



Is the Biden Administration Trying to Prolong the Ukraine War?

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created a humanitarian tragedy for that country, and all reasonable people should want the increasingly bloody conflict to end as soon as possible. Policies that the Biden administration is pursuing, however, threaten to prolong the war and its suffering. The troubling question arises about whether Washington's policies are merely inept, or whether they reflect a deliberate strategy to bleed Russian forces and inflict a geo-strategic defeat on a great power adversary – regardless of the cost to Ukraine. Indications are mounting that it's the latter scenario.

Even the decision by the United States and other NATO members to pour weapons into Ukraine, including Javelin anti-tank weapons, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, and Switchblade drones, has had the inherent effect of prolonging the armed conflict. Without those arms shipments, it is likely that the Russian invasion would have proceeded faster, perhaps much faster, and more decisively. Western leaders, though, had understandable motives for wanting to deny the invader an easy victory. From their viewpoint, not assisting Ukraine would mean seeing a case of military aggression against a sovereign state rewarded. Because the aggression occurred in Europe, the United States and its NATO allies had an even greater incentive to inflict pain on Russia for creating the biggest disruption of the continent's peace in nearly eight decades.

Some other Western, especially U.S., actions are less understandable. Administration officials have been noticeably unenthusiastic about statements by Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, expressing a willingness to renounce his country's ambitions to join NATO and instead accept a neutral status with multilateral guarantees. A firm, written commitment that Ukraine will never become a NATO member was a long-standing Russian demand even before the war began. Zelensky's newfound receptivity has increased the prospects for a peace accord. So, too, has Moscow's decision to scale-back military operations near Kyiv and other areas in northern Ukraine.

US leaders should be expressing explicit support for such diplomacy and the compromises it has begun to reflect. Furthermore, Washington should state explicitly that it will respect the terms of any peace settlement the two belligerents might be able to reach. Thus far, however, the Biden administration's reaction to the bilateral peace talks has been tepid at best, and it even remains uncertain whether the United States would refrain from discouraging or undermining an accord.

Washington's apparent ambivalence regarding the peace talks is not the most worrisome aspect of the administration's behavior, however. Far more troubling have been the president's indiscreet, combative public remarks. Biden startled observers around the world with an apparently impromptu statement near the end of his speech in Warsaw, Poland: "For God's sake, this man [Putin] cannot remain in power!" The comment was widely interpreted as embracing a new US policy of regime change with respect to Russia. Both the president and his aides tried to insist that there was no shift in policy, but their muddled explanations lacked credibility.

Moreover, Biden's comment (and his subsequent anti-Putin diatribe at a press conference) may well have been more than just the gaffe-prone president's latest verbal blunder. The administration is heavily populated by officials who have been fans of forcible regime-change initiatives for more than two decades. The substance of US policy, especially the extensive sanctions that Washington and the European powers have imposed on Russia following the invasion, certainly seems designed to achieve that goal. The underlying logic of Washington's approach is to exert such excruciating pressure on Russia's economy that powerful oligarchs and other members of the country's elite will take steps to remove Putin from power. Biden's public call for regime change may have been indiscreet, but it was not inaccurate. It also is an approach that influential individuals in the foreign policy community and the news media openly embrace.

The thesis that Washington is intent on regime change gained new credibility when the administration endorsed calls to charge Putin with war crimes. Seizing on videos indicating that Russian troops may have summarily executed civilians in the Ukrainian city of Bucha, Biden stated on April 4 that the Russian leader "is brutal, and what's happening in Bucha is outrageous, and everyone's seen it." The president then called for gathering more evidence for "a war crimes trial."

Given the US track record of brutality against civilians in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and other places, Biden's call for putting a foreign head of state on trial for war crimes is more than a little hypocritical. If such a principle were to be applied with any degree of consistency, Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden would need to be in the dock right next to Putin. But the reality is that leaders of powerful nations (or even leaders of smaller countries that have powerful patrons in the international system) need never worry about being held accountable for war crimes.

Consequently, the only way Putin would have to fear such a proceeding would be if he were overthrown (and remained alive after that episode). And the only way he is likely to be overthrown is if Russia is defeated in Ukraine or accepts a peace treaty that appears to be a defeat for Moscow's policy goals. The prospect of a coup and subsequent war crimes trial thus creates a very powerful incentive for Putin to continue the war indefinitely, if a success cannot

be achieved through diplomacy. Indeed, it creates an incentive to escalate if necessary – perhaps even to the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

The Biden administration's strident moral posturing may needlessly prolong the Ukraine war at great cost in both treasure and blood to the Ukrainian people. Calls for regime change and putting Putin on trial for war crimes are dangerously irresponsible.

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