



Biden's return to world stage has a Ukraine, China and India problem

Jonathan Lemire and Alexander Ward

June 15, 2023

Senior U.S. officials are convinced that future support for the Ukraine war — and President Joe Biden's global reputation — hinges on the success of Ukraine's counteroffensive.

Succeed and Western military and economic aid will flow. Stumble or fail to meet expectations, and that support will likely dry up, sparking heightened calls for an expedited diplomatic resolution and hampering one of the White House's signature international achievements.

Kyiv has had its share of make-or-break moments during the 16-month war it has waged against an invading Russia. But the current round of fighting has taken on heightened importance back in Washington, where domestic politics is muddying the overall picture.

U.S. officials do not know if lawmakers will greenlight more funding for Ukraine when the current tranche runs out. Any initial missteps in the counteroffensive, administration officials fear, could empower House Republicans to scuttle efforts by their Senate counterparts to boost defense spending.

Anxiety is also growing in Washington as Ukrainian elements are striking deep into sovereign Russian territory, leading to several private, stern admonishments in diplomatic backchannels.

U.S. officials believe that Kyiv, or at least pro-Ukraine forces, are responsible for a drone attack on the Kremlin and explosions that have killed both a prominent pro-war blogger and the daughter of a Russian nationalist. And this week, [the Washington Post reported](#) that the U.S. had intelligence indicating that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government planned to attack the Nord Stream pipelines — and later, officials believe, a pro-Kyiv group did it instead.

POLITICO spoke to five U.S. officials about the mounting concerns that could sully Biden's hoped-for triumphant return to the world stage. All spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal thinking.

The political uncertainty in the U.S. and the expanding war in Eastern Europe will serve as dual backdrops when world leaders meet at NATO's summit this July in Vilnius, Lithuania. The

gathering is setting up a key moment for Biden, as he contemplates a stop in Helsinki to mark the acceptance of Finland into the alliance.

Biden on Thursday, while standing alongside Rishi Sunak, the prime minister of fellow NATO member the United Kingdom, pledged again to support Ukraine and downplayed growing Republican skepticism over funding Kyiv.

“I believe we’ll have the funding we need for Ukraine for as long as it takes,” Biden said.

The Biden administration is confident in the story it can tell to foreign leaders that visit Washington and in Vilnius, senior administration officials say. The U.S. came out of a debt-ceiling debate that threatened to tank the economy mostly unscathed, underscoring the president’s message that democracies can deliver. They believe the crisis’ resolution comes at a good time for the president, allowing him to act as a global statesman while the Republican field to replace him grows crowded and chaotic.

A successful Ukrainian counteroffensive would be another foreign policy win Biden can tout. But the administration will still face pressure to address questions Europeans and Ukrainians want answered: Will the U.S. offer clear security guarantees for Kyiv, the imminent deliveries of F-16 fighter jets and a concrete path to Ukraine’s membership in NATO?

“It’s great to see the president able to turn his attention to pressing international issues,” said Kori Schake, director of foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. “Decisions we make today are going to affect the peace and security of Americans for a generation.”

Biden has always felt a large degree of comfort navigating international issues, having served as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a globe-trotting vice president before getting to the Oval Office.

But his current foreign policy plate is packed — and Ukraine isn’t the only priority.

He will have to address mounting concerns about Saudi Arabia’s defiance of American wishes by moving to raise the price of oil; collapsing military-to-military talks with China as President Xi Jinping’s military acts aggressively toward U.S. crafts in the region and plans to establish a spy base in Cuba; and an uneasy visit coming this month from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi that cuts against his argument that the 21st century’s defining conflict is between small-d democrats and autocrats.

From its first days, the Biden administration declared that the homefront was the source of America’s strength. If the nation’s house was in order, then the U.S. would have greater success achieving around the world. The lines between domestic and foreign policy, Biden has repeatedly argued, have never been more blurred.

The debt ceiling debate showed the tension that interlocking domestic and global priorities present.

Biden managed to attend the G-7 summit in Japan but had to cut his swing through Asia short in order to deal with negotiations. The canceled visits to Australia and Papua New Guinea allowed China to portray America as an unreliable partner.

Tensions had been escalating between the United States and China well before then, nearly breaking down when a Chinese spy balloon traversed the United States. The administration's continued sanctions on Chinese defense minister, Li Shangfu, and recent incidents when both a Chinese fighter jet and warship buzzed dangerously close to their American counterparts have eroded what little bonhomie remained.

U.S. and Chinese militaries are barely speaking. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin could only shake his Chinese counterpart's hand during a forum in Singapore last week as Beijing refused repeated requests for a formal meeting.

There are some limited bright spots. U.S. and Chinese officials continue to hold economic, trade and diplomatic meetings and Secretary of State Antony Blinken is expected to go to China in the coming weeks, a rescheduling of his previously postponed trip over the balloon embarrassment.

But Biden's critics say that such continued outreach to China actually is having a harmful effect, rewarding Beijing even as it acts provocatively.

"The idea that China can be a reliable partner in any serious way, without major changes to its belligerent approach, is chimeric at best," said Jamil Jaffer, founder and executive director of the National Security Institute at George Mason's Scalia Law School. "Biden might spend his time better really shoring up our allies and getting the rest of the White House and the nation on board with the idea that we need to be ready for a real, long-term fight with China."

Part of Biden's renewed focus on international affairs will be driven by current political realities. He has a far greater array of unilateral powers in foreign policy than domestic affairs. And using those powers allows him to play up his role as an effective commander-in-chief for a reelection bid. Though Biden was sharply criticized for the 2021 military withdrawal from Afghanistan, he has received bipartisan praise for rallying support for Ukraine and stabilizing alliances shaken by his predecessor, Donald Trump.

"While elections aren't usually about foreign policy, this one in 2024 will be about who will be capable of governing — and he can help convey that on the world stage. It's subtle but effective," said Julian Zelizer, presidential historian at Princeton University.

But some feel that there could be an opportunity for Republicans to turn a strength into a vulnerability, including by arguing that Biden's focus on Ukraine has diverted attention and resources from problems at home. The attack line could be: "Biden cares more about his fancy friends in Brussels than he does about you," said Justin Logan, director for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian-minded think tank.

The current moment also carries reminders of the limits to any president's foreign policy powers. Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter, announced a million-barrel-per-day production cut at last weekend's OPEC Plus summit in an effort to boost sagging energy prices. The decision

put it at odds with most of the West — which could soon pay more for gas at the pump — and underscored the futility of Biden’s visit with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman last July.

And later this month, Biden is set to welcome Modi to the White House for just the third state dinner of his presidency. The high honor is normally reserved for close allies, but this one will be for an increasingly authoritarian ruler who promotes Hindu nationalism and jails journalists.

While Modi is viewed with wariness in the White House, the U.S. continues to court him as an essential bulwark to Xi or Russian President Vladimir Putin. His country will host the world’s leaders at the G-20 in New Delhi this fall.

“It’s not ideal that we need him,” said a Democratic Senate staffer familiar with the visit planning, “but we do. He’s who we got.”