

Should Ukraine Sabotage Russian Infrastructure?

What Happens Next - 01/27/2024

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, politics, and war.

Today's topic is Should Ukraine Sabotage Russian Infrastructure?

Our speaker Hal Brands who is the Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Hal is the author of the book entitled *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today*.

I want to learn from Hal whether Ukraine can go on the offensive to encourage Putin to negotiate. Will the current stalemate force Ukraine to move towards unconventional asymmetric warfare? Should Ukraine employ sabotage to destroy Russian infrastructure like the critical Trans-Siberian Railroad and other soft targets to improve local morale and bring the war to Putin's home turf?

Buckle up!

Hal can you please begin with your opening six-minute remarks.

Hal Brands:

For my six minutes, I thought I would talk about where things stand in the war right now, where they may be going next year, and what it will all mean for international security for years to come. Right now, the war is a dynamic stalemate. It is a stalemate in the sense that the front lines are not moving. The Ukrainians failed in their effort to punch through the main Russian defensive lines in the South this year.

The Russians have also failed to budge the Ukrainian front lines; they have made a few gains here and there, but at appallingly high human cost. That is the stalemate part, but dynamic in the sense that the balance of forces in the war will not remain static.

Both sides are trying to build advantages for 2024 and beyond by throwing lots of men if you are Russia. Or developing better means to strike Crimea and Russia if you are Ukraine. Ukraine is not going to be able to launch a big decisive offensive this year. But you can try to build the forces that would launch a successful offensive in 2025. It is dynamic that both sides are

positioning themselves for operations present and future. And what is done now will determine who comes out ahead.

Where are things going?

If you are looking at the U.S. and the Ukrainian side of this, there are five things the U.S. and Ukraine ought to be doing this year to get ready. Ukraine is going to need more training, more equipment, more sophisticated long range strike capabilities and it should continue striking at Russian naval forces in the Black Sea.

It should keep holding Russian targets at risk within Crimea because Crimea is the logistical hub for Russian operations in southern Ukraine. And so, the more you can deny Russia the use of that peninsula militarily, the more pressure you can put on Russian forces elsewhere. Ukraine is taking strikes within Russia itself. They have been doing this at a much higher clip recently. They have been using drones, special operations forces, sabotage, and other long reach means to bring the war home to Putin and the Russian population. That is important for morale purposes and for trying to illustrate the costs of the war to Putin.

Success is not going to be Ukraine liberating all its territory. That is going to be exceedingly difficult, but it could be liberating territory, perhaps getting down to the Black Sea, putting pressure on Russian forces so Putin eventually feels compelled to negotiate a settlement that would leave Ukraine as a viable entity. And whether that happens or not will bear heavily on the final question, which is what is the legacy that this war leaves?

If you wind the tape back to the middle of 2022, the expectation in Western countries was that the Ukraine war, while it was terrible for Ukraine, was going to be good for the Western world. It was going to weaken Russia, leave Russia incapable of further aggression. It expanded NATO. We were seeing the West pile sanctions on Russia. And the war looked like it was going to weaken the countries that are challenging the existing order and strengthen the Western community that is defending it.

Two years into the war that is less certain. The sanctions have been disappointing relative to expectations. They have hurt the Russian economy; they have not crippled it. They have not ended Putin's ability to make war. And Russia comes out of the war with this big pool of trained manpower with a mobilized defense industrial base. We are already seeing support for the Ukraine war slip in the United States. We will not know what it means for international security until all is said or done, but the war could leave a darker legacy than we expected.

Larry Bernstein:

During the 2012 presidential debate, Mitt Romney said that the biggest risk to American security was Russia. And Obama told Romney that he suffered from a Cold War mentality. In Ukraine one superpower is stuck on the battlefield while another provides armaments for its opponent. Isn't this a classic Cold War proxy combat?

Hal Brands:

It is. Ukraine is a sovereign nation fighting for its independence, but it is a proxy war. This is a golden opportunity for the United States to impose sky-high costs on Russia by enabling the Ukrainian defense. Lloyd Austin, the Secretary of Defense, said in the Spring of 2022 that the U.S. goal was to weaken Russia so that it cannot perpetrate this aggression again.

And this is a bargain from the perspective of American security. 5.5% of the U.S. annual defense budget has inflicted this terrible toll on the Russian military. The U.S. has benefited enormously from this conflict in wearing down the Russian military. And that is sometimes lost in the discussion of the burdens of supporting Ukraine.

Larry Bernstein:

The Biden Administration wants to provide some weapons but does not want escalation, either nuclear in Ukraine or non-nuclear on NATO supply lines. This has limited the West's plan of action to provide offensive weapons for fear of Russian reprisals.

Hal Brands:

The broader point is a good and an interesting one. U.S. concerns about Russian escalation were most pronounced early in the conflict when we did not know what Putin's risk calculus was. And then in late 2022 when it looked like Russian forces were melting away on the battlefield, we worried that Putin might get desperate and use nuclear weapons. Since the nightmare scenario has not come to pass, U.S. officials have become more comfortable with Ukrainian strikes on Crimea.

The U.S. has become more forward-leaning on the capabilities that is providing Ukraine. The concern is that there is still circumstances in which Putin would be tempted to escalate or to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine circumstances in which Putin believes that he is facing a military defeat on the battlefield that will lead his regime to crumble at home. That is an existential problem for Putin. He does not want to end up like Qaddafi who was killed by his own people. Putin has watched the tape of Qaddafi getting killed repeatedly. The takeaway being "I ain't going out like that." The US would get more nervous if you saw an utter breakdown of Russian forces in Ukraine where command and control was fragmenting.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is Ukrainian raids in Russia. During the American Civil War, Confederate General Robert E. Lee invaded Pennsylvania with no intention of taking territory. His objective was to cause havoc with the purpose of electing a few Democratic governors in northern states to push Lincoln to the negotiating table. Will Ukraine do raids into Russia to encourage a negotiation?

Hal Brands:

I do not think the Ukrainians have the offensive capabilities to enter and hold a significant portion of Russian territory, without stripping the frontline bare. Maybe Ukraine could grab a chunk of Russian territory, but then you leave the front lines of the east and the south undefended, and that is bad. Ukrainians have tried to do a version of this. There was a force that went across the border last year, held some territory for a day or two. It was a raid and then pulled back. That is probably the extent of what Ukraine is capable of, but they are trying to generate that effect. That is what drone attacks on the Kremlin are about. That is what sabotage deep within Russia is about. It's not so much about the military effect it creates. It's about the psychological effect, and they're trying to show Putin, we can bring the war home to you, and so you're better off settling at some point.

Larry Bernstein:

During World War II, Churchill was a big proponent of sabotage against the Nazis. General Marshall opposed it because he thought it was a distraction from a major offensive necessary to win the war. That said, desperate men in desperate times should consider sabotage.

You have written about the importance of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. It is the longest railroad in the world from Moscow to the Far Eastern city of Vladivostok on the Pacific. The railroad is a critical piece of infrastructure moving material from China across the country, which is impossible to defend. There are other soft targets in Russia. Should we expect to see Ukraine sabotage Russian infrastructure?

Hal Brands:

The Ukrainians think this is an area of opportunity. There are two things to keep in mind which are relevant to the Marshall-Churchill debate that you referenced. The first is that sabotage within Russia is not going to be what decides this war. The Ukrainians can conduct all the sabotage they want, and if they cannot kick the Russian forces out of the trenches in Southern and Eastern Ukraine, they will not resolve the war on their terms.

Though sabotage can still be effective in maintaining Ukrainian morale at home and showing the Ukrainian population that they're just not sitting there taking punches in the face while Russia is getting off scot-free. They can exacerbate logistical difficulties for Russian troops. If you can impede the railroad traffic coming across Russia from east to west, if you can impede the

commercial traffic coming from China. It's not going to win the war, but it may have some effect at the margin.

Larry Bernstein:

President Xi said there is no greater friend to China than Russia. The war in Ukraine has improved relations between these authoritarian regimes. How will this great friendship improve Russia's performance on the battlefield?

Hal Brands:

Russia is being kept afloat by China absorbing trade that is no longer welcome in the West, particularly energy exports. Russian trade has been redirected to Asia, and China is absorbing a lot of it. Russian companies are trying to raise capital in Hong Kong. China is providing microchips. It is providing a whole range of dual-use goods that are not strictly lethal military aid but have military applications and can be useful on the battlefield.

North Korea sold Russia ballistic missiles and artillery that has been used in Ukraine. China is playing a more important role in helping Russia sustain the economic wherewithal to keep fighting. Without China, Russia would be sunk.

Larry Bernstein:

Does North Korea have equipment for sale that can make a meaningful contribution to Russia's war effort?

Hal Brands:

Well, they have got a ton of stuff that matters on the battlefield, even if they do not have economic heft. North Korea has significant artillery tubes north of the DMZ with which they plan to pound Seoul into oblivion if there is ever a conflict. They own artillery shells that were made in Russia and sold to North Korea. So North Korea can sell them back to Russia. And since artillery is one of the central capabilities in this fight, it matters giving Russia the fire superiority that it has right now.

What is in this for North Korea? The answer is we do not know, and that is what makes us so nervous because what we worry is that the Russians are becoming more willing to part with the crown jewels in terms of military technology and know-how. We worry that they might be helping the North Koreans with their missile program and will magnify the threat that North Korea poses to South Korea, Japan, and the United States.

Larry Bernstein:

It is stunning how quickly the global munition supply was depleted in the first year of the war in Ukraine. What are we doing about that?

Hal Brands:

We've learned that modern war is still a question of mass more than anything else. It would be even more the case in a war between the U.S. and Russia or the U.S. and China. You need deep magazines of munitions, whether it's artillery, ammunition or long-range strike assets, because you will blow through them very quickly in a high intensity fight. The second thing we have learned is that Western countries, particularly in Europe, made a mistake in 2022 where they decided that they would supply Ukraine out of existing stockpiles on the assumption that the war would not be a long one.

Russia may produce twice as much artillery ammunition in 2024 as the entire West combined. Russia's going to have an artillery advantage this year. It will even out after that because US artillery ammunition production will ramp up in late 2024 and after. The arsenal of democracy is not what it used to be. The U.S. defense industrial base is not the base that won World War II or the Cold War. It has been weakened by three decades of post-Cold War disinvestment. We are having trouble just generating the supplies that Ukraine needs, and we would have even more supplies in a war of our own.

Larry Bernstein:

In that famous conversation between then President Trump and Zelensky. Trump told him that Ukraine was Europe's problem. Talk to Merkel for money and military hardware. Is Ukraine Europe's problem?

Hal Brands:

Absolutely. If Ukraine goes down, then you're going to have Putin in a position to exert greater pressure on Poland, on the Baltic states, on Romania, up and down the eastern front of the European Union and NATO. But for that same reason, Ukraine is also America's problem because the United States has a vital interest in keeping Europe stable and preventing the place from falling apart the way that it did in 1914 or in 1939. European countries are slacking on defense spending. They need to be doing more. It is also fair to say that if the United States drops out of this coalition, the Europeans will not be able to generate the supplies that Ukraine needs to get through the next year or two.

Larry Bernstein:

After his invasion of Ukraine, Putin laid out his narrative for why Russia initiated the war in Ukraine. Take Putin's narrative seriously. Why are the Russians fighting this war?

Hal Brands:

There are a few ways of looking at this, all of which do take Russian concerns and narratives seriously. The longest standing one is that Ukraine had long been a part of the Russian Empire,

even when that empire was called the Soviet Union. It is a critical piece of that empire because of the agricultural riches, and its position on the Black Sea at the intersection of Europe and Asia. For that reason, it is not crazy that the Russians would want to control Ukraine. Zbigniew Brzezinski said Russia with Ukraine is an empire automatically. Russia without Ukraine is something less.

Russia does genuinely have concerns about Ukraine's relationship with the West. The irony is that the reason that Ukraine's relationship with the West has gotten so much closer in recent years is Russia. Ukraine was a divided society when it came to the question of whether it wanted to align with NATO and the EU or align with Russia back in 2013. That question has been resolved because Russia keeps behaving aggressively that gives Ukraine no option but to align more with the West if it wants to survive. And then the last piece of this requires taking Putin's history seriously, and you got to remember that Putin was in East Germany when the wall came down, and the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe imploded. He lived through the 1990s when Russia was a failed state that was continually humiliated on the world stage. He views it as a central part of his mission to put Russia back together as a great power and to reclaim some of the greatness, the respect, and the prestige that Russia lost when the Soviet Union collapsed. I don't sympathize with that narrative. The Soviet Union was a terrible thing, but nonetheless, you can take it seriously in understanding Putin's motivations.

Larry Bernstein:

John Mearsheimer who is a Professor of International Relations at the University of Chicago spoke previously on this podcast said that the US and our western allies are the ones that triggered this war by offering EU and NATO membership to Ukraine that forced Putin's hand. Does Putin believe that?

Hal Brands:

At some level I am sure that Putin believes that he was forced into doing this. That said, you got to keep in mind that Putin has never believed that Ukraine is an independent country. It can only exist as a part of Russia. The second thing to keep in mind is that if you are asserting that talk about NATO expansion antagonized Russia and forced it to invade countries on its border: Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014 and after. You are also claiming implicitly counterfactually that absent talk of NATO expansion, Russia would not behave aggressively towards smaller countries on its borders.

There is nothing in modern Russian history to suggest that that claim is true. Russia has tried to achieve security through expansion to subordinate countries along its frontier. There is a longer history here that sometimes gets lost and all the talk about what was and was not said about NATO expansion.

Larry Bernstein:

If you were representing Putin at the negotiation table, what settlement terms would you offer Ukraine?

Hal Brands:

I want to consolidate my control over the regions, the Donbass of Ukraine that I annexed back in late 2022 in addition to Crimea. So that's thing one, and that is non-negotiable. I want Ukraine to be disarmed so that it can no longer threaten the Russian state. I certainly do not want it to have close military ties to the West, and I would like the current elected government of Ukraine to be thrown out and put in place people that I can manipulate and coerce.

I don't necessarily need to physically occupy all of Ukraine, but I want to occupy the parts of it that I have annexed, and I want a very pliant Ukraine that will do my bidding, allow me to deploy my forces on its territory if I deem fit, and absolutely will not be a member of the West, and I will keep wrecking Ukraine as long as I need to until you give me what I want.

Larry Bernstein:

Switch places. You now represent Zelensky at the table. Are you willing to acquiesce to any of Putin's demands?

Hal Brands:

No, I do not think so. This is exactly the problem, which is why we are fighting.

Therefore, there is no settlement to be had right now because neither side's minimum aims are compatible with the others. If Zelensky were to give any of what Putin just asked for, he would be signing the death warrant of Ukraine as an independent state. Zelensky can accept grudgingly a peace in which Ukraine does not liberate every inch of the territory it has lost to Russia since 2014. It can accept a peace in which it does not retake Crimea.

Larry Bernstein:

When Trump was president, he was asked by a reporter if Montenegro were attacked, would the US defend it? He said, no. Are you out of your mind?

Article 5 in the NATO treaty requires that the US do just that. Article 5 is why Ukraine wants to be a member of NATO, but the reality is, despite treaty obligations, President Trump's comment reflected reality. The United States is not willing to go to war and risk LA and NYC to protect Ukraine, Montenegro, or the Baltic states. These countries are not strategic interests of the United States. What Professor Mearsheimer or Trump would say, is that these countries are in Russia's sphere of influence and are not critical to US interests. So, why do these countries rely on Article 5?

Hal Brands:

This has always been a dilemma of U.S.-Alliance commitments. The alliance matters enormously to U.S. security because it regulates the balance of power in a region that is a source of tremendous economic and military potential in the world. But the individual states, particularly the smaller ones, do not on their own add up to an existential interest for the United States. So then if you are trying to answer President Trump's question, "Why should we defend Montenegro if it's attacked?" Why should we defend Lithuania if it is attacked? You end up falling back on one of two answers. The first answer is that if you do not meet aggression in place A, aggression becomes more likely in place B, and place B might matter more. It is the domino theory logic of international relations. There is a certain fundamental truth to it, which we saw in the run up to World War II.

The second argument is a variation of that, which is that the U.S. has an interest in living in a world where aggression is punished, because even if I can't specify exactly what bad thing happens to the United States when Lithuania is conquered, sorry Lithuania, I can say based on experience that bad things happen to the United States in a world where aggression runs rampant and key regions fall into chaos. That is the world that produces the 1941 scenario. Now that, I admit, is a relatively abstract argument. It is hard to put in concrete terms why the U.S. should fight for a Baltic state.

Larry Bernstein:

Small states want bigger states to defend them, and bigger states are reticent to go to war particularly if the small state is not a strategic interest. Ukraine is a close call.

Hal Brands:

Ukraine is a giant country. Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe by territory after Russia. Ukraine is far more strategically important than Montenegro or Estonia or a bunch of countries that are U.S. allies. If you want to make the case for Ukrainian membership in NATO, there is a far stronger case that Ukraine is intrinsically important enough than Lithuania.

Larry Bernstein:

I thought the domino theory fell into disrepute in the post-Vietnam era. Has the domino theory made a come-back?

Hal Brands:

The domino theory was the basis of American national security policy during the Cold War, and American national security policy during the Cold War was a stunning historic success, right? The United States was constantly concerned that if it did not prevent the Soviets from taking over West Berlin, then West Germany would crumble. And if West Germany crumbled, then

Western Europe would crumble and so on and so forth. The United States fights in Korea in 1950, not because it cared about Korea, but because it worries that if it does not defend Korea, then Japan will freak out and cut a deal with the Soviets.

Larry Bernstein:

The domino theory was abandoned in the mid-1970s after the fall of Vietnam when Australia, Indonesia, and Thailand did not fall into communist hands.

Hal Brands:

Do not tell that to Laos and Cambodia. The domino theory leads the United States into a bad place in Southeast Asia. I will not defend the Vietnam War on the merits. Fighting for 10 years in South Vietnam gave the more important countries time to get their act together politically, economically, militarily. So, they were less vulnerable when the collapse came in Saigon in 1975. But if you are looking at U.S. policy during the Cold War, it hardly could have come out better for the United States. The United States sustains a favorable balance of power during the Cold War, in part by holding these forward endangered positions, it contains the Soviet Union. It defeats the Soviet Union without ever having to fight the Soviet Union directly.

We get a transformative change in the balance of power and the strategic situation when the Berlin Wall comes down, the Warsaw Pact collapses, the Soviet Union implodes. I would count that as a big success. Of course, the domino theory can be taken too far that logic has costs and leads you into bad places sometime. It's always a matter of judgment how you apply it. But since 1945, the United States has taken this proposition seriously, and I would say since 1945, the United States has been successful overall in its foreign policy.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is the brain drain in Ukraine and Russia. Ukrainians have fled to the West and most of them will never return. Ukrainians probably would prefer to live and work in France or Germany rather than a battered Ukraine.

When the war started, millions of bright, educated, creative Russians fled because of the draft. Is it in the West's interests to encourage young people in Russia to emigrate? And if so, should the United States and Europe encourage it by offering work visas to Russians?

Hal Brands:

Yes, this is a big strategic opportunity to weaken Russia as a competitor. It is an opportunity economically and technologically for the United States and European states. Sure, there are security concerns. I am sure those things can be handled. Strategically, this is a no-brainer. On the question of getting Ukrainians to go back. And this is one of the reasons why victory for Ukraine must not simply be surviving this onslaught but emerging as an economically viable

state. Because otherwise, how are you going to get the refugees to come home after the war ends?

Larry Bernstein:

Does Putin care if Russia's brightest young people emigrate?

Hal Brands:

Yes, in the sense that it is not great for Putin that Russia is becoming a less economically dynamic place, but no, from his perspective, the people who are leaving are probably the people who oppose him. They are the most liberal outward facing elements of Russian society, and that are not Putin's base. And the more they leave, the more the remaining population skews Putin politically.

Larry Bernstein:

Biden impounded Russia's foreign currency reserves. Putin will surely demand Russia's money back as part of a negotiated settlement. Will Russia get its money back?

Hal Brands:

I do not think they'll get the money back, and I don't think we will abandon the sanctions. And so, in theory, you could hold the money as leverage in a negotiation to bring the war to an end. And that is the hope that some Western leaders have. But it is marginally more likely that the U.S. and the West will seize some assets. At the very least, the interest, maybe the principal as a means of keeping Ukraine in the fight and a down payment on its reconstruction. The concerns about doing this are real. If it were an easy call, we would have done it already. But some of them can be mitigated if you do it as a group.

If you are worried about undermining the role of the dollar as a reserve currency because you are undermining America's reputation as a safe place for assets, well that concern is mitigated if you are doing this in concert with the UK, European countries, Japan, the countries and entities that control all of the other key reserve currencies. Where else are you going to go? And my hunch is that as we start worrying more about sustaining Ukraine over the long term, seizing the assets will become more attractive to Western leaders.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do some Republicans in the House of Representatives oppose sending military aid to Ukraine?

Hal Brands:

Well, there are some who genuinely believe that this is not an America's interest. That is a relatively small portion of the Republican conference in the House. Matt Gaetz, for instance,

thinks that this is not in the U.S. interest. That group is small. The problem is that group is bigger than the Republican majority. And you constantly must worry if you are Speaker Johnson that if you go against that line of opinion within the Republican party, you may be fenestrated in the way that McCarthy was because it takes only a small number of Republicans to call a motion to vacate the chair under the rules that govern the House.

There is a larger group of Republicans that if you were to administer the sodium pentothal would probably be in favor of aid to Ukraine, but they worry about the politics of the issue, especially with President Trump likely to be the Republican nominee and staking out an anti-aid position on this. They're playing political hardball and there's nothing necessarily wrong. It is certainly not un-American to do so because they think they can get major concessions on the border issue from President Biden because Biden values Ukraine aid.

Larry Bernstein:

Trump says that when he is the next president, he plans to sit down with Putin and resolve the Ukraine war in a few minutes. What would that look like?

Hal Brands:

It is unlikely to happen. But what President Trump has in mind is he would tell the Ukrainians, go to the negotiating table or I will cut-off aid, and he will tell Putin, go to the negotiating table, or I will double aid. And by doing that, you will get everybody to come to a compromise solution.

I do not know that it is that simple because the two sides are still so far apart, and it is going to take some material change on the battlefield for one side or both to conclude that their interests are better served by accepting an unsatisfactory peace than by continuing to fight the war. Trump might make a big show of seeking a deal. He is unlikely to land Zelensky for whom this is existential. He is unlikely to land Putin, although both might have incentives to play along. Interestingly, the Biden administration would also love to have a negotiation to bring this war to an end, but they will probably do it more deliberately and go to the Ukrainians and say, "let's bankroll you for one last big offensive in 2025, and then see where things stand." So, it will be a less chaotic process, but it is not clear whether this would come about because the two sides remain so far apart.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each podcast with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to the fighting in Ukraine?

Hal Brands:

If you had gone back in time to February 23rd, 2022, and you had told observers in Ukraine and in the West that this is where we would be two years later, they would have taken this scenario every day of the week and twice on Sunday. No one expected Ukraine to do this well, and we should keep that in mind. Yes, it's easy to get discouraged about the failure of the 2023 offensive, but the big story here is still that Ukraine has successfully defended its independence with the help of the West and the face of Europe's biggest attempted land grab since World War II. And that's worth being optimistic about.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Hal for joining us today.

If you missed our previous podcast the topic was Success and Failure in the Israel Defense Forces. Our speaker was Eitan Shamir who is the former head of the National Security Doctrine Department at the Israel Ministry of Strategic Affairs. He is the co-author of the book entitled The Art of Military Innovation: Lessons from the Israel Defense Forces. Eitan explained how Israel was asleep at the switch on 10/7, and how the IDF adapted to the complex military operations that are ongoing in Gaza.

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Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.