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By Lally Weymouth

Volodymyr Zelensky: ‘Everyone will lose’ if Russia invades Ukraine

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President Biden said Wednesday that [he believes](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin will invade Ukraine: “My guess is he will move in. He has to do something.” Now all eyes are on Volodymyr Zelensky, the 43-year-old president of Ukraine, a country menaced by 100,000 well-armed Russian troops. Recent U.S.-Russia-NATO talks [failed to resolve](#) this tense situation. Instead, Russia maintained its extreme demands, insisting that NATO cease its expansion and that Ukraine be barred from joining the alliance. Neither Washington nor NATO agreed to these terms, but Biden has ruled out sending U.S. forces to Ukraine. Washington had threatened sanctions over an invasion, but Wednesday, Biden wavered, saying a “minor incursion” might not lead to harsh sanctions after all. That means if Russia invades, Ukraine could be on its own. Biden, attempting to clarify the U.S. position, [said Thursday](#) that if “any assembled Russian units move across the Ukrainian border,” that would be an invasion, which would be met by a “severe and coordinated economic response.” Also Thursday, [Zelensky tweeted](#): “We want to remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations. Just as there are no minor casualties and little grief from the loss of loved ones.” This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Soviet Union, and some experts suggest that Putin may be aiming to restore some of its lost territory, starting with parts of Ukraine. Zelensky took time earlier Wednesday, before Biden’s news conference, to speak to The Washington Post’s Lally Weymouth by videoconference. Edited excerpts follow:

Q. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said today that you face an “unprecedented” threat in your country. Do you believe the Russians are about to invade Ukraine and take new territory?

A. Today our partners are saying that war may start tomorrow if there is a powerful escalation on the Russian side, and then there will be powerful sanctions applied. But if we are talking about the sanctions policy and the probability of escalation, then the question is, why are you not introducing sanctions now rather than wait until after the escalation?

Q. I saw [your tweet](#) supporting the bill introduced by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.) to sanction Russia over the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, but it was defeated. A new bill called the Guard Act proposes immediate sanctions on Russia over its military buildup.

A. I just want to make this clear. As a country that is building a powerful economy and undergoing reforms, I support imposing sanctions now. I asked one leader: “Why do you support sanctions against Russia in case there is an invasion into Ukraine? Why do you need sanctions after we lose the whole territory of Ukraine?”

Q. Will the population resist the Russian troops?

A. Now we have lots of Russian-speaking Ukrainians who support Ukraine — even those who had a positive sentiment about Russia after the occupation of Crimea and Donbas. I know that everyone is going to protect our country. Apart from the army, each and every Ukrainian will fight to protect their land.

If we are going to protect ourselves against one of the most powerful armies in the world, then this will be war. And if this will be war, it’s going to be a very strong war, and everyone will lose. Hundreds of thousands of lives will be lost. Ukraine will suffer; Russia will suffer; European countries adjacent to Ukraine will suffer; and the ones who are further away will be impacted by a migration crisis. For us, the most important thing is to preserve our territory.

Q. You have said publicly you have an interest in speaking with Presidents Putin and Biden about the current situation in Ukraine — not being left out of the talks, as you were last week.

A. Let’s have a dialogue with Russia. I’m asking the United States to help us to find a format. We support dialogue; we are against war.

Q. How effective will strong sanctions be in preventing war?

A. Sanctions are considered to be a preventive tool because they can be applied and then lifted. If there is an invasion by Russia, do you introduce powerful sanctions after we might have already lost several territories? Once you introduce sanctions, what will Russia do?

Q. Russia has a lot of reserves and can probably tough out the sanctions, don’t you think?

A. Exactly. So once you introduce even powerful sanctions, they will look at you and say, “Listen, we can deal with this, we can continue as it was.” I think this is wrong.

[Putin aims beyond Ukraine. Checking him right now is crucial.](#)

Q. Do you think SWIFT sanctions [which would cut Russia off from the international payment messaging system known as SWIFT] might actually have some effect if they were put on now? Germany has already [come out against](#) SWIFT sanctions.

A. I cannot see why the world should not be united regarding the introduction of sanctions.

Q. Has President Biden given your country all the military assistance and weapons that it needs to defend Ukraine from a Russian invasion? Antiaircraft weapons, drones, air and coastal defense, counter-electronic-warfare provisions, Javelins, Stingers? What else do you want from Washington?

A. To be honest, I’m not one of those political leaders who discuss tiny details of military support because I think those should be confidential. I think the military support from the Biden administration is stronger than it was before. Whether it

will suffice, I will say no, but this is not about a specific American president. We are facing hybrid war. We are under attack: a military attack, cyberattacks and energy attacks.

Q. Do you worry that the Russians aim to take certain parts of your country, and if so, which parts? Might they try to build a land bridge from Crimea to Russia including Mariupol or some of the water reserves above Crimea? What is the worst case?

A. I will say realistically if Russia decides to enhance their escalation, of course they are going to do this on those territories where historically there are people who used to have family links to Russia. Kharkiv, which is under Ukraine government control, could be occupied. Russia needs a pretext: They will say that they are protecting the Russian-speaking population. After the occupation and the annexation of Crimea, we understand that this is feasible and may happen. But I don't know what they are going to do because these are big cities. Kharkiv has over 1 million citizens. It's not going to be just an occupation; it's going to be the beginning of a large-scale war.

Q. This year is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Soviet Union. Do you believe that Putin thinks his legacy will be cemented by getting back Ukraine or large chunks of Ukraine?

A. Putin is not young, and I think he should be thinking about what he will leave behind. If he takes away the territory of Ukraine, it will be a temporary victory of one nation over another. I have lots of Russian friends and acquaintances who feel sorry about what happened. Our territories will come back to us. In 2014, we were friends; now we are in war with each other. I think Putin has a big chance to agree to a peaceful resolution, to sit around a table and find a compromise.

Q. There are a lot of Russians who believe that Ukraine was and is part of Russia. They talk about the "Russian lands of Ukraine."

A. I understand that they are talking about Crimea. They want us and the world to forget about Crimea. They have occupied it and nurtured the separatists in the Donbas. They will be ready to give us the Donbas if we forget about Crimea. No one is going to forget Crimea.

Q. Do you think Putin will try to install a government in Ukraine that is more friendly to him?

A. To put in place a government that would be completely controlled by Russia would be impossible. Even if they do, this would be the shortest-lived government because people will simply not accept it. Maybe Putin thinks that the majority of Ukrainians support him and his policies. I think this is a big mistake to think like that.

Threatening to invade Ukraine will help Putin at home. Actually invading won't.

Q. People say that when you were first elected, Putin thought you would be easy to deal with, and he got annoyed because he found you were very pro-NATO, pro-West, and he couldn't make a deal with you. Do you think there's any truth to that?

A. When I got married, my wife also thought that I am going to be ... I'm joking. I'm just saying that I am what I am. I haven't changed. I wanted to have a neighborly conversation [with Russia] to say, yes, we have a war going on, but let's have a quick fix. However, I wasn't prepared to betray my country. I do understand that, as they think, I turned out to be a strongman — a hard nut, a nut that is hard to crack, as they say in Ukraine.

Q. It must have been surprising for you, coming from an acting career and a popular TV show, to get elected in 2019 and enjoy 70 percent popularity in the polls. Things were going pretty well. But this is a nightmare: All of a sudden, 100,000 troops are around your border. Putin is talking about seizing parts or all of your country. You don't come from a military defense background. How have you handled this?

A. Ronald Reagan was also not a military person.

Q. Do you admire Reagan?

A. I like him. I didn't know him personally. I respect very much people who fight and who get the result they desire.

Q. Did you find being president of Ukraine harder than you thought it would be? How did it differ from your expectations?

A. Being the president of Ukraine is a big honor for me. I had lots of people in my life who shared things with me. I thought if people have given to me, I have to give back and have to be grateful. So I decided to run for the presidency only because we had a difficult situation. I'm grateful that I became popular among our people. I will do whatever it takes. I'm not afraid of difficulties. In terms of war, I think no president of Ukraine was ready to have a war with Russia. But we are nevertheless ready.

Q. Americans are very inward-looking now — everyone talks about covid and the new omicron variant. How do you explain to everyday Americans why Ukraine matters?

A. I would say the following: I'm not your president, so it's difficult for me to find the proper words when addressing you. But I would like to explain that it doesn't matter where a person lives, there are simple straightforward rules and principles: You can't kill people; you can't deal drugs; you can't commit violence; there shouldn't be slavery. We all live on this Earth. This is about values. There are civil rules, rules that may help us survive in this world. The Ukraine question is about two countries, one of which is attacking the other — it's a moral question. You can't capture someone's territory, and you can't invade.

Q. Do you think the U.S. has let you down, if you are being honest? It seems that you will be on your own no matter what they say. Biden has said he won't send ground troops to Ukraine.

A. In terms of being left alone, this will be the mistake of the whole world. The world will not be the same if the war happens, and Europe will not be the same for sure.

Q. Are you more worried about a conventional war or a hybrid attack? I saw that you blamed Russia for the [cyberattack on your governmental websites](#) that took place last Friday.

A. Our specialists told me that yes, there is a very high probability that it originated from Russia. This is not the first or the last attack. If you have to compare which war is more dangerous, a cyberattack or a conventional war, I think it is hard to say. I think that missile and rocket shots and full-fledged aviation assaults are much more threatening. The consequences of war are more difficult than cyberattacks.