

The Russia–Ukraine War at One Year: The Biden Administration Owes the 118th Congress More Answers

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Defeating Putin in Ukraine would prevent future Russian aggression in Europe and curb Chinese military ambitions in the Pacific and beyond.

But one year and \$100 billion later, Americans deserve answers from the Biden Administration about its strategy to end Putin’s war in Ukraine.

To win the war in Ukraine, Congress should only back targeted funding requests, demand more from European allies, and keep China out of reconstruction contracts.

There is a clear strategic advantage for the United States in the defeat of Vladimir Putin’s barbaric war on Ukraine, both in terms of preventing future Russian aggression in Europe and deterring Chinese expansionism by demonstrating Western resolve and lethality.

It is, however, essential for the U.S. to give Ukraine the necessary support in a way that provides full accountability to the American people and does not add major unfunded liabilities for U.S. taxpayers or consume resources required to counter the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Confronting Russia and China simultaneously will require more from some European allies who are not supporting Ukraine enough to allow the U.S. to shoulder the bulk of the load deterring China in the Pacific.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5301>

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Absent a plausible and decisive plan to help Ukraine to win the war in a fiscally responsible manner, conservatives should not support additional Biden Administration requests for funding for Ukraine in the 118th Congress, which have been vast in scale, blanket in nature, and lacking in full oversight. Conservatives in Congress should only back clearly targeted funding requests for vital weaponry and military hardware that Ukraine needs to win against Russia, while calling on some of America's partners in Europe to provide more military and civilian assistance to Ukraine.

As the American people contemplate the one-year anniversary of Vladimir Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine, it is becoming apparent that Congress is overdue in asking hard questions of the Biden Administration about the proposed goals and objectives of the U.S. strategy in the conflict. President Joe Biden has enjoyed bipartisan support for Ukraine funding requests from Democrat-led majorities in the House and Senate, but without answers to hard questions that support could change in the 118th Congress with a Republican majority in the House and increasing opposition to the war from the far Left. While the American public supports the fight for Ukrainian freedom against Russian aggression, this war is no abstract contest over international norms—and if Americans are to continue to support it, they need a clear and serious assessment of where the war stands at the one-year mark, not platitudes and political gamesmanship as the conflict grinds on.

Questions for President Biden

Following are the questions that President Biden must answer before Congress approves any additional funding for Ukraine:

How Has the Biden Administration Adjusted to the Intelligence Failure at the Beginning of the War? On the eve of the invasion, the U.S. intelligence assessment was that the war would be quick, and that Putin would be able to topple President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government in days. According to this analysis, Zelenskyy would establish a government in exile, which the U.S. would support, in addition to arming an insurgency to harass and counter Putin's forces. That assumption was the basis of the materiel that was pre-positioned in Ukraine, as well as the early packages of additional aid.

Thanks to the remarkable bravery of both the Ukrainian people and their president, as well as strong, unified support from the U.S. and many North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, this assumption proved to be false. But it is unclear when and if the Biden Administration fundamentally shifted its strategy to adjust to this reality, and the timid and incremental

support it has supplied over the past eight months suggest that it remains in a defensive, responsive posture that will enable Ukraine to survive, but not to prevail.

What Is President Biden’s Assessment of the Funding Required for Ukraine, and Why Does He Support Bundling Individual Requests into Larger Funding Vehicles? The U.S. will mark the one-year anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine having provided more than \$100 billion in aid, which has been divided roughly equally between non-military and military aid. The sheer scale of this expenditure demands accountability to the American people and some estimate of future funding requests.

Future requests should also be in stand-alone legislation to enable robust debate in Congress on Ukraine and prevent them from being bundled into “must pass” vehicles. Just because the \$46 billion for Ukraine in the recent \$1.7 trillion omnibus bill was only a fraction of the total does not justify so large an expenditure if the President cannot articulate a viable strategy and allies could be doing more. Some European countries are doing a great deal both in terms of military aid and support for refugees. Others, notably France and Germany, as well as the bureaucrats in Brussels, however, are not meeting their obligations, and it is unfair to burden the American taxpayer because of their fecklessness.

How Does the Biden Administration Reconcile Policy Priorities that Appear to Be in Direct Conflict with Winning the War in Ukraine? No Member of Congress should shy away from demanding an explanation for why the Biden Administration has been undermining its own stated policy of unlimited support for Ukraine (“as much as it takes for as long as it takes”) through actions aimed at a domestic political audience, which makes it difficult to support the status quo. Two examples:

1. **Viktor Bout:** By releasing the “merchant of death” in exchange for basketball star Brittney Griner, President Biden secured the return of a detained American citizen, but Bout has already declared his intent to return to the battlefield in support of Putin, who achieved a much-needed public relations victory with the Russian public. The Biden Administration needs to justify Bout’s release in terms of his potential negative impact on U.S. support for Ukraine.
2. **Environmental extremism:** The Biden Administration has repeatedly stuffed funding legislation, including the Inflation Reduction Act and the recent omnibus, with billions of dollars for initiatives such as “environmental justice” at the Environmental Protection Agency, which exists to thwart and stifle domestic U.S. fossil fuels production.

Given Putin's weaponization of energy in the Ukraine war, this directly counters our ability to both satisfy domestic needs and supply partners and allies abroad to reduce reliance on Russia.

What Is the Desired Final Outcome? Putin has overreached with the invasion of Ukraine, which is an opportunity for the U.S. and NATO to punish him for his reckless miscalculation, and, most important, to avoid a repeat. This is Putin's third military incursion into Europe in 15 years. Attempting to provide an offramp and accepting his land grabs has only resulted in escalating aggression, with this second invasion of Ukraine being the bloodiest and most expensive to date.

The U.S., Ukraine, and European allies need to determine whether they are committed to supporting Ukraine to the extent that Putin has to change his calculus and realize that ending a losing effort is his only means of survival. That determination is what should guide any additional American support.

From a geostrategic perspective, an actual defeat for Putin would be valuable to the U.S. in terms of curbing Chinese military ambitions both in the Pacific and beyond by demonstrating to Chairman Xi Jinping the effectiveness of U.S. and allied weapons systems. If there is a clear understanding of this secondary effect of victory in Ukraine, it could go a long way toward extending U.S. support. But to be effective, this deterrent cannot be unilaterally American and will require a coordinated endeavor across NATO to ensure that all countries meet their commitment to spend 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense, and that both the European and Pacific theater are adequately supplied with ammunition and equipment.

Recommendations for the Administration, Congress, and the Ukrainian Government

In order to maintain bipartisan support for Ukraine, the Administration should:

- **Help Ukraine to win.** President Biden's key strategic goal in 2023 should be to end the war on terms favorable to Washington and Kyiv, which would mean, in conjunction with European partners, providing military assistance on a scale sufficient to win the war. For the United States, victory would mean a Putin regime that is unable to mount a subsequent attack on a NATO country that could obligate direct U.S. involvement in a European war. Absent this declared end state, it will be hard to justify any additional requests for assistance.

- **Unleash American energy dominance.** President Biden should lay out a strategy to insulate the American public (and U.S. allies) from the fallout of Putin's energy war by maximizing U.S. production of and access to reliable fuels (oil, coal, natural gas, and nuclear energy) and constructing pipelines and export terminals to move fuels where they are needed for domestic consumption and export. The U.S. and the EU have been reluctant to expand domestic production and impose the truly crushing economic sanctions that would destroy Putin's economy due to concerns about additional spikes in energy prices and restrictions in supply. The U.S. largely has the power to mitigate this risk, and absent a plan to do so it will be hard to justify any additional requests for assistance to Ukraine.
- **Prevent the use of nuclear weapons.** A nuclear escalation could have catastrophic consequences and potentially drag the United States into a hot war. President Biden has justified restricting certain military aid to Ukraine in the hopes of preventing Putin from using a nuclear weapon, but this merely allows Putin to hold U.S. aid hostage with nuclear threats as he has been doing since the beginning of the war. China will not be a constructive partner of any sort on Ukraine but could provide an effective deterrent against Putin using a nuclear weapon if it believes its own interests could be harmed by his actions.

Congress should:

- **Set the terms for reconstruction of Ukrainian cities and infrastructure to prohibit Chinese involvement.** If Ukraine expects American taxpayer investment or U.S. government support for American entities that participate in the reconstruction process, Congress should set the terms. Given that the PRC is essentially funding Putin's invasion of Ukraine by continuing to purchase Russian energy exports, it would be intolerable for it to then profit from reconstructing the destruction in which it is complicit. It would be all the more intolerable if contracts with state-owned Chinese entities are directly or indirectly paid for with U.S. support. All Americans need to hear directly and unequivocally from President Zelenskyy is that their money will not be spent on contracts with PRC entities or free up other resources for this purpose. Absent such assurances, Congress should not consider any requests for reconstruction support.

Ukraine's leadership should:

- **Work with conservatives in Congress.** If President Biden continues to politicize support for Ukraine, Ukrainian leadership could help to restore bipartisan support for assistance to Ukraine by more proactively engaging with and addressing conservative concerns about corruption and drifting into endless war.

Conclusion

There could be broad, bipartisan support for these recommendations in Congress, but more fundamentally, the American people need to be convinced that continued engagement in Ukraine is in the national interest and merits the investment of their resources. The burden is on the Biden Administration to make this case. Congress, particularly the Republican House, cannot continue to function as a rubber stamp for funding requests from a President who has not provided a clear, practical strategy to win the war.

The Biden Administration exploited President Zelenskyy's December visit to Washington to bolster support for the largely unrelated omnibus legislation, which has increased partisan tensions over Ukraine. If President Biden refuses to work closely with conservatives on Capitol Hill, he risks undermining a year of concerted U.S. support for Ukraine, allowing Putin to regroup for potential future aggression, failing to exploit the opportunity to deter China, and repeating the experience of previous Presidents who have been unable to effectively make the case for war support to the American people. All of which would be a waste of the \$100 billion already committed to Ukraine.

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