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## Biden faces complaints he emboldened Russia by mainly saying what he wouldn't do

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President Joe Biden is dismissing complaints he has limited his options on Ukraine and Russia by outlining what he will not do, but voters remain unconvinced.

A majority, 56%, of respondents told *Associated Press-NORC* pollsters Biden has not been "tough enough" on Russian President Vladimir Putin, compared to 36% who considered his approach "about right." Although Republicans were less likely to support major U.S. engagement in Ukraine, 68% of GOP respondents believed Biden could do more. Regarding Democrats, 43% held the latter opinion in contrast to 53% who thought Biden had struck the "right" balance.

Biden stating he would not deploy U.S. service members to Ukraine, so soon after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, was part of the administration's efforts to undermine Putin's attempts to create a "pretext" for his invasion, including portraying Ukraine and NATO as aggressors, according to Brookings Institution's Center on the United States and Europe senior fellow Daniel Sullivan.

"Contrary to what I've been hearing about Biden being weak, it was a particular circumstance of Putin's own narrative," he told the *Washington Examiner*. "Biden robbed Putin of his narrative."

For Cato Institute Defense Policy Studies Director Eric Gomez, Biden's decision was the best for U.S. credibility after former President Barack Obama's "red line" debacle with Syria in 2013.

Even if Biden had not been candid about his opposition to sending personnel to Ukraine, Putin would have likely gauged his stance given his campaign rhetoric, according to Ivana Stradner, a Foundation for Defense of Democracies adviser.

"I'm not so concerned about the troops per se — I'm more worried about other things," she said of the threat of nuclear, chemical, and cyber attacks.

"This is his one-shot game. Already he feels like a wild animal that is cornered and that is angry," Stradner added of Putin's anxiety regarding "regime survival."

"When people tell me, 'Oh, he lost 15,000 troops,' who cares? We're talking about a dictatorship where there is no such thing as a domestic audience cost. He does not feel that he owes anything to his population," she added.

Sullivan concurred with Biden's less clear response should Putin use a nuclear or chemical weapon in Ukraine because it was uncertain whether he, for example, would rely on mustard gas on the battlefield or more targeted Novichok nerve agent poisonings in the same vein as Sergei and Yulia Skripall in Salisbury, England, in 2018.

"The other thing they've done instead of just talk about it is they've sent protective equipment to the Ukrainians, and they have put the relevant NATO forces for those types of incidents on high alert," Sullivan said.

For Sullivan, the United States needs to continue providing Ukraine with intelligence and ensure Putin does not control the country's skies. But he contended the no-fly zone discussion was "a diversion" based on Ukraine's success with surface-to-air, anti-armor, and cruise missiles, as well as drones. The Ukrainians would have also required training for Poland's MiG-29 airplanes despite their Soviet origins.

Stradner echoed Sullivan's calls for more intelligence and lethal weapon-sharing with Ukraine, though she would prefer more equitable contributions from NATO partners such as France and Germany.

Gomez cited contradictory polling about a possible no-fly zone, as those who initially endorsed the idea then distanced themselves from it when pressed whether they would back clashes in the air between NATO and Russia.

"The U.S. is trying to figure out ways to support Ukraine but in a way that keeps the conflict somewhat bounded and doesn't open it up to potentially even greater devastation," he said.

Biden was needled after his NATO and G-7 summits in Brussels on whether expressing his desire to avoid World War III, specifically ruling out military intervention, has "emboldened" Putin since he knows the U.S. is unwilling "to get involved directly."

"No and no," he replied.

Biden also defended whether the sanctions he and his allies introduce in the future will change Putin's calculus, seeing as they have failed to do so thus far. Biden and his aides have been criticized, too, for not implementing sanctions when Putin first ordered assets to the Ukrainian border.

"Sanctions never deter," he said in Brussels. "The maintenance of sanctions, the increasing the pain, and the demonstration, why I asked for this NATO meeting today, is to be sure that after a month, we will sustain what we're doing not just next month, the following month, but for the remainder of this entire year. That's what will stop him."

But Biden's problem, at least publicly, could become the limits of his power to push Putin to modify his behavior. Gomez did note that Biden and his staff may have privately conveyed steps their Russian counterparts could take in exchange for less economic pressure or that Putin may not be ready to make a deal.

"It puts Putin in the position of, 'Well, then why not escalate? If I'm going to be hurt either way, but maybe escalating or doing something even more violent could get me what I want, then why not gamble?'" Gomez said.