

What the U.S. Must Do Immediately to Support Ukraine

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Vladimir Putin's use of military force against Ukraine creates an unstable Europe and threatens U.S. and allied economic and security interests.

The top priority for the U.S. is to get weapons in the hands of Ukrainians while implementing crippling economic sanctions against Russia.

The U.S. should work with allies to develop an enduring and systematic approach to providing weapons, training, and medical care to Ukrainians.

More than one month into Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, the conflict seems nowhere close to being resolved. The actions by the U.S. and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies are steps in the right direction, but they must do much more. Right now, the U.S. must prioritize the free and rapid flow of weapons and intelligence to Ukraine; extend economic sanctions further to include all of Russia's major banks; apply the same sanctions, where applicable, to Belarus and to any other country helping Russia; think strategically of how to best engage with countries in Eurasia; help Europe to reduce its dependence on Russian energy; and prepare for the long-term training and equipping of Ukrainian fighters in NATO countries.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5259>

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The Situation

After more than a month of major fighting, the only thing that is clear is that Russia is not meeting its intended military objectives at this point in the campaign. Logistics are becoming a big problem for Russia. So is low morale among Russian forces. U.S.-provided Javelins (anti-tank missiles) and Stingers (anti-aircraft missiles), Britain-provided next-generation light anti-tank weapon (NLAW) missile systems, and Turkey-provided TB2 drones (which have proved effective against Russian equipment in Karabakh, Libya, and Syria) are causing major problems for Russian forces. In the coming weeks the Switchblade loitering munition and the British Starstreak air defense system should be in use by Ukrainian forces.

At the time of this writing, Russia's main advance against Kyiv (Ukraine's capital and largest city) and Kharkiv (Ukraine's third-largest city) have been halted. In the case of Kyiv, Ukrainian forces have pushed Russian forces back almost to the Belarusian border. In the south, the port city of Mariupol remains encircled and under siege by Russia. Russia has made its best advancements from Crimea and captured Kherson (Ukraine's 20th-largest city) on March 3. However, Russia's subsequent advance toward Mykolaiv (Ukraine's ninth-largest city) have been repeatedly repelled. This has left Odessa (Ukraine's second-largest city), presumably one of Moscow's top objectives, out of reach of the Russian military.

Two high-level meetings in Turkey between Russian and Ukrainian officials have not resulted in any progress. At the time of this writing, the prospect of meaningful cease-fire talks is remote. On March 29, Russia's deputy defense minister, Alexander Fomin, said that Moscow wanted to "increase mutual trust, create the right conditions for future negotiations and reach the final aim of signing a peace deal with Ukraine." In order to do so, he claimed that Russia would "radically reduce military activity in the direction of Kyiv and Chernihiv."¹

U.S. officials say there is no evidence² that Russia is withdrawing forces around the capital in any meaningful way. The effective Ukrainian defense around the capital gave Russia no choice but to halt its offensive. However, it is likely that Russia will divert military units and resources to the Donbas region to maximize and hold territorial gains in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts before future peace talks.

Thinking Long Term, Acting Now

It should be the priority of the United States to ensure that Russia pays a high price for its invasion of Ukraine. For Americans who believe in strong and secure national borders, the primacy of national sovereignty, and the right to self-defense, support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression is natural. Now that Ukrainians are having some success on the battlefield it is time to double down on supporting them. To do so, the U.S. should:

- **Ensure the free and unrestricted transfer of weapons, munitions, and other supplies to the Ukrainians, including a continuous flow of intelligence.** As the war drags on, their need for weapons and munitions will only increase. The U.S. must lead efforts to develop a resilient and reliable system to deliver much-needed weapons and munitions on an enduring basis.
- **Work with the Ukrainian government to allow American experts access to captured Russian equipment.** Ukrainian forces have captured some of Russia's most advanced electronic warfare equipment, air defense systems, and Main Battle Tanks. The sooner that U.S. experts can analyze this equipment, the faster it might be able to help NATO allies and Ukraine to develop tactics, techniques, and procedures to counter and defeat Russian equipment.
- **Lead efforts in Europe to create a clearinghouse for Ukrainian military needs.** Many NATO members in Eastern Europe operate similar military equipment as does Ukraine. NATO should serve as a clearinghouse to match Ukraine's military needs with equipment that NATO members might be willing to share. This is especially true of spare parts and specialized equipment required for maintenance.
- **Work behind the scenes, not in the public space, on difficult or controversial options for helping Ukraine.** The failed proposal to send Polish MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine showed a lack of U.S. leadership and promulgated a perception of American incompetence. Such a complex issue of transferring fighter jets from one country to another should have never been played out in the public space. The same can be said of the proposal to transfer Slovakian S-300 missiles and systems to Ukraine. U.S. policymakers must work behind the scenes on complex issues and not give up until there is a satisfactory outcome.

- **Expand the scope and reach of U.S. economic sanctions against Russia to maximum levels.** The situation is desperate in Ukraine. This is not the time to keep more sanctions in “the back pocket.” The existing unprecedented economic sanctions should be expanded to sanction in its entirety, and without any exemptions, all of Russia’s major banks and energy sector.
- **Replicate these sanctions for Belarus and any country helping Moscow to evade them.** Belarus has served as an enabler, if not a belligerent actor, in this conflict. Without Belarus’s support, Russia would not have been able to pressure Kyiv so quickly in the invasion. Belarus, or any other country that offers support for Russia’s aggression or succor for economic sanctions should feel the full force of U.S. sanctions.
- **Ensure that the impact of sanctions against Russia are mitigated to lessen any undesired impact on the U.S. economy and American consumers.** While economic sanctions targeting Russia must be maximized, the Biden Administration must work with Congress to pursue economic policies at home that promote growth and energy policies that increase production and improve resilience.
- **Seize frozen Russian assets to arm and support Ukraine.** Since economic sanctions have been implemented, tens of billions of dollars of Russian assets have been frozen in G7 and other allied and partner countries. The U.S. should seize these assets and use them to train, fund, and equip the Ukrainian military, alleviate the humanitarian crisis, and in the future, rebuild Ukraine.
- **Work with NATO members to establish training facilities in Poland or other NATO countries to train Ukrainian troops in operating advanced Western military hardware.** The U.S. should prepare now to train and equip the Ukrainians for the long term. The excuse often used for why more advanced military hardware cannot be given to Ukraine is that the Ukrainians do not know how to use it. The war in Ukraine is likely to be protracted. This means identifying military equipment that could help Ukraine to defend itself and then establishing a training and equipping program for Ukraine for the long term.

- **Work with NATO members to open field hospitals in Hungary, Poland, Romania, or Slovakia, while making U.S. military facilities at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany available for wounded Ukrainians.** Ukrainian soldiers are fighting gallantly against Russia, but not without terrible costs to life and limb. Thanks to advancements in battlefield medicine made possible by two decades of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. is well placed to share best practices with Ukraine. In extremis, the U.S. should consider providing long-term medical care and rehabilitation support to some of the most seriously wounded soldiers.
- **Keep the Chinese–Russian connection in mind.** Russia is China’s junior, albeit important, partner on the global stage. As U.S. policymakers formulate America’s strategy toward China, they must remember that anything that can weaken Russia on the global stage will have an impact on China. It is in America’s interest that Russia fails in Ukraine.
- **Take advantage of Russia’s unbalanced geopolitical equilibrium.** Russia is almost solely consumed by events in Ukraine and the impact of economic sanctions. This is an opportunity for the U.S. to build its bilateral relations with important countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Secretary of State Antony Blinken should visit both countries immediately.

Both countries are crying out for more Western engagement. Both are crucially important for helping Europe to diversify its energy imports away from Russia. Both see Russian weakness in Ukraine and have recently taken a tougher line against the Kremlin in a way that would have been unimaginable before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. While the Kremlin considers Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to be in its “sphere of influence,” both want to pursue a balanced relationship with all major global powers. U.S. policymakers should not waste this geopolitical opportunity.

- **Start planning a new approach to energy security now.** Every barrel of oil and cubic foot of natural gas that Europeans get from somewhere other than Russia, the safer the continent will be. While the immediate priority for the White House is arming Ukrainians and crippling the Russian economy, it should start developing an energy

strategy for Europe. Good starting points would be (1) maximizing U.S. liquefied-natural-gas exports to Europe; (2) supporting an expanded Southern Gas Corridor connecting Caspian gas to southern Europe; (3) encouraging the construction of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline to bring natural gas from Central Asia to Europe bypassing Russia; (4) exploring energy possibilities in the Eastern Mediterranean region; and (5) bolstering the Three Seas Initiative to improve energy connectivity in Eastern Europe.

Transatlantic Stability

Russia must pay the highest price possible for its barbaric aggression. Russia is the aggressor and Ukraine the victim. A sovereign Ukraine is necessary for overall European stability, which is in U.S. and NATO interests. Modern Ukraine represents the idea that every country has the sovereign ability to determine its own path, to decide with whom it has relations, and how, and by whom, it is governed. In many ways, the long-term stability of the transatlantic community will be decided in Ukraine. The U.S. must act accordingly.

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Endnotes

1. Daniel Boffey and Shaun Walker, "Russia Bombards Chernihiv Hours After Pledging to Halt Shelling," *The Guardian*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/30/ukraine-russia-bombards-chernihiv-hours-after-pledging-to-halt-shelling> (accessed on March 30, 2022).
2. Chelsea Ong, "Pentagon Says Russian Troop Movements 'Not a Real Withdrawal'; U.S. Warns of Global Food Insecurity," CNBC, March 30, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/29/russia-ukraine-live-updates.html> (accessed March 30, 2022).