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Biden under pressure to do more for Ukraine

Katherine Doyle

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Three weeks of war in Ukraine has brought both parties to full agreement, with Democrats and Republicans telling President Joe Biden: You're not doing enough.

Even as he announced \$1 billion in new military aid for Ukraine, Biden came under fire for the limits of his response, beating back calls for measures the White House believes could prove escalatory.

With Russian forces encircling Kyiv, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has implored the United States and its allies to "close the sky over Ukraine," urging support for a no-fly zone over his country that Biden has flat-out rejected.

The White House has resisted this and other measures called for by Zelensky, warning that fighters jets or air cover could lead to a direct war with Russia.

"If we were President Zelensky, we would be asking for everything possible as well and continuing to ask for it because he is watching his country and his people be attacked and brutalized by President Putin and the Russian military," press secretary Jen Psaki said. "But how President Biden makes decisions is through the prism of our own national security."

To implement a no-fly zone, "it would require us potentially shooting down Russian planes, NATO shooting down Russian planes," Psaki said, adding that "we are not interested in getting into World War III."

Biden shot down a plan floated by Poland that involved delivering fighter jets to Ukraine by delivering them first to a U.S. air base in Germany.

And there is likely to be more that Ukraine wants that Biden won't yield.

"The idea that we're going to send in offensive equipment and have planes and tanks and trains going in with American pilots and American crews, just understand — and don't kid yourself, no matter what you all say — that's called World War III," Biden said while speaking to House Democrats this month.

The president, who branded Putin a "war criminal" soon after Zelensky's address to Congress, has failed to say what actions by Russia could prompt a more vigorous response or what this action might entail.

And though he called Zelensky's remarks "convincing and significant" on Wednesday, the president raised concerns that some of Ukraine's proposals could prolong the war or drive Putin to retaliate against the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Still, pressure on him to draw so-called red lines is mounting, with House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Gregory Meeks and ranking member Michael McCaul discussing concerns with reporters after Zelensky's address.

"When they use chemical weapons, which will come next ... are we going to stand back as a nation?" McCaul asked. "We need to start asking these questions."

Meeks added, "We just can't sit back and watch chemical weapons or nuclear weapons to be utilized."

America's trans-Atlantic allies are newly open to the economic costs of inflicting pain on Moscow, including a crackdown on Russian energy imports that proved largely unthinkable before the invasion. But whether this will extend to red lines for Russia isn't clear.

Some measures the president is implementing now were not available to him before the war started, said Joel Rubin, the deputy assistant secretary of state under former President Barack Obama and an official in the Bush State Department. As Biden hoped to forestall an invasion, his aides worked furiously to align Western allies over the penalties they would impose on Moscow if Putin's army began rolling westward into Ukraine.

Acting too soon, including by providing Ukraine with preemptive weapons, may have accelerated the invasion, without the repercussions the West has used to stifle Russia's economy, ratcheting up the cost of the war.

"If we had armed them to the teeth, every single thing that Zelensky is asking for today, two months ago, that very well could have been used as a predicate for an invasion," Rubin said. "Europe wasn't there two months ago."

Biden is still trying to avoid drawing NATO into a direct conflict with Russia, declining to provide troops to Ukraine and seeking to limit America's supply of offensive weapons to the country.

"The administration is trying to assist Ukraine's defense in as many ways as possible without a direct U.S.-Russia shooting war," said Richard Fontaine, the CEO of the nonpartisan Center for a New American Security.

Psaki declined to confirm reports that the weapons package contains 100 Switchblade "killer" drones, maintaining that "defensive weapons is what we have provided."

Officials have also been reluctant to discuss an off-ramp for the war, as negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow move haltingly in fits and starts.

"For me, the bigger concern is whether Biden's people have a clear endgame in mind," said Justin Logan, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. "Do they seek a strategic defeat of Russia in Ukraine? Do they seek a negotiated settlement that is as favorable as possible to Ukraine? Do they know?"

"War termination is a very tricky business, and it's clear the Ukrainians are feeling little need to concede much of anything," he said.

Biden's top aides speak daily with Zelensky and his advisers for a near-constant exchange of policy needs and views. The president has rallied Ukraine's European neighbors to the cause,

driving Germany to up its defense spending dramatically and uniting trans-Atlantic allies on a menu of uncomfortable sanctions designed to cripple Russia's economy.

"With the U.S. deeply implicated in the war and the setbacks suffered by Russia, Washington's view of what ought to happen next should carry weight," Logan said. "Whether it will is up to Biden."