

## The Blob's Perpetual War

Who is this conflict really about?

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President Joe Biden has approved another big spending package on arms for Ukraine, this one worth nearly \$3 billion. He justified the expenditure with the usual lofty rhetoric: “Today and every day, we stand with the Ukrainian people to proclaim that the darkness that drives autocracy is no match for the flame of liberty that lights the souls of free people everywhere.” This, after toadying up to the criminally aggressive Saudi dictatorship.

Kiev warrants support. But what is the administration’s strategy? To fuel the war as long as governments are willing to fight and people are willing to die? Ukraine already has been ravaged by war. No one benefits from another endless war or frozen conflict.

The Biden administration has made no effort to pass European defense responsibilities to where they belong: the Europeans. For years, prosperous European allies have refused to take responsibility for their own defense, preferring to free ride on America.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine appeared to finally shake the continent from its complacency. However, despite much rhetoric—especially from Germany, the continent’s wealthiest but perhaps least responsible power—enthusiasm for spending more on defense among the European countries is fading. With the Biden administration rushing U.S. forces to Europe, other NATO members are happy to let Uncle Sam pick up the check.

Despite the torrent of promises to back Kiev until the Second Coming, the Europeans have so far allowed Washington to provide most of the military aid for Ukraine as well as troops for Europe. The Germans, British, and French? Busy, busy. You know how much they have to do, running (and in London’s case, fighting) the European Union. Nor are the Italians, Spanish, or anyone else west of the Oder River interested in underwriting Ukraine, let alone sending troops to defend it.

In this case, however, Biden may have a deeper purpose in tossing more of Americans’ money at what increasingly looks like another perpetual conflict. Contrary to Washington’s pious proclamations about selflessly helping the heroic Ukrainians, the Biden administration appears dedicated to using Kiev to fight a proxy war against Russia. Americans remain safely at home while Washington battles Moscow in Europe to the last Ukrainian. With its current strategy, the

Biden administration seems prepared to finance a war that kills off Ukraine's entire male population to weaken Russia.

Washington's professions of undying support for Kiev, including *carte blanche* backing for Ukrainian war objectives, is an open invitation for expanded military operations. Hence Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's talk of retaking not just the Donbas, but Crimea. Next may be plans for a march on Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Vladivostok.

For Ukraine to retake the land it has lost since February, it would require a massive increase in not just Western weapons but Ukrainian manpower, which appears lacking. Moreover, if Kiev seriously threatened Moscow's hold over territory that most Russians view as part of their country, President Vladimir Putin likely would escalate. He could order general mobilization. Or, more ominously, he could use chemical or nuclear weapons. The latter would be catastrophic for Ukrainians, but, frankly, not so bad for U.S. policymakers hoping to discredit Moscow.

Continuing U.S. weapons shipments—some of which apparently don't reach Ukrainian forces, instead ending up for sale on the black market—encourages Kiev to continue fighting irrespective of the likelihood of success. The administration typically doesn't give the Zelensky government what it asks for, but rather what the administration believes Kiev *should* ask for, which in practice seems to be enough to keep shooting without offering a real chance of victory. Again, the result conveniently damages Russia without causing any American casualties.

Although the usual suspects in the Biden administration and Washington think tanks insist that Kiev is better positioned in any military stalemate, ready to emerge at some point with an advantage, that so far is not evident in practice. Ukraine's economy has crashed, millions of people have fled the country, tens of thousands have been killed, the government relies on Western aid to pay its bills, and Russian forces occupy roughly a fifth of Ukraine. Claims that this situation favors Kiev seem like fake news. It is difficult to accurately follow the course of the war, especially given the overwhelming information bias toward Ukraine, but Kiev does not appear close to reversing Moscow's advances.

Russia evidently made slow but steady progress this summer. Kiev apparently has gained some ground with its long-promised counter-offensive, but even its own troops are reporting heavy casualties, potentially costing Kiev some of its best-trained troops. Who, then, is going to liberate the Russian-held Donbas and Crimea? If Kiev is able to make, at most, modest advances with shrinking forces, what future offensive gains is it likely to make? If the ongoing attack fails, Russia likely will return to the offensive, picking up small, slow gains. Then what?

Washington apparently has no strategy. When asked about depleted U.S. ammunition stocks, State Department spokesman Vedant Patel ignored the question and declared: "what's important to remember here is that the United States has stood with the people of Ukraine for 31 years, and we will continue to firmly stand with them as they defend their freedom and independence. Our belief is, is that we will do everything we can to ensure that Ukraine can defend itself, can defend its territorial sovereignty, to defend its territorial integrity. And we are going to continue to stand with Ukraine for as long as that takes."

But what does Kiev hope to achieve? Or, more accurately, what does it expect the West, meaning mostly the U.S., to enable it to do? Apparently in April, Ukrainian and Russian negotiators tentatively agreed to a return to the status quo ante, with Kiev ready to accept

neutrality and forgo NATO membership. However, the allies—British Prime Minister Boris Johnson visited Kiev shortly thereafter—were appeared unenthused and may have urged Zelensky to reject the deal.

If the allies undermined peace negotiations that, if successful, would have prevented much death and destruction, what did they promise in return? Instead of victory, all the U.S. and Europe have so far delivered to Ukraine is more conflict, combat, and casualties. Is this merely the impact of ineffective, inadequate policies, or instead is it by design, a desire to keep the conflict going for the benefit of Washington and Brussels, without much concern over the consequences for the Ukrainian people?

Indeed, the issue is likely to become more important in Europe as winter approaches. As early as May, the European Council on Foreign Relations found the continent split over its preferences for "peace" (wanting to end the war as soon as possible) or "justice" (punishing Russia). The Council explained that “[t]he public debate was turning away from events on the battlefield and towards questions of how the conflict will end, as well as its impact on people’s lives, on their countries, and on the EU. It was also a moment when Europeans were becoming much more aware of the global economic and social consequences of the war: high inflation, and energy and food crises.”

Although most people surveyed believed that Ukraine should decide how long it wanted to fight, many also wanted to accelerate the end of the war. A plurality believed their government was paying too much attention to the conflict compared to domestic concerns.

These sentiments are sure to grow stronger with the onset of winter and colder weather. Although European officials seemed surprised and were outraged that Moscow cut natural-gas supplies, that was made inevitable by Western economic sanctions. Although the sanctions, especially the technology restrictions, will do great damage to Russia’s economy over the long term, the allies are losing, too. And with the recent jump in energy prices, Moscow has been earning more from its exports than before while Europeans have been suffering from surging energy costs.

Ultimately, only Ukrainians can decide their future. But the U.S. should look after its own interests. A proxy conflict against Russia is foolish—and extremely dangerous, with the constant potential for escalation and expansion. America’s objective for Ukraine and Europe should be peace, not endless war, despite the temptation to use Kiev to weaken Russia.

Washington’s aid has succeeded in its essential purpose, enabling Ukraine to defend its independence. Now the allies should indicate to Ukraine that their backing is not open-ended. U.S. and European support for Kiev should be tied to realistic war aims with an emphasis on reaching a stable peace settlement.

Indeed, as part of this process the Biden administration should give Brussels the lead in aiding Ukraine and negotiating with Russia. Nearly eight decades after the conclusion of World War II and three decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, it is well past time for the Europeans to take over primary responsibility for their own defense. They will act like children as long as Washington treats them as children.

American officials have grown used to running the world. But the U.S. requires their attention, and the people they are sworn to serve deserve their help. Washington has spent the last two

decades fighting endless, purposeless, unnecessary, destructive wars. For the sake of Americans as well as Ukrainians, the U.S. should not allow Ukraine to become another one.

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