

Biden at war: Inside a deliberate yet impulsive Ukraine strategy

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The crowd at Warsaw's Royal Castle was still jubilantly waving Polish and American flags when President Biden's aides realized they had a serious problem.

Biden had just delivered a forceful speech on March 26 in Poland's capital — seeking to rally the world against Russia's war in Ukraine — before [careening off-script in the final minute](#) of his remarks to seemingly call for the removal of Russian President Vladimir Putin: "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power."

Offstage — as their motorcade idled, waiting to spirit the U.S. president back to Air Force One and back to Washington — Biden's team raced to clean up his ad-lib.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan took the lead as the group debated its options, including just letting Biden's comments stand, with no walk-back. Biden himself — who ended his remarks at 6:43 p.m. — also helped workshop and sign off on a statement.

At 7:20 p.m., aides blasted out a clarification: The president's point, they said, "was that Putin cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbors or the region. He was not discussing Putin's power in Russia or regime change."

The 37-minute scramble to clarify Biden's nine-word gaffe, details of which have not been previously reported, illustrates the singular role Biden has played during Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine — at times emotional and freewheeling, at other times carefully choreographed and deliberate, but frequently a central player in helping to marshal the West's response to Russia. As the war enters its seventh week Thursday, Biden has left his distinct imprint on the crisis — in ways both intentional and not, and in ways that have both clarified and complicated the situation.

The president is considered a foreign-policy hand — the former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — with a broad aversion to military adventurism. Early in his presidency, he unilaterally pulled out of the 20-year war in Afghanistan. And with Ukraine, he has certain clear lines he hasn't crossed — a no-fly zone above Ukraine, or U.S. combat troops on the ground in the country. He has said repeatedly that he does not want the conflict to escalate into a direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia — a possibility he likens to "World War III."

But Biden's response to the crisis has also been deeply emotional. It led him to make off-the-cuff comments, as he did in Warsaw. And it led him, earlier in March in Washington, to get ahead of his own administration — and the international community — when [he dubbed Putin a “war criminal.”](#)

“For Biden, this is personal,” said Alina Polyakova, president and CEO of the Center for European Policy Analysis. “He spent a huge amount of time working on Ukraine when he was vice president. I think he's deeply invested personally in the future of the country, and I think he personally sees this as his major test for his presidency.”

And in a few instances — such as his March 8 decision to ban Russian oil and gas imports and impose new trade restrictions on Russia — Biden has been nudged into a decision he previously opposed under pressure from Congress or international allies.

This portrait of Biden at war is the result of interviews with 24 senior White House officials, lawmakers, congressional aides, diplomats and foreign policy experts, many of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity to share candid insights.

In Warsaw, hours before he veered off-script, Biden met with Ukrainian refugees newly arrived in Poland. He held a young, pink-clad girl aloft, wrapping his arms around her legs, and later spoke of “the depth and strength of the human spirit” before calling Putin “a butcher.”

Back in Washington after his trip, Biden was asked about his call for Putin to leave power. He claimed he was not articulating a new U.S. policy during the speech, nor was he walking back anything afterward.

“I was expressing the moral outrage that I feel,” Biden said, “and I make no apologies for it.”

When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) was asked during a March 3 news conference about a proposed halt to Russian oil and gas imports, she answered quickly: “I'm all for that — ban it.”

There was one big sticking point: Biden and his team were publicly opposed to the idea. One week after Russia invaded Ukraine, the top Democratic and Republican leaders heading the House and Senate finance committees had begun discussing how to craft a bipartisan deal that would hurt Russia economically after negotiations on sanctions fell apart in the Senate.

In announcing her support for an oil and gas ban, Pelosi was breaking with the Democratic president and his team. Administration officials were worried about skyrocketing gas prices as well as the possible ramifications of such a policy without the support of their European allies, who are much more reliant on Russian energy.

At the time, the legislation also included measures to restrict trade with Russia, and the White House was hoping to delay or kill the effort. Though Biden and his advisers had privately decided they were fine supporting the Russian energy import ban, they were still more skittish when it came to the trade portions of the bill, officials said.

Executive staff members had already begun expressing their concern to the relevant committees about passing such a bill without the administration's approval, and urged them to hold off until they could ensure the international community would support their provisions.

But momentum was rapidly shifting away from the White House.

Two days later, a Saturday, [Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky](#) virtually addressed [members of Congress](#). For roughly an hour, the Ukrainian leader pleaded with lawmakers to send military support in the form of weapons, antitank and anti-air missile systems, and asked for the United States to institute a no-fly zone over Ukraine. He also requested that the United States start hitting Putin where it hurt, asking for direct sanctions on the Russian president and the banning of oil imports.

Lawmakers left the meeting with Zelensky eager to support the Ukrainian president. That Monday, committee leaders announced a rare bipartisan deal, a version of which Congress sent to Biden's desk Thursday — [a proposal that would ban Russian oil and gas imports](#) in the United States; limit trade relationships with Russia and its neighboring ally Belarus; and force U.S. trade representatives to begin looking into how they could temporarily suspend Russia's participation in the World Trade Organization.

Later that same day, Biden picked up the phone.

In an evening call with Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.), Biden asked the Democratic leaders to stand down on the legislation, which still included the trade restrictions. Pelosi, however, made clear how important it was to show Congress's support for Ukraine through a rare bipartisan deal that both chambers could agree on, three people familiar with the call said.

Pelosi also told Biden that, politically, it was important to get Republicans to support the energy ban because it would make it harder for them to blame Biden for any future gas price hikes, these people said.

She said she was open to discussing removing some of the trade provisions — the part of the legislation that most concerned Biden — but said limits on Russian energy would get a vote no matter what, these people added.

"We're going forward," Pelosi told the president, one of these people said.

The next day, Biden announced he would support a ban on energy imports even without the backing of the international community.

"We will not be part of subsidizing Putin's war," Biden said, announcing the ban from the Roosevelt Room.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, White House aides had been working to alert allies to their change in plans.

Victoria Nuland, the undersecretary of state for political affairs, had initially told Group of Seven allies that the United States was still exploring a ban on Russian oil and gas, according to two people familiar with the meeting. Nuland reconvened the allies to inform them that Biden would be announcing a ban after all.

And Barbara Pompili, France's minister of ecological transition, said later that Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm had called "to warn me a few days before the announcement, because they don't want to put us in a difficult situation."

Finally, late on Wednesday, March 9 — six days after Pelosi first announced her support — the House approved the legislation banning Russian oil and gas imports, as well as directing the U.S. trade representative to use "the voice and influence of the United States" at the WTO to condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine and encourage it to force Russia out of trade relations.

Later in the week, Pelosi began her remarks to reporters attending a Democratic retreat in Philadelphia by applauding the president for supporting the provisions.

"I want to commend the president for his extraordinary leadership," she said.

The comment — like so many asides from Biden — was impromptu and unplanned. Speaking March 16 at an event to celebrate the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act, Biden turned and responded to a reporter's shouted question about Putin.

Yes, [Biden affirmed](#), "I think Putin is a war criminal."

The next day, Biden doubled down, calling Putin "a murderous dictator, a pure thug, who is waging an immoral war against the people of Ukraine."

But the administration at that point had not made an assessment on whether Russian forces had committed war crimes, which would come six days later.

It was emblematic of Biden's approach to the Ukraine crisis, where his deliberate machinations have frequently been upended by his tendency to speak from a place of emotion.

At the time, asked about Biden's "war criminal" assertion, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said, "He was speaking from his heart and speaking from what we've seen on television, which is barbaric actions by a brutal dictator through his invasion of a foreign country."

The approach has served to personalize the crisis, in ways that can cause complications. Moscow immediately condemned Biden's war criminal remark as "unacceptable and unforgivable."

Similarly, Biden's later remarks about Putin not remaining in power may have fed the Russian leader's paranoia in a way that U.S. officials had sought to avoid.

For Biden, however, the crisis in Ukraine is deeply personal. As President Barack Obama's No. 2, Biden served as the administration's point person on Ukraine, having visited the country six times during that period and developing [an especially close relationship with former leader Petro Poroshenko](#), with whom he had at least 50 calls and meetings.

He devotes much of the epilogue of his 2017 memoir, “Promise Me, Dad,” to a speech he delivered to Ukraine’s parliament, the Rada, at the end of 2015, after Russia annexed Crimea and Ukraine was still working to become a fledgling Western democracy.

Calling it “as important a speech as I had ever made in Europe,” Biden writes, “I told them they had arrived at a moment of being able to create a real, independent, and sustainable democracy in Ukraine that was akin to America’s own revolutionary moment more than two hundred years earlier.”

Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said Biden’s personalization of the conflict with Russia can also be an asset.

“I think it galvanizes the attention of the world about how horrific the actions [are] that Putin’s been taking here: the war crimes that are being committed, the inhumanity that is being exhibited,” Menendez said. “President Biden is a very soulful person. He’s a man of deep faith, and I’m sure he sees these atrocities and he ultimately speaks as to what’s in his heart, and in some respects that’s refreshing.”

As the war in Ukraine approached the end of its first month, aides say, Biden realized the crisis was only going to get harder.

The devastating images from Eastern Europe that had rallied the world in moral outrage against Russia could lose their shock value, and the adrenaline and momentum that had launched the Western alliance into fierce action might start to fade. Fissures and new challenges were likely to emerge.

The allies, Biden decided, needed to gather in person.

Biden’s team, knowing there was already a European Council meeting scheduled in Brussels in late March, sprang to action. Julianne Smith, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, organized a NATO meeting in Belgium’s capital for the same day, and Biden advisers also decided to try to pull the G-7 nations together for a meeting. Germany, the current chair of the G-7, invited Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to fly in for the gathering, and he agreed.

Biden said, ‘I’m coming to NATO on this day,’ and we were all like, ‘Great, we’ll come, too,’” said one European diplomat, explaining how the United States spearheaded the day of meetings in Brussels on March 24.

The goal was both to discuss NATO’s role in deterrence and security assistance for Ukraine, as well as the E.U. role in sanctions and export controls — and, equally important, to keep the allies unified against Russia.

In some respects, Biden’s handling of the crisis has been a success story for his administration. He came to office promising to restore America’s credibility on the global stage and, unlike under former president Donald Trump— who repeatedly threatened to dismantle NATO —

foreign leaders and diplomats say the military alliance is stronger than it has been in decades. Biden has even found some spots of rare bipartisan agreement at home.

From the beginning, Biden has been generally clear about U.S. strategic objectives, and his leadership has helped define the contours of the conflict. Before Russia invaded, Biden signed off on a decision to declassify intelligence and share it widely, both with allies and the public.

He also outlined steps he was unwilling to take, because he feared such actions would put the United States on a path to direct military confrontation with Russia. He has said he will not send U.S. combat troops into Ukraine, nor will he support a no-fly zone there.

And it was Biden who, after consulting with military leaders and the intelligence community, made the decision not to help send Polish MiG fighter jets to Ukraine through the U.S. Ramstein Air Base in Germany, fearing it would be seen by Moscow as direct U.S. involvement.

“The amount of time that the president is spending on this, the meetings that they’re having every day — frequently late at night — this is not somebody who’s deferring big pieces of this policy to his Cabinet,” said Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, a global risk consultancy. “I think he’s very involved.”

Alongside allies in Brussels, Biden announced [a plan to reduce Europe’s reliance on Russian fossil fuels](#), which includes working to increase liquefied natural gas exports to Europe by at least 15 billion cubic meters this year. And he said the United States would take in 100,000 Ukrainian refugees, as well as provide \$1 billion in new humanitarian aid.

In Brussels, the G-7 also released a sharply worded statement warning Russia of the consequences of using chemical, biological or nuclear weapons in the conflict. But diplomats and U.S. officials said there was little discussion of specific scenarios — or hypothetical responses from the West — should Russia go ahead with such a move.

The Biden administration has stood up a second “Tiger Team” to internally game out different attacks and responses, but has been especially cautious about sharing any possible repercussions publicly.

“We’ve had the opportunity to coordinate with our allies. We’ve had the opportunity to get organized internally. We’ve been clear publicly that Russia would pay a severe price,” Sullivan told reporters, flying from Brussels to Poland on Air Force One. “And beyond that, I’m not going to speak further to the issue.”

Part of the reticence is because officials warn it is hard to know how to respond without knowing the form and scale of what Russia might do. A massive chemical attack on a residential area in Kyiv, for instance, is different than a targeted attack against the Ukrainian military in a less populous area. The United States and its allies believe Russia is likely to try to first test their resolve with a smaller attack on Ukrainian troops, several people familiar with the discussions said.

But in Brussels, another subtext for not wanting to draw a red line with Russia over chemical weapons was also clear, these people said. As president, Obama famously threatened to enforce a red line against such weapons in Syria, but then failed to act when the country's leader used chemical weapons on his own people.

“The main thing was learning lessons from Obama,” said the European diplomat. “We don’t want to set a red line and not stick to it.”

Already, some of the challenges Biden predicted when he gathered the NATO allies are starting to emerge. New evidence of Russian atrocities in Ukraine — including [gruesome images from Bucha](#) of dead bodies in the streets and evidence of executions and torture — have horrified much of the world, but [Europe remains divided on how much it can pare back its use of Russian energy](#) in response.

And despite Ukraine beating back the Russian military far more successfully than most anticipated, the fighting is expected to drag on. Speaking in the White House briefing room Monday, Sullivan said the administration believes “Russia is revising its war aims” and repositioning its forces in the eastern and southern parts of the country.

He said he expected Russia to focus its efforts on the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, but also warned that Moscow will continue air and missile strikes across the country — “frankly, to cause terror,” he said — in cities such as Kharkiv, Kyiv, Lviv, and Odessa.

Zelensky has tried to offer off-ramps to Russia, saying he could do so if he had certain security guarantees from the United States and other Western allies. But even if the West were willing to offer such assistance, one person familiar with the discussions said, there is skepticism that Putin would accept such an outcome.

Administration officials and diplomats now talk about the war — which they once hoped to prevent — in terms of months, if not years.

For Biden, Putin’s escalation tactics have only reaffirmed his early assessment of the Russian leader. On Monday, the president said the West still needs to provide Ukraine the weapons they need to fight the Russians and gather information on the atrocities to have a war crimes trial.

“You may remember I got criticized for calling Putin a war criminal,” Biden said. “Well, the truth of the matter — you saw what happened in Bucha. This warrants him — he is a war criminal.”

He concluded: “This guy is brutal. And what’s happening in Bucha is outrageous, and everyone’s seen it.”