



# ISSUE BRIEF: EXPLAINING RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE AND THE NEED FOR AN AMERICA FIRST APPROACH

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's brazen invasion of Ukraine is just the latest manifestation of the damaging weakness the Biden Administration is projecting on the world stage. Over the course of the first year of the Biden Administration, the credibility of American deterrence has eroded due to the debacle of America's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, the failure to secure the southern border, and a less than serious policy obsessed with climate change. On the threat from Russia, President Biden ceded America's leadership to Europe, removing strong policies like the Nord Stream II sanctions that the Trump Administration had imposed and instituted restrictions on critical intelligence sharing with Ukraine that it is only now weighing lifting over 2 months into the war.

In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) appears stronger and more unified than it has been in a generation. Yet, this is *despite* an absence of clear policy direction and leadership by the United States. An anecdote illustrative of the problem suffices to illuminate the situation: President Biden spent the weekend in Delaware at his vacation home just after Putin's invasion. Meanwhile, the Europeans took the lead. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced an extraordinary German rearmament, the European Union stepped up to render crucial aid to Ukraine at war, and several European leaders visited Kyiv. President Biden announced sanctions the week Putin's invasion began, yet lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and reporters criticized them for not going far enough and whether they would be enough to stop Putin. They did not.

The foreign policy decisions of the Biden Administration over its first year, including its weak policy toward Russia and Eastern Europe and ceding American leadership to European nations, show how this administration's policies have helped bring about the Ukraine crisis. Biden Administration officials have been far too slow in delivering the needed lethal military aid to Ukraine that its president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has requested. Indeed, some commentators believe this aid would enable Ukraine to "win this war, not merely survive it" ([Wall Street Journal Editorial Board, 2022](#)). The Biden Administration has also failed to define America's conditions for the resumption of normal relations with Russia.

## **POLICY DECISIONS THAT EMBOLDENED PUTIN**

President Biden's questionable national security policy decisions regarding Russia, China, Iran, and other adversaries, critically undermined America's reputation as a strong and decisive state on the world stage and encouraged Putin's belligerence. Moreover, President Biden's decision to lift the Trump Administration sanctions on the Nord Stream II pipeline in May 2021 sent a clear message about a less determined U.S. foreign policy not only to Russia but also to European nations dependent on Russian energy ([BBC News Editors, 2021](#)). Putin also likely took note of President Biden's unwillingness to stand up to Communist China and his dubious attempt to seek China's assistance to stop Russia's invasion of Ukraine. America's global credibility also has been undermined by the Biden Administration's obsession with revamping the deeply flawed 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, an effort that essentially will put

Russia in charge of a new nuclear deal and will remove the Iranian Revolutionary Guard from a U.S. list of state-sanctioned terrorist organizations.

President Biden's ambiguity regarding Ukraine's prospects for NATO membership in the weeks leading up to Putin's actions further aggravated tensions ([Bandow, 2021](#)). Indeed, Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO) wrote a letter in February to Secretary of State Antony Blinken warning that this administration's advocacy for Ukrainian membership in the alliance could flare up tensions with Russia at a time when America needed to focus on the much more serious and growing threat from Communist China ([Hawley, 2022](#)).

An alternative approach, as pursued under the Trump Administration, is to employ American leadership to engage with nations in Eastern Europe to understand their security and sovereignty needs as well as purposeful challenges to NATO to step up to do more.

## **THE AMERICA FIRST APPROACH TO RUSSIA AND UKRAINE**

The Trump Administration's America First approach to the Russia-Ukraine conflict was not isolationist. Rather, it represented a shift in U.S. policy toward Europe and our alliances. When engaging with other nations, the Trump Administration pursued a more transactional approach where every engagement with another nation reaps a substantial benefit to the American people. Additionally, this approach required all nations to share the risks and costs within alliances rationally and sustainably. In addition to advancing America's interests, this approach helps strengthen and modernize alliances. By building on their strengths, allies and partners allow Americans greater flexibility and ability in times of need.

The Trump Administration's approach to NATO focused on pushing alliance members to share the burden reflected a calculation about relative financial spending on the alliance and a more foundational question about where defense spending was going. Put differently, all allies spending more equitably reflected a commitment to address threats. This new approach also created the space to consider other tools for demonstrating support to non-NATO members' defense and sovereignty—as demonstrated, for example, by the lethal aid the Trump Administration provided to Ukraine as part of the bilateral relationship and not connected to America's NATO commitment.

The Trump Administration's engagement with Ukraine and Russia focused squarely on securing all nations that share a border with Russia, whether they were members of NATO or not. In the process, NATO members deepened their trust in the United States, recognizing that pushing NATO to do more reflected a seriousness about European defense and deterrence. This explains how the Trump Administration was the first to arm Ukraine with lethal military aid, a measure that past administrations refused to do for fear it would provoke Russia ([Lederman, 2017](#)). In fact, this did precisely the opposite. Additionally, the Trump Administration did not rely on multilateral summits to negotiate Ukraine's security and engagements to establish America's deterrence against Russia. Instead, President Trump engaged directly with President Putin and even canceled a planned meeting at the G-20 in 2018 over reports of Putin's planned action regarding Ukraine—a move that sent a clear message that there would be consequences if Ukraine's sovereignty were violated ([Shaw, 2018](#)). This two-pronged approach of arming Ukraine while confronting President Putin directly prevented the developments the world currently witnesses.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Putin is currently on a losing trajectory militarily in this war as he has been unable to overwhelm Ukrainian military forces across the Western front or to take the capital city of Kyiv. Nonetheless, with the recent installment of General Aleksandr Dvornikov as commander of Russia's military in Ukraine, he has signaled a resolve to persist and likely to focus on the Donbas region. The steps that the international community has taken so far—particularly sanctions and, in light of the atrocities uncovered in the Ukrainian city of Bucha, removal of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council and calls for war crimes investigations—are solid and correct steps in the right direction to hold Putin accountable. But they will not be enough to stop Putin from escalating his involvement in Ukraine further. As mentioned earlier, the Biden Administration needs to provide the lethal military assistance that Ukraine needs to win the war—and to do this immediately.

The United States should attempt to develop a diplomatic course to transition out of the current conflict by identifying credible interlocutors to present diplomatic offramps for Russia and Ukraine that preserve Ukraine's sovereignty and security—framing these offramps in a manner that resonates with both parties and working directly and through credible interlocutors will be key to succeeding.

Unfortunately, a peace agreement appears unlikely at this point in the Ukraine war. President Putin is unlikely to agree to give back territory his forces have captured since the current conflict began in February. President Zelensky has recently said he will not agree to territorial concessions. Ukrainian concession to Russia also looks increasingly unlikely due to well-publicized atrocities and accusations that Russian forces have committed war crimes and genocide.

As a result, the Ukraine conflict could simmer on for months. Any end to the conflict probably will be a fragile cease-fire and cessation of hostilities with no peace agreement.

In the long term, Putin's invasion will shift the nature of the country. Russia's inability to achieve a swift victory over Ukrainian forces has placed severe pressure on him, and it remains to be seen whether his ability to suppress dissent (or use more brutal methods to do so) inside of Russia will endure. Despite the constitutional amendment allowing him to stay in power until 2036, President Putin may not see a return to power because of this invasion. Whether this will occur through a coup or an electoral transfer of power, Russia's future is in flux. Washington must be prepared to navigate a turbulent political landscape in Russia.

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