

Justin Bullock: Welcome back to another episode of Bush School Uncorked. We're recording live, again at Downtown Uncorked, in Historic Downtown Bryan. It's taken me two seasons but I can say it all in one breath.

Gregory Gause: I'm very happy that you've remembered that Downtown Bryan is historic, and we're very happy to be in Historic Downtown Bryan.

Justin Bullock: I thought you'd be proud. So we're doing our last recording of the year, both of this semester and of the year. We have Ambassador-

Gregory Gause: Calendar year, not academic year.

Justin Bullock: Not academic year. But not everyone works on an academic year like us. They know end of the year is a calendar year.

Gregory Gause: Fair enough.

Justin Bullock: And we're lucky enough to have former ambassador Larry Napper, who's a professor at the Bush School with us. So we'll jump into meeting him and chatting with him in just a moment. A couple things to keep in mind, again, we'll be done with recording for this year, we have a bunch lined up for you in the spring. So maybe some surprises, some different ways of sharing our podcast with you. So be on the look out for that in the spring, and we'll continue the fun then.

Gregory Gause: Can we preview the first guests in the spring?

Justin Bullock: Go right ahead.

Gregory Gause: Well, we're going to have the dean of the Bush School, Mark Welsh. And the senior associate dean of the Bush School Frank Ashley as our first guests in mid January.

Justin Bullock: Mm-hmm (affirmative), in mid-January. So they'll get us rolling in January and then we'll be trying to do about two a month, and I have a couple more things up our sleeves as we get going in the spring.

Gregory Gause: And given the fact that we have such a distinguished guest today, we might get a lot more downloads than we usually do. So you should introduce yourself as the host.

Justin Bullock: Oh me, I'm Justin Bullock, I'm assistant professor at the Bush School of Government and Public Service, and I'm still your host.

Gregory Gause: And I'm Gregory Gause, I am the co-host of this podcast, and I'm head of the International Affairs Department at the Bush School.

Justin Bullock: Which is good, because we're going to be talking about international affairs today. And as the audience knows, I know little to nothing about international affairs.

Gregory Gause: But you're enthusiastic about it, so that counts for a lot.

Justin Bullock: And I know a lot more now after being your co-host for two years.

Gregory Gause: Two years.

Justin Bullock: And co-colleague for ... this is year six for me.

Gregory Gause: Year six for me too, because you remember, you and I came in the same time.

Justin Bullock: That's right. All right, we'll taking up a lot of the air. How about we introduce our guest. Greg.

Gregory Gause: Ambassador Larry Napper is a professor of the practice of international affairs at Bush School of Government and Public Service, and a long-time American foreign service officer, US Ambassador to Latvia and Kazakhstan. Old Russia hand in the State Department. And we are incredibly fortunate to have him at the Bush School. So Larry, welcome to the podcast.

Larry Napper: Well, thank you, I appreciate the opportunity to come down and uncork with you guys, so here I am. And it only took me a couple years to get me-

Gregory Gause: [crosstalk 00:03:03] Well, you know we save the best for last. We wanted to make sure we had the podcast, a well-oiled machine, before we had you on, Larry.

Larry Napper: Well, I appreciate that very much. And it is true that I've spent a lot of my foreign service career working on the issues of Russia and Ukraine. I'll tell you a story about that, when I first got here to the Bush School, they said, "Well, what do you think you can do for us?" And I said, "Well, I think I can probably teach you a course or two on diplomacy and the dark arts of that. And I could probably teach a course on Russia and global politics." Whereupon people around the table started looking... this was 2005, 2004/5, looking around at each other and saying, "Well, do we really think we need a course on Russia and post-Soviet states."

Gregory Gause: Yesterday's news.

Larry Napper: Yes. Isn't Russia on the junk heap of history, and this is an area which has gone into the obscurity which it so richly deserves, and from which it shall never re-emerge and nobody gives a damn about it. So why do we think students are going to be interested in this? Well, suffice it to say I don't get that question anymore.

Justin Bullock: I can't imagine why.

Gregory Gause: Have you sent a basket of fruit to Mr. Putin?

Larry Napper: Yes, right, well, he certainly deserves it. Yeah.

Justin Bullock: That also came out in the ... This is part of the Obama and Romney campaign, right? Obama was skewing Romney saying-

Gregory Gause: [crosstalk 00:04:42] Said Russia was the biggest geopolitical threat-

Larry Napper: It's a matter of ... It's an astonishment to me that the last presidential election turned around the whole debate of who was the puppet ... which one was the puppet of Vladimir Putin. And now, we're engaged in yet another political imbroglio, which is tied up our own political system with regard to that part of the world. And so, as I said a minute ago, I don't get that question anymore.

Justin Bullock: Yep, I can imagine that.

Larry Napper: And I do have student interest in my class. So we continue our study of Russia, Ukraine as part of the world at the Bush School.

Justin Bullock: The rise of Putin's influence has been job security for you.

Larry Napper: Well, you can say that, yeah, you can say that. Yeah.

Gregory Gause: So Larry, why don't we dive right in. We're not going to talk about impeachment today?

Larry Napper: Thank you very much, I appreciate that.

Gregory Gause: Justin and I, we talk about impeachment a lot.

Justin Bullock: And the three of us have actually talked about impeachment together already.

Gregory Gause: That is true. So-

Larry Napper: Yes, my dear wife won't even listen to anything on the radio about it anymore, right out to-

Gregory Gause: Who can blame her? Who can blame her? But maybe if we work backwards for listeners, it might be a good way to understand how Ukraine and the Ukrainian issue got involved in American politics. So maybe if you can start with the famous phone call, Zelensky, and who Zelensky is, and we can work back from that-

Larry Napper: If you don't mind, I'll start back a little bit further than that.

Gregory Gause: Okay.

Larry Napper: Because we should spend a few minutes on Zelensky and the phenomenon of the current Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky. So Ukraine has been really since its inception as an independent country, or its resumption in independence, however you want to say that, and it can be said in both ways, in 1991, a troubled and divided place.

Larry Napper: And those divisions deepened after 2004 when there was a disputed election between a candidate who was perceived as being close to Putin, close to Russia, and then a set of candidates on the other side in the presidential election, a presidential candidate and his supporters who seemed to be more inclined, and were more inclined toward the West, toward an opening to NATO and the European Union and so on.

Larry Napper: Well, that set off a very long period of the deepest imaginable divisions in Ukrainian politics, where there were a set of contested elections, hotly contested elections over the next decade and a half.

Gregory Gause: Honest elections? Mostly?

Larry Napper: By the standards of the region, yes. In other words, Ukraine proved that it could conduct a mostly free and fair election. Again, given the standards of the region. And did so on several occasions. The problem was these elections never decided anything right, because like our own elections, and some of this will not sound unfamiliar, they were incredibly divisive, very closely contested and divided between, if you want to call it, a very bright red-blue division. You could almost draw a line north and south through the middle of the country, and to the east of that line would be supporters of the more pro-Russian line, and to the west of that would be ... And right down that line you could almost contest it. Right?

Gregory Gause: And that line divides linguistically [crosstalk 00:08:50] or-

Larry Napper: Linguistic, cultural, yes.

Gregory Gause: Okay. So the folks on the western side of that line will be more likely to speak Ukrainian, be members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and the people on the east of the line more likely to speak Russian-

Larry Napper: And would be more likely to see their cultural load stone in the West, to try to watch Western television-

Gregory Gause: [crosstalk 00:09:16] On the western side of that line.

Larry Napper: And on the other side would be predominantly Russian-speaking areas, and culturally Russian and would watch Moscow TV-

Gregory Gause: So why is that part of Ukraine-

Larry Napper: It's not part of ... I mean it's not entirely so. You would find speakers on both sides, and you would find ... it's a much more mixed picture than that. But if we're speaking here on the whole, and you can almost follow those lines, you can almost follow the line of election results on both ... And it broke down that way.

Gregory Gause: So I said we should start-

Larry Napper: So here is-

Gregory Gause: ... at the end and work back. But let me ask you, with that line, talk to us about the borders of Ukraine, which I think were created in the Soviet period, right? The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was one of the-

Larry Napper: [crosstalk 00:10:09] Let me ... Let's ... There, we would have to go all the way back to 1991 when the Soviet Union began to break apart. And obviously when it became clear that the union could not hold, the center could not hold, and that a whole group of new independent states were going to come into existence, not just Russia, but a number of states who either had never been independent states, such as Kazakhstan, or states like Latvia who had had an independent past and were going to regain their independence. The question became, "Oh my god, how are both they and we the international community going to sort out the question of borders across 11 time zones, at least 15 different independent states, none of which had settled borders with their neighbors." And we're going to confront a situation in which they were ... immediately all of them ... we were going to be ... there was going to be a terrible ethnically-based series of these conflicts from west to east, across 11 time zones in Eurasia.

Larry Napper: Complicated by the fact that there was a nuclear dimension to this. Because the Soviet nuclear arsenal was deployed not only in the territory of Russia, but also on the territory of what became the independent states of Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. And we did not want to see ... We in the United States and the Bush administration did not want to see-

Gregory Gause: First Bush administration.

Larry Napper: ... the first Bush administration-

Gregory Gause: Bush 41, our hero.

Larry Napper: ... did not want to see this become a series of bitter ethnic conflicts over borders, again, across 11 time zones, exacerbated greatly by the fact that all of a sudden these nuclear weapons were going to be dispersed in not one but four different independent countries.

Larry Napper: So to get to your question, the only way we could figure out how to sort this out was to say, "All right, as the price of the United States recognition of your independence, we will recognize the independence of these states as the borders of the then existing, that is prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union, the existing Soviet Union republics within the Soviet Union." Right? So whatever was in the Russian Republic became the borders of Russia. Whatever was-

Gregory Gause: This is like African decolonization where basically everybody said these borders are so messed up but nobody wants to deal with them, so we're just going to accept the colonial borders at independence.

Larry Napper: And if you want us to recognize your independence, you will have to accept that. And so you get very weird anomalies, I wish your viewers had a map right in front of them, but for instance, there's the little enclave of Kaliningrad, which is part of Russia, right? But sits on the other side, on the western side of the three Baltic states. And the reason why that is so is because it was part of the Russian-

Gregory Gause: Soviet Socialist-

Larry Napper: ... Soviet Socialist-

Gregory Gause: ... Republic.

Larry Napper: ... within the USSR. You have, and this is a much less known and less understood issue, you have the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, yeah, which is almost entirely Armenian but yet sits entirely within the borders of Azerbaijan. And those two countries had been at war over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh for the-

Gregory Gause: Since 1991!

Larry Napper: ... since 1991.

Gregory Gause: Basically. And I don't know why you say that nobody knows about Nagorno-Karabakh, of course, everybody knows about Nagorno-Karabakh.

Justin Bullock: Two of the three of us knew all about it...

Larry Napper: Well, if we had any Armenians here-

Gregory Gause: They would know about Nagorno-Karabakh.

Larry Napper: ... or any Azeris. So there you have it. Now, it worked in some cases, it worked to keep the peace in some cases, and it didn't work in others. As I said, the Armenians and the Azeris immediately went to war over Nagorno-Karabakh, but at least wars didn't break out across 11 time zones. And once we were able to negotiate the return of the nuclear war heads from Belarus, Ukraine,

Kazakhstan to Russia, the nuclear dimension of those kinds of conflicts began to recede.

Justin Bullock: So the borders of Ukraine are just a consequence of where they were as part of the-

Larry Napper: Exactly. And I know where you're going with this, which is the problem and the issue of Crimea. When independence came, Crimea was a part of the Ukrainian Socialist Republic within the old Soviet Union. So the rule being the rule, that's where it resided in terms of where the international boundaries, the internationally-recognized international boundary of Ukraine. But Crimea has a long and deep history with Russians as well. And as a matter of fact, it was only in 1964 when Khrushchev, the then Russian Soviet Premier transferred the jurisdiction of Crimea from the Russian Republic to the Ukrainian Republic, as a consequence of one of his needing to garner the votes in the politburo on some issue or another, I can't remember what it was, of the Ukrainian leadership. So it didn't seem to matter then.

Gregory Gause: Right. Nobody was thinking about [crosstalk 00:16:24] breaking up the Soviet Union-

Larry Napper: Nobody was thinking that the Soviet was going to ... It certainly didn't occur to Khrushchev that this might occur, that this might happen at some point in the future, and that this might become an issue.

Gregory Gause: Right. Neither did Khrushchev consider that he would [crosstalk 00:16:40] was about to be overthrown.

Larry Napper: But for both ... Yes, exactly. But for both Russians and Ukrainians, if you will, Crimea is sacred ground. For different reasons and for a variety of historical reasons. There are thousands of Russian war graves on Crimea.

Gregory Gause: The Crimean War, yeah.

Larry Napper: From the Crimean War in the 1850s and even before that-

Gregory Gause: When they fought the Ottomans.

Larry Napper: ... yes ... from the period of Catherine's wars against the Ottomans to push them off [inaudible 00:17:18] of the Black Sea. And by the way, it was at the end of one of those wars, the Ottoman Empire ceded Crimea specifically and by treaty to the Russian empire in the same year that the British Empire granted the independence of the United States of America.

Gregory Gause: Ah, there we are.

Justin Bullock: Very interesting.

Larry Napper: So this has a long history.

Gregory Gause: Back to Zelensky.

Larry Napper: Yeah. So remember this divide, right?

Gregory Gause: A north-south line between west and east.

Larry Napper: Yes. Zelensky is a different cat, in the sense that he is the first Ukrainian politician since at least 2004, and even before that, who in his electoral campaign won in every corner of Ukraine, from west to east. Across the whole of the country where voting actually took place. The only place it didn't take place, voting, was in the areas that are ... the separatist enclaves of the two provinces in eastern Ukraine, Luhansk and Donetsk, which are not now under-

Gregory Gause: Ukrainian control.

Larry Napper: ... Kiev's control. Wherever voting-

Gregory Gause: Nor in Crimea.

Larry Napper: ... Right and not in Crimea.

Gregory Gause: Because the Russians have established their control over Crimea.

Larry Napper: Exactly, exactly. But everywhere else, west to east, across that divide, Zelensky won. He won in part because he is not a typical Ukrainian politician. The Ukrainian people were fed up with their political class. Right?

Justin Bullock: This is sounding familiar.

Larry Napper: Well, there is a certain echo here.

Gregory Gause: Wait till we get to the TV part.

Larry Napper: Well, and decided to try something different, right? So Zelensky is not a politician, not a government guy. He's an actor. He had a TV show which amazing-

Justin Bullock: [crosstalk 00:19:29]

Larry Napper: ... amazing as it sounds, the format of the show was that by ... he was just a Normal Joe, right? Who by some quirk of completely unforeseen and unforeseeable events winds up as President of Ukraine. Well, that's exactly what happened in real life. I mean he-

Justin Bullock: That was the premise of the show?!

Gregory Gause: Life imitates art-

Larry Napper: Life imitates art, the show came to true. He won a masterful campaign on the basis of look, let's pull our socks up, let's try to get going, let's try to deal with the issues of political conflict and corruption and the erosion of state capacity that have dogged us. And let's try to find ... let's see if it might be possible to also negotiate our way out of this conflict in the east that has embroiled us and the Russia ... we Ukrainians and the Russians and made all of our lives so miserable.

Larry Napper: And his campaign just swept to victory, over Poroshenko, the then incumbent President who was a representative for good or ill or seen certainly as by the electorate as yet another member of the discredited Ukrainian political establishment.

Gregory Gause: Poroshenko was ... He came to power as a result of kind of an anti-Russian uprising.

Larry Napper: He came to power as a result of the so-called Maidan Revolution or the Maidan Uprising. Again, this is going to get very complex for your listeners, but-

Gregory Gause: That's why they're listening though.

Larry Napper: ... As a result of this constant back and forth that I talked about, a swinging back and forth between the pro-Russian leadership and the pro-Western leadership, the President of Ukraine in that period was a man named Yanukovich who was from the pro-Soviet side-

Gregory Gause: Pro-Russian side.

Larry Napper: ... Yes, pro-Russian, sorry, I slipped there.

Gregory Gause: Yeah, we all make those slips.

Larry Napper: The pro-Russian-

Gregory Gause: Except the youngsters who don't remember the Soviet Union.

Larry Napper: He remembers only Russia.

Gregory Gause: Yeah, right.

Justin Bullock: I remember the Rocky movies kind of ...

Larry Napper: Well, then you may remember the Soviet Union. So Yanukovich was for a time flirting with a closer relationship with the EU, including an EU association agreement through most of 2012 and 2013. He appeared on the verge of

moving away from his former Soviet connections and moving in to a more EU-centered politics. But he decided in the end that the EU was imposing too many conditions on that, and so he backed away from it and reinvigorated his embrace of Vladimir Putin, whereupon, lots and lots of Ukrainians went to the square, to Maidan in Kiev, held out there protests and demonstrations, one thing led to another, and finally Yanukovich was forced to flee.

Larry Napper: Whereupon Poroshenko, this politician that Zelensky just beat, was elected as ... first as an interim and then as an elected president. But he too struggled to deal with Ukraine's problems of declining state capacity, of corruption, and the war in the east which was a ... has been a huge drain on Ukraine.

Larry Napper: So Zelensky was able to say, "Look, let's put this behind us. Let's try to get a fresh start. Let's try to stop being I am against you, let's try to be Ukrainians, and let's try to get a grip on our problems."

Gregory Gause: When did the Russians intervene militarily in Ukraine?

Larry Napper: They intervened in March of 2014-

Gregory Gause: So this is-

Larry Napper: ... after Yanukovich fled. They intervened first to cease Crimea. And in my view ... It is my view that it had been on the shelves of the general staff a plan to do precisely that for a long time. Because one of the issues between Russia and Ukraine, and throughout this entire period, was the status of the fleet, the Black Sea fleet anchored in Sevastopol. And the terms and conditions under which the Russians would have continued to have access to that or control of the fleet anchored there-

Gregory Gause: So all during independent Ukraine from 1991, the Russian fleet was still-

Larry Napper: And it would go back-

Gregory Gause: ... the Black Sea fleet was still base at Sevastopol.

Larry Napper: Yes.

Gregory Gause: Yeah.

Larry Napper: And when the more pro-Russian crowd was in charge in Kiev, then all that went well and thing ... Yeah? But when the more Western, more EU-oriented crowd would be in the ascendancy, then they would get ... Russia and Ukraine would get into a fight over this and there'd be talk of ending the lease or of curtailing it and all this. Which gave the general staff and the Kremlin the willies. Right? And so I think there was ... I think in my own view, there was a decision taken at the time well, we're through with this, and we have an opportunity here, we're

going to end it and we're going to reclaim Russia's historic rights in Crimea, as they saw it.

Gregory Gause: Now, the Crimean intervention was pretty direct, but-

Larry Napper: It was direct, it was quick and it was relatively bloodless.

Gregory Gause: Right. But the intervention in the other parts of Ukraine was more veiled, little green men supposedly. Right?

Larry Napper: Well, no, there were lots of little green men deployed in Crimea as well.

Gregory Gause: In Crimea as well.

Larry Napper: So this wasn't ... The Crimean operation wasn't a-

Gregory Gause: [crosstalk 00:26:13] a military takeover.

Larry Napper: ... like the Marines assaulting or D-day invasion or something like that-

Gregory Gause: So all of these interventions were done in essence by Russians not wearing Russian uniforms.

Larry Napper: An application of what has come to be known as the Russian doctrine of hybrid warfare, right? A whole range of less than overt military operations, but a range of political, military, psychological, informational actions that taken together can really cause trouble for a weaker or even a stronger adversary, right? And Ukraine was much the weaker adversary.

Larry Napper: It didn't take long. It took less than a month to wrap up the Crimea action and then to legitimize it by a vote-

Gregory Gause: A referendum.

Larry Napper: A referendum which was held under very questionable circumstances. And then a vote in the Russian Parliament-

Gregory Gause: In the parliament.

Larry Napper: ... to go ahead with annexation. So the referendum was basically a question "do you want to be annexed or not?... Oh yes, we want to be. "Then the Russian Parliament said, "Okay, if you want that, we'll ... " So all of this was pre-arranged, pre-cooked, but it was done quickly. Right?

Gregory Gause: So the Russian-

Larry Napper: Then began the so-called ... in reality the Russian intervention in the easternmost provinces of Ukraine itself, right? I mean Crimea is Ukraine itself too, but I'm talking about the easternmost provinces that are called the Donbass.

Gregory Gause: Donbass, right. Listeners should know that Crimea is practically an island in the Black Sea. It's connected to the mainland by-

Larry Napper: By a peninsula.

Gregory Gause: ... by a peninsula. But now we're talking about the Donbass region, which is kind of part of Ukraine proper, as it were, not stuck out in the middle of the Black Sea.

Larry Napper: Two provinces parts of Donetsk province and Luhansk came under separatist control, people saying, "We want out of the rule of Kiev. We want to establish our own local government, and we might at some point also envisage the possibility of linking to Russia, right? Or being annexed by Russia." As had been the case with ... just finished with Crimea.

Larry Napper: Well, this touched off a conflict between the Ukrainians trying to retain sovereignty over their own territory and control over their own border, eastern border, and the separatists, who immediately came into being as a result of Russian intervention across the Ukrainian border. Essentially, Ukrainians lost control over their internationally-recognized boundary between Russia and Ukraine as it applies to those two eastern provinces. And so Russian forces could come back and forth across that ... Kiev lost control over the border. So it's essentially ... there is no de facto, de jure, the border still runs where it ran. But de facto, the border has been lost between Russia and the area of these two irredentist or-

Gregory Gause: Separatists.

Larry Napper: ... Separatists enclaves.

Gregory Gause: So from the Kiev perspective, this is an international war and that the Russians are basically fighting the legitimate government of Ukraine over these two provinces, whereas the Russia perspective is this is a civil war within Ukraine, and perhaps some sympathetic people in Russia might be occasionally helping them a bit.

Larry Napper: Yes. But I guess I'd characterize this fairly accurately, the public position of the two sides, but in reality, the Russians have been extensively intervening in the conflict ever since it broke out in 2014. They have Russian regular forces, albeit in [inaudible 00:31:10] have intervened, they have provided weapons and support and sometimes very sophisticated weapons, like the anti-aircraft

battery that shut down a Malaysian ... or was it a Malaysian airline or a Dutch airline.

Gregory Gause: Malaysian.

Larry Napper: Yeah, but it was headed to-

Gregory Gause: To Amsterdam.

Larry Napper: It was en route to Amsterdam.

Gregory Gause: Right.

Larry Napper: Yeah, the Malaysian airliner which lost some 250 people, innocent air passengers. So it's a been mess, it's been a grind, it's been an inconclusive war that has claimed thousands and thousands of not only military combatants but civilian lives, because that battle line ... that line of contact runs right through heavily populated civilian areas. And so when you open an artillery barrage or it starts sending rockets back and forth, you're going to kill civilians as well as combatants. And that has happened with great regularity.

Justin Bullock: And where does that leave us with ... so Zelensky comes into power, has-

Larry Napper: [crosstalk 00:32:17] So Zelensky came in to power, and he came in with the notion of, as I say, trying to pull our socks up domestically, but also-

Gregory Gause: And this is very recently, 2018. Right?

Larry Napper: Yeah, it's April of this year. He won the presidency. And then his-

Gregory Gause: April 2019.

Larry Napper: Yes.

Gregory Gause: Oh, okay. Yeah, yeah.

Larry Napper: And then won a sweeping victory in the parliament over the summer. Right? Now, before we get back to Zelensky, there's a long-running debate in the United States about what to do about all this. Right? It has been up to now an issue on which Republicans and Democrats could agree that something should be done, that the United States should oppose the Russian annexation of Crimea, and that the United States should help Ukraine to resolve this issue in the east that the Russians should not be allowed just to foment this separatist violence and this assertion of independence, both of which would have violated Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Right? Both the loss of Crimea and the loss of these provinces, parts of these two provinces in the east.

Larry Napper: So the debate turned around what to do? Well, one thing that was agreed by everybody is that we should apply sanctions on Russia. And that has been in place now since 2014, sweeping sanctions on the Russian economy, and they have grown progressively more severe over time. And they have been, to some degree or another, also adopted by others, especially the European Union. Not exactly the same set of sanctions because the Union operates in a different way than the United States operates, but the general principle is that the Russians should pay a price for this and that they should pay an increasing price until they stop it, right?

Larry Napper: In the United States, there was a long debate about whether American assistance should include military assistance. Some favored it, some did not. The Obama administration decided to provide some military assistance, but military assistance that did not involve lethal ... that is things that actually go bang.

Gregory Gause: We do split hairs, don't we?

Larry Napper: So we're talking about communications, medical services, all kinds of things-

Gregory Gause: Night vision goggles.

Larry Napper: Night vision, yes, things like that, but not bang, boom.

Gregory Gause: Right.

Larry Napper: But this was hotly debated about whether or not this should be done. Then when the Trump administration came in, the decision was taken that yes, we will cross that line, we will provide lethal assistance to Ukraine. And so that decision was made and the first transfers of US-made military lethal equipment... especially in the form of these Javelin anti-tank missiles, because the Russians had a big advantage and the separatists had a big advantage in armor over the Ukrainian side. And so the idea was well, let's redress the battlefield balance a little bit by giving the Ukrainians a way to deal with the Russian armor. So yes.

Gregory Gause: So this was under the Trump administration.

Larry Napper: Yes.

Gregory Gause: Which kind of goes against the general notion that Trump is more pro-Russian.

Larry Napper: Well, I mean that also is a very complex subject. But suffice it to say that there were and are people in the Trump administration who saw crossing that line into lethal assistance as a ... among them were the then Secretary of Defense Mattis, and the then-

Gregory Gause: National Security Advisor.

Larry Napper: The then National Security Advisor, H. R. McMaster and others who said, "Okay, we should do this." And that decision was made. And here again, here again, and I want to stress and emphasize this, while there had been debate over what particular step should be taken, what there was never a debate over, Republicans and Democrats, there was a broad consensus that the United States should be in the corner of Ukraine, right? The United States should be a strong supporter of Ukraine, of its independence, of its territorial integrity. And so Congressional provisions for assistance to Ukraine passed with overwhelming majority, Republicans and Democrats together.

Larry Napper: So here you have this convergence of a policy on which, one of very few that Republicans and Democrats bipartisan policy, and an opening, an opening with Zelensky's election to actually get behind Ukraine-

Gregory Gause: A reformist President.

Larry Napper: ... a reformist President with a mandate-

Gregory Gause: Clean up corruption-

Larry Napper: ... And with a mandate running from east to west across every place that could vote in Ukraine for the first that anybody can remember.

Gregory Gause: Since Ukrainian independence in 91.

Larry Napper: Or at least since 2004.

Gregory Gause: At least since 2004.

Larry Napper: And then we just bust it. We blew it entirely.

Justin Bullock: So tell us a little bit about that.

Larry Napper: We have managed in the course of a few weeks time to undercut Zelensky, to isolate him further, to drag Ukraine into the partisan ... the American partisan debate, right? To drag its international reputation through the sewer, and to leave Zelensky without his most consistent and ardent supporter.

Gregory Gause: Without a superpower ally.

Larry Napper: At just the time when he needs it most. Because yes, it's true that Zelensky won a huge and resounding election, yes it's true he's a new face and an outsider, yes, it's true he has sweeping support, but he also faces a bow wave of expectations from people who voted him into office, on the notion that here's a guy who can get something done. And if he doesn't, if he doesn't-

Gregory Gause: What comes next?

Larry Napper: ... his popularity is going to drop like a bowling ball off the edge of that table. Unless he can deliver on some of those expectations. And we have just upped the degree of difficulty exponentially, by allowing this to happen, by allowing Ukraine to be dragged into our domestic politics in this fashion.

Gregory Gause: So I don't want to get us into impeachment-

Larry Napper: I don't want to get into it either.

Gregory Gause: ... but-

Larry Napper: But that's the fact of the matter.

Gregory Gause: Yes. But the aid then did come. And has it had an effect on the ground. I know it's still early days, but the aid was released, it did get to Kiev.

Larry Napper: Yeah, it has been delivered. I think it has had a much greater positive impact on Ukrainian morale, and less so in the effectiveness of Ukrainian battlefield performance. But there has been an upward tick on that dimension, on the Ukrainian battlefield performance, which has been going on now for a year or so. That is the Ukrainian army has become ... the Ukrainian forces have become increasingly more effective. That line of contact that we're talking about has largely stabilized. There were periods in which the separatists appeared like they were gonna run Ukrainians off the map. And for a while, Ukrainians also had ... it's gone back and forth.

Larry Napper: But I would say that they've done better over the past year or so, and part of that has been the encouragement, the sense of support that the transfers and military assistance ... Now, if you're asking me, how many Russian armored vehicles had been knocked out by these Javelins-

Gregory Gause: Who knows.

Larry Napper: ... I don't know. And I've even seen reports that the Javelins have not actually been deployed to the front lines, that they're being very careful and cautious about how they handle it.

Gregory Gause: Don't want to lose them.

Larry Napper: Don't want to lose them and also if there is a chance that Zelensky can cut a deal with Putin that would make some sense... Well, for instance, he is making the effort, just in the last couple of days. He's been meeting with Putin in Paris-

Gregory Gause: Right, this is-

Larry Napper: ... under the-

Gregory Gause: ... to some extent, we're already turning to our audience questions, because one of the audience questions that was given to us was the question about what was going on in Paris in these talks between Putin, Zelensky, Macron and Angela Merkel.

Larry Napper: First of all, this is not in itself new. This forum had ... What? Louder. This forum has been operating for quite some time. As a matter of fact, all the way back in 2014, 2015, right, there was reached the so-called Minsk Agreement among these parties, right? The Russians, the Ukrainians, the-

Gregory Gause: The French and the Germans.

Larry Napper: ... and the French and Germans.

Gregory Gause: Were we there?

Larry Napper: The United States was much more involved in the negotiations than we are now.

Gregory Gause: Okay.

Larry Napper: We have-

Gregory Gause: Hands off now.

Larry Napper: ... hands off, we don't-

Gregory Gause: We have other things we're negotiating with the Ukrainians.

Larry Napper: Yeah.

Gregory Gause: No, we won't get any further into that.

Justin Bullock: We're just dancing around it tonight, dancing around.

Larry Napper: Look, when Putin and President Trump met for the first time in June of 2017, Putin says, "Well, we really ought to have a dialogue on this. We really ought to get together and see what we can do."

Larry Napper: So the President looks at Tillerson, Tillerson looks at the President, and out of that came the appointment of an old friend of mine, Kurt Volker, as the special representative for Ukraine, right? Who would try to engage with Putin's representative and see whether [inaudible 00:45:34].

Larry Napper: So yes, the US for a time was fairly heavily engaged in Ukraine diplomacy with Russia, trying to see whether there might be some way in which a settlement could be arranged. Well, getting back to the Forum again, out of these talks with

the Europeans and the Ukrainians and Russians came the so-called Minsk Agreement, which had a number of provisions. It had military provisions. So for a disengagement of these heavy forces along the line of contact, right? So you could get down the level of violence. You could stop killing so many civilians, and you could also reduce combatant deaths. Pry the forces apart. That would be the first order of business.

Larry Napper: The second and later order of business, political order of business would be to say a kind of grand trade here that on the one hand, Ukraine would pass a set of measures through the Ukrainian parliament, which would make a fairly wide grant of autonomy to these provinces in the east that were the separatist provinces, Luhansk and Donetsk. Right? And in return for that, the de jure international border of Russia and Ukraine would be restored to Kiev's control.

Gregory Gause: The Ukrainians basically recognize that Crimea is lost-

Larry Napper: No.

Gregory Gause: ... not on the table for them?

Larry Napper: No. But the Minsk Accord did not deal with Crimea, it dealt only with the conflict in the east, right? Ukrainian position on Crimea is Crimea is part of Ukraine, we should get it back. The Russian position is Crimea is part of Russia and case over. So you have two opposing positions, but they're not ... they don't discuss that, because there's nothing to discuss.

Larry Napper: Now, the problem with this Minsk Accord was that it was never implemented. The forces were never [inaudible 00:47:52] apart along the line of contact. The Ukrainian parliament could never pass-

Gregory Gause: [crosstalk 00:47:58] Pass the-

Larry Napper: ... Poroshenko could never get through this package of autonomy-

Gregory Gause: ... autonomy.

Larry Napper: ... measures. Right? And the Russians could never be brought to agree to a set of measures to restore Ukrainian control over the de jure international border in the east. So that's where it sat. Back and forth, you go first, no we'll go first, no you go first. And the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe deployed a number of observers along the line of contact to see whether this was actually ... this engagement of forces actually was going to take place, or did take place.

Larry Napper: In some cases, there were some salutary efforts to pull back, but on the whole, it never took hold. Those forces were still in close to juxtaposition to each other,

still engaging in these artillery and rocket barrages, still killing each other and killing civilians as collateral damage to this and so on.

Larry Napper: So this meeting now is a fresh attempt by Macron, by Merkel, and certainly by Zelensky and Putin to revisit this and see if we can put some real life into these arrangements and get something. Now, what is different about this is this is Zelensky's first go around. Remember, he was only elected in April and this is his first try at this face-to-face diplomacy with Putin. That's another reason why it is so unfortunate what has happened. Because there's no American there. There's no ... this sense of support that Ukrainians and Zelensky have felt from the United States has basically been just within a few weeks time dissipated.

Larry Napper: And now it's going to get even worse, because what I fear happening is that Ukraine itself is going to become a dividing point in our own domestic politics, that one side is going to say we're pro-Ukrainian, the other side are going to say we're not. We're against them because they are the ones who caused this calamity to fall upon ... Again, I don't want to get over and-

Justin Bullock: Don't use that impeachment word.

Gregory Gause: Yeah, that word. So why did Putin come to the table in Paris? Does he think that Zelensky is weak and maybe he can take advantage?

Larry Napper: Part of it is that Putin believes that he's got a leg up, that he has got Zelensky cornered, right? That he needs this, he needs it desperately. Remember that bow wave of expectations?

Gregory Gause: Yeah.

Larry Napper: That he is without his principle supporter all of a sudden, that he's young, inexperienced. I mean remember Putin is on his fourth American President. He's been around since 1999. He knows this brief like the back of his hand, for good or ill, he is the world's most experienced leader. He's been around in terms of head of one of the major powers for the longest time of any of them. And he knows how to play a hand. And Zelensky is completely untested in this arena. And so Putin figures, maybe I can take into the cleaners-

Gregory Gause: [crosstalk 00:51:55] Why-

Larry Napper: ... and not only that, if he could get an agreement favorable to Russia, then Putin could turn around and say to the Europeans who are sitting at the same table, "Hey, isn't it time to lift these sanctions? Yes, because I'm here, you, we all agreed, let's lift the sanctions. And forget what the Americans are going to do, they're so feckless, they're falling over themselves, and they're not a factor anymore anyway." So that's his reasons.

Gregory Gause: What did Macron and Merkel have?

Larry Napper: Macron and Merkel have decided that nobody else is going to do this, that the United States is-

Gregory Gause: Out to lunch.

Larry Napper: ... [inaudible 00:52:52], right?

Gregory Gause: That's a nice way to say out to lunch.

Larry Napper: That the United States is so preoccupied with its domestic turmoil and is in the ... and in the current circumstances couldn't give a damn less about this. So if that's the case, then all right, we got to do it, or else it's not going to get done.

Larry Napper: And by the way, this is a way of saying, for people like Merkel and especially Macron to say, "Look, maybe we don't need the United States. Maybe we can get this done on our own." And the United States isn't coming riding over the hill like the US cavalry anytime soon. So what are we going to do, sit around and do nothing? Let's at least try-

Gregory Gause: To do something.

Larry Napper: ... to do something, and see if we can make this work.

Gregory Gause: So we're coming close to the end of our hour, which is what we usually try to do. We had one kind of pre-question from the audience, but are there any other questions from the audience?

Larry Napper: The gentleman's question is very well taken. What does this mean? I mean this one headline says, "Okay, they've agreed to a cease fire." Well, they agreed to a cease fire in 2015. The question is will they actually do it.

Guest Speaker 1: It seems like Putin has the upper hand, is he actually willing to compromise on anything?

Larry Napper: That's what remains to be seen. If we could get a cease fire all along that line of contact. If we could at least get the military provision of the Minsk Accords that would separate the forces done, then you'd have to tackle the broader political tradeoff of autonomy for a restoration of the border, but at least that would be a start.

Justin Bullock: It will be really interesting too to see maybe Macron and Merkel are able to come up against Putin in negotiating favorably, maybe they don't need the Americans at the table.

Gregory Gause: But can they guarantee ... Can they guarantee implementation of the deal? And that's, I think, the problem for the Europeans being the folks, the third parties at

the table, as opposed to the Europeans and the US, it's a lot easier for Putin to ignore them.

Larry Napper: Look, the Europeans can't guarantee anything on this. All they're doing is providing a table, and a setting, and an invitation, and a place, right? The only people who can make this work are Russians and Ukrainians. And Zelensky would very much like to have a ceasefire. Because he could deliver on-

Gregory Gause: He could deliver on something.

Larry Napper: ... something that he had promised the Ukrainian people in the election. He said, "I will try to get an end to the conflict, and by the way, I think I can do it." And if he could get even that, just a ceasefire in place, I think that would-

Gregory Gause: Help him a lot.

Larry Napper: Yeah.

Justin Bullock: Hopefully he's more successful than Trump negotiating with North Korea-

Gregory Gause: Well, that's a pretty low bar. And on that happy note, I think that we've come to the end of our time. I'd like to thank the crowds who came to attend today's podcast.

Larry Napper: Okay, hear that crowd.

Gregory Gause: Masses of Ukrainians and Russians out there who came to listen to us, and to thank Larry Napper, our friend and colleague, for coming down and spending his time on the podcast. I predict this might be the most downloaded podcast because Ukraine is a hot topic and people want to know about it. Larry, thanks very much.

Larry Napper: Thank you guys for staying clear of the i word-

Gregory Gause: As best as we could.

Larry Napper: ... I appreciate that.

Gregory Gause: As best as we could.

Larry Napper: And also thank you for the invitation to come down and uncork with you, I would be happy to do it again at some point.

Justin Bullock: [inaudible 00:57:06] to do it again, let's do that. Thanks Larry.

Larry Napper: All right.

Gregory Gause: And happy New Year, happy Holidays, merry Christmas, happy New Year to everybody, we'll be back in your feed in January of 2020.

Justin Bullock: Yep, and keep an eye out, we'll be hopefully on a couple mediums in the spring. So happy New Year and we will see you in 2020.

Gregory Gause: 2020.