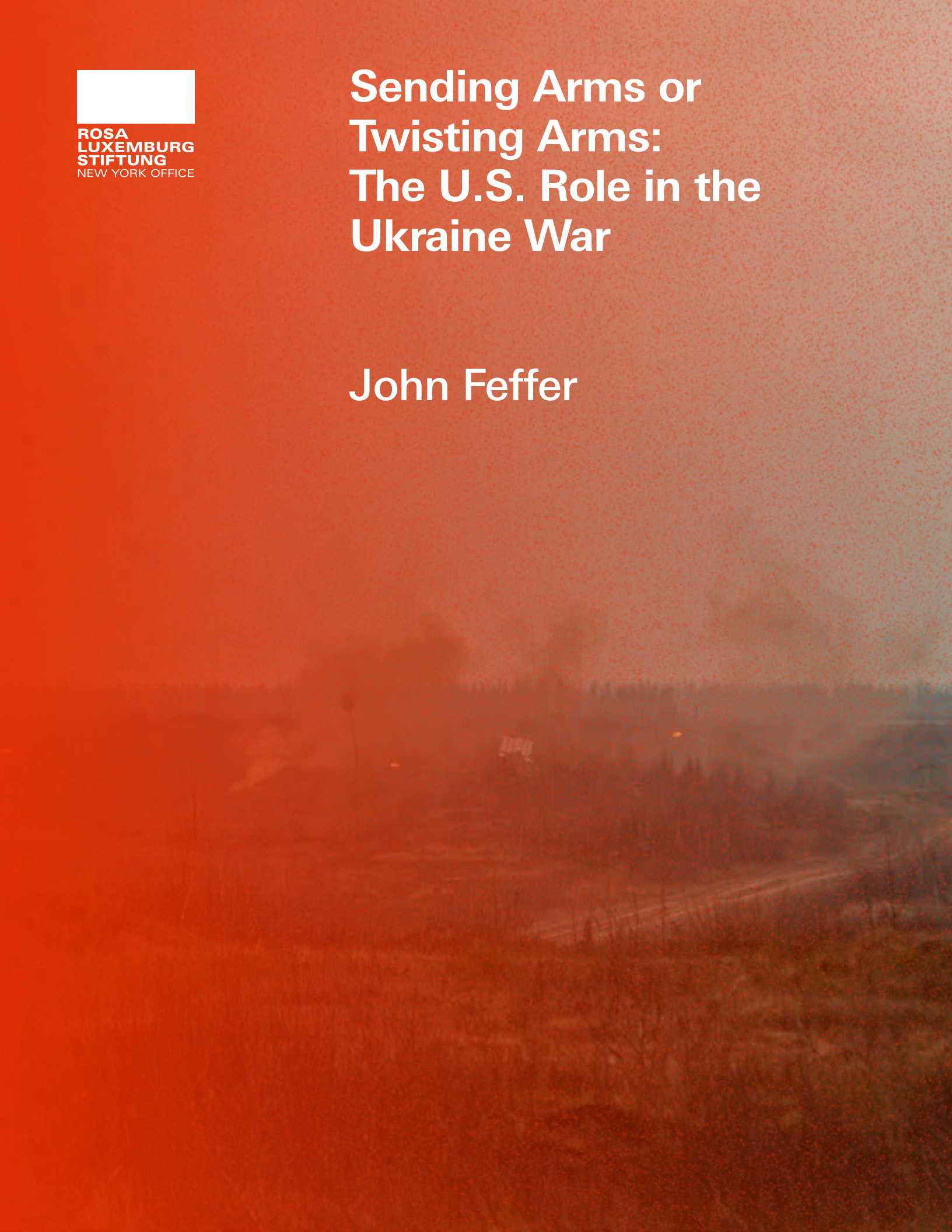




# Sending Arms or Twisting Arms: The U.S. Role in the Ukraine War

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# **Sending Arms or Twisting Arms: The U.S. Role in the Ukraine War**

**By John Feffer**



## **Executive Summary**

In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the United States has backed the government in Kyiv with military hardware and economic assistance. The Biden administration has also done its best to constrain Russia’s ability to wage war even as it has been careful not to provoke a direct confrontation or spur escalation on Russia’s part.

Russia did not launch its attack as retaliation for NATO’s expansion, however provocative the incorporation of former Soviet republics into the alliance might have been. The invasion resulted from Russian President Vladimir Putin’s growing nationalism, his territorial ambitions to build a “Russian world,” and his fear of the spreading influence of democratic movements on the periphery of Russia and within his country as well.

Although U.S. military contractors and energy companies have benefited hugely from the war, they are not driving U.S. security policy. The Biden administration—and the military industrial complex—remains focused on

containing China. The idea that the United States is engaged in a “proxy war,” using Ukraine to weaken Russia, is belied by the fact that: Ukraine is in charge of the war effort, Russia has already revealed itself to be considerably weaker than previously assumed, and a risk-averse Pentagon wants the war over sooner rather than later.

U.S. policy on Ukraine is not without divisions—within the administration, in Congress, and in the population at large. So far, however, these differences of opinion have had no major impact on administration policy. If the war continues into the 2024 election season, however, the Biden administration will face increasing calls from Republicans and a Republican voter base to reduce support for Kyiv.

There are two primary scenarios for how the war plays out in the future. Either Ukraine will follow the “Croatia scenario” by pushing Russian troops entirely out of the country and potentially setting into motion the political downfall of Vladimir Putin. Or, in the “Korean scenario,” the war will settle into a period of stalemate after the first year of surprising reversals.

For the time being, the Biden administration is backing the first scenario. But a stalemate will inevitably strengthen calls for a “diplomatic endgame” that will bring the combatants as well as the United States and probably China to the negotiation table, perhaps through the mediation efforts of a more neutral party like Turkey. The next few months will be crucial, as Ukraine makes another push to achieve the “Croatia scenario” through a second counteroffensive. It still has a chance, with U.S. and European support, to achieve a just peace that upholds international law and punishes an aggressor for its illegal actions.

# **Sending Arms or Twisting Arms: The U.S. Role in the Ukraine War**

## **Background**

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the United States quickly moved to support the government in Kyiv. With Joe Biden in the White House, having replaced someone who made no effort to conceal his admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin, this U.S. support was no surprise. Prior to the invasion, the Biden administration **had been warning** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky publicly for a month and privately for several months of the likelihood of an intervention. It had helped Ukraine bolster its defense with **\$400 million** in military aid in 2021, on top of the \$2 billion provided between 2014 and 2020. After Russia invaded, that figure skyrocketed to **over \$31 billion** (plus **more than twice that amount in non-military** assistance).

U.S. support for Ukraine over the last year has not been confined to military hardware. The Biden administration has led a global campaign to: condemn Russia; levy both multilateral and unilateral sanctions against the Kremlin and its domestic supporters; persuade allies to provide military and economic assistance of their own; strengthen NATO and usher in new NATO members; and mobilize energy supplies for Europe to substitute for Russian imports.

Despite this broad-based effort to defend Ukraine, the United States has nonetheless displayed a certain degree of caution. It has drawn the line at committing U.S. forces to the battlefield, aside from **a handful of Special Forces**. It has refused to support a no-fly zone over the country, and it has **not sent surveillance planes** over the Black Sea for fear of engaging Russian forces. It has hesitated to supply Kyiv with every weapon system on its wish list, whether fighter jets or long-range missiles. This caution reflects in particular the anxieties of the Pentagon—a risk-averse institution—about provoking an escalation of the conflict both horizontally (into adjoining countries) and vertically (involving non-conventional weapons like tactical nuclear devices).

The Biden administration has calibrated this balance between military assistance and geopolitical caution within a rapidly changing global context. Russia's actions have divided the world into three blocs: illiberal supporters of the Kremlin and its imperial policy, the largely democratic club of nations who directly support Ukraine, and the much larger group of fence-sitters

who generally acknowledge that the invasion was a violation of international law but are reluctant to break with Moscow.

The United States has tried to turn these divisions into assets by expanding ties with allies, isolating Russia's few supporters, and pushing the fence-sitters away from the Kremlin. The skepticism that Donald Trump brought to the trans-Atlantic relationship, with his threats to withdraw the United States from NATO, has been decisively reversed. All talk of a "strategic reset" of relations with Russia, which was popular during the Obama years and seemed again possible under Trump, has disappeared. The Biden administration has warned China—and other countries—not to supply Russia with weapons or violate technology bans.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not fundamentally altered U.S. national interests, but it has shifted the means by which Washington pursues those interests.

Certain things remain unclear, however, about U.S. policy. For instance, to what degree is the United States committed to weakening Russia further by supporting either a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive or a prolonged war of attrition? Or is the United States eager to push for negotiations between the aggressor and the victim to resolve a conflict that distracts attention from other strategic U.S. priorities, primarily the containment of China? How long can the Biden administration maintain the flow of military aid to Ukraine, given a divided Congress and weakening public support? What role can the United States play in advancing a just peace in Ukraine? What plans does the United States have for transatlantic relations after the war is over, and in what way does Russia fit into those plans?

In trying to answer these questions, this report will address certain prevailing myths about the conflict concerning NATO expansion, the new global energy map, and the role of the military-industrial complex in fueling the conflict. It will look at how the United States has benefited, in some cases inadvertently, from the war. And it will assess splits within the Biden administration, between the two major parties, and among U.S. public opinion more generally to better understand the likely future trajectory of U.S. policy toward the region.

## **U.S. Policy Pre-Invasion**

A longstanding irritant in U.S.-Russian relations has been the expansion of NATO, which began to creep eastward in the 1990s. Despite increased

Russian anxiety over the stability of its “near abroad,” the United States promoted NATO enlargement even to the borders of Russia with the incorporation of the Baltic states in 2004. **As I warned in 1996:**

*By admitting certain countries before others, NATO would sharpen already existing divisions in the region—between the more prosperous North and the less prosperous South, between Eastern Europe and the struggling countries of the former Soviet Union. This division in particular threatens Ukraine, whose eastern half contains a large ethnic Russian population. Russia simply cannot countenance the absorption of Ukraine into a Western security alliance. Ukraine itself suspects that it will be allowed to slip into the Russian sphere of influence in exchange for Russia’s approval of Visegrad Four membership in NATO.*

Yet the promotion of NATO, however destabilizing, was not the proximate cause for Russia’s backing of separatist movements in Ukraine, seizure of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, or invasion of the country in February 2022. NATO membership for Ukraine, before the invasion, was never really on the table.

In 2008, when Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko pursued NATO membership, the Western alliance **said no**, offering only the vaguest promise of future consideration, and even the United States **later abandoned** its efforts to bring Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. On top of that, only **15 percent** of the Ukrainian public at that time associated NATO with “protection” of their country. A year later, only **21 percent** of Ukrainians polled wanted their country to join NATO.

Up until the 2022 invasion, Ukrainian membership in NATO was a non-issue—except in the rhetoric of Kremlin strategists. Moreover, at no point did NATO pose **any direct military threat to Russia**. Troops and exercises on one’s border are exasperating, even provocative, but they do not represent a *casus belli*.

Despite his statements before and after the invasion, Vladimir Putin has **never been primarily concerned** about Ukrainian membership in NATO. He was more worried about Ukraine’s closer relationship with Europe, which he interpreted as an **embrace of democracy** and a rejection of “Russian” identity that put at risk the substantial Russian-speaking minority (which was by no means united in its attitudes toward the Kremlin). This, after all, was the precipitating factor in the 2013-4 Euromaidan protests, which featured a huge public reaction to a Russia-leaning president’s rejection of a parliament-approved association agreement with the European Union.

Putin had long identified the protection of Russian-speaking minorities in the near abroad as a chief foreign policy objective, which had prompted the brief war in Georgia in 2008. As such, Putin **was particularly anxious** that the spirit of the “color revolutions” in Russia’s neighbors would spread to Russia itself, a concern borne out by the waves of protests that radiated out from Moscow to the hinterlands beginning with the first Dissenters’ March at the end of 2006. None of the Color Revolutions focused on joining NATO. Rather, they more frequently referenced the values of the European Union—democracy, human rights—even if they were not explicitly about membership in the EU.

When it came to Ukraine, Russian nationalism proved more salient than any specific complaint about NATO. Particularly in the aftermath of the Euromaidan protests, Putin began to move away from the civic nationalism he’d earlier promulgated—as befit a politician in a multiethnic empire—to embrace a more clearly ethnic nationalism. His articulation of a **“Russian world”** that expanded Russian territory, absorbed Russian minority populations, and denied the distinctness of Ukrainian language and culture intensified a previously marginal element of explicit chauvinism in Russian policy. It was as if the right-wing extremism of Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal Democratic party had infected Putin and his United Russia party (as well as Gennady Zhuganov’s Communist Party). After the Euromaidan protests, a Russia First exceptionalism came to dominate Putin’s thinking, reflected in a notable linguistic turn: his increasing use of *ruscky* (ethnic Russian) instead of *rossisky* (civic Russian) when describing all things Russian.

But perhaps the most salient reason that NATO expansion didn’t motivate Putin to invade Ukraine were the easily foreseeable repercussions of a military intervention. An unprovoked attack on a non-NATO member was sure to encourage wavering countries, like Sweden and Finland, to apply for membership. The invasion would give the alliance more cohesion—and greater incentive to increase military spending—than it had for some time. These consequences flowed from Russian actions even as the Kremlin failed to achieve its objectives. If Putin had managed to seize all Ukrainian territory and replace the government in Kyiv, he would have only generated stronger pushback from a NATO on even higher alert.

NATO expansion was not the only irritant in U.S.-Russian relations. The United States withdrew from arms control treaties during the George W. Bush (ABM Treaty) and Donald Trump (INF, Open Skies) administrations. The United States further annoyed the Kremlin by putting missile defense installations in Eastern Europe, **under NATO control**, during the Obama years. Meanwhile, the United States was concerned about the dependency of European countries on Russian fossil fuels and, in particular, the construction



of the Nord Stream pipelines to supply Germany with Russian natural gas. Outside of Europe, Moscow and Washington clashed over policy in the Middle East, particularly Syria, and in Central Asia.

These tensions were troubling, but manageable. The Ukraine conflict, however, brought east and west into what now seems to be an irreversible confrontation. Contact between Washington and Moscow has dried up. Russia has largely severed its relations with Europe beyond the delivery of a decreasing amount of oil and natural gas, and the Kremlin has been **re-orienting** its fossil-fuel infrastructure to supply an Asian clientele. Both sides have been lobbying countries throughout the Global South to join one side or the other within this new bipolar environment.

The U.S. relationship with Ukraine has long been ambivalent, depending on the character of the administrations in Kyiv and Washington, the currents of U.S.-Russian relations, and events on the ground in Central Europe. The Russian invasion has seemingly eliminated that ambivalence. Moreover, the United States has benefited from the conflict in indirect ways that only reinforce this realignment. Every day the war proceeds, this renewed Cold War dynamic becomes more entrenched.

## **The Energy Factor**

Energy politics are of utmost concern to the Biden administration. Biden does not want to see significant increases in oil prices at home or its European partners suffer from a lack of energy. At the same time, he wants to push a transition to “clean energy” with the United States at the forefront of global innovation. The war has proven a challenge on all these fronts. It has also provided an opportunity to wean European partners from Russian energy imports and supply them with U.S. natural gas.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, the first challenge for the Biden administration was the surging price of gas. By the first week of March 2022, gas at the pump **cost well over** \$4 a gallon. This increase coincided with rising inflation (since early 2021) that threatened the administration’s claims of a post-COVID economic recovery. It prompted Biden to release what eventually amounted to **180 million barrels** of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. In addition, the administration reached out to Saudi Arabia (unsuccessfully) to increase oil output and successfully eased sanctions on Venezuela to **permit Chevron** to bring more of that country’s oil to global markets.

Prices **continued to rise**, reaching more than \$5 a gallon in June before steadily falling toward \$3, ending up on the one-year anniversary of the invasion at a price lower than 12 months before. The price reduction can be **largely attributed** to the additional oil that the United States and its allies brought to the market, as well as the continued sale of Russian oil at fire sale prices. The initial spike in prices brought **record profits** to many oil companies in 2022, with Exxon setting a new record of over \$55 billion in profits and Chevron doubling its 2021 profits.

Because of this unanticipated resurgence of demand for fossil fuels, the United States leapt to the top of the list of global energy suppliers. As Patti Domm **explained** at CNBC in March 2023:

*Not since the aftermath of World War II has the U.S. been so important as an energy exporter. The Energy Information Administration said a record 11.1 million barrels a day of crude and refined product were exported in the week ended Feb. 24. That is more than the total output of either Saudi Arabia or Russia, according to Citigroup, and compares with 9 million barrels a day a year ago.*

It's not just oil. In 2022, for instance, the United States **doubled** its shipments of natural gas to Europe, filling an important gap created by reductions in Russian imports. Indeed, the United States supplied **fully half** of Europe's natural gas needs in 2022, along with 12 percent of its oil. Natural gas companies, like their counterparts in the oil industry, **raked in significant wind-falls**. Thanks to these increased U.S. imports, along with a relatively mild winter and declining energy prices, Europeans did not experience the worst-case scenario of extensive blackouts and freezing apartments.

The Biden administration doesn't benefit directly from the country's renewed status as top energy supplier. Unlike the Russian or Saudi state, the U.S. state doesn't own the energy sector. There are, however, some indirect monetary gains through taxes—and Biden has threatened to gain even more through a windfall profits tax on oil and gas companies, which Republicans oppose. Washington has also acquired some additional leverage with energy-poor countries. But dominant market position is a side effect of the war, not a driving force behind U.S. efforts to defend Ukraine.

The runaway profits of the oil and gas sector are also something of an embarrassment for an administration that has put so much emphasis on a transition to renewable energy. In his State of the Union address in 2023, Biden deliberately stepped into the debate on energy currently going on in the United States. Alongside his encomium to a green energy transition,

Biden acknowledged that the country continued to depend on fossil fuels. “We are going to need oil for at least another decade,” he **said**. But then he complained that the companies were not investing in expanding their infrastructure and production to keep prices low, a very different argument from one that excoriates these companies for their failure to shift to sustainable energy production. Emphasizing this point, the administration shortly thereafter **approved** a major new oil drilling project on Alaska’s North Slope.

Republicans **are pointing** to the Ukraine war as proof that the United States must remain not only energy independent but globally dominant through expanded fossil fuel production. These arguments **are echoed** by Democrats like Joe Manchin and industry lobbyists who support additional pipelines for fracked natural gas and oppose any regulations curtailing the operations and profits of everything from coal-fired power plants to refrigerator manufacturers. U.S. energy lobbyists **increased their spending** in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the invasion, and the results were predictable. As Oliver Milman **writes** in *The Guardian*, “They paved the way for new pipelines and export facilities, established a new taskforce to boost gas exports to Europe and approved \$300 million in funding to help build out gas infrastructure on the continent.”

The war has simultaneously given fossil fuel companies an unexpected boost and pushed countries dependent on Russian fossil fuels to accelerate their plans to shift to sustainable energy sources. This desire for the energy independence that solar and wind power provide **can even be seen in China**, which has been perhaps the biggest beneficiary of the war in Ukraine in terms of cheaper fuel imports. Like other larger importers, China understand the strategic vulnerability created by a dependency on external energy supplies, however cheap that energy might be at any given moment.

## **The Military-Industrial Factor**

U.S. energy companies are not the only firms that have profited from the war. Military contractors have benefited from an upsurge in contracts to supply Ukraine with the artillery, tanks and drones that it has been using to defend itself.

These contracts are part of an overall boom for the U.S. military-industrial complex. For 2024, Congress approved **an \$858 billion military spending bill**, a full \$45 billion more than even the Biden administration requested. This represents a 4.3 percent increase in spending compared to increases **closer to 1 percent** between 2015 and 2021. Even if the Republicans in Congress

push through some cuts to the latest appropriations bill, it will still likely end up the largest U.S. military budget in history.

The Ukraine-related portions of this budget are not insignificant. For instance, Lockheed Martin will get **nearly a billion dollars** to replenish the stockpiles of missiles that the Pentagon has delivered to Ukraine, and Raytheon will receive \$2 billion to supply missile systems to Ukraine. As with the energy industry, arms lobbyists upped the amount of money and time they spent pushing for this or that provision in the defense appropriations bill. Some of these lobbyists also **provided their services pro bono** to Ukrainian clients.

But Ukraine-related provisions in Pentagon spending are not ultimately driving U.S. security policy or even the increases in military spending. The centerpiece of that policy remains China, and the military-industrial has been geared toward responding to the “China threat.” Joshua Keating in *Grid* **explains:**

*The low-tech, artillery-heavy warfare that’s taking place in Ukraine hasn’t been a major area of focus for Western defense firms in recent years, and it will take time and money to ramp up production. As Dan Grazier, a defense policy fellow at the Project on Government Oversight, told Grid, “Look, 155-millimeter artillery rounds aren’t sexy. The money is in developing the next new thing.”*

The “next new thing” is not going to be deployed in Ukraine, given the hesitancy of the Biden administration and NATO to provoke escalation through the provision of the most advanced weapons systems to Ukraine. Another concern of military contractors is the potential of ramping up production of artillery and other weapons for the Ukraine conflict only for the war there to end and these products to go begging for buyers. The “China threat,” on the other hand, promises to be a bonanza for decades to come.

When it comes to arms exports, the war is only accelerating recent trends by helping to boost U.S. overseas sales and reducing Russia’s share of the global market. Although Ukraine has indeed increased its imports substantially, many from the United States, the **major uptick in sales** of U.S. arms comes from Asia—South Korea, Japan, and India—and comes in response to a perceived threat from China, not Russia. And where Russian exports have fallen, it hasn’t necessarily been the United States that has jumped into the gap. In India, for instance, France has been the major beneficiary of falling Russian sales.



The U.S. military-industrial complex has indeed profited from the Ukraine war (at least in the medium-term). But, like with fossil fuel companies, the arms industry is not driving U.S. security policy. Providing weapons to fight an anachronistic war is more of a distraction for manufacturers, lobbyists and politicians who continue to focus on a future conflict with China.

## **U.S. Differences of Opinion**

Biden entered office **eager to execute** the long-awaited Pacific pivot that Hillary Clinton had proclaimed as secretary of state during the Obama administration. Much of the administration's security policy, prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, was devoted to solidifying U.S. containment of China. Biden even maintained key elements of his predecessor's approach, from the economic sanctions on Beijing and the more visible engagement with Taiwan to the "Indo-Pacific" terminology and the Quadrilateral alliance of India, Australia, Japan, and the United States that Trump helped revive in 2017.

The administration's national security strategy, released in October 2022, **outlines** the twin challenges of China and Russia: "We will prioritize maintaining an enduring competitive edge over the PRC while constraining a still profoundly dangerous Russia."

But in reality, the administration has put China at the top of its list of priorities. The reasons are obvious. Russia, a global superpower, has been unable to take over Ukraine, a considerably smaller and weaker country. Moreover, the war has revealed critical gaps in Russian military capabilities, exposed its limited global influence, and demonstrated that its economy has become ever more dependent on extractive industries instead of diversifying into the more value-added sectors that typify a truly advanced industrial nation. A comparison of military spending by China and Russia over the last two decades—from roughly \$10 billion to around \$65 billion annually for Russia; from \$23 billion **to nearly \$300 billion for China**—provides a clear indication of their relative importance in the U.S. strategic worldview.

Simply put, Russia at this point isn't a large enough threat to warrant a pivot *away* from Asia. China, after all, "is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to advance that objective," **according to the Biden administration strategy**. The notion that the Biden administration would prefer to draw out the war in Ukraine to further degrade Russian capabilities—**put forward** by the Russian government and its supporters—does

not square with the administration's stated (and unstated) priorities or with the already degraded status of Russia's military.

Gen. Mark Milley, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, indicated in November 2022 that negotiations between Ukraine and Russia might be more likely in the winter when the two sides would be locked in a stalemate. Milley's comments were more an assessment of Ukrainian capabilities than a stated preference for negotiations. But it nevertheless revealed something of a wedge between a more optimistic State Department and a more pessimistic Pentagon. *According to Politico:*

*the comments echoed a broad sense inside the Defense Department that the coming winter provides a chance to discuss reaching a political settlement to end the war. Senior military officials believe Ukraine will be challenged to expel Russian forces from all occupied areas, as is Kyiv's stated end goal. That's especially the case in the Crimean peninsula, which has been held by Russia since 2014.*

U.S. intelligence documents leaked in April 2023 **underscore the increasingly pessimistic evaluation** of administration officials that Ukraine doesn't have sufficient military capacity to retake much territory at all and that the conflict will soon bog down into a stalemate. Such assessments, of course, depend on battlefield developments. A successful second counteroffensive by Ukraine in spring 2023 that seizes land along the southern coast to cut Crimea off from the Russian mainland might further shift the calculus of the Pentagon and the intelligence community.

In the meantime, the Biden administration has had to deal with the growing politicization of the conflict in Congress and in Republican Party circles. Although Congress was initially united in its condemnation of the Russian invasion—a bipartisan Senate resolution **passed unanimously** in the middle of March 2022; a similar bill in the House attracted **only three nay votes**—that unity soon began to break down, particularly over the issue of military assistance. The Democratic Party has tended to favor undiminished support for Ukraine—and that includes **even members** of the party's Progressive Caucus, despite **the brouhaha** around its letter in October 2022 calling for direct negotiations with Russia—while the Republican Party is itself divided between traditional hawks and a more radical wing that has a fondness for Putin's ultra-conservative social views.

By May 2022, for instance, a House bill on additional appropriations for Ukraine attracted **57 nay votes**, all Republicans. By October, House minority leader Kevin McCarthy **warned** that the Republicans might reduce aid

to Ukraine if the party took over Congress after the mid-term elections, though this turned out to be largely political posturing to assuage figures like Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia who **promised** that “not another penny will go to Ukraine.” In February 2023, Matt Gaetz (R-FL) **introduced a resolution** to end support for Ukraine, but it has little chance of passing, and the issue of funding will **not likely make** it back on the congressional docket before September, already after Ukraine’s expected second counteroffensive.

The “isolationist” wing of the Republican Party—MAGA supporters like Greene and Paul Gosar of Arizona—have used the Ukraine issue as a stick to strike the Biden administration. Just after the president’s trip to Ukraine in February 2023, Gosar **tweeted**, “Joe Biden visiting Ukraine is a slap in the face to every American, especially the people of East Palestine, Ohio. Ukraine is not our friend, and Russia is not our enemy.” The reference to the train accident in Ohio has been one common Republican message: money should go to domestic needs not the Ukrainian war. Of course, this refrain is largely absent from Republican policy as it relates to overall military spending or appropriations for other conflicts. Another tactic has been to insist on **more oversight** of arms deliveries because of Ukraine’s reputation for corruption, which in itself is a reasonable demand, though one that again many Republicans have cared little about in other contexts.

These politicians are taking their cues from Donald Trump, still the Republican frontrunner for the 2024 presidential elections, who **seems determined** to make Ukraine a campaign focus. His leading challenger, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, has **similarly used** military assistance to Ukraine as a way to criticize the Biden administration. Among other likely presidential candidates, both **Nikki Haley** and **Mike Pence** have lined up unambiguously on the side of Ukraine and U.S. military assistance.

Such arguments by Trump and his acolytes, amplified by media outlets like Fox News, have had a profound impact on U.S. public opinion. According to a Pew poll from the end of January 2023, the number of Republican voters who think the United States is providing too much military assistance to Ukraine, for instance, **has increased dramatically** over the last year from 9 percent to 40 percent (the increase among Democrats has been much less, from 5 percent to 15 percent).

This growing divide within Congress and the electorate suggests that Ukraine will indeed be a pivotal issue in the 2024 elections, regardless of whether the conflict is still ongoing at that point. Republicans will continue to talk about misplaced budget priorities, a “failure” on the administration’s part to **focus sufficiently on China**, or conversely a “failure” to support Ukraine

with enough weapons. However, if any foreign policy issue has the potential to drive a stake through MAGA, it would be Ukraine, as Trump's coziness with Putin will necessarily come back to haunt him.

## Prospects for Peace

There are two leading endgame scenarios for the war in Ukraine. The first, the Croatian scenario, refers to the successful 1995 campaign by the Croatian army to push Serbian forces out of positions they occupied inside Croatia. Ultimately, this successful Operation Storm led to a peace agreement that ended the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and contributed to undermining Serbian support for strong-arm leader Slobodan Milosevic, who lost elections five years after his Kosovo debacle and was later handed over to the Hague tribunal to face charges of war crimes.

The other scenario is the Korean one. As in the Korean War, the first year of the Ukrainian conflict has featured dramatic reversals of territorial control. What comes next might resemble the last two years of the Korean War, in which the two sides battled to a virtual stalemate around the original line of demarcation. If Ukraine and Russia fight to a place of mutual exhaustion, they might also reluctantly agree to an armistice.

Currently, the Biden administration is hoping for the first scenario by providing military assistance to Ukraine just as the United States had earlier supported Croatia. Russia has a much larger army than the one Serbia inherited from Yugoslavia, and U.S. assistance is accordingly much larger as well. The framing of the conflict is also global rather than regional. In his speech in Warsaw just after his wartime visit to Kyiv, Biden **discussed** the conflict in civilizational terms: between democracies and autocracies. He has also **called** Putin a war criminal and urged a trial to determine his complicity.

Some critics **on the left** and **on the right** have taken the president to task for his restraint and urged the administration to go "all in" by supplying Ukraine with everything it wants. As one point of comparison, the United States sent the Soviet Union through the Lend Lease program in World War II **over 11,000 planes and more than 6,000 tanks and tank destroyers**. So far, the Biden administration has sent Ukraine **only 31 tanks** and no advanced jets. Even taking into consideration the greater sophistication of modern weaponry, the contrast is stark. Still, Biden has shown more determination in his support of Ukrainians than, for instance, Obama demonstrated when he was going back and forth around providing U.S. assistance to democracy struggles during the Arab Spring.



The Croatian scenario will require Ukraine to achieve its maximalist goal of pushing Russian forces not only back to the pre-invasion lines of demarcation but out of the Donbas and Crimea as well. Only a military victory of such proportions would qualify as an unambiguous win for Zelensky. Only a military failure of such proportions could trigger a political downfall for Putin. With a mere return to the status quo ante, Putin could claim success for his intervention for ultimately “protecting the rights” of the primarily Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine. His political survival and that of his supporters would be vouchsafed.

But the pursuit of the Croatian scenario could have various unintended consequences. Russian military forces will not be easy to dislodge from Crimea in particular. Moreover, Russia has officially annexed the peninsula and the Donbas (as well as the two southern provinces between the two). In the case of serious attempts by Ukraine to move into these areas, Putin will predictably claim that Ukraine is “invading Russia,” which he might use to justify escalation up to and including the use of nuclear weapons.

Even if Ukraine were to succeed in expelling all Russian troops and Putin indeed falls from power, a new, even more right-wing government in Moscow could argue that Putin failed to pursue total war in Ukraine. A second Ukraine war, like the second Chechen war with which Putin began his presidency, could be mounted to decisively punish the country that dared to stand up to Russia. This time, direct confrontation with NATO and the United States could be part of the plan. In other words, the prospect of escalation accompanies not only the scenario of Putin being pushed into a corner but also the aftermath of a definitive Russian military loss.

In this situation of Russia’s loss and Putin’s departure from power, the U.S. role would be to avert catastrophe by offering a new Russian government something in lieu of Ukrainian territory: a place in a new trans-Atlantic security system. This must not be the junior partnership offered to Russia as part of the **Partnership for Peace program** in the 1990s, but an authentic, equal status in a newly empowered OSCE or a new OSCE-like institution. Such an offer, however, must make what might seem like an arbitrary distinction between leaders guilty of war crimes and a state that is absolved of responsibility. Something similar has transpired in Serbia, with certain actors convicted of war crimes and EU membership dangled in front of a nationalist government in Belgrade (with its own earlier ties to Milosevic) to compensate for relinquishing claims to Kosovo.

The second scenario, the Korean-style stalemate, would likely yield an unstable peace that resembles the current standoff between India and Pakistan,

with the Donbas substituting for Kashmir. Ukraine, meanwhile, would resemble not Croatia after Operation Storm—independent, whole, and without the presence of foreign troops—but Bosnia after the Dayton Accords: a country weakened by incoherent political structures, contested jurisdiction in disputed territories, and an economy that has never fully recovered from the war. It's hard not to see this Bosnia scenario as Putin's fallback option to ensure that a weak and divided Ukraine poses no future threat. It will also be difficult to launch a new European security system with an unapologetic Russia that could well be biding its time before launching a fresh offensive. Here again, an angry right-wing will likely pressure Putin to fight an all-out war to succeed where the previous invasion had not.

But it is this latter scenario of stalemate that would **trigger** the “diplomatic endgame.” Here, U.S. options are limited, given its clear partisanship. However, some kind of negotiating framework might include Russia and China on one side facing Ukraine and the United States on the other in four-party talks. A country that considers itself a friend to both combatants, like Turkey, might serve as the mediator that brings these four parties to the table.

In this diplomatic endgame, the United States and NATO can provide security guarantees and economic assistance to Ukraine. Ukraine won't have NATO membership any time soon, but the alliance can provide the country with a special status just short of Article 5 protections. Given that the destruction of the country will require **upwards of a \$1 trillion** in reconstruction costs, with little if any coming from Russia in the form of reparations, this scenario will require a **Marshall Plan-sized commitment** from the United States and its allies. Meanwhile, the United States can offer security guarantees to Russia as well around the placement of offensive weaponry and the scope of military exercises near Russian borders.

An oft-unstated assumption behind the “diplomatic endgame” is that the United States will apply pressure on Ukraine to abandon its maximalist demands in the face of an implacable foe. The United States would use the stick of threatening to cut off arms supplies and the aforementioned carrots of security guarantees and reconstruction assistance. A corollary is that China would put similar pressure on Russia, though it doesn't have much in the way of leverage beyond its energy purchases.

Nevertheless, both superpowers have strong reason to apply such arm-twisting. China has a highly ambivalent attitude toward Russia's invasion. It objects to such infringements on the sovereignty of recognized states—it goes without saying that it doesn't consider Taiwan such a state—and it is

manifestly unhappy with unpredictable geopolitical acts that jeopardize the global economy and China's place within it. It has **reportedly promised** to provide some military assistance to the Kremlin, under the cover of civilian aid, but it has yet to do so. Even though it is happy that the U.S. government's attention is divided, China wants this war over, and its 12-point peace plan in early 2023 was **a strong restatement** of this desire. The United States, as explained above, wants to refocus on other foreign policy matters, avoid the risk of escalation with Russia, and bring some stability to the global energy market.

The two combatants are not yet at the point where such persuasion is possible, since they both continue to harbor maximalist goals. So, this kind of "diplomacy" remains entirely abstract.

Also abstract is the future of the European security system. At the moment, NATO is the clear winner in this conflict, having resurrected its old purpose of preventing Russian encroachment into Europe proper. Moreover, the central U.S. role in the alliance has been strengthened, and the option of an independent European military force has become considerably **more remote**. The OSCE, meanwhile, **has been marginalized** even beyond the largely ineffectual role it played before the war broke out. The old dream of a collective security arrangement stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok has been effectively buried in the Donbas, though a post-Putin government could help resurrect it.

## **Looking Ahead**

This moment for east-west relations is bleak. The war rages on in Ukraine. Arms control is a dead issue. A cold war threatens to descend upon the larger world order. The "peace" that is discussed in foreign policy circles in the West often comes with several asterisks: loss of territory and a fragile state for Ukraine, lack of prosecution of war crimes for Russia, few guarantees that the conflict will not resume after a strategic pause. This kind of "peace" was secured under the Minsk agreements following Russia's military interventions in Ukraine in 2014. Ukraine, quite sensibly, fears a "Minsk 3" that effectively rewards the Kremlin for its aggression.

The United States will play a pivotal role in determining this outcome through its mix of military assistance and diplomatic leverage. For now, the Biden administration seems to believe that a relatively low-cost and low-risk commitment will enable Ukraine to achieve the same results that Croatia secured in 1995. If Ukraine fails to do so in the first half of 2023, the Biden

administration will have to decide whether to maintain this approach, dramatically increase assistance, or push for a “diplomatic endgame.” There isn’t likely political support now for the second option, given Republican control of Congress. Nor is there sufficient support within the administration to pressure Ukraine to abandon its territorial ambitions. So, unless the Ukrainian government itself decides that it is time to negotiate, the United States will continue with the current status quo approach.

For the time being, then, the Biden administration supports a “just peace” in Ukraine that would give victory to the victim and punishment to the aggressor. But this approach is highly contingent on what happens on the ground in Ukraine and what happens in American politics. Even though they have both benefitted from the way the war has squeezed Russia, the United States and China will not let the conflict go on indefinitely. In the interim, however, a relatively weak country that gave up its nuclear weapons three decades ago continues to buck the geopolitical odds by beating back a nuclear superpower bent on expanding its empire. That, in itself, is a win for international law and points toward a more just world order. ■



## About the Author

John Feffer is director of **Foreign Policy In Focus** at the **Institute for Policy Studies**. He is the author, most recently, of *Aftershock: A Journey into Eastern Europe's Broken Dreams* (Zed Books). He is also the author of the dystopian novel *Splinterlands* (Dispatch Books) and its soon-to-be-released sequel *Frostlands*. He is the author of several other books, and his articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Salon*, and many other publications.

