

The United States and the Ukrainian Crisis: Implications for the Internal Arena and the Great Power Competition

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The response by the United States to the Ukrainian crisis is focused on efforts to send military aid, maintain and strengthen coordination with allies in Europe and NATO, and intensify the economic and political isolation of Russia. It is too early to outline scenarios for ending the campaign and certainly to sum up the broader significance of the crisis for the US and the great power competition. However, in the coming months the administration intends to act more forcefully to strengthen the image of President Biden as a leader who has brought together a broad coalition to oppose Russia and exact a heavy price for its aggression. This is partly with a view to the midterm Congressional elections (November 2022), which traditionally deal largely with internal matters, but the Ukrainian situation gives the administration an opportunity to attack the Republicans for their policy on Russia and blame them for economic decline. It is also a chance to show China, the chief rival of the United States, that the US administration has the motivation and the ability to defend its interests.

Since the start of the crisis in Ukraine, United States policy has focused on three levels of action:

- a. Military aid to Ukraine: Along with other countries, the administration continues the rapid delivery of military aid to Ukrainian territory. Since the crisis began, the administration has [approved](#) precedent-setting military aid packages of about \$1 billion. The most recent included 100 suicide UAVs (Switchblades) and some 9000 shoulder launchers (6000 AT-4, 2000 Javelin anti-tank missiles and 800 Stinger anti-aircraft systems). The United States stresses that the Ukrainian army has already begun using the equipment and has been effective in countering the moves of the Russian army.
- b. Preserved and strengthened coordination between the United States and its allies in Europe and NATO: The efforts led by President Joe Biden from even before the start of the Russian invasion will reach new heights this week with his trip [to Brussels](#) to participate in a summit meeting of the heads of NATO countries, meet with the

heads of European Union member countries, and take part in the G7 summit. Immediately thereafter, Biden is expected to visit Poland. Since the start of the crisis, the US President has been careful to demonstrate a clear line of full cooperation and coordination with his counterparts in NATO and Europe. Over the past few weeks his unequivocal commitment to defend the security of NATO members has been prominent, when [time after time](#) he has repeated that “We will defend every inch of NATO territory with the full might of a united and galvanized NATO.”

- c. Russia’s economic and political isolation: The administration continues to exact a heavy economic price from Russia, and President Biden also announced that the United States would [stop buying oil from Russia](#), thus damaging “the main artery of Russia’s economy.” Britain intends to stop buying Russian oil by the end of 2022. Other European countries will continue to import oil from Russia, but at the same time there are increasing efforts in Europe to find alternatives and stop relying on Russia in this context.

It is still too early to paint possible scenarios for the outcome of the Ukrainian campaign, and certainly regarding the broader significance of the crisis for the United States and the great power competition. This is partly due to the dynamic nature of events on the ground and their influence on political decisions yet to be made by the United States and European countries. The rapid pace of developments, and in particular the urgency that has characterized the decision making processes of President Biden and his NATO colleagues so far, are evidence that moves that only a few weeks ago seemed unlikely are now considered obvious. Therefore, it is possible that what at present looks like an illogical development may be perceived as unavoidable in a few short weeks.

However, analysis of the policy and conduct of President Biden and his administration already yields some insights that will presumably characterize the American scene in the coming months. On entering the White House, the current administration gave top priority to domestic issues, with the emphasis on economic and social improvement. In the international arena, the focus was the strategic rivalry with China, the

promotion of climate issues, and strengthened ties with Europe. As for Russia, the intention was to confront it, but in a controlled way that included dialogue. Against this political background, a critical reference point is the midterm Congressional elections in November 2022, and the effort to ensure a Democratic majority, which is always a difficult challenge for an incumbent administration. The crisis in Eastern Europe forces President Biden and his administration to adjust their priorities, but it does not materially change the intention to focus on the primary objectives that the administration set for itself: the domestic arena and the competition with China.

In the coming months, in the run-up to the midterm elections, it appears that the administration will focus on leveraging its handling of the Ukrainian crisis to help the Democratic party emerge victorious. Traditionally, and certainly in recent years, the United States elections, and for Congress in particular, are decided by the domestic issues. The widespread assumption is that there is a threat to the current narrow Democratic majority in the Senate and possibly also in the House of Representatives. It is also likely that in the coming elections, US voters will again be concerned with economic problems, and above all, rising inflation. However, the administration is expected to stress that the Republican party, with its policies of support for Russia and President Putin, strengthened Moscow's motivation to take action against Ukraine – with all the implications for the international arena, including the impact on the US economy. As the administration sees it, the support it is now receiving from the Republicans is evidence of the past failure of their policies.

It is still not possible to determine whether President Biden's handling of the East European crisis will have a significant effect on his public support, which was low in recent months. But [surveys](#) show that most of the public support the administration's policy, with the emphasis on the use of sanctions, including [support](#) for stopping the purchase of oil from Russia, in spite of the risk of increased prices. Some of those polled even want the administration to take stronger steps against Russia. A majority of [the American public](#) continue to oppose direct US military involvement in the

crisis, although 30 percent of the public support extending the involvement, and in particular the enforcement of a no-fly zone over Ukraine.

Clearly President Biden estimates that his conduct vis-à-vis Russia in the crisis has a direct effect on his image as a leader, both internationally and domestically. It appears that both inside and outside the United States, observers are impressed by his determination and his handling of the crisis, by bringing together an effective international coalition against Russia. There is an impression that the administration and Biden personally were ready for the situation, and the months prior to the invasion were utilized to prepare the policy that was implemented when it erupted. This means that the United States will grant Ukraine the aid it requires, excluding direct military involvement. While it is possible that President Biden's repeated declarations on this matter may spur Russia to continue or even escalate the military campaign, they are first and foremost designed for internal needs, that is, to secure public support for the administration's policies, including their cost, particularly economic. At the same time, the administration is most likely taking into account that in the event of an escalation in Russia's actions, and particularly if it turns to unconventional weapons, the NATO leaders will face a dilemma regarding the scope of their own military involvement.

The crisis with Russia is expected to continue and to influence the US agenda, but it does not fundamentally change US perceptions that the threat from China is more significant, and the main long-term effect on US interests will be derived from the outcome of the competition with China. Even if the nature of the struggle against China is different from those defining the struggle against Russia, still in the eyes of the administration, China's actions toward the United States will be influenced by American determination to prove that Russia has paid a high price for its aggression for no political achievements. In his conversation with the Chinese president, [Biden stressed](#) the serious consequences for China if it decides to help Russia in the Ukrainian campaign. The assessment in the United States is that President Putin has not yet fully absorbed the enormity of the task and the price involved in his attempt to achieve his objectives, both

regarding the future of Ukraine and certainly regarding his demands relating to NATO. Yet still, the vulnerability of Russia, and especially of its military, has highlighted the gaps between it and the West in general, and the United States in particular.

As the Middle East, the Biden administration presumably understands that at present it must intensify its efforts to persuade the Gulf states, and above all Saudi Arabia, to increase their oil production in order to block any price rise. However, this intention does not appear to indicate any possible material change in its objectives and priorities in the Middle East. At this stage countries of the region are trying to maintain their room to maneuver, including sometimes by adopting policies that conflict with Washington, or in the best case, a neutral position. The significance of this policy for their future relations with the administration is yet to become clear in view of the balance of strengths and weaknesses that develops between the United States and its rivals, Russia and China, and also in view of the interpretation later given to their actions during the crisis – in the US political system, in the administration itself, and in Congress.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen