

EXPERT INSIGHT | Center for American Security

# UKRAINE END STATE

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## TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ The Biden Administration's incremental armament of Ukraine and failure to establish an end state has entrapped America in an endless war.
- ★ The U.S. must abandon the foreign policy establishment's view that this war is a zero-sum game in which Putin's removal from power and the total defeat of Russia is the only acceptable "win."
- ★ The U.S. should instead pursue a negotiated end-state by moving beyond the NATO membership line for Ukraine in favor of bilateral security support.
- ★ The U.S. should also leverage military aid to Ukraine, making any additional U.S. aid packages contingent on Ukrainian officials agreeing to join peace talks with Russia.

The largest war in Europe since the end of World War II continues. As a direct result of Russia's unwarranted invasion of a sovereign neighboring nation, hundreds of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in action. At the same time, Ukrainian towns and cities have been destroyed—almost one-third of Ukrainians have become refugees. The war has now crested more than 600 days with no end in sight. As a simple data point, the period of World War II, from the Allied invasion in Normandy until the end of the war in Europe, took 336 days. The war in Ukraine has now seemingly become endless.

The U.S. has provided approximately \$113 billion in economic, humanitarian, and military aid to Ukraine since Russia's war of aggression began, and now, another \$61.5 billion of U.S. aid is being openly discussed.<sup>i</sup> Without question, the U.S. is a proxy in this war because of its sheer volume of support. Yet, American military support has been incremental as the U.S. has delayed delivering heavy long-range ATACMS missiles or fighter aircraft to Ukraine and only sent these weapons two years into the war. Though President Biden says U.S. support will be for "as long as it takes" and resolute, that is not true. Support for Ukraine has been reactionary, incremental, and void of strategy.

History and experience have shown that incrementalism in conventional warfare is ill-advised, and limited warfare is the path to defeat. Successful warfare means going all in, decisively, with

a predetermined end-state. It does not mean going half-in through a drawn-out process. As General Douglas MacArthur stated, “It is fatal to enter any war without the will to win it.” U.S. incremental support in the form of key weapons systems, including ATACMS missiles and advanced F-16 fighter jets, have belied President Biden’s rhetoric on America’s commitment to Ukraine’s goal of militarily defeating Russia.

### **Significant Concerns from the Public and Policymakers on the U.S. Approach to Ukraine**

American support for the Ukrainian war effort is mixed. National-level polling has revealed increasing concerns from the American people regarding the amount of U.S. tax dollars flowing to address security threats overseas while not addressing critical issues at home.<sup>ii</sup> Unfortunately, the Biden Administration has perpetuated these concerns by continuing to provide military and economic support without clearly defining what our vital national interests are in the war. President Biden has stated that this war is a “battle between democracy and autocracy,” and the American interest is to uphold the preservation of democracy.<sup>1</sup> He has also not yet told the American people why such heavy financial and military support has been given while serious domestic security issues such as the border crisis continued to be ignored.

Among policymakers, support across the political spectrum remains fractured. Several members of Congress, including Senators Josh Hawley (R-MO) and Rand Paul (R-KY), have advocated cutting off military aid to Ukraine entirely or stopping it until certain conditions are met. These conditions could include defining an end-state to the war and how it would be accomplished.<sup>iii, iv</sup>

### **An America First National Security Approach**

In light of these concerns and growing uncertainty about our Nation’s involvement in the war, a major question must be addressed: What is the appropriate national security strategy for the U.S. relative to Ukraine?

An America First national security strategy is based on the constitutional premise of “We the People,” meaning the government is intended to represent the interests of the American people directly. Overseas, this America First approach to national security is assured by focusing first on the American people. It starts by asking how America’s engagement abroad will affect our own Nation. Cemented in the 2017 National Security Strategy, the Trump Administration launched an America First approach to international engagement by setting the standard that any international arrangement must achieve “a better outcome” for the American people.<sup>v</sup>

The phrase “America First” refers to an approach grounded in an awareness of America’s unique role in the world and her unmatched ability to do best for others when our people are first strong, safe, and prosperous. This America First approach means that any commitments of American lives or dollars must deliver concrete benefits to the American people. Those commitments are more specific and are made easier when there are clear and definitive objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> [Full transcript of President Biden's speech in Warsaw on Russia's invasion of Ukraine - ABC News \(go.com\)](https://www.abcnews.com/news/2022/02/25/biden-speech-warsaw-ukraine/)



This America First approach to national security does not mean retrenchment or isolationism in which America recedes from engagement in the world. Rather, it means a nuanced way to approach national security by ensuring that America's actions are guided by "principled realism," tied directly back to advancing America's vital national interests.<sup>vi</sup> This approach, therefore, avoids vague, grandiose, and other ideological paradigms that seek to justify U.S. engagement abroad unnecessarily.

Furthermore, an America First national security strategy means staying out of endless wars or interventions that lack clear objectives or benefits. In his seminal work on why great nations fail, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Yale University Professor Paul Kennedy warns of "strategic overreach." Kennedy defines this idea as the process of a nation expending its financial, human, and diplomatic capacity overseas without focusing first on home.<sup>vii</sup> History has repeatedly shown that when nations do conduct strategic overreach, they inevitably bring about their own decline and eventual collapse. Applied to the U.S., Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., cited Paul Kennedy and this principle of strategic overreach when he argued that "America cannot be an empire abroad and continue to be a democracy at home." His message was that when America's focus is set on developing a hegemonic empire abroad and being the world's policeman without a well-defined plan, America's ability to preserve its constitutional republic will suffer.

In his first address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, President Donald J. Trump stated clearly that it is the right of every nation to fight for its sovereignty. President Trump told the assembled UN members, "The true question for the United Nations today for people all over the world who hope for better lives for themselves, and their children is a basic one: Are we still patriots? Do we love our nations enough to protect their sovereignty and to take ownership of their futures...so let this be our mission and let this be our message to the world: we will fight together for peace, for freedom, for justice, for family, for humanity and for the almighty God who made us all."<sup>viii</sup>

This was a simple clarion call that nations must be willing to protect their sovereignty, and we would also be there to support them. These were hardly the isolationist words of Neville Chamberlain or Charles Lindbergh.

### **Defining an Appropriate America First Approach to Ukraine**

Unfortunately, the Biden Administration recently requested an additional \$61.4 billion in Ukraine aid to Congress without providing a defined end game. With further requests for military and financial aid to Ukraine looming, the America First position on Ukraine should be clear.

It appears that the positions of both Russia and Ukraine are to keep fighting until either "wins" the war. Russia wants to defeat Ukraine as a nation, and Ukraine wants Russia to remove its forces from all the Ukrainian land they have occupied since 2014. With enormous personnel and material losses by both countries, the war has evolved into a long-term war of attrition in which neither side currently has the advantage. As a recent article by Marcus Walker in the *Wall Street*



*Journal* stated, “...none of the main actors (in the war) have political goals that are both clear and attainable.”<sup>ix</sup>

Options to end the war are limited. A total victory by either side is implausible. Distasteful as it may sound, it is time to address some type of negotiation for peace. Otherwise, this conflict becomes a long-term war of attrition that Russia, with its vastly larger resources and population, as well as the economic backing of China, might eventually win.

Negotiation does not mean surrender. On the contrary, during negotiations, warring will continue. As we experienced in both the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, combat continued during negotiations. There should be no “frozen conflict.” Once negotiations start, we should understand that U.S. military aid to Ukraine will not immediately come to a halt due to the need to enable Ukraine to negotiate from a position of strength.

The Ukraine war has crested more than 600 days, and Russia still occupies approximately 20% of Ukrainian territory in the eastern Oblasts (States).<sup>x</sup> An earlier Russian military offensive has culminated, and the current Ukrainian counteroffensive has slowly reoccupied some territory.<sup>xi</sup> Even if the current Ukrainian offensive is successful in certain regards, it will not be enough to bring an end to the war, nor will it lead to Ukraine recapturing and liberating all its territory from Russian forces. To achieve Ukraine’s goals, a series of future counteroffensives would be required, and launching them would require significant financial and military support from the U.S. and NATO allies. However, if Ukraine is able to make gradual advances in liberating its territory from Russian forces, such progress may bring about the necessary conditions for negotiations sooner rather than later.

Esteemed political theorist Hans Morgenthau, writing in his classic work *Politics Among Nations*, reminded us that “statesmen are always tempted to sacrifice the requirements of good foreign policy to the applause of the masses. He must strike a prudent balance.”<sup>xii</sup>

Applying Morgenthau’s sentiments to the current Ukraine war, the focus should be on stopping the enormous killing and destruction and providing stability to the region. Given the magnitude of Russia’s destructive invasion, emotive responses have characterized much of the Western response to Ukraine. Although many of the serious concerns, such as the humanitarian plight of millions, are rightly merited, this same emotive response has framed policy remarks that have threatened to bring America back into endless wars and have negated meaningful solutions. For example, both sides of the political aisle have suggested that regime change in Russia is the sole way to end the war in Ukraine. President Biden and Senator Lindsay Graham (R-SC) have each communicated the notion that Putin’s removal from power is the way to end the war.<sup>xiii, xiv</sup> This war has also been framed as a zero-sum game in which Russia must be entirely defeated as a nation in order for Ukraine to “win” and for the war to end. In contrast, when President Trump was asked whether he wanted Russia or Ukraine to win the war, he replied he wanted “everybody to stop dying.”<sup>xv</sup> This expressed a desire to prioritize an end to the war to prevent further casualties and escalated tensions in the region over prolonging a war to meet the idealist goals of the foreign policy establishment.



Morgenthau's sentiments, therefore, offer wisdom for today. The war in Ukraine must be met with statesmanship of a "prudent balance" that has the American interest in mind as the lead priority. Rather than trying to gain "the applause of the masses" and the foreign policy establishment, statesmanship must instead focus on the pragmatic means to advance America's vital national interests.

Bringing an end to the war in Ukraine will not appease the foreign policy personnel who view this conflict as a mission of promoting democracy and defeating Russia as a nation. Instead, the war in Ukraine will be brought to an end by those who understand that the ultimate moral good in this war is to reach an end-state through decisive, America First leadership.

As our Nation's Commander in Chief, explaining and driving an end state to this conflict is a singular role of the president.

When it comes to national security and involving economic and military treasures overseas, presidential leadership remains paramount. Alexander Hamilton, writing in Federalist Paper No. 70, refers to the need for "energy" from the Nation's Chief Executive that can easily be translated into action and leadership. Yet, today, when it comes to leadership in helping to end the longest war in Europe since World War II, our country is unfortunately lacking.

### **Working Toward a Negotiated Settlement**

Unless we insist on the unrealistic outcome of an unconditional surrender by either side, the idea of a negotiated settlement with conditions will likely be the ultimate solution.

The initial step toward such a solution should be engagement on the nation-state level in order to establish direct talks between Presidents Putin and Zelensky, first individually and then together. The initial meetings could be on neutral territory, possibly in Vienna, Austria. Possible extended discussions at Camp David in the U.S. could follow in a manner similar to what was achieved in the 1978 Middle East Camp David Peace talks between Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Israeli President Menachem Begin.

For negotiations to be successful, incentives and pressure points for both parties are needed. Major discussion points must include a full withdrawal of Russian forces from Eastern Ukraine while ruling out Ukraine's near-term NATO membership. Ukraine could then be offered bilateral security agreements between the U.S. and European nations. Russia would be warned that a failure of negotiations means a continuation of war, with the West fully and unconditionally supporting Ukrainian military operations to evict Russia forcefully from Ukraine.

Ukraine's potential NATO status has long been at the center of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Ukraine believes ultimately, only NATO accession will blunt Russia's desire to defeat and occupy Ukraine. A recent July NATO Summit asserted that "Ukraine's future is in NATO." Future is the operative word here.<sup>xvi</sup> Article 10 of the NATO Treaty is conditional and states that "The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to



further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Membership in NATO must enhance regional security, not degrade it. Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. policymakers have recognized the unique redline Ukraine poses to Russia relative to NATO expansionism. U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Williams Burns asserted that “Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin),” while George Kennan, architect of the Cold War Containment theory, further acknowledged that NATO expansionism would be the most “fateful error” of U.S. policy in Europe.<sup>xviii xix</sup> U.S. policymakers should realize that the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO could further provoke Russia and possibly cause a conflict between NATO troops and Russia if either side were to break a future cease-fire agreement while Russia still occupies Ukrainian territory.

Until the time is appropriate for Ukraine to apply for admission to NATO, bilateral security agreements and acceptance of Ukraine as a major non-NATO ally would be more appropriate. By taking the NATO issue off the table in the near term, the U.S. offers an incentive for Russia to join peace discussions and a possible peace agreement.

Taking NATO membership off the table in the near term also would create breathing space for NATO allies, some of whom are reluctant to support Ukraine’s admittance. All recognize Article 5 of the Treaty, which explains that an attack on one is considered an attack on all.

Moreover, preemptively granting Ukraine NATO membership before a cease-fire or agreement for peace talks would remove any incentive for Russia to abide by any negotiated settlement and would risk a wider, more deadly war.

One of the consequences of the Biden Administration’s approach of sending endless aid packages to Ukraine without a defined end state has been to eliminate any incentive for Ukraine to join peace talks and instead opt for total victory. Ukraine, for example, was open to negotiations – and even pressed for negotiations – throughout March of 2022.<sup>xx</sup> Yet, President Biden’s assertion that the U.S. will send aid “as long as it takes” has given Ukraine the greenlight to use American resources to achieve its own national goals.

The U.S. should, therefore, consider leveraging its military aid to Ukraine to make it contingent on Ukrainian officials agreeing to join peace talks with Russia to negotiate an end state to the conflict.

The consequences of failure must be addressed as well. Previous attempts by France and Germany to bring peace to the region through Minsk I and II were profound failures. It must be clear to both warring parties that failure to bring peace to the region will have consequences. If Ukraine balks on the initiation of peace talks, U.S. military aid should cease. If Russia balks, the U.S. should provide and press the European allies to provide complete and total aid to Ukraine to pursue military escalation. If these consequences are communicated early to both, the potential for success will increase.



Negotiations can work but require strong American leadership to execute both pressure points and incentives in a peace deal. Former President Trump, as a businessman, approached negotiations with nation-state leaders from the framework of “Think Big.” We as a Nation should think big and stop the enormous killing and destruction between Ukraine and Russia.

Historically, it is a good truism to remember that unintended consequences seem to occur with the gravest results in war and produce outcomes and changes not foreseen by those who planned the initial actions. Helping to bring an end to the largest European war in this century is worth the effort.

Congress has a role to play as well. The House of Representatives is given the power of the purse by the Constitution. They should use that authority to safeguard taxpayer funds by eliminating arbitrary funding and ensuring funding is only sent congruent to a defined end-state.

As the body that provides advice and consent, the U.S. Senate can ensure a bilateral security arrangement with Ukraine is formulated as we have historically done. This formal bilateral arrangement through the Senate is necessary to circumvent America’s past broken promises to Ukraine. President Bill Clinton’s initiative to have Ukraine give up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security assurances from the U.S. in the Budapest Memorandum cannot be repeated.

Most importantly, solving the issue of Ukraine allows us to pivot intellectually, diplomatically, militarily, and economically to the greatest threat we face today and will continue to face in the next decade—Communist China.

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