

FOREIGN POLICY

FOR AMERICA

Ukraine – Background & Talking Points Memo

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Background

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of “special military operations in Ukraine.” Shortly after, Russian forces began a multi-front, full-scale invasion of Ukraine and launched aerial, ground, and artillery attacks on Ukrainian cities including Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Mariupol. Putin has longed to bring Ukraine back into Russia’s fold, which he views as fundamentally part of Russia’s culture and history. With possible Ukrainian admission to NATO on the horizon, Putin has attempted to change the European security architecture and challenge NATO expansion.

Heroic resistance by the Ukrainian military has derailed Putin’s plans for a swift and decisive victory across multiple fronts. More than a year and a half later, Ukrainian forces have been able to reclaim areas where Russian forces rapidly advanced, especially on the northeastern border. The southern portion of the country—including Crimea—abutting Russia remains under Russian control and access to the Black Sea is compromised.

Over the course of the conflict, military forces under Putin’s command have perpetrated atrocities. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has confirmed [9,444 civilian deaths](#), but the actual number is likely to be much higher. Approximately [14 million civilians have been displaced](#) by the war and more than [17.6 million people need humanitarian assistance](#). An independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine has [identified multiple war crimes](#) committed by Russian forces including, “attacks on civilians and energy-related infrastructure, willful killings, unlawful confinement, torture, rape and other sexual violence, as well as unlawful transfers and deportations of children.”

Putin has also weaponized global food and energy supplies. He has cancelled the Black Sea grain deal brokered by Turkey and the UN last year, preventing Ukrainian crops and fertilizer exports from leaving ports in the Black Sea. The blockade of one of the world’s biggest grain suppliers has caused world food prices to soar and led to shortages in the Middle East and Africa. He has also drastically cut Russian oil and natural gas supplies to Europe, which depends on Russia for nearly 40% of its natural gas needs, creating global energy insecurity.

The United States has played a pivotal leadership role in rallying allies and partners to assist Ukraine’s defense. Historic efforts by the State Department, the Defense Department, and White House have built a massive coalition of international actors to provide security and economic assistance to Ukraine and hold Russia accountable for its aggression. From the start, the United States has worked in lockstep with allies in NATO, the EU and beyond to coordinate

the strategic rollout of sanctions on Putin, his political allies, and sectors critical to Russia's warfighting capabilities. Robust, U.S.-led diplomacy has strengthened NATO's ability to act collectively in the face of Russia's aggression, underscoring the importance of our stalwart commitment to the Atlantic Alliance.

So far, Biden Administration efforts have been bolstered by broad bipartisan outrage over Russia's invasion. [Congress has approved](#) over \$48 billion in supplemental appropriations for security assistance and \$30 billion in economic and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since February 2022, as well as billions more to replenish Department of Defense stocks provided to Ukraine. So far, the United States has provided more than [\\$43 billion in security](#) assistance, enabling the Administration to provide needed weapons and training to Ukraine. In August, the White House submitted an [emergency request of \\$24 billion](#) in FY2024 supplemental funding for Ukraine. The request includes \$10.5 billion in security assistance to Ukraine and other countries affected by the war, including \$4.5 billion to replenish DOD stocks, \$5 billion for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, and \$1 billion in Foreign Military Financing.

Ukraine is now several months into its long-awaited counteroffensive to retake Russian occupied territory. While progress has been slow, some breakthrough of Russia's defenses has been possible near Zaporizhzhia. So far, Ukrainian [military casualties](#) include close to 70,000 killed and 100,000-120,000 wounded. Russian military casualties are much higher at 120,000 killed and approximately 170,000-180,000 wounded.

Talking Points

Russia's Illegal War

- Vladimir Putin's unprovoked, full-scale invasion of Ukraine is illegal and unacceptable. It shakes the very foundations of international security and is a threat to democracy everywhere. The United States has mobilized an overwhelming international coalition to ensure that Russia's actions are met with severe economic and diplomatic consequences and that the people of Ukraine have the humanitarian and security assistance they need.
- There is no justification for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and President Putin and his cronies bear full responsibility for this war.
- The Russian government continues to promote fantastical conspiracy theories and misinformation to justify its war of aggression and avoid accountability for its horrific actions in Ukraine. Its leadership must be held accountable by the international community.

Democracy and Rule of Law

- By ruthlessly violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russia's unprovoked invasion is an egregious affront to the very foundation of the rules-based international order that keeps America and the world safe. **The international community cannot allow or normalize Russia's illegal seizure of Ukraine's sovereign territory, which**

would simply embolden Putin's territorial ambitions elsewhere and encourage other would-be aggressors to attack their neighbors.

- **This war is bigger than Russia; it's about the world we want to live in.** Either we let authoritarian governments ignore international rules and standards, threaten sovereignty and territorial integrity, carve out spheres of influence through the brutal use of force, and carry out their will unchecked, or we work together to protect an international community undergirded by freedom, democracy, and human rights.
- Ensuring Ukrainian success has implications for other conflict issues and deterrence lessons for future territorial aggression in Ukraine and beyond.

International Solidarity

- The Biden Administration's response to the invasion has been the right one. U.S.-led diplomatic efforts have delivered a **historic coalition of more than 50 allies and partners** to support Ukraine and confront and hold accountable Russian aggression.
- Contrary to President Putin's claims, NATO is a defensive alliance – its driving principle is that “an attack against one Ally is considered as an attack against all Allies” – and has no interest in attacking Russia. Its members freely choose to be part of the alliance.
- In addition to providing security assistance to Ukraine, the United States has provided significant economic assistance to prevent the collapse of Ukraine's economy. It is also important to continue working with allies and partners to support countries neighboring Ukraine as they assist millions of refugees from the conflict, and welcome Ukrainian refugees to the United States.
- **We are not alone in our support, and our allies are making significant sacrifices as part of this effort.** The United States has led an unparalleled diplomatic effort to secure military and economic assistance contributions from our allies and partners, providing Ukraine with critical capabilities and support. At least [11 European countries](#) have exceeded the United States in their contributions as a percentage of their total GDP.

U.S. Security Assistance

- U.S. security assistance has been critical in helping Ukraine defend its freedom from Russian aggression. The National Defense Strategy highlights Russia as an acute threat and deterring Russian aggression as vital to our national interest. Through our security assistance to Ukraine, the United States has been successful in supporting Ukraine in denying Russian victory, eroding Russian military capabilities, and deterring Russia from attacking beyond Ukraine targets.
- Ongoing and bipartisan Congressional support has been an important demonstration of the America's unwavering commitment to our alliances and partners, the rules-based international order, and the values that undergirds it. **This isn't charity—it is an investment in a more stable and peaceful world and ultimately makes America safer.**
- President Biden has made clear that U.S. troops will not be deployed to defend Ukraine, which is not a NATO member. **We are providing robust support now to prevent a future and more disastrous confrontation with Russia. The investment we make now in Ukraine's security is far less than what we would have to pay for a larger**

conflict in which we are directly engaged. U.S. security assistance is critical to ensuring that Ukraine is successful, the fighting ends on their terms, and any resolution prevents any future aggression from Russia to Ukraine or elsewhere.

Reactive Q&A

Q. What about our own border and the threat to territorial sovereignty posed by illegal immigrants?

A. Nothing about our response to Russia's brutal aggression precludes us from securing or addressing humanitarian conditions at our southern border. The United States can—and should—continue to uphold and protect the international principles that keep us safe abroad at the same time that we are making resources available to the Department of Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection to secure our borders.

Q. What about Ukraine's struggle with corruption?

A. We don't condone corruption and misuse of security assistance and neither does President Zelensky. He has introduced several anticorruption initiatives and has welcomed high level discussions with the U.S. and partners on this matter. The recent resignation of the Ukrainian Defense Minister is an example of just how seriously this matter is being taken by the Ukrainian Government. Moreover, the inspectors general of the State Department, Defense Department, and USAID have pledged to conduct robust oversight of how U.S. assistance is spent in Ukraine. Waste, fraud, and abuse in any government program should always be a top concern for policymakers, but stopping all assistance to Ukraine rather than taking steps to root out corruption and implement oversight requirements would punish the people of Ukraine and be a win for Russia, not those responsible for the immediate crimes.

Q. Why are we in a proxy war that could escalate into a more direct confrontation with Russia? What is our end game and strategy? The lack of diplomatic strategy and unfettered aid will prolong the war.

A. There are no U.S. troops fighting in this war and President Biden has been appropriately cautious in avoiding a direct confrontation with Russia. President Biden has made clear that U.S. troops will not be deployed to defend Ukraine, which is not a NATO member. **We are giving them the tools, but it is the Ukrainian military and people who are the ones on the battlefield sacrificing their lives.** In coordination with our allies and partners from around the world, we are focused on providing robust and specific security assistance so that we can prevent a future and more disastrous confrontation with Russia. **If Russia is not stopped now, it is only a matter of time before the conflict spills over and we will have to consider military involvement, and it won't be on our terms.** We are looking to ensure that Ukraine is successful, the fighting ends on their terms, and any resolution prevents any future aggression from Russia to Ukraine or elsewhere. The Biden Administration has made it clear that we stand behind Ukraine in its diplomatic efforts to end the war on just terms.

Q. Why are we wasting our military resources on the wrong problem? China is the real threat and problem we should be preparing for.

A. We can and are doing both. These do not have to be mutually exclusive. The National Defense Strategy identifies Russian aggression as an acute threat, while China is the pacing challenge for competition. The Pentagon has taken steps to ensure that the aid provided to Ukraine does not trade-off with what our armed forces need to contend with other possible contingencies elsewhere in the world. U.S. efforts to mobilize a vast international coalition and impose costs on Russia has also sent a powerful message—including to the leadership in Beijing—that aggression will fail and be met with a potent international response. **Success in Ukraine remains vital to deterring possible PRC aggression against Taiwan or other U.S. partners and allies, and failure in Ukraine would only embolden would-be aggressors elsewhere.**

Q. It's been over 3 months into the counteroffensive, what do we have to show for it?

A. War and military operations are complex. Even with the best of planning and resources, the outcome is not guaranteed. The Ukrainian military has been extremely resourceful and has denied a decisive Russian victory with borrowed resources, rapid and compressed international training, and a more capable adversary. It is too soon to make a judgement about the counteroffensive. **Moreover, giving up on Ukraine would send a dangerous message to Putin that he can outlast and exhaust those opposing his brutal war.**

Q. We are running a \$2 trillion dollar deficit, we should be fixing our own problems.

A. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a U.S. and collective security problem. The National Defense Strategy highlights Russia as an acute threat and deterring Russian aggression as vital to national interest. Through our security assistance to Ukraine, the United States has been successful in supporting Ukraine in denying Russian victory, eroding Russian military capabilities, and deterring Russia from attacking beyond Ukrainian targets.

Items to Amplify:

- **Sen. Republican Leader Mitch McConnell on Ukraine:** <https://www.c-span.org/video/?530288-2/sen-republican-leader-mitch-mcconnell-ukraine>
- **Sen. Richard Blumenthal:** <https://twitter.com/SenBlumenthal/status/1699436491187831271>
- **Rep. Jason Crow:** <https://twitter.com/RepJasonCrow/status/1700354087064392059>
- **55+ NGOs Call on Congress to Provide Supplemental International Assistance:** <https://www.interaction.org/blog/55-ngos-call-on-congress-to-provide-supplemental-international-assistance/>
- **President Zelensky's Address to Congress:** <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/16/text-zelensky-address-congress/>

Have more questions? Contact:

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