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## **Biden Fails to Explain Why U.S. Should Fight Proxy War Against Russia**

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President Biden can't stop talking about Ukraine. Three weeks ago, in the aftermath of Congress' failure to include Ukraine money in the stopgap budget bill, he declared, "I want to assure our American allies, the American people, and the people of Ukraine that you can count on our support."

In fact, the people to whom he is obliged are his countrymen, who are paying the bill and risking the potential consequences of this war, including military escalation. That is why they are increasingly asking him to stop tossing away their money on a proxy war that could bring America into direct conflict with Russia.

Last week, Biden played a slightly different game, speaking of his return from Israel. Knowing that political support for that state is overwhelming, he speciously added Ukraine to the mix. It is hard to imagine two more different issues: Biden himself admitted that " Hamas and Putin represent different threats." After all, Russia is a nuclear-armed, major, conventional power; Hamas is not.

Biden also treated sanctimony as justification for the hyper-proxy war with Russia. "History has taught us," said the new-found friend of Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who offered to turn American military personnel into royal bodyguards, that "when dictators don't pay a price for their aggression, they cause more chaos and death and more destruction."

One may be reminded of when Washington backed Riyadh's bloody aggression against Yemen and Iraqi Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran. Of course, America has also launched its own unprovoked and unjustified wars, most recently against Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya. Tragically,

over the last two decades, the U.S. has caused far “more chaos and death and more destruction” than Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea combined.

Biden contended that “if we don’t stop Putin’s appetite for power and control in Ukraine, he won’t limit himself just to Ukraine.” Perhaps Putin secretly daydreams about playing Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin combined in conquering Europe. Yet, despite being in power for nearly a quarter century, he has done virtually nothing to put such a plan into operation. Even if he secretly harbored such ambitions today, who believes that he could succeed? His government botched the initial invasion of Ukraine and remains on the defensive 21 months later. If victory comes, whatever territory Moscow acquires likely will be modest and Russia will desperately need to recover economically. Imagining that a revived Red Army would accomplish for Vladimir Putin what no other dictator was able to achieve in centuries past is the triumph of fear over experience.

Biden, perhaps the most devoted Europhile of any modern president, lauded NATO for keeping the peace and acting as “the cornerstone of American security.” Why then, with Europe possessing ten-plus times the GDP and thrice the population of Russia, must the U.S. still treat other NATO members as helpless military dependents and permanent security wards? Only in Washington do officials believe that the way to end dependency is to make others more dependent.

Perhaps most important is Biden’s insistence that “we do not seek to have American troops fighting in Russia or fighting against Russia.” Nevertheless, he turned the Ukraine conflict into a proxy war against Moscow: The U.S. underwrote, trained, and supplied Ukraine’s military, and helped Ukrainians kill prodigious numbers of Russian soldiers, target senior Russian officers, sink Russian ships, and destroy Russian military installations. From Moscow’s perspective, the two countries already are at war. Although Putin seems unlikely to use nuclear weapons to win, he might use them to not lose.

Biden went on to claim, bizarrely, that “we know that our allies, and maybe most importantly our adversaries and competitors, are watching...and if we walk away and let Putin erase Ukraine’s independence, would-be aggressors around the world would be emboldened to try the same. The risk of conflict and chaos could spread in other parts of the world: in the Indo-Pacific, in the Middle

East, especially in the Middle East.” Yet the president rejected similar claims from Republicans after he withdrew from Afghanistan, leaving behind chaos, collapse, and calamity.

His credibility claim fails to distinguish between existential and peripheral interests and between treaty commitments and unofficial assistance. It creates the problem he complains of by declaring credibility to be at risk in a situation when it wasn't—until then. It requires Washington to sacrifice money and lives in forever wars otherwise not worth fighting.

The president continued with the standard boilerplate that “America leadership is what holds the world together. American alliances are what keep us, America, safe. American values are what makes us a partner that other nations want to work with.” In that statement are strong echoes of the late Madeleine Albright's claim that the U.S. is the “indispensable power,” which Biden cited.

How can anyone seriously make such a claim for the American leadership that blew up Iraq, supported regime change in Libya and Syria, turned Afghanistan's countryside into a human abattoir, backed the totalitarian Saudi government's brutal assault on Yemen, aided authoritarian governments throughout the Middle East, and otherwise sacrificed human life at vast scale around the world? Yet Albright claimed that the US stands taller and sees further.

In Ukraine, “American leadership” meant lying to Moscow and adopting policies that helped turn it into an adversary—expanding NATO to Russia's borders, backing “color revolutions” against Moscow's neighbors, dismantling Russia's historic friend Serbia, targeting the Russo-friendly Yanukovich regime, allowing NATO into Ukraine (rather than Ukraine into NATO), and refusing to negotiate with Moscow over allied policies.

Biden offered no reason to believe that Ukraine can gain “the capability to push invading Russian forces off their land. And the air defense systems to shoot down Russian missiles before they destroy Ukrainian cities.” High-tech allied equipment has enhanced Kiev's ability to fight, but modern “wonder weapons” will not deliver victory. The increased capabilities provided by the allies likely have only delayed the ultimate outcome.

Indeed, the tone in both Brussels and Washington has turned negative. Putin's early failures emboldened the U.S. and its allies to increase their expectations and seek Moscow's defeat. Into

that effort they poured abundant money and weapons, which helped Kiev win back territory last fall. Nevertheless, Moscow adapted to its failures and Ukraine's recent "counteroffensive" has been a bust, taking back minimal land at high cost in lives and materiel.

Kiev can ill afford to replace its personnel losses. Ukraine's population, substantially smaller than Russia's to start, has been further depleted by the exodus of millions of refugees. Draft avoidance is widespread. Moreover, Kiev's most fervent military boosters have few arms left to give, including artillery, perhaps the most important weapon in this war, and the munitions to go with it. Increasingly there are hints that allied officials recognize negotiations are necessary.

President Volodymyr Zelensky has rejected such a course, a position reflecting Ukrainian public opinion. Huffing and puffing, however, won't dissipate Kiev's current military miasma. No one believes that Ukraine can triumph on its own. If allied support is not enough, then only escalation—the allies' formal entry into the war—could deliver victory. That, however, would be potentially suicidal, and is recognized as such even by most members of Washington's foreign policy elite.

The U.S. has no serious, let alone vital, interests at stake warranting such a course. Any conflict would be likely to go nuclear—a catastrophe. It is one thing to bet that Vladimir Putin won't use nukes in response to Western materiel going to Kiev. Attacking Russian units and installations would force him and the hardline nationalists who dominate Moscow's policy to fight or surrender. No one should expect the latter.

Some Americans still want to weaken Moscow by fighting to the last Ukrainian. For instance, Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah termed U.S. aid an "extraordinarily wise investment." Yet using Ukrainians as cannon fodder is a dubious moral venture. The ongoing conflict is destabilizing and dangerous, likely far more than a Russian victory. Moreover, deepening the enmity of a nuclear-armed state and thereby pushing its government, which once looked westward, toward China, North Korea, and Iran, is geopolitical stupidity.

Finally, current policy, attempting to shovel enough cash and arms to Kiev to keep it fighting if not winning, is not sustainable. Western nations are tiring of the expensive stalemate, which is destroying Ukraine and killing Ukrainians without ultimate purpose. Russia has the advantage in

what has become a war of attrition, especially as Western states increasingly see such a course as not only costly but futile.

Washington and the Europeans should propose a new security system that respects Ukrainian sovereignty while conceding Ukrainian neutrality. They should talk with Russia about the restoration of peace and stability, indicating their willingness to return frozen assets and eliminate sanctions.

They also must have tough discussions with Kiev. Ukrainians should not—and in practice cannot—be forced to do anything. Yet Western governments should indicate that they plan to downshift the proxy war, formally abandoning even the pretense of supporting expansive objectives such as the reconquest of the Donbass and return of Crimea. A deal needs to be made. It won't be a good one, but the longer Ukraine waits, the worse the deal is likely to become.

The starting point for this shift should be Congress winding down aid, ultimately ending American support other than humanitarian assistance. The consequences would be difficult for Ukraine, but the alternatives are all worse: unrealistic, costly, ineffective, and unsustainable. Washington should take the lead in ending a war that it did so much to encourage.

The Russo-Ukrainian war is a tragedy. Vladimir Putin bears blame for choosing war, which will leave his legacy forever drenched in blood. But the West, too, bears much blame. The allies, led by Washington, lied to Moscow officials, ignored Russian security interests, and turned Ukraine into a weapon to advance American dominance. Even NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg recently admitted that the war was unnecessary, resulting from the alliance's refusal to forgo NATO expansion, something that was never in its interest—which is why Kiev received promises rather than actions after it was promised inclusion at NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit.

Most tellingly, the Western states would never suffer Moscow to treat them how they have treated Moscow. In 1962 Washington nearly ignited what would have been nuclear war to stop the Soviet Union's military expansion into a nation next door. Without a change of course in Western policy toward Ukraine, the ignition this time could be complete.

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