



# War in Ukraine in a Polarised America

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RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

America's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine surprised many analysts, both because of its severity, and because of the speed and vigour with which it was implemented. Yet President Biden's policy toward the war in Ukraine has also been noteworthy because of the bipartisan support it has enjoyed at home. Americans have become used to hyper-partisanship as a defining feature of their government and politics, but Biden's policies of support for Ukraine have engendered a rare instance of cross-party unity in Washington, DC. For how long will US support for Ukraine endure? And what are the limits of bipartisanship? In this article, we argue that the key to answering these and related questions is to ascertain the national interests that US leaders view as being at stake in the war. After considering three rival explanations of US policy toward Ukraine, however, we conclude that it is difficult to determine whether there is any stable intersubjective understanding of the US interest in Ukrainian security. The future of America's engagement in Ukraine will depend upon how the war is experienced, processed, and politicised by actors on the home front.

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## KEYWORDS:

United States; Ukraine;  
Russia; domestic politics;  
interventionism

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Harris P, Marinova I, Gricius G.  
War in Ukraine in a Polarised  
America. *LSE Public Policy  
Review*. 2023; 3(1): 12, pp. 1–8.  
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31389/  
lsepr.89](https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepr.89)

To what extent does Ukraine ‘matter’ to the United States? Before the war, it was fair to assume that a sizable gap existed between US rhetoric about Ukrainian security and Washington’s willingness to act in defense of the country. At least, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and eight years of war in the Donbas had elicited only a modest response from the United States. President Obama, for example, imposed economic sanctions and diplomatic punishments upon Russia from 2014 onwards but refused Ukraine’s requests for lethal military aid with which to combat Russian-backed separatists. President Trump, meanwhile, cared so little about Ukrainian security that he infamously threatened to withhold aid unless his counterpart President Zelensky would agree to investigate alleged corruption involving Joe Biden’s son, Hunter Biden. This apparent ‘quid pro quo’ was what led to Trump’s first impeachment by the US House of Representatives. Assessing the situation in late 2021 and early 2022, it would hardly have been surprising if Russian leaders had concluded that US support for Ukraine was nothing more than cheap talk. The revealed preference of America’s leaders, it seemed, was to avoid the vertical or horizontal escalation of the smoldering war in eastern Ukraine, even if this meant tolerating Russia’s violation of global norms regarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the non-use of military force.

In the event, of course, the United States responded to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 with vigour and resolve. Helped by the fact that US intelligence services had correctly assessed Moscow’s intention to invade, President Biden wasted no time mobilising US allies and a large number of non-aligned countries to condemn the Putin regime at the United Nations and in other international fora. Biden also unleashed economic sanctions of unprecedented breadth and depth on the Russian economy, despite the predictable costs that these measures would entail for US firms and consumers [1,2]. Most importantly, the Biden Administration involved itself in the physical conduct of the war by sharing intelligence with the Ukrainian military, by providing essential financial and humanitarian assistance to Kyiv, by supplying vital arms and ammunition, and by providing training to Ukrainian forces. The scale of this support has been impressive, including thousands of Stinger (anti-aircraft) and Javelin (anti-tank) missiles, dozens of howitzers and high mobility artillery rocket systems (‘HIMARS’), Abrams tanks, and even the Patriot missile defence system [3–5]. Indeed, the quality and quantity of US involvement in the conflict led some astute observers to question whether Washington could accurately be described as anything other than an active belligerent [6]. Yet despite the high level of risk that obviously comes along with participating in a third party’s war with Russia – a nuclear-armed power that borders several US treaty allies – President Biden’s support for Ukraine enjoyed broad bipartisan support in Congress and the country at large. This is a rare instance of cross-party consensus in an era defined by polarisation, hyper-partisanship, and political dysfunction [7].

What explains the contrast between America’s lacklustre support for Ukraine before February 2022 and its robust engagement in the conflict since Russia’s full-scale invasion took place? In this article, we consider three stylised rationalisations of US policy toward Ukraine and explore the implications of each explanation. While the available evidence does not permit us to make any strong claims about which account of US policy might be superior to the alternatives – not least of all because the war in Ukraine is still ongoing – our analysis at least suggests that the future of US support for Ukraine will be critically dependent upon how the war is experienced, processed, and politicised at home. America’s response to the war has been robust over the past year, but there are reasons to suspect that this level of support could become unsupportable if the domestic context shifts.

## **BELATED BALANCING, OVERREACH, OR BLOODLETTING?**

One way to understand why the United States rushed to support Ukraine in February 2022, despite having done relatively little in Ukraine’s material defense for the prior eight years, is to frame the response as an overdue balancing behaviour. From this view, the United States should have done much more to contain the Russian threat from 2014 to 2022 given the obvious, real, and present danger that Moscow posed to transatlantic security [8]. The correct response to the annexation of Crimea would have been to check Russian aggression through the provision of lethal aid to Ukraine, the expansion of US deployments to Eastern Europe, and perhaps even the admission of Ukraine into the NATO alliance. The implied counterfactual is

that Russia would never have invaded Ukraine in 2022 if the United States had done more by way of credible deterrence. That the Obama and Trump administrations failed to take such measures must have been the result of some set of domestic-level pathologies such as the war-weariness of the US public, the personal failings of individual leaders, or political dysfunction in Washington, DC [8]. Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however, any domestic impediments to balancing against Russia were pushed aside. Popular revulsion at Putin's war, stirring media coverage of the invasion, and a swell of elite-level support for intervention gave the Biden Administration the political cover necessary to mobilise the United States behind an adroit foreign policy the likes of which should properly have been in place since 2014 or perhaps even 2008.

An opposite view is that US leaders before February 2022 had been wise to prioritise peaceful bilateral relations with Russia over the absolute security of Ukraine. From this perspective, President Biden has not so much skilfully recalibrated US policy toward Ukraine as he has overreacted, overreached, and deviated from a more sober course. The invasion of Ukraine was an appalling violation of international law, but did not come anywhere close to threatening US national security. While the United States does have some limited interests at stake in Ukraine, these do not justify the level of risk that Biden has assumed with its bold measures to defend Kyiv [9]. This view of US policy toward Ukraine is typically favoured by realist (or 'restrainer') scholars and analysts, who worry that the United States risks sparking a full-blown conflagration with Russia over an issue that, at base, has little relation to core US interests. As Ben Friedman has argued, 'The war has a low probability of a serious escalation, but the longer you continue to roll those dice, even if the odds are low, the more likely you are to hit on a future disaster' [10]. Instead of providing Ukraine with a blank cheque to prosecute its war against Russia, this line of reasoning holds that US interests would be best served by diplomacy to bring the war to a swift conclusion – even if this means tolerating some territorial gains for Russia [9].

A third explanation is that Ukraine's fate *per se* does not matter much to the United States, but the unexpected opportunity to weaken Russia is one that the US government has been highly motivated to seize post-February 2022. After 2014, the United States was muted in its response to Ukrainian insecurity because there were not obvious options for using the Crimean annexation or the war in the Donbas as entry points for engineering the enervation of the Putin regime. But once Russia initiated its full-scale invasion of Ukraine – and especially after Kyiv's forces began to inflict heavy losses upon the Russian military – officials in Washington were quick to identify an opportunity to turn the war into a blistering defeat for a longstanding Great Power rival. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin lent some credence to this view when he described US policy as one of ensuring that Russia would never again be able to wage a similar invasion in the future [11], which several commentators took as an admission that US policy was now to destroy as many Russian forces as possible [12–14]. Viewed through this lens, what the United States is doing to Russia in Ukraine is a cynical, opportunistic, and self-serving policy of bloodletting – an attempt to degrade a rival power – rather than a defense of strict national interests or international norms [15 p155].

Which of these explanations is correct? Should US policy toward the war in Ukraine be viewed as a necessary corrective to an ill-fated policy of under-balancing against Russia? Is the United States alternatively guilty of overreach and overreaction? Or are US leaders engaged in a cold and calculated policy of bloodletting against a Great Power rival? These are important questions. If answers could be furnished, then analysts would be far better equipped to understand the present and future contours of US policy toward Ukraine and Russia. If the US political class has truly determined that Ukraine's survival is integral to US national security, for example, then bipartisanship on the question of military support for Kyiv can be expected to persist; the Russian threat will induce leaders in Washington to put aside their partisan differences in service of a well-understood national interest. On the other hand, if the Biden Administration can credibly be portrayed as overreaching in Ukraine then it follows that, at some point, savvy political entrepreneurs in Washington will recognise the advantage in telegraphing this message to the voting public; as a result, it should be expected that leading politicians (especially those in the party out of power) will stake out positions in opposition to the war, perhaps hastening the demise of US backing for Ukraine. The same is true if the White House has primarily been motivated by a desire to weaken and punish Russia. A cynical and unnecessary policy of

bloodletting would be hard to justify to the general public, not least of all because it carries high risks of provoking an increasingly desperate Russian regime to attack NATO, and so would ultimately be vulnerable to objections at the domestic level.

## DISSECTING BIDEN'S CONSTRAINED INTERVENTION

Alas, as noted above, the available evidence makes it difficult – if not entirely impossible – to discern at this juncture whether and to what extent US leaders truly view national interests to be at stake in Ukraine. Part of the problem is that President Biden has responded to the war in Ukraine by pursuing what we call ‘constrained interventionism’. This is a hybrid approach that blends elements of militarism, interventionism, and risk-taking with instances of restraint, buck-passing, and circumspection. From a foreign policy perspective, there are obvious benefits to such a strategy: the Biden Administration is clearly aspiring to check Russian aggression and buoy the government in Kyiv while still respecting some firm boundaries when it comes to dealing with Russia. But for the time being, constrained interventionism is proving to be a difficult animal to dissect. Elements of the strategy are consistent with all of the stylised models of US policy described above. This makes it challenging to identify clear evidence of what is truly driving America’s engagement in the Ukraine War and to what extent disquiet with these policies has the potential to metastasise into fully fledged opposition to the Biden approach.

To some analysts, the ‘interventionist’ components of Biden’s strategy toward the war in Ukraine are evidence that the United States is engaged in overdue balancing behaviour against the Russian regime. The provision of financial and humanitarian assistance to the government of Ukraine; the supply of military aid, and the gradual expansion of this aid to include high-value weapons systems such as Patriot missile systems and Abrams tanks; intelligence sharing with Ukrainian forces; and determined efforts to isolate Russia as much as possible on the world stage – all of these policies and others like them suggest that President Biden views Russia as an existential threat to US national security and the world order upon which a wide range of US interests depend. Viewed from Europe, Biden’s clear leadership on Ukraine has been interpreted as welcome evidence that the United States remains committed to the transatlantic alliance despite the tumult of the Trump years, the chaotic (and unilateral) withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the so-called ‘pivot’ to Asia.

To other analysts, however, the ‘constrained’ elements of Biden’s approach to the war are reason enough to suspect that the White House understands Ukraine’s fate to be something far less than an existential issue for the United States. On the contrary, it seems plausible that President Biden’s *overriding* goal in Ukraine is not to see Russian forces ejected from the occupied territories but to minimise the risk of a Russian attack on the United States or a NATO ally. Toward this end, the United States has prevented partners in Europe from supplying Ukraine with fighter jets, for example, while summarily dismissing proposals such as the designation of no-fly zones above Ukraine, the blockade of Russian ports, or the deployment of regular US forces to western Ukraine (although a small number of US special forces have been operating in areas of Ukraine under Kyiv’s control). Tellingly, the United States has also refused to endorse Kyiv’s bid for membership of NATO – an uncompromising position that would seem to betray a hard reality that the Biden Administration does not, in fact, view Ukraine’s security as something worth fighting for.

At the same time, there is also compelling evidence to suggest that the United States is engaged in bloodletting in Ukraine – at least to a degree. Secretary Austin’s comment about wanting to ‘weaken’ Russia, noted above, is the most obvious case in point [11]. But which explanation of US foreign policy toward Ukraine is most accurate? Unfortunately, there is precious little evidence to allow objective analysts to discriminate between the rival explanations laid out above. Overdue balancing, overreaction and overreach, and bloodletting – each of these explanations can plausibly account for the strategy of constrained intervention. To understand which causal logic(s) might actually be at play, new evidence will be needed regarding US interests, intentions, and risk-acceptance – evidence that has yet to be observed, and will only become available with the passage of time.

So far, we have argued that the question of how US elites are defining national interests in relation to Ukraine is of critical importance to understanding the future of US policy toward the war, but also that this question is unanswerable at this juncture. However, it is worth emphasising that America's support for Ukraine will also be contingent upon how the war is 'felt' in domestic politics beyond the Beltway. The insight here is that leaders are not always empowered to pursue national interests as they see fit. On the contrary, the ideas and interests of ordinary people often intervene to upend decision-makers' plans or else encourage leaders to change their minds about the desired ends and means of foreign and defense policy. This makes it even more challenging to say with confidence what is causing the US response to the war in Ukraine, and when and why America's support for Kyiv might falter.

In broad terms, the war in Ukraine promises to affect America's domestic politics in three interrelated ways: short-term economic, long-term fiscal, and party-political. First and foremost, there is the short-term economic cost of the war. By moving to buoy the government of Ukraine and supply advanced weapons, America is ensuring that Ukraine does not lose its fight for national survival. Yet the United States will pay an economic price for as long as the war continues [1,2]. Given that Ukraine is a major supplier of grain and Russia is a major exporter of energy (oil and natural gas) to world markets, it was inescapable that the disruptions of war would push up prices in the United States and around the world – and at a time when inflation was (and remains) high because of the Covid-19 pandemic [15]. Going forward, it will matter enormously whether the US media and voting public remain broadly supportive of Ukraine despite the negative impact upon US households or whether the United States begins to experience some fatigue with the war, perhaps even growing to resent the government in Kyiv for refusing to make peace with Putin's Russia.

There are also long-term costs to the US taxpayer that are taking shape because of the war in Ukraine. While the money spent on the war (estimated at around \$75bn by February 2023) is manageable when viewed in the context of the overall US defense budget, the conflict has been used by the Biden Administration and members of Congress to justify higher defense spending into the future. Any suspicions (or hopes) that President Biden might be intent on downsizing the US military and shifting national resources from guns to butter should therefore be laid to rest. Counterintuitively, however, it is not always Russia being portrayed as the primary exigency requiring the United States to spend more on defense; even after the invasion of Ukraine was well underway, the Department of Defense was describing China – not Russia – as the 'pacing challenge' to the United States. Since February 2022, the US government has been emphatic that expanded military commitments in Europe will not prevent upgrades to US capabilities in the Indo-Pacific designed to meet the challenges posed by a rising China. Needless to say, waging broad-based strategies of containment against two Great Power rivals on either side of the Eurasian landmass will not be cheap. For these reasons, the long-term costs of the war (and the US response to it) should be considered highly significant from a fiscal perspective.

Third, the war has shown some early signs of becoming a position issue in US politics – that is, an issue that politicians in both parties may choose to seize upon in order to make broader points about foreign and defense policy. In October 2022, for example, progressive Democrats released a letter calling for President Biden to support talks to end the war in Ukraine. While these legislators later walked back their letter (blaming its accidental and unauthorised release on a staff member), the incident at least hinted at uneasiness among left-wing Democrats regarding the Biden Administration's interventionist approach. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Republicans have been even more vocal with their criticisms of Biden's strategy. Even though only a handful of Republicans have called for US support to be terminated, a growing number have found it expedient to caution against giving Kyiv unrestricted aid (a so-called 'blank cheque'), including the two most likely figures to represent the party in the 2024 presidential election: Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis [16,17].

It is important not to overstate the significance of Ukraine in US domestic politics. The war did not seem to be a high-salience issue during the 2022 midterm elections, for example. But there are emerging signs that the war in Eastern Europe is exerting sizeable effects upon the economy, government, and politics of the United States. The current upshot is that President Biden seems to feel empowered (or even compelled) to 'stay the course' in Ukraine lest he

resurrect popular memory of his chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. But this calculus could yet shift in response to changing conditions at the domestic level, especially in the run-up to and aftermath of next year's presidential election.

## CONCLUSION: REVEALED PREFERENCES OR CONCEALED FRACTURES?

In the final analysis, the war in Ukraine can be said to have revealed some things about US foreign policy and domestic politics while making it harder to discern other patterns. Counterintuitively, the war might have revealed precious little about the importance of Eastern Europe to the United States. It is tempting to conclude, of course, that America's deep engagement in the Ukraine War is evidence that this region of Eurasia matters more to the United States than had previously been appreciated (the 'belated balancing' explanation). But we have cautioned against treating US involvement in the war as dispositive evidence that Ukraine's security is a national interest of the United States. There are other plausible explanations of America's conduct over the past year ('overreach' or 'bloodletting') that do not assume any strong US interest in Ukrainian security *per se*. To be sure, the available evidence is clear that a broad-based majority of the US political class is willing to back an intervention to defend Ukraine so far – but there is also evidence that some US leaders are looking for ways to politicise the war for narrow partisan gain. It is not at all clear, therefore, that the recent history of US support for Ukraine is rooted in immutable material interests.

One thing the war *has* revealed, perhaps, is that policies of retrenchment and restraint remain unpopular in US politics – or, at least, risky for politicians to embrace [18]. Interventionism, on the other hand, continues to enjoy a wellspring of support at home. Even leaders who oppose US support for Ukraine tend to couch their opposition in language much different from restraint, usually arguing that the United States should be doing much more to balance against China in the Indo-Pacific. This general climate of anti-restraint and anti-retrenchment sentiment is nothing new, of course. President Trump ran up against these same ideational roadblocks when he proposed retrenchment from Afghanistan, Syria, South Korea, and elsewhere. President Biden endured some of the strongest criticisms of his presidency when he ended the twenty-year war in Afghanistan. But even so, it is notable that the US political class has (so far) determined that the United States must be engaged in Ukraine and should use its enormous material and soft power to influence the war's trajectory. Even if the political foundations of US interventionism are showing some visible signs of decay, they seem to be in much finer fettle than some analysts (and even President Putin) had suspected prior to February 2022.

Perhaps most importantly for analysts of US foreign policy, however, the Ukraine War might be concealing some long-term fractures among the US political class. Broadly speaking, the strategy of constrained interventionism is one that most national-level leaders can get behind. So far, the two parties and most individual lawmakers have sought to distinguish themselves from each other in ways that do not risk contradicting the overall consensus that the United States ought to be backing Ukraine. But cracks in this consensus are not hard to discern and may yet widen, especially if the war continues for years and the domestic implications for United States become ever more apparent [19,20]. Indeed, it would be unusual if political polarisation and hyper-partisanship did not emerge as features of the domestic debate over Ukraine, just as they are features of most other national-level conversations. Today, the most obvious signs of dissent come from Republicans [21], some of whom have sensed an opportunity to benefit from public scepticism about 'black cheque' support for Kyiv. Even Kevin McCarthy, Speaker of the House since January 2023, has repeatedly insisted that US support for Ukraine should be provided within limits – a position supported by the far right of the Republicans in Congress as well as conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation [22,23]. If the Republican Party takes control of the White House in 2024, with or without majorities in Congress, the conditions will be ripe for a significant change in approach.

The war in Ukraine was a major exogenous shock to US politics and foreign policy, jolting the Biden Administration to overhaul its approach to European security and forcing other domestic actors to develop their own coherent narratives to make sense of Russia's war of choice. To some, the invasion was evidence that the United States should do more to combat Russia, China, and other would-be revisionist powers, perhaps at the expense of engagement in

peripheral countries such as Afghanistan [24]. To others, the war has been a reminder that the United States must redouble its efforts to minimise the risk of conflict with its Great Power rivals in a multipolar world, lest the war in Ukraine (or a future war over Taiwan) result in calamitous results. For the past year, Biden's pragmatic policy of constrained intervention has succeeded at bridging these rival sensibilities as well as the wider fractures that plague contemporary US politics; most people in the United States have found something to like about the policy, helping to avoid a situation where the war in Ukraine becomes just another issue over which US politicians fight tooth and nail. However, as the war drags on – and as its implications continue to be felt by people in the United States and their elected representatives – more will become clear about the extent of US interests in Ukraine and the likely future of US commitments to the region. Dramatic shifts in policy are not out of the question.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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#### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

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DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31389/  
lseppr.89](https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.89)

**Submitted:** 03 April 2023

**Accepted:** 12 June 2023

**Published:** 08 September 2023

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