

U.S. Foreign Policy towards Russia's continued Invasion of Ukraine

Roberta Haar

The one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an appropriate time to take stock of U.S. foreign policy towards the conflict. The stakes of the war are clearer for European countries, especially those closer to the fighting. However, after the midterm elections and half way through Joe Biden's presidential term, is America still all-in as a supporter of Ukraine or has fatigue and the success of Trumpian isolationists tempered U.S. enthusiasm for acting as the arsenal of democracy? Add to this uncertainty, equally important questions about Biden's willingness to continue to lead and to unify a Western military operation against Putin. The recent debate on whether and when to supply tanks to a Ukrainian army that was obviously in need of more heavy military hardware and more ammunition, suggests that cracks are appearing in leadership, unity, and the ability to arm the defender.

NATO'S POST-COLD WAR STRATEGIC PROBLEM

The level of anguish that the months-long "tank debate" exhibited, mirrored the equally agonizing deliberations about whether to send Polish fighter aircraft, or HIMARS rocket launchers, then whether to send the 300km-range ATACMS missiles, which might allow Ukraine to strike deep inside Russia. Every new weapon system underwent an analysis regarding whether it would change or escalate the fighting in Ukraine, with the Baltics and Poland becoming ever more exasperated. For instance, would tanks allow Ukraine to recapture more lost territory, including Crimea, a peninsula that holds the headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and would such moves push Putin into using nuclear weapons?

However, the real problem with the piecemeal, incremental way of adding weapons indicates that NATO allies, the U.S. in particular, do not have a clear idea of the intended outcome of the war. The crux of these debates is about whether the members of NATO and their allies should give the Ukrainians the wherewithal to win the war, and along with this, what are their goals and what is the strategy linked to those goals.

If instead of debating each weapons system, NATO had a clear objective, it could decide on the appropriate weapons

to supply or even if other instruments are better suited. If Ukrainian victory was the strategic goal, NATO could supply Kyiv with the weapons it needs to fight the way it would fight. Thus, the debate is the wrong way around; rather than debate which weapons system to give Ukraine, NATO leaders should be deciding their strategic goals and limitations and then framing the choice of weapons within those parameters.

Positively, each promise to give more and better fighting capabilities means that the outcome of these debates leans towards giving Ukraine real capacities. Equally positive, there appears to be a realization that a lack of strategy and piecemeal support is having a detrimental effect. A recent shift to training and equipping a battalion's worth of armored units does more evidently support a strategy. It also sends a message to the invader that conquest will not be easy.

NATO'S POST-COLD WAR LEADERSHIP PROBLEM

Alongside NATO's post-Cold War problems with defining a clear strategy, it periodically evidences leadership and solidarity problems. Putin's observation of divisions between the allies led him to believe that the West would not respond to his invasion of Ukraine. The Biden administration deserves

credit for its distinct willingness to take the lead of a Western military operation and to build unity in an international coalition against Putin. The Europeans deserve credit for their willingness to join America in applying rather rigorous sanctions, which had significant impact on their economies and the affordability of keeping their citizens warm.

However, the debates about tanks put unity back into question—nearly a year into the war, one could ask: is NATO as united as it was earlier? The fact that German chancellor Olaf Scholz resisted taking the lead in sending German-made tanks (and even denied other countries permission to send their Leopard 2s to Ukraine), despite a growing chorus that he should, indicated a divided leadership and a unity on the wane.

Matthew Kroenig labeled the decision by the Biden administration to have Germany take the lead as “‘lead from behind’ 2.0.”¹ Kroenig argues that Biden made the same mistake that Barack Obama made, that Europe exists as a coherent entity and will act on its own without U.S. leadership. Instead, Kroenig states, Biden should own the fact that the United States is still the leader of the Transatlantic alliance.

Moreover, Biden should have known that Germany would move only under the cover of an American commitment of M1 Abrams tanks. To his credit, Biden did come to this realization by the end of January, but how many Ukrainian soldiers and civilians died while NATO members shied away from being the first to announce their tanks were heading east?

NATO’S POST-COLD WAR COMMITMENT PROBLEM

A year ago, I wrote in this magazine that Putin’s war of choice on Ukraine succeeded in resolving several problems that have stalked NATO since Obama’s presidency, including its execution problem.² Scholz’s unprecedented pledge to invest €100bn for armed forces, which is twice as much as earlier annual budgets, was a big step in rectifying the execution predicament for one of Europe’s largest countries.

However, Scholz’s vow petered out in months of disappointment, in gaffes and an incrementalistic mindset by German Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht, and in a general misunderstanding of the extent of the Bundeswehr’s problems. To be successful, Scholz’s *Zeitenwende*, his proclaimed turning point of German defense, must first slay a bloated, toxic bureaucracy and find innovative ways to inject money meaningfully. After thirty years of underfunding, the German military needs a *Zeitenbomb* to make a clean break with the past if it wants to complete its *Zeitenwende*.

In addition to these issues specific to Germany is the fact that other than the states closest to Russia—plus the Unit-



ed Kingdom—most countries in Europe are not stepping up as they should in the military space. Adding to this willingness-deficit is a growing capabilities-deficit brought on by dwindling armories. Even the U.S. exhibited these execution issues. In fact, America sent so many weapons that U.S. military leaders are getting worried that the country does not have enough for its own troops.

Of course, weapons and training costs money, which in the wake of Biden’s colossal green energy spending legislation, Europeans may shift to their own massive green investments. Although Europeans were initially pleased that the U.S. passed major legislation to combat climate change, they quickly soured on it when they realized that the local-provisions element gives favorable treatment to Mexico and Canada but not the EU. Cries of protectionism and unfairness are not helped when Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, the key architect of much of the controversial parts of the current policy, suggests to Luxembourg’s Prime Minister Xavier Bettel that spiking cost of energy due to Russia’s



Every new weapon system underwent an analysis whether it would change or escalate the fighting in Ukraine. Pictured is a German Leopard 2 A6 main battle tank during exercises in Lithuania in 2020 (photo: Karolis Kavolelis / Shutterstock.com)

war in Ukraine could be offset by entering into long-term contracts with U.S.-based producers.³ For Europeans, such comments drive a dagger into concepts of unity and confirm suspicions that U.S. business is trying to take advantage of the EU's energy woes caused by the war in Ukraine. For their part, Americans feel that they have been warning Europeans for a long time that their fossil fuel dependencies on Russia were a bad idea.

The reality of the whole postwar frenemy-differing-economic-interests of Transatlantic relations may not only undermine the Europeans' capability to provide meaningful military aid to Ukraine, but it might also impact Transatlantic unity. The Biden administration's balancing of a number of centrifugal forces—of bringing multilateralism “back,” of “blunting” China's rise, of reinvigorating American industrial power and of leading a NATO alliance to help Ukraine, has all the potential to backfire and misfire.⁴

FROM PUTIN'S PERSPECTIVE

This, of course, is exactly what Putin is hoping will come to pass—that cracks in unity will appear, that Biden's leadership falters and that the members of NATO never figure out what they want and develop a clear strategy aligned to those aims. A return to political divisions over what sort of relationship Europe should build with Russia would also bolster Putin's use of pipeline politics and his calculations that he can ride out Western sanctions and wait for Ukraine fatigue to set in along with cold houses and high gas prices.

Moreover, from Putin's perspective, the announcements by Germany and the United States that they would supply Ukraine with dozens of Leopard 2 and M1 Abrams tanks is a boon. The tanks play into the Moscow narrative that Russia is in a proxy war with NATO. Putin's propaganda machine immediately said these tanks were more evidence of the West's intent to wound Russia through Ukraine.



Biden should own the fact that the United States is still the leader of the transatlantic alliance. Pictured are President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris participating in an expanded bilateral meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on December 21, 2022, in the Cabinet Room of the White House (photo: Flickr / The White House)

If enhanced support strengthens Putin's storyline, committing tanks and the like might make reaching a peace settlement less likely. We should keep in mind that 85% of the world's population has not sanctioned or punished Putin for his war of aggression.⁵ New supplies for the Ukrainian army or new sanctions on Russia will not nudge these populations toward the West's viewpoint, especially if this 85% resents the higher cost of food because of an ongoing conflict.

And, while there are many miscalculations and mistakes that could be highlighted on the part of the Russian president, today Putin still controls large parts of four Ukrainian provinces that complete a land bridge to Crimea. Inch by inch, Putin's army is also winning the bloody war of attrition through artillery barrages, human-wave attacks, and strikes aimed at Ukraine's electrical grid. Since everyone expects Putin to mobilize more troops in the spring as well as to keep his arms factories working triple shifts to prepare for such a spring offensive, it is clear that it will be difficult to expel Russian

soldiers from Ukrainian territory in the near future. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, cautioned that 2023 could be a very bloody year.⁶

Add to these facts, the point that Putin has no domestic challengers. Those in his government who briefly attempted to speak truth to power were humiliated and swatted down. Few are willing to disagree with their dear leader. While he may have miscalculated the steadfastness of Western support for Ukraine, there is no sign that he is now backing down in the face of this resolve. Putin's entire political future rested on absorbing Ukraine into the Russian fold, meaning at present there is no sign that he intends to back down.

FROM ZELENSKY'S PERSPECTIVE

But, if there is no sign that Russia is ready to back down or engage in peace talks, neither are there signs that Ukraine is willing to surrender. The commitment of sending Leopard 2 and M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine is also a boon to Volody-

myr Zelensky. The tanks, the training and equipping of entire armored units might protect Ukrainian forces at their current positions but also give them capabilities to breach Russian defenses and then recapture more occupied territory.

The loudest voices advocating for Leopard 2s and M1s believe that they have the potential to give Ukraine an advantage that converts into imposing a ceasefire and handing peace terms to Moscow. Especially in the expected spring fighting season. This is because the Leopard 2s are lighter and faster and more accurate than the Soviet era tanks the Ukrainians were using.⁷ After their successes in the fall, the Ukrainian army lost momentum because they did not have enough armor and firepower to keep up the fight. Ukraine military leaders and their like-minded advocates argue that if they have artillery, tanks, and air defense, they will be able to resume a forward marching campaign.

Add this Ukrainian zeal to keep on fighting to Putin's continued hard enmity rhetoric about his reasons for invading Ukraine, and it remains unlikely that Zelensky will approach the negotiating table to end the war. With no real incentives existing for either Putin or Zelensky, the chances that the war continues for some time are high.

UKRAINE FATIGUE DOES NOT EASILY GO AWAY

With no end in sight, how likely is it that the West keeps its resolve? Leading up to the U.S. midterm elections Biden prevailed over isolationist sentiment in his own party and found enough Republicans to also support his Ukraine policy. Bolstering Biden's policy is the fact that Trumpian Republicans did not realize a significant red wave in the midterms. However, this is not say that anti-Ukraine forces are banished from Congress and the American public discourse. It also does not cancel out the possibility that Trump or someone like Trump wins in 2024 and returns American foreign policy to transactional-neo-isolationism.

The end of January 2023 also revealed a corruption scandal in Ukraine, reminding backers of Ukraine that not that long ago the country was noted for its astronomically high levels of sleaze. Zelensky fired nine top officials over allegations of war profiteering. If the nine were actually involved in corruption, it is a welcome step forward, but if their firing is an attempt to shore up Zelensky's power by purging potential political rivals, it is a step back.

Well-publicized corruption scandals also call into doubt the mission. Tax payers and voters paying especially expensive energy bills will not be charitable if they believe their money is going to pay for dachas or nice holidays for corrupt Ukrainian officials. This kind of graft will undermine Ukraine's international support and the war effort and contribute to fatigue.

THE AUGURIES OF LEOPARDS AND M1S

A year into the war, as the signs of spring become evident in my garden with blooming snowdrops, I am reminded of Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* in which a soothsayer tells the dictator "Beware the Ides of March," a warning that he would suffer great misfortune and betrayal in the middle of March. A foreshadowing that concludes with Caesar's assassination at the hands of his most trusted advisors. What would a fortune teller say to the current dictator as he contemplates the misery and terror that he has afflicted on his own citizens and those in Ukraine? Is the ultimate outcome of the intense debates over the fall and winter about whether to give Ukraine the means to win the war, a spring prophesy to *Beware the Auguries of Leopards and M1s*?

This might be a fanciful turn of phrase that the poet and political scientist in me finds enticing. But I do know that the U.S.' role as a key driver of the West's unified response to Putin's aggression continues to hold, that NATO countries are severing their attachment to Russian fossil fuels while at the same time continuing to send ever more sophisticated military aid to Ukraine. Biden's surprise visit to Kyiv adds sincerity to the Biden administration's commitment. Nothing may happen to the dictator in March or in all of 2023. But we do know that his military manpower losses are great, with estimates as high as 180,000 soldiers, and we know that the Ukrainians are not ready to give up the fight.

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