose a 100% tariff on China if it “goes into" Taiwan—these mixed messages became talking points used by the opposition party in Taiwan to mock the ruling party. John Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser during his first term, wrote in his book that Trump once compared Taiwan to the tip of a ballpoint pen to illustrate how insignificant it was next to China, which he likened to the size of the desk in the Oval Office. I had the chance to speak with Bolton in person, and he confirmed that the story was true.*

Trump highlighted China as a geopolitical threat to the U.S. during his first term, and his successor, President Joe Biden, largely maintained that focus. But Biden tended to be less volatile and more predictable than Trump. He has stated that the U.S. and China are in an "extreme competition" and that China poses the "most significant threat and challenge" to the U.S. Regardless of political affiliation, be it Republican or Democrat, the priorities of U.S. diplomacy, defense, budgeting, and decision-making center around what is deemed in the "national interest.”

What is the "national interest" of the United States? The concept of "national interest" has varied among successive U.S. presidents. If we look back over the past 80 years, from the end of World War II to the post-Cold War era, all U.S. presidents—except for John F. Kennedy—formulated national security strategies. Kennedy believed that the government should be dynamic and flexible, avoiding a rigid "framework," which is why no national strategic plan was established during his administration. As a result, it was often seen as reacting too frequently to international events or crises rather than taking a proactive approach.

While each president has taken different actions in response to various international situations, the overall "national interests" of the United States generally align with the following definitions:

The safety of the nation and its people, the preservation of constitutional institutions and values, and the creation of an international environment that fosters U.S. prosperity.

Regardless of which party is in power or in the opposition, there must be a fundamental consensus on the "national interest" for the government to create a "national security strategy" that reflects this interest. This approach helps the U.S. government and its people effectively and systematically address various threats and crises. The primary purpose of a "national security strategy" grounded in the "national interest" is to aid the government in policy-making. This means that no matter which party is in power, the interests of the party or the personal political ideologies of the president should not overshadow the national interest. This ensures the protection of national interests, the safety of the people, the preservation of democracy and constitutional governance, and the creation of an international environment conducive to U.S. prosperity.

So the next question we must ask is: If the national interest of the United States is "the safety of the nation and its people, the preservation of its constitutional institutions and values, and the creation of an international environment conducive to U.S. prosperity," then what is the national interest of the Republic of China/Taiwan?

The Competition Between National Identity and National Interest

Since the direct presidential elections began in 1996, the government has needed to engage in dialogue with the people to secure votes. However, with the onset of presidential elections, the issue of "unification and independence,” deeply tied to questions of national identity, has consistently been leveraged as a political tool for mobilization. This has caused us to neglect discussions about the national interest for far too long. Simply accusing the other party of being "Taiwanese," "mainlanders," "indepen-

dence activists," or "communist sympathizers" has become the predictable strategy in election after election. The goal of political debate has become focused solely on gaining power, often sacrificing the pursuit of consensus on the national interest.

As a result, for nearly 30 years, meaningful discussion about the national interest has been scarce in Taiwanese civil society. Government officials, from the President down, often lack a clear strategy for effectively allocating time and public resources. Instead, they focus on minor issues, which prevents them from reaching a meaningful consensus on urgent national priorities. This has led to significant disagreements over national security policy among the various political parties, creating a state of gridlock.

Should the defense budget be increased? Some argue that raising the defense budget signals hostility toward China and heightens the risk of conflict. Others believe that only by expanding the budget can we enhance military readiness and prevent war through deterrence. Should military service be extended? Some argue that extending service amounts to a declaration of war against China, while others believe that being well-prepared is essential for dealing with a hostile neighbor and protecting the safety of people's lives and property.

For example, when China suddenly deployed a large number of warships in the waters east of Taiwan, it was clear that its stance had changed from what it was 30 years ago. China is now ramping up military exercises around Taiwan, routinely crossing the median line of the Strait, and effectively surrounding Taiwan at sea. In the face of these aggressive threats, politicians from different factions in Taiwan continue to offer vastly different interpretations, deepening existing disagreements.

During Trump's reelection campaign, when he accused Taiwan of "stealing" U.S. chips and suggested it should pay "protection money," commentators on TV news talk shows were polarized on the issue. They struggled to frame the debate in terms of "national interest," instead focusing on "identity" and accusing one another of "selling out Taiwan."

In another instance, when President Lai said that the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China are not subordinate to each other, and that Taiwan is not part of China, in my opinion, the president made such a statement based on the existing Constitution of the Republic of China. It is only natural to declare it. But politicians from different camps continue to hold varying views on the sovereignty and governance of the "Republic of China," resulting in heated confrontations in the legislature that can be quite embarrassing for outsiders to witness.

All of these outcomes lead to a situation where, when a significant crisis arises, whoever is in power has to assess and respond to it from scratch. Sometimes they do too much, sometimes they do too little, and sometimes they seem simply at a loss for what to do.

What is the "national interest" of the Republic of China/Taiwan? If successive governments cannot clearly communicate to the people what our "national interest" is, then different factions will simply adopt the views of other countries and impose them on Taiwan. Some may equate China's national interests with Taiwan's, while others may consider Taiwan's interests to be the same as those of the United States. Due to years of neglect in thinking about what "national interest" truly means, we risk surrendering our rights as a sovereign nation, turning our country into a battleground for larger powers' rivalries.

"We are fighting for the entire world, and we are fully aware of what we are up against. American society should share this understanding to ensure that support for Ukraine remains steadfast and to recognize that we are also fighting on their behalf." (Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, 2022)

As a sovereign and independent nation, Ukraine has its own national interests, with the foremost being the "protection of national sovereignty and an independent government chosen by the people of Ukraine." (National Interests Magazine, July 16, 2024) Any negotiations must take place without compromising Ukraine's sovereignty.

The U.S. national interest involves preventing Russia from using nuclear weapons and avoiding a strengthened alliance between Russia and China, which could pose a greater threat to the Western world and, ultimately, to America's economy and power.

Ukrainian President Zelenskyy understands the differences and similarities between Ukraine's and America's national interests. Therefore, after Trump's reelection in 2024, and considering Ukraine's national interests, Ukraine quickly adjusted its national security strategy. After over two years of conflict with Russia, Zelenskyy chose to engage with Trump, recognizing that greater challenges lay ahead. Only by knowing each other and understanding America's national interests can Ukraine find the right way to cooperate with the U.S. in the fight against Russia.

Russia also has its own "national interests." For years, Putin has referred to Ukraine as a "nonexistent country," justifying the invasion of Ukraine by claiming that “no one can harm Russia’s national interests.” This rationale has led to the occupation of Ukrainian territory, manipulation of Ukrainian presidential elections to install pro-Russian leaders, the 2014 invasion of Crimea, and the outbreak of all-out war against Ukraine in 2022, making conflict a daily reality. The spaces for people’s activities have dwindled to cold subway stations, basements, and bomb shelters lacking heat and electricity.

"That is the key rhetoric they use to justify their invasion. They must convince their people, locking them in an information bubble, claiming that Ukrainians do not exist, that they are just a small, insignificant group in a remote border area, that they have no language, no heritage, no history—nothing at all. They say that we were originally part of Russia and that we separated only because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and insist that the separation is only temporary." (Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, 2022)

When political leaders stop seeing "people" as "people," that's when the most tragic and inhumane wars happen.

"Warfare changes our way of life, creating a completely different state of existence. This state forces us to choose between preserving our human dignity or becoming animals, terrorists, plunderers, or abusers. I have seen it all; we have witnessed the atrocities of the Russian invasion." (Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, 2022)

Noble souls have been reduced to ugly beasts.

"They are trying to control us through starvation and cutting off water and electricity. If you’re not God and you do this, then what does that make you? You’re just a barbarian. Kremlin officials should think carefully about what they want to be. Do they want to be barbarians, lunatics?” (Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, 2022)

The outcome of the 2024 U.S. presidential election will have a significant impact on the global geopolitical landscape, but one thing will remain constant: in relation to Ukraine and Taiwan, the U.S. will continue to prioritize its own national interests.

Identify National Interests and Safeguard National Security

What are Taiwan's national interests, and how do they differ from those of the United States under Trump's leadership? How should the two sides cooperate without ignoring the expectations of all sectors for peace in the Taiwan Strait? This is not just the responsibility of the ruling party; it is a question that leaders from all parties must address together. Taiwan is a democratic country where political parties change, but only by putting an end to fruitless debates over "national identity" and internal conflicts can political parties reach a consensus on national interests and truly find solutions for the people of Taiwan.

By the time you read this article, Volodymyr will have returned to the battlefield. Before he left campus, I thanked him for walking with me. As this year’s course wrapped up, I headed back to Taiwan while he went home to Ukraine. We hugged goodbye, and I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d have another chance to walk with this Ukrainian friend by the Charles River. Still, we both believe that as long as we can live as human beings, keep our dignity, and hold on to our spirit, there’s a lot to look forward to in the future.