



# Biden's Ukraine Policy is Less than Meets the Eye

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Senior administration officials recently made the case on Capitol Hill for still more funding for Ukraine. In testimonies before the Senate Appropriations Committee, both Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken argued in favor of a massive \$61.4 billion to backstop Kyiv's fight against Russian aggression. The package, they made clear, is crucial in both practical and symbolic terms. As Blinken put it, the United States "must not give our friends, our rivals, or our foes any reason to doubt America's resolve."

But behind the lofty rhetoric lies a sobering question: Does the White House truly want Ukraine to win? The answer is less clear-cut than it appears.

To be sure, since the start of Russia's war of aggression last year, the administration has been admirably steadfast in support of Ukraine's efforts to defend its sovereignty, correctly seeing them as an essential struggle for freedom over tyranny and imperialism. President Joe Biden has repeatedly intoned that American support for Ukraine's fight will continue for "as long as it takes." At the same time, though, the White House has repeatedly made decisions that ensure Russia's war on Ukraine can drag on for far longer than it otherwise would.

Despite the provision of voluminous amounts of aid (now totaling more than \$113 billion), Washington has been painfully slow to provide Kyiv with the battlefield platforms it needs to qualitatively improve its position and take the fight to the enemy.

That has certainly been the case with the Army Tactical Missile System, better known as ATACMS. Since last year, officials in Kyiv have been clamoring for the sophisticated stand-off weapons, arguing that they would enable the Ukrainian military to target Russian forces entrenched in the Crimean Peninsula from further (and safer) distances. But, until quite recently, the Biden administration made it painfully clear that it simply wasn't prepared to provide them.

It wasn't until Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Washington this fall that the White House proffered a nominal number of the missiles as part of a \$325 million weapons package. There now appears to be a new understanding between Washington and Kyiv regarding the equipment—but it took over a year, and many Ukrainian lives lost, to get there.

And ATACMS is hardly the only weaponry that has been delayed. Ukraine was asking Washington for advanced F-16 fighter aircraft, needed to gain a semblance of air parity with Russia in its sovereign airspace, for nearly a year before the idea was finally approved this summer. Yet those planes are still not flying; long training times mean that the F-16s in question won't be in a position to contribute to Kyiv's defense until at least the end of the year.

Worse still, America's allies have taken their cues from the administration's piecemeal approach. This summer, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced a plan to provide Ukraine with 17 billion euros (\$18.13 billion) in military aid and weaponry through 2027. That's an admirable long-term commitment to Ukraine's defense. Just as clearly, though, such assistance would be far more impactful if it was provided in the near term, rather than dribbled out over nearly half a decade.

The reasons for the delays are practical. Officials in Washington have long fretted that, if the weaponry provided to Kyiv ends up being too potent, Ukraine might turn the tables on the Kremlin and take the offensive—potentially resulting in a wider war with Russia. That's a valid worry. Having been attacked in an unprovoked fashion, Ukraine is understandably eager to hit back and impose costs on its tormentor.

But the converse is also true; without sufficient firepower, Ukraine lacks the battlefield superiority to decisively turn the tables on the Russian military, or to change Moscow's strategic calculus enough to deter further aggression.

The result is a strategy of support for Ukraine that's robust in form, but flimsier than it should be in practice. Moreover, it's one that is extremely vulnerable to disruptions—whether temporary (like a possible shutdown of the federal government) or more lasting, which might happen depending on who wins the U.S. presidency next year.

The consequences have been profound—and profoundly deleterious. In a recent interview with *The Economist*, Valery Zaluzhny, the commander-in-chief of Ukraine's armed forces, admitted that, after months of his country's long-anticipated counteroffensive, Kyiv's gains have been meager. He confessed, that absent some sort of transformative qualitative change on the battlefield, the war has become one of positional warfare in which Russia has a distinct advantage in terms of manpower.

If, in the coming weeks, the conflict does end up becoming a stalemate, as Zaluzhny fears, it won't be due to Ukraine's timidity. Rather, a big part of the blame will lie with our decision to draw out support for the country's defense against Russian aggression, instead of giving Kyiv the tools it needs to end the conflict quickly and decisively.

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