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RESEARCH REPORT | Center for American Security

AMERICA FIRST, RUSSIA, & UKRAINE

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine was an avoidable crisis that, due to the Biden Administration's incompetent policies and rejection of the America First approach to national security, has entangled America in an endless war.
- ★ The Biden Administration's risk-averse pattern in the armament of Ukraine coupled with a failure in diplomacy with Russia has prolonged the war in Ukraine, which now finds itself in a war of attrition with Russia.
- ★ Bringing the Russia-Ukraine war to a close will require strong, America First leadership to deliver a peace deal and immediately end the hostilities between the two warring parties.

Overview

The war in Ukraine is an avoidable tragedy that resulted from President Biden's incompetence as a world leader and his chaotic foreign policy. The war has divided Americans and the conservative movement over what America's involvement in this conflict should be and how the Ukraine War affects European and global stability. The Ukraine War is an exceptionally complex foreign policy question for the United States.

Advocates of aggressive U.S. support, including some who call for direct U.S. military involvement, view the war as a significant threat to American, European, and international security. They claim that without robust and limitless American military aid to Ukraine, Russia will move after conquering Ukraine to rebuild the former Soviet Union and invade other countries, including NATO members. Some of these advocates claim that a Russian victory in Ukraine would undermine democracy and security in other areas of the world and could encourage China to invade Taiwan. Those who hold this view, especially President Biden, have strongly criticized as pro-Russia, pro-Putin, anti-democracy, and isolationist anyone who has opposed or even expressed skepticism about American military aid to Ukraine.



Although some U.S. critics of military aid to Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government might indeed be isolationists, the vast majority are Americans worried about whether America's vital strategic interests are at stake in the Ukraine War, the potential of the involvement of U.S. military forces, whether America is engaged in a proxy war with Russia that could escalate into a nuclear conflict, and the need to establish a plan to end this war and not simply provide weapons for a conflict that appears to have become a long-term stalemate.

A primary requirement for the America First approach to U.S. national security is first a competent and decisive commander-in-chief—a president who exercises strong leadership on the world stage, names exemplary national security officials, and implements a coherent and effective foreign policy to protect America from foreign threats and promote its interests abroad.

The America First approach also requires a strong military, the prudent use of U.S. military force, and keeping U.S. troops out of unnecessary and unending wars. It means working in alliances and with partners to promote regional security while requiring alliance members and allies to carry their full weight in defending security in the region.

Based on these principles, we believe the tragic failures of the Ukraine War exemplify why the America First approach to U.S. national security better addresses the challenges this type of conflict poses to U.S. national interests and how it could have been prevented. Most importantly, the America First approach to national security provides guidelines on how this war can be brought to an end.

How an America First Foreign Policy Reduced Risks from Russia During the Trump Administration

We believe the most important way the America First approach to national security could have affected the Ukraine War was to prevent it. A strong and decisive president who stood up to Russian President Vladimir Putin with a tough and coherent U.S. foreign policy for Russia, Ukraine, and NATO could have prevented Putin from ordering the February 24, 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In our view, tough and coherent policies implemented by President Donald Trump are why Russia refrained from invading its neighbors during his presidency but felt no such constraints during the administrations of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden.

Trump dissuaded Putin from invading neighboring states because his leadership and foreign policies promoted deterrence and peace through strength. Putin saw in Trump a strong and decisive president who was prepared to use all tools of American power—peaceful and coercive—to defend U.S. interests. Similar to other U.S. adversaries, Putin also viewed Trump as unpredictable and unconventional. In light of Trump's threat to destroy North Korea if it threatened U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific, Trump's summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, moving the U.S.



embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, bombing Syria for using chemical weapons on civilians, dropping America's largest bunker buster bomb on an ISIS redoubt in Afghanistan, imposing strong economic sanctions on China while keeping dialogue open with Beijing, Putin could not be sure how Trump would respond to Russian belligerence. This unpredictability played an important role during the Trump presidency in impeding hostile actions by U.S. adversaries.

Trump also had a Russia policy that demonstrated American strength. For example, in 2018, after the Russian mercenary Wagner Group advanced on U.S. bases in Syria, they were met with immediate and decisive action when President Trump authorized punitive airstrikes against them. Those airstrikes set back Russia's operations and influence in the region. Russia never retaliated against the United States over that attack—which reportedly killed hundreds of Russian mercenaries—likely because Putin did not know how Trump would respond.

The Trump Administration strengthened Europe's deterrence posture toward Russia by revitalizing the NATO alliance to work for American interests by pushing NATO members to contribute fairly to the alliance and meet their NATO Article 3 and Wales Declaration defense spending targets. By reforming NATO to return it to its original intent to serve as a collective security arrangement, the burden of Russian deterrence no longer fell solely on the United States. The Europeans were pressed to step up to defend their regional security and return to being effective allies.

The Trump Administration imposed strong sanctions against the Nord Stream II Pipeline, built to transport Russian natural gas from Russia to Germany, to halt its completion. Trump officials also pressured European states to delink from the Russian energy supply, an effort that undermined Russia's ability to weaponize energy in the region—and one that Europe resisted until Russia invaded Ukraine.

This included Trump publicly criticizing Germany for making itself dependent on Russian gas imports. At a July 2018 NATO summit, Trump condemned Germany's support of the Nord Stream II pipeline, saying, "Germany, as far as I'm concerned, is captive to Russia because it's getting so much of its energy from Russia." Trump was even more critical of Germany for its dependency on Russian energy in his September 2018 speech to the U.N. General Assembly. "Germany will become totally dependent on Russian energy if it does not immediately change course," the president said. "Here in the Western Hemisphere, we are committed to maintaining our independence from the encroachment of expansionist foreign powers." It is ironic today to watch video of German diplomats in the General Assembly hall at the time laughing at Trump's criticism.

During the Trump Administration, the United States no longer tolerated Russia's repeated nuclear treaty violations and withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. The Trump Administration also began the process of withdrawing from the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty with Russia in hopes of negotiating a stronger and more effective treaty that also would include China's nuclear arsenal.



On Ukraine, the Trump Administration promoted a strong deterrent approach by authorizing the first-ever lethal military aid package to Ukraine, equipping its armed forces with advanced Javelin anti-armor missiles, naval vessels, and Mark VI patrol boats. This was a major break from the Obama Administration, which agreed only to provide nonlethal military assistance despite passionate appeals by Ukrainian officials for U.S. arms to fight pro-Russian separatist rebels in the Donbas.¹ President Obama refused to send weapons to Ukraine because he feared it would provoke Putin. President Trump disagreed and sent weapons to Ukraine as a sign of American strength and support for a friendly state.

At the same time, Trump was open to cooperation with Russia and dialogue with Putin. Trump expressed respect for Putin as a world leader and did not demonize him in public statements. Trump's political opponents criticized him for this, but Trump's approach was no different from how multiple U.S. presidents dealt with Soviet leaders during the Cold War. This was a transactional approach to U.S.-Russia relations in which Trump used his experience as a dealmaker to find ways to coexist and lower tensions with Putin while standing firm on American security interests. Trump spoke with Putin many times during his presidency, including at least five times in person and over 17 phone calls.

How Biden's National Security Incompetence Resulted in Disaster for Ukraine

President Biden's poor leadership as commander in chief, a weak national security team and national security policies, combined with a complete misunderstanding of Russia, Putin, Ukraine, and NATO, established conditions that led Putin to order the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and conduct an overt war of aggression in defiance of the United States and the international community.

Biden began his presidency by portraying himself as an anti-Trump president who would reverse all of his predecessor's policies. This meant reverting to naïve and failed foreign policies, mostly from the Obama Administration. Because of Biden's intense dislike of Trump, he attempted to reverse even Trump's successful policies and refused to give Trump credit for his foreign policy successes.

And yet Biden's foreign policies have been unserious and incoherent. Early in his administration, Biden designated climate change as the main threat to U.S. national security. Biden's orders led to the precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, an epic foreign policy disaster that did enormous damage to American credibility and global security. The president needlessly antagonized and alienated important U.S. allies, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia, and resumed President Obama's foolhardy efforts to appease Iran in the absurd hope of making it a U.S. partner for peace in the Middle East.

Biden's policy toward China has been weak and confusing. He did nothing to hold Beijing accountable for the origin and spread of the COVID-19 virus. He weakened the readiness of the U.S. armed services and military recruitment with ill-advised



COVID vaccine mandates and by imposing diversity, equity, and inclusion indoctrination on personnel. Biden also has deliberately refused to secure America's southern border, which has led to a huge influx of illegal migrants.

In May 2021, nine months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Biden Administration waived U.S. sanctions on the construction of the Russian Nord Stream II pipeline, a decision that garnered bipartisan opposition. Biden officials claimed at the time that the reason for this decision was to mend U.S. relations with Germany, which they alleged were strained over Trump Administration policies, such as challenging Germany's reliance on Russian energy and its failure to meet its NATO defense spending contributions.

Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates wrote in his 2014 memoir, *Duty*, "I think [Biden] has been wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security issue over the past four decades." Gates wrote those words six years before Biden assumed the Oval Office and was talking about his foreign policy competency when he was a younger man. Today, Biden's signs of mental decline, frequent erroneous foreign policy statements that his aides quickly walk back, and his amateurish senior national security officials have added to a global perception that this is the weakest and most incompetent U.S. administration on foreign policy in history.

Biden's demonstrable lack of strategic skill increased the chances of Russia invading Ukraine by undermining the perception of American-led deterrence. More importantly, Biden's foreign policy incompetence led to critical U.S. policy errors that needlessly antagonized Putin and emboldened him to order Russian troops to invade Ukraine.

Biden Misjudged Putin Before He Ordered Russian Troops to Invade Ukraine

Ukraine's potential admission to NATO was a sensitive issue for Vladimir Putin even before Joe Biden took the oath of office in January 2021. Although Putin was momentarily open to the idea in the early 2000s, he began to speak out against it after the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit, which confirmed that NATO one day planned to admit Ukraine as a member.

Putin has long argued that Ukraine could never leave Russia's sphere of influence by claiming Russians and Ukrainians are one people, denying that Ukrainians are a separate people, and opposing the idea of an independent Ukrainian state. During a one-on-one meeting with President George W. Bush in 2008, Putin said, "You have to understand, George. Ukraine is not even a country."² During a visit to Kyiv in 2013, Putin said, "God wanted the two countries to be together," and their union was based upon "the authority of the Lord," unalterable by any earthly force.³ Putin underscored and highlighted this idea in a July 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," in which he argued Ukraine could only be sovereign in partnership with Russia and asserted that present-day Ukraine occupies historically Russian lands.⁴



During a February 2024 interview with Putin by journalist Tucker Carlson, Putin provided a long, nonsensical account of Russian and Ukrainian history in which he disputed Ukraine's nationality and history and repeated his ridiculous claims that Russia invaded Ukraine in part to fight Nazism in the country.⁵

The Biden Administration's approach to national security rejected Trump's transactional approach to Russia, under which Trump established a working relationship with a U.S. adversary. Biden replaced the Trump approach with a liberal internationalist one that promoted Western values, human rights, and democracy. Contrary to the Trump Administration's America First stance on national security, the Biden approach put the idealistic agendas of the global elite ahead of a working relationship with Russia. Biden was not interested in working with Putin. He wanted to lecture and isolate him.

Biden's hostile policy toward Russia not only needlessly made it an enemy of the United States, but it also drove Russia into the arms of China and led to the development of a new Russia-China-Iran-North Korea axis. China and Russia hope to use this axis to challenge the current U.S.-led world order and the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve currency. Russia has used this axis to obtain attack drones from Iran and missiles and artillery shells from North Korea for its invasion forces in Ukraine.

Biden's approach ignored Putin's fear of Ukraine moving closer to the West and joining NATO. Although Biden and his senior officials never explicitly called for Ukraine to join NATO, they dangled NATO membership before Ukraine and repeatedly said this decision was up to Ukraine. Biden further confused the situation by stating several times in 2021 that the United States and NATO would stand behind Ukraine's "sovereignty and territorial integrity," statements that sounded like Biden offered Ukraine security guarantees. In addition, during a June 2021 NATO Summit, NATO reaffirmed the commitment made at the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit that Ukraine would one day become a member.

Given Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's stepped-up campaign for NATO membership in 2021, these statements and gestures appeared to be more than implicit endorsements of Ukraine's bid for NATO membership in the near future. Putin's paranoia about Ukraine joining NATO grew in September 2021, when the Kremlin strongly objected to Ukraine joining joint military operations with NATO members and said the expansion of NATO military infrastructure in Ukraine would cross a Russian "red line."⁶

In December 2021, as tensions grew and there were growing signs that Russia was planning to invade, Putin presented a five-point ultimatum demanding legal guarantees that NATO would not admit new members, especially Ukraine and Georgia. Putin also issued demands that would have undermined NATO, including giving up military activity in Eastern Europe. The Biden Administration rejected the ultimatum, threatened Russia with sanctions, and said America would "respond decisively" if Russia invaded Ukraine.



Biden confused the situation further in a January 18, 2022 press conference when he said Russia will “move in” to Ukraine but that the United States and its allies might be divided on how to respond if a Russian invasion was a “minor incursion.” This gaffe shocked Ukrainian officials since it seemed to indicate Biden might tolerate Russia invading Ukrainian territory to some degree. More importantly, the gaffe telegraphed to Putin Biden’s fear of escalation and lack of resolve just as he was about to order the invasion.

As Russia prepared to invade Ukraine, the Biden Administration scolded Putin and threatened “unprecedented” sanctions. Instead of using negotiations to de-escalate tensions, Biden reiterated to Putin and Zelenskyy that NATO membership for Ukraine was still in Ukraine’s hands. The Biden Administration also declassified intelligence on Russia’s war planning in the misguided belief that it would somehow deter an invasion. As Russian tanks moved toward the Ukrainian border and an invasion appeared days away, Biden Administration officials stepped up their condemnations of Putin and threats of sanctions and isolation.

An America First approach could have prevented the invasion.

First, it was in America’s best interests to maintain peace with Putin and not provoke and alienate him with aggressive globalist human rights and pro-democracy campaigns or an effort to promote Ukrainian membership in NATO. It made no sense even to allude to supporting eventual NATO membership for Ukraine, as this would require a unanimous vote of NATO members, which at the time was highly unlikely. Ukraine also needed to meet stiff membership requirements, including democratic and military reforms that included aligning the Ukrainian military with NATO equipment. (At the June 2023 NATO Summit in Vilnius, NATO members pledged to admit Ukraine once they agreed “conditions are met,” and dropped the membership requirements. This was understood to mean NATO would consider admitting Ukraine after the war ends.)

Second, it was in America’s interest to make a deal with Putin on Ukraine joining NATO, especially by January 2022 when there were signs that a Russian invasion was imminent. This was the time when the Biden Administration should have dropped its obsession with publicly criticizing Putin and worked toward a compromise. A U.S. offer to delay Ukraine’s admission into NATO for a decade might have been enough to convince Putin to call off the invasion, but Biden Administration officials refused to make such an offer.

Third, the United States and its allies should have sent substantial lethal aid to Ukraine in the fall of 2021 to deter a Russian invasion. Instead, as an invasion appeared likely in December 2021, Biden ignored urgent appeals from Zelenskyy for military aid—especially anti-tank Javelins and anti-air Stingers—and warned Putin that the United States would send lethal aid to Ukraine *if* Russia invaded. Biden’s message conveyed U.S. weakness to Putin, implying he could use military intimidation to manipulate U.S. policy toward Ukraine.



Biden's Errors at the Start of the War Doomed Ukraine

Russia reportedly began its February 2022 assault against Ukraine with a plan of invading over a 10-day period, quickly taking Kyiv, and annexing the country by August. It didn't turn out that way.

Ukraine's military learned from Russia's 2014 invasions and was much better prepared. Ukraine's army was well trained and had amassed billions of dollars in advanced weaponry from the West, including Javelin anti-tank missiles unblocked by President Trump that inflicted huge losses on Russian forces. Russia's army performed poorly due to inadequate leadership and planning, deficient equipment, poor logistics, and ill-trained troops. The Russian military was also unprepared to defend against state-of-the-art advanced missiles and attack drones.

Nevertheless, Ukraine's counteroffensive against Russia ran out of steam by the fall of 2022 because the United States and its allies failed to provide the country with the weapons it needed to continue the fight to reclaim its territory.

There were limits to how involved the United States could be involved in the conflict. To this day, America lacks a defense treaty with Ukraine and it is not a NATO ally. Intervening in the war in Ukraine lacked a clear, vital U.S. national interest. Moreover, there was a risk of nuclear escalation if NATO troops faced Russian forces in this conflict. This meant, as heinous as the Russian invasion was, the West, led by the United States, was unprepared for a response.

Like other NATO leaders, Biden correctly kept U.S. troops out of the conflict directly. Biden failed to recognize until it was too late, however, that it was in America's interests and the interests of global security for the United States to do everything possible short of direct U.S. military involvement to help Ukraine. To promote American interests and values, President Biden should have provided Ukraine with the weapons it needed to expel Russian forces early in the war and used all forms of statecraft to end the war, including sanctions, diplomatic isolation of Russia, and, ultimately, negotiations.

The main objective of military assistance to Ukraine, short of direct U.S. military involvement, was to prevent the precedent of an aggressor state seizing territory by force and defending the rules-based international order. It also was in America's interests to ensure that Russia lost this war because, due to Putin's decision to make Russia an aggressor state, a defeated and diminished Russia was the best outcome for U.S. and global security. Some believed this would prevent Russia from invading other states, including NATO members, after it conquered Ukraine. It also was likely that a devastated Russian military would allow the United States to direct its defenses against China, a far more serious threat to its national security.

Biden was prepared to give up on Ukraine after the February 2022 invasion and offered to evacuate Zelenskyy from Kyiv. Zelenskyy rejected the offer, famously replying: "The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride." Although Russian forces



seized a significant amount of Ukrainian territory in the first few weeks of the war and got close to Kyiv, they were pushed back over the following six months when the Ukrainian army seized the initiative. Bolstered by years of training and an arsenal of advanced weapons, the Ukrainians surprised the world by dealing devastating losses to the Russian army.

By October 2022, Ukrainian counteroffensives had pushed Russia out of northern and central Ukraine. By November, they had recaptured 54 percent of the land Russia seized since the beginning of the war. This left Russia occupying an area of eastern Ukraine mostly comprised of the Donbas region plus Crimea, which Russia seized in 2014.

The United States and other NATO members limited their military aid to Ukraine in 2022 out of fear of escalating the conflict. In the early phases of the war, the Biden Administration delayed the provision of Army Tactical Missiles (ATACMS), altered the range capability of High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) missiles to prevent long-range strikes, and denied Poland's request to send MiG-29 fighter aircraft to Ukraine. As a result, Ukraine's arsenal ran low by October 2022, which gave Russian forces a chance to regroup. Ukraine would never again reclaim a strategic advantage in the war and the conflict became a stalemate by late 2022.

The *Wall Street Journal* discussed how the Ukraine War came to this outcome in a November 2023 article:

A growing number of Ukraine's backers in Europe and the U.S. say Kyiv likely would be in a stronger position today if the Biden Administration had more quickly delivered valuable equipment such as tanks, long-range rockets and jet fighters. Protracted debates about the armaments, which have been provided or are being prepared for delivery to Ukraine, meant Kyiv lost valuable time early this year when it could have pressed gains achieved against Russia late last year.⁷

There were hopes that a new influx of advanced weapons from the United States and NATO members would help Ukraine turn the tide of the war in a spring 2023 counteroffensive. It didn't happen. Weapons arrived late and in insufficient numbers. For example, the Biden Administration failed to provide Ukraine with fighter aircraft and sent only 31 Abrams Tanks — equivalent to only a battalion. Ukraine also began to run out of 155 mm artillery shells by July 2023.⁸

Biden agreed in May 2023 to send F-16s to Ukraine. Not only were these fighters not available for the 2023 spring offensive, but as of this writing, they still have not arrived and are not expected to be deployed and combat-ready until mid-summer 2024 at the earliest. When the fighters arrive this summer, as few as six of the 45 planes promised will be delivered due to a lack of trained Ukrainian pilots, according to the *New York Times*.⁹



Ukraine's spring 2023 counteroffensive also failed because Russian forces had time to establish defenses in depth in eastern Ukraine that proved more formidable than Ukrainian officials had anticipated.

Biden Promotes a Proxy War with Russia

As the Ukraine War shifted to a new phase of stalemate and attrition in late 2022, the Biden Administration continued to lack a coherent strategy to help Ukraine win the conflict or end it. It provided greater numbers of advanced weapons but not enough to shift the war in Ukraine's favor. There was no U.S. strategy to achieve a ceasefire or an end state for the conflict or to deal with the reality that Ukraine would likely lose a long-term war of attrition. The Biden Administration also spurned attempts to hold peace talks. President Biden instead demonized Putin, often calling him a war criminal.

In short, the Biden Administration began in late 2022 to use the Ukrainian military to fight a proxy war to promote U.S. policy goals of weakening the Putin regime at home and destroying its military. It was not a strategy, but a hope based on emotion. It was not a plan for success.

Biden's repeated statements that he was prepared to send arms to Ukraine "for as long as it takes" without providing a strategy for Ukraine to win the war or a plan to end the conflict epitomized the real intention of his policy to use the conflict as a U.S. proxy war against Russia. Biden, throughout his tenure, attempted to define the "as long as it takes" approach by claiming the war was about standing up to a tyrant and defending and promoting global democracy.¹⁰ But Biden never explained how U.S. military support of Ukraine would accomplish his goals.

The Biden Administration's approach to Ukraine garnered criticism from many Americans who were hesitant about the direction of the war and the amount of military aid the U.S. has provided.

The U.S. has given Ukraine over \$113 billion in roughly the first two years of conflict. The Biden Administration requested an additional \$61.4 billion in early 2024.¹¹ National polls revealed the majority of the American public was opposed to sending more military aid to Ukraine amid the 2024 stalemate.¹² The vast sum of support depleted U.S. military stockpiles, strained our defense industrial base, and jeopardized America's military readiness.

For example, since the beginning of the conflict, the U.S. has sent over 2,000 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine.¹³ Yet at the current rate of production, it will take the United States 13 years to backfill and replenish this munition stockpile.¹⁴ The U.S. has also sent Ukraine more than 2 million 155mm artillery rounds, but the U.S. currently produces only 14,000 rounds of 155mm ammunition per month.¹⁵ The Pentagon has noted that 14,000 rounds are often depleted by the Ukrainian army within 48 hours of direct fighting between Ukrainians and Russians.¹⁶



As a result, Pentagon officials announced in December 2023 that U.S. aid to Ukraine has drained the Department of Defense's draw-down account to the extent that the U.S. will have to make "tough choices," either supporting America's own military readiness or continuing to "support Ukraine in the way they need to be supported on the battlefield."¹⁷

Former President Trump proposed in February 2024 to add some accountability to the Biden Administration's seemingly endless aid requests for Ukraine by making these payments a no-interest loan that Ukraine would repay after the war. This idea attracted bipartisan support and is currently being seriously considered by White House and congressional leaders.

Administration officials credit President Biden with successful leadership that provided Ukraine with the military assistance it needed to push back Russian forces. In their view, Biden helped save Ukraine by uniting and strengthening the NATO alliance. The truth is that NATO members stepped up to help Ukraine because it was in their security interests. It had nothing to do with the Biden Administration's diplomatic efforts. In many cases, such as when NATO members wanted to send F-16s and MiG fighters to Ukraine, Biden blocked or delayed those weapons. In other cases, European states provided weapons to Ukraine that the United States refused to send. Until October 2023, for example, the United States refused to send Kyiv a crucial long-range missile system, the ATACMS. Prior to that time, Ukraine had to rely on similar missiles from the French and British (SCALPs and Storm Shadows missiles).¹⁸

At the same time, the Biden Administration's flawed approach to the Ukraine War has strained NATO's defense industrial base so heavily that many are unable to backfill military equipment at the rate at which they are sending weapons to Ukraine. Admiral Robert Bauer, chairman of NATO's military committee, told the 2023 Warsaw Security Forum that "the bottom of the barrel is now visible" in terms of NATO allies' military stockpiles.¹⁹ As a result, several of America's European allies have begun to prioritize their national defense over sending military aid to Ukraine.

For example, Poland has been a leading and consistent supplier of weapons to Ukraine, accounting for 17 percent of Ukraine's total imports of major arms, artillery, and weapons systems in 2022.²⁰ This provision of military equipment to Ukraine, however, has depleted Poland's military equipment stockpiles by approximately one-third and has challenged Poland's ability to provide for both its own military and Ukraine's military.²¹ Despite increasing its military expenditure budget from 3 percent to 4 percent of its GDP in 2023, Poland's defense industrial base has faced challenges in backfilling its military stockpiles at the rate at which it is sending materials to Ukraine. As a result, Poland's military aid to Ukraine has resulted in "temporary gaps in the Polish military's capacities." In 2022, Poland sent MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine before the country received its procurement order for FA-50 aircraft from South Korea for its own military.²²



The war in Ukraine and Ukraine's dependency on Western nations for military equipment has thus given rise to Ukraine fatigue among the Europeans, threatening to leave the United States, once again, as the primary defense contributor to Europe and further straining America's ability to maintain its own critical defense stockpiles.

Sparring Over Peace Talks

Biden's preference for using the Ukraine conflict as a proxy war to hurt Russia rather than help Ukraine win the war is also why the United States has done nothing to promote a cease-fire or a peace agreement. In some cases, the United States and some of its European allies have blocked attempts to pause or end the war. Under an America First approach to the Ukraine conflict, once it became a stalemate and a war of attrition, it was in the best interests of Ukraine, America, and the world to seek a ceasefire and negotiate a peace agreement with Russia.

Peace talks and a cease-fire to end the war are a complicated matter, obviously. The Ukrainian government understandably is resistant to any settlement that would reward Russian aggression and not restore all of its territory. Zelenskyy does not trust Putin to abide by a peace agreement or cease-fire. He signed a decree in October 2022 stating that Ukraine would refuse to negotiate with Putin.

Zelenskyy put forward a 10-point peace plan at a G-20 summit in November 2022. The plan's call for restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and a Russian affirmation in accord with the U.N. Charter, withdrawal of Russian troops, and a special tribunal to prosecute Russian war crimes were ambitious and just. Since there was no way to force Russia to agree to such terms, however, Zelenskyy's plan went nowhere.

The Biden Administration's approach to negotiations has been devoid of strategy and presidential leadership. Biden and his team have consistently opposed any cease-fire or peace agreement that does not include a complete Russian withdrawal from all Ukrainian territory. Biden officials also have said they will not force Ukraine to agree to a peace agreement or join peace talks.

Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in April 2022 reportedly discouraged Zelenskyy from a possible cease-fire agreement, although the Ukrainian leader might have backed out of the proposed agreement on his own. Russian officials claimed the United States was behind Johnson's pressure to scuttle a peace agreement.²³ Biden Administration officials denied this. However, given its consistent opposition to a cease-fire and peace talks, we believe it is possible that Biden officials discouraged the Ukrainian government from striking a peace agreement with the Russians at the time.

In November 2022, General Mark Milley, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, voiced disagreement in internal administration meetings with the position of other Biden officials on Ukraine negotiating a settlement with Russia. Milley reportedly argued that the Ukrainian military had achieved as much as it could hope for at the



time and urged Ukrainian officials to cement their gains in negotiations.²⁴ The Biden Administration did not adopt Milley's position.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in June 2023 that the United States would not support a cease-fire or peace talks until Kyiv gained strength so it could negotiate on its own terms. Blinken also claimed that giving in to pressure from Russia and China for negotiations would result in a false "Potemkin peace."²⁵ This remains the Biden Administration's position.

In lieu of establishing direct talks between Russia and Ukraine, President Biden has eroded the diplomatic channels necessary to reach a negotiated end-state to the war. Biden has repeatedly demonized Putin by calling him a war criminal and a dictator and even alluding to supporting regime change in Russia.²⁶ After the deadly October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, Biden likened Putin to Hamas.²⁷ Moreover, the president has yet to have a single phone call or meeting with Putin since the war began.

European states, especially France, have generally taken a position similar to Biden's "as long as it takes" approach to arming Ukraine but have been open to peace talks. France, the UK, and Germany appeared to break somewhat with the Biden Administration in February 2023 when the *Wall Street Journal* reported these countries wanted to promote stronger ties between Ukraine and NATO to promote peace talks because of their growing doubts that Ukraine could expel Russia from Ukrainian territory and because Western support for Ukraine could not continue indefinitely.²⁸

There was a break between the foreign policy establishment and the Biden Administration on Ukraine in 2023 when Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass and Georgetown University Professor Charles Kupchan argued in an April 2023 *Foreign Affairs* article that the West needs a new strategy to get from the battlefield to the negotiating table in the Ukraine War because "the most likely outcome of the conflict is not a complete Ukrainian victory but a bloody stalemate." Their recommendation was for the Biden Administration to prioritize ending the Ukraine war by pressing for a cease-fire and peace talks.²⁹

Haass reiterated this position on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" program, reportedly a favorite show of President Biden, on November 21, 2023 when he said the war is unwinnable and called for Ukraine to change its strategy to protect and save the 80 percent of the territory it controls and pursue a cease-fire with Russia. The host, Joe Scarborough, agreed with Haass' assessment.³⁰

The late Henry Kissinger took a similar view in a spring 2023 interview with the *Economist* in which he said it was essential to end the war as soon as possible. A peace agreement, in Kissinger's view, would require territorial concessions by both sides. Because this would result in instability that could spark new wars, he called for a rapprochement between Europe and Russia to secure Europe's eastern border.



Kissinger also changed his position in early 2023 to favor NATO membership for Ukraine.³¹

There were some reports in late 2023 that positions were shifting on talks to end the war. Putin signaled to European officials last fall that he was open to a cease-fire along the current battle lines. *Politico* reported in December 2023 that the Biden Administration and European officials were shifting their positions from total victory by Ukraine to improving its position in eventual peace talks to end the war. However, it appears the Biden Administration did not adopt this approach. Moreover, neither American nor Ukrainian officials showed interest in Putin's alleged peace offer, and U.S. officials reportedly formally rejected Putin's suggestion of a ceasefire in mid-February 2024.³²

Time to Stop the Killing

Asked during a May 2023 CNN town hall whether he wanted Ukraine to win, President Trump answered, "I want everybody to stop dying. They're dying. Russians and Ukrainians. I want them to stop dying." Trump added: "I don't think in terms of winning and losing. I think in terms of getting it settled so we can stop killing all those people."

When the former president was asked if he thought Putin was a war criminal, he replied, "This should be discussed later, and if you say he's a war criminal, it's going to be a lot harder to make a deal later to get this thing stopped."

In a February 17, 2024 tweet, national security expert and retired Army Colonel Kurt Schlichter observed: "Ukraine is not losing because America hasn't given it enough shells. Ukraine is losing because there aren't enough Ukrainians. And I'm on the side of the Ukrainians. I helped train them."³³

We agree with President Trump and Colonel Schlichter. America needs a new approach and a comprehensive strategy for the Ukraine War.

According to Ukrainian intelligence, an estimated 400,000 Russian soldiers are currently deployed in Ukraine and control much of Ukraine's eastern provinces of Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kherson as well as Crimea.³⁴ Russian forces have hardened their defenses along the 600-mile-long front line and have saturated an estimated 30 percent of Ukrainian territory with landmines.³⁵

Schlichter is right about Ukraine facing a demographic crisis and running out of soldiers. About 200,000 Russian troops have been killed in the war, and 240,000 wounded. The Ukrainian army has suffered about 100,000 dead and up to 120,000 wounded. But Ukraine's population is much smaller than Russia's. The population of Ukraine today is estimated at 36.7 million, a significant drop from its February 2022 population of 45 million. Many Ukrainians have fled the conflict. The total population of free Ukraine may be as low as 20 million. On the other hand, Russia's population is 144 million.³⁶



Reflecting these developments, CNN reported in November 2023 that training and recruiting Ukrainian troops had become a serious challenge, and the military was facing problems with enforcing mobilization rules.³⁷ On April 2, 2024, Zelenskyy signed a law to address the troop shortage by lowering the country's minimum conscription age for men from 27 to 25. The Ukrainian leader also signed new laws do away with some draft exemptions and create an online registry for recruits.³⁸

To add to these challenges, prospects for Ukraine's army in 2024 are not promising. After failing to move the battlelines during its 2023 counteroffensive, Ukrainian forces appeared to be losing ground in early 2024 because of battle fatigue, arms shortages, and what appears to be a new Russian offensive strategy. Although the \$61 billion military aid package that the Biden Administration was pressing Congress to approve in early 2024 and military aid from the EU might help Ukraine maintain the current battlelines this year, it will do so at the cost of the lives of thousands more Ukrainian soldiers and billions of dollars of military aid. There is little prospect that paying these high costs will allow Ukraine to regain its territory from Russia. Moreover, given the Ukrainian army's manpower problems and the likelihood of growing opposition in the United States and Europe to providing huge amounts of military aid, the Ukrainian army probably will begin to lose ground over time.

Objections to continuing U.S. logistical support for the Ukraine War are also driven by other factors. The war is drawing down America's stockpile of advanced weapons, such as HIMARS missiles, that may be needed in other conflicts, especially if China invades Taiwan. Many members of Congress believe the Biden Administration should place a higher priority on stopping the huge influx of illegal immigrants crossing the U.S. southern border, the fentanyl crisis plaguing American communities, and the deterioration of our military instead of spending tens of billions of dollars on weapons for the war in Ukraine.

A prolonged war in Ukraine also risks deepening the alliance between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, which has been strengthened by the conflict. Iran and North Korea continue to supply Russia with the weaponry it needs to wage this war, while China remains a financial partner to Russia to deepen the two nations' "no limits partnership."

Many supporters of Biden's "as long as it takes" approach on the right and left in the United States as well as in Europe contend it is crucial to continue to arm Ukraine because Putin's invasion is a threat to global stability and democracy. Many claim other rogue states, such as Iran and China, will be emboldened by any outcome of the war that allows Russia to keep Ukrainian territory and does not hold Putin accountable. The trouble with these arguments is that it is too late to avoid the possible consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Sending weapons to an endless stalemate for these reasons is expensive virtue signaling and not a constructive policy to promote peace and global stability.



America First is not isolationist, nor is it a call to retreat America from engagement in the world. An America First approach to national security is, however, characteristically distinct from a foreign policy establishment that often keeps the United States mired in endless wars to the detriment of the country by putting idealistic principles ahead of the interests of the American people. There is a pathway forward in Ukraine in which America can keep its own interests prioritized while also playing a role in bringing the largest war in Europe since World War II to an end. That role must be through decisive, America First leadership where bold diplomacy paves the way to an end-state. What we should not continue to do is to send arms to a stalemate that Ukraine will eventually find difficult to win. This should start with a formal U.S. policy to bring the war to a conclusion.

Specifically, it would mean a formal U.S. policy to seek a cease-fire and negotiated settlement of the Ukraine conflict. The United States would continue to arm Ukraine and strengthen its defenses to ensure Russia will make no further advances and will not attack again after a cease-fire or peace agreement. Future American military aid, however, will require Ukraine to participate in peace talks with Russia.

To convince Putin to join peace talks, President Biden and other NATO leaders should offer to put off NATO membership for Ukraine for an extended period in exchange for a comprehensive and verifiable peace deal with security guarantees. In their April 2023 *Foreign Affairs* article, Richard Haass and Charles Kupchan proposed that in exchange for abiding by a cease-fire, a demilitarized zone, and participating in peace talks, Russia could be offered some limited sanctions relief. Ukraine would not be asked to relinquish the goal of regaining all its territory, but it would agree to use diplomacy, not force, with the understanding that this would require a future diplomatic breakthrough which probably will not occur before Putin leaves office. Until that happens, the United States and its allies would pledge to only fully lift sanctions against Russia and normalize relations after it signs a peace agreement acceptable to Ukraine.³⁹ We also call for placing levies on Russian energy sales to pay for Ukrainian reconstruction.

By enabling Ukraine to negotiate from a position of strength while also communicating to Russia the consequences if it fails to abide by future peace talk conditions, the United States could implement a negotiated end-state with terms aligned with U.S. and Ukrainian interests. Part of this negotiated end-state should include provisions in which we establish a long-term security architecture for Ukraine's defense that focuses on bilateral security defense. Including this in a Russia-Ukraine peace deal offers a path toward long-term peace in the region and a means of preventing future hostilities between the two nations.

Regrettably, we see no prospect that the Biden Administration will do anything to end the Ukraine War and may implement policies to make the conflict worse. Nevertheless, the above are a few creative ideas for an America First approach to end the war and allow Ukraine to rebuild. President Donald Trump also has a strategy to end the war that he has not fully revealed. We are hopeful there will be a



new president in January 2025 to implement these American First ideas to end this devastating conflict.

The Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian people will have trouble accepting a negotiated peace that does not give them back all of their territory or, at least for now, hold Russia responsible for the carnage it inflicted on Ukraine. Their supporters will also. But as Donald Trump said at the CNN town hall in 2023, “I want everyone to stop dying.” That’s our view, too. It is a good first step.

Author Biographies

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