

## The U.S. Should Support the Ukrainian Grain Deal

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On October 29, Russia announced the [indefinite suspension](#) of its Black Sea Grain Initiative, an agreement that allows agricultural shipments to leave Ukrainian ports. The Russian government called this a retaliatory measure after [blaming Ukraine](#) for an attack on the port of Sevastopol—the largest city in Crimea and home to Russia’s Black Sea Fleet—that involved the use of [unmanned sea drones](#). Although Moscow [returned to the grain deal](#) on November 2 after [receiving](#) security assurances from the Ukrainian government that shipments would not be [used](#) for “military operations against the Russian Federation,” the agreement could collapse if the parties choose not to [renew it](#) later this month.

The United States did not invest any diplomatic capital to mediate the grain deal, leaving that to Turkey and the United Nations (UN). But the agreement stands as a rare example of effective cooperation between Moscow and Kiev to alleviate the stress on [international agriculture markets](#) that has hit the Global South hardest. Rather than allow the deal to collapse and risk [future escalation](#) in the conflict, the United States should discourage Ukraine from striking targets in Crimea and communicate to Russia it will not support any effort by Kiev to retake the peninsula.

Ukraine is one of the world’s [largest exporters of food](#), so the deal’s collapse would lead to a rise in global food prices. But even before the Russo-Ukrainian War started, [cereal and oilseed markets](#) were tight due to shrinking stocks, creating upward pressure on prices. An [analysis](#) from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development noted that economic sanctions imposed since the start of the invasion have dissuaded agribusiness firms from engaging with Russia and “could also disrupt its imports of agricultural inputs.” Even though the United States has [not imposed sanctions](#) directly on Russian agriculture and fertilizer exports, the grain deal helps mitigate the impact of these trends.

According to U.N. data, [9.8 million tons of food](#) have been exported from Ukraine since August 3 thanks to the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The top commodities shipped [include](#) corn, wheat, rapeseed, and sunflower oil and meal, and the leading [recipients](#) include Spain, Turkey, China, Italy, and the Netherlands.

While many assume higher-income countries will be most affected, lower-income countries will bear the brunt if the deal is not renewed. More than a quarter of countries [receiving food](#) through the initiative are lower- to lower-middle-income countries, including Egypt, India, Kenya, Sudan, and Yemen. Under the deal, the World Food Program has been able to purchase thousands of [tons of wheat](#) to support humanitarian efforts in the horn of Africa, Afghanistan,

and Yemen. These lower-income countries in the Middle East and North Africa [heavily depend](#) on Ukraine for wheat and grain, especially during the winter when most of these commodities are consumed.

U.S. diplomacy could go a long way in preventing the deal from expiring later this month. Washington should privately discourage Kiev from launching further attacks against targets in Crimea and assure Moscow that it does not support the expulsion of Russian forces from the peninsula as a Ukrainian war aim. If necessary, the Biden administration should withhold intelligence support from Ukraine to ensure it proscribes strikes on Crimean targets.

Statements by [Ukrainian officials](#) that Crimea will be “liberated” and one-off, [non-strategic attacks](#) against targets on the peninsula have needlessly jeopardized the grain deal. While its 2014 annexation of the peninsula was certainly illegitimate and unwarranted, Russian interests in Crimea cannot be dismissed as easily as its [sham referenda](#) in September that “incorporated” the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. As Cato Institute scholar Doug Bandow recently [explained](#) in *TAC*, “Crimea matters because most Russians view the territory as Russian. Losing it would maximize the political impact of defeat. Putin would be at risk—much more from hardline nationalists than liberal democrats.” The risk of Moscow conducting a [nuclear test demonstration](#) and escalating the conflict would increase if Kiev launched a new offensive to retake Crimea.

Crimea also has military value for Russia in the crowded Black Sea region. After the seizure of the peninsula, the local balance of power gradually shifted in Russia’s favor, leading Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan to [complain](#) in 2016 that the Black Sea had become a “Russian lake.” Russia’s naval base in Sevastopol hosts the famed Black Sea Fleet and allows for the projection of a “[counter-naval](#)” force comprised of anti-access/area-denial systems, such as long-range anti-air and anti-ship missiles, as well as radars and sensors that can detect [NATO navies](#) operating nearby. Given the [underlying geopolitical tensions](#), a conflagration on the peninsula would be destabilizing for the region and could potentially involve [neighboring NATO states](#).

Regardless of the legal or historical merits of Ukraine’s position, there are few benefits and numerous risks in opening a new front to retake Crimea. Rather than encourage Ukraine to expand its war aims, the United States should support the Black Sea Grain Initiative through diplomatic efforts to restrain Kiev and assure Moscow. Along with stabilizing international commodities markets and limiting spillover from the conflict, U.S. policymakers might find that their diplomatic tools are more useful than [rhetorical condemnations](#) and could [end the war](#) for good.