



# Will Russia's Ukraine War Prompt An American Awakening On Iran?

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President Joe Biden has revamped U.S. goals in Ukraine from de-escalation and negotiations to a Ukrainian victory and the “degrading” of Russia’s military, reflecting a long-overdue reappraisal of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his war aims.

It is not the first time of late that Washington has come to see that conventional wisdom about a global power was woefully out of date. For decades, the U.S. foreign policy elite had assumed that rising prosperity in China would force more political freedom at home and more global integration abroad. Instead, Xi Jinping’s tightening grip at home and greater aggressiveness abroad has forced Washington to recognize China as less a competitor than the biggest long-term threat to America.

The question, then, is whether the tardy U.S. reawakening about Putin’s Russia (on top of the tardy reawakening about Xi’s China) will prompt an equally overdue reawakening about Iran’s mullahcracy.

Like other democracies, the United States is, in the words of diplomat George Kennan, “slow to wrath.” It is also slow to enlightenment, preferring to envision trust and understanding on the part of allies and enemies alike, and reluctant to change its mind until well after reason has demanded it.

Consider U.S.-Russian relations. “I looked the man in the eye,” President George W. Bush said after meeting Putin in June 2001. “I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. I was able to get a sense of his soul, a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country.” President Obama followed Bush with a call to “reset” relations between the nations, to a “sustained effort ... to identify mutual interests, and to expand dialogue and co-operation that can pave the way to progress.”

Notwithstanding the high hopes, Putin invaded Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, contending that the latter was not a separate state but rather an integral part of Russia. He then annexed Crimea while the world largely stood by, hoping Putin’s appetite would be sated with a slice of southern Ukraine.

Though Biden reacted far more appropriately to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, rallying the West to impose harsh sanctions and send arms to Kyiv, he nevertheless raised concerns about igniting “World War III,” limited the arms he sent, held certain sanctions in abeyance in hopes of convincing Putin to change course, and conceded that Russian forces might sweep across and occupy Ukraine.

Biden has now lost his hesitation, perhaps because he realizes that – as Crimea in 2014 begat Ukraine in 2022 – any concessions to Putin will prompt another such Russian aggression in the future. Biden is no longer conceding Russian territorial gains, is providing the heavier equipment that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky long sought, and is labeling Putin a “war criminal” who should face trial. After meeting with Zelensky in Kyiv, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin reframed the U.S. goal: “to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can’t do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.”

So, what about Iran? Ever since the revolution of 1979 that toppled the Shah and catapulted the mullahcracy to power, presidents of both parties have sought to cajole, incentivize, and convince Tehran to ease its hostility toward Washington and work with it to end regional conflicts and lessen tensions.

But to no avail. The Islamic Republic remains the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism; is making progress on its nuclear and related ballistic missile programs; recently unveiled new drones and other upgraded military equipment; seeks to extend its revolutionary theology beyond its borders; exerts undue influence over Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen directly or through terrorist proxies; chants “death to America” at parliamentary sessions and other official ceremonies; and continues to hold U.S. citizens and threaten the lives of current and past U.S. officials.

None of that was influenced by the 2015 global nuclear deal that gave Tehran tens of billions of dollars in sanctions relief in exchange for limits on its nuclear program. Nor, despite President Obama’s high hopes, did Tehran use the funds for economic and social development at home. Instead, it channeled them into more weapons development and terrorist activity. Nor, despite Obama administration contentions, did the deal close off all Iranian avenues to a bomb, if only because it was set to expire in stages.

Fast forward some seven years, and even as Biden admirably rallies the nation and world against Putin’s naked aggression in Ukraine, his negotiators are working in Vienna to resurrect the flawed 2015 deal (officially, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), from which President Trump withdrew the United States in 2018.

The latest reports from Vienna suggest that the Iran talks are close to collapse – and that may present a timely opportunity. As we did with China and Russia, we retain disproven theories about Iran. We need to see Iran as the implacable adversary it is and then craft a broad strategic approach to it that makes sense.