



High time for the US to support Ukraine's victory — and Russia's defeat

February 23, 2023 **Lawrence J. Haas** *The Hill*

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President Biden's surprise trip to Kyiv was gutsy, and he deserves credit for leading the West in an impressive military, diplomatic, and economic effort to isolate Moscow and help Ukraine rebuff Russia's attempted conquest.

One year into the war, however, Biden's administration must discard its strategic ambiguity about U.S. war aims and make clear that, like Kyiv, Washington seeks an unambiguous Ukrainian victory and Russian defeat — and that it will give Kyiv the weaponry it needs to make that happen.

Doing so would include U.S. (and other Western) fighter jets and longer-range missiles that Kyiv now seeks, as well as resupplies of the weaponry and ammunition that Washington already has provided.

When it comes to the end game of this war, Kyiv knows what it wants, based on recent conversations with Ukrainian political and military leaders: to restore Ukraine's territory of 1991, when it resumed independence after the Soviet crack-up. That includes Crimea, which Russia unilaterally annexed in 2014.

What does Washington want? No one knows, because the administration refuses to specify. Biden and his team say that Washington will support Ukraine "as long as it takes." But as long as it takes to do what? U.S. officials suggest that they envision Russian-Ukrainian negotiations at some point, and perhaps a settlement that does not necessarily return all contested areas (including Crimea) to Ukraine.

The case for an unambiguous Ukrainian victory and Russian defeat seems overwhelming, however.

For starters, it would strengthen the free and democratic world against an emerging Beijing-Moscow-Tehran authoritarian axis that seeks to weaken the United States and re-write the post-World War II rules of international order, which include respect for the territorial integrity of sovereign nations.

China and Iran have thrown in their lot with Russia. The former is providing technical and economic aid and reportedly considering lethal aid as well, while the latter has become "Moscow's most significant military backer in the war" by providing drones to attack critical infrastructure and other targets.

In helping to ensure Vladimir Putin's defeat, the West would send a strong message to other would-be aggressors that they will face severe consequences if they threaten the territorial integrity of another state.

That's a particularly important message to send at a time when Beijing, which insists that Taiwan is part of China, is increasingly threatening military action to make it so. Asked at the recent Munich Security Conference to reassure his audience that military escalation against Taiwan was not imminent, China's top diplomat declined to do so.

A Ukrainian victory also would promote nuclear nonproliferation. It would demonstrate that Kyiv had not been foolish to give up the nuclear weapons it inherited after the Soviet crack-up, and that Washington and the West will protect other non-nuclear nations which otherwise might seek a nuclear capacity to ward off aggression.

Nevertheless, the administration seems at war with itself about how much to commit to Kyiv's fight.

While Biden himself has mouthed full-throated commitment to the principles of sovereignty and democracy, his administration is sending other signals. In what seem like strategic leaks, unnamed administration officials suggest that U.S. aid won't be unlimited, and that "as long as it takes... doesn't pertain to the amount of assistance."

Those leaks, of course, undermine Biden's pronouncements. They also likely encourage Putin by suggesting that U.S. support will wane and — with a much larger populace than Ukraine — he can win a war of attrition by throwing ever-more bodies into the fight. They also likely dishearten the leaders and people of Ukraine, who are putting their lives on the line for freedom while we cheer from the sidelines.

In its hesitation to give Kyiv everything that experts believe would enable Ukraine to win, the administration seems driven by multiple fears: That a desperate Putin will follow through on his repeated threats to use nuclear weapons. That a Russian defeat will destabilize the region. That a coup will topple Putin and usher in a more hostile successor. And that a significantly more protracted war could prove increasingly costly to the United States by draining its military resources.

Let's dispense with these fears. For starters, nuclear weapons wouldn't likely give Putin much benefit on the battlefield in a war of this nature, and he'd be razing territory that he says is intrinsically part of Russia. Moreover, his use of nuclear weapons likely would cost him critical support in Beijing.

Yes, a Russian defeat would mean an uncertain future and maybe a new hostile leader in Moscow. On the other hand, a defeated Russia will be too weak to threaten Ukraine, the Baltic states, and former Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe for the foreseeable future. As for fretting over prospects of a more hostile leader, we should dispense with any remaining hopes of working productively with Putin and ask ourselves: How much more hostile could the next leader possibly be?

A year into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, what have we learned? The new era of counterintelligence must shift focus to the gray zone.

As for cost concerns over U.S. support for Ukraine, they are penny-wise and pound-foolish. The U.S. military commitment to Ukraine remains a small share of U.S. defense spending overall, and a Russian defeat would ease U.S. military cost pressures over the long term by weakening one of America's most lethal adversaries. Anything less than a Russian defeat could encourage more Russian aggression, forcing Washington to spend even more on its military to defend itself and its allies.

With the stakes of this war so high for both Ukraine and the world, let's stop "deterring ourselves" (as one retired lieutenant general put it) and give Kyiv the weaponry it needs to win outright.

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