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## Biden's inconvenient truth on Putin

Washington's uncompromising tone risks exposing western divisions over how to end the war in Ukraine

**EDWARD LUCE**



A demonstrator holds a sign depicting Russian president Vladimir Putin during a rally in support of Ukraine in Miami, Florida, earlier this month © Chandan Khanna/AFP/Getty

**Edward Luce** YESTERDAY

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Washington's definition of a gaffe is blurting out the truth at an awkward moment. On Saturday Joe Biden [said out loud](#) what every western leader is surely wishing in private — the end of Vladimir Putin's rule. The awkward bit is that Russian regime change could now be mistaken as Nato's explicit goal. That, of course, could make Putin even less likely to settle terms that could bring Russia's [invasion of Ukraine](#) to an end.

Biden's statement cannot be deleted though White House officials did their best to give it a different gloss. [They insisted](#) that when Biden said Putin "cannot remain in power" what he meant was that he should not exercise power over other countries. Moreover, Biden's words were not in the text of the speech he gave at Warsaw's royal castle on Saturday.

That is all very well. But the effect of Biden's aside could make it harder to sustain the [democratic unity](#) that was the chief message of his Warsaw speech. On Sunday, France's president, Emmanuel Macron, urged western leaders to avoid escalatory rhetoric as it would make Putin even less likely to come to the table. In recent days Biden had called Putin a "butcher" and a "war criminal" — again. saving in public

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what western leaders believe in private.

Will any of this change Putin's calculations in practice? The answer is probably not. Russia's leader has already passed the point of no return with his indiscriminate, though militarily incompetent, war in Ukraine. He has made it plain that his ultimate goal is to bring Ukraine and probably other former Soviet territories back into mother Russia's fold. Any ceasefire or larger deal that Putin might offer Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky would thus be treated with the utmost scepticism.

But the growing sense that Putin's removal is America's real end game could make it harder for any interim deal to be struck. On Sunday, Liz Truss, the UK's foreign secretary, said that western sanctions could be removed if Russia agreed to end the war. This is a departure from Biden's stance. He has been careful to avoid saying when or even whether US sanctions on Russia could be lifted. Given Biden's view of Putin, it is hard to picture the circumstances in which the US would reincorporate Russia into the global economy while Putin is still there.

Moreover, domestic US pressure is tilting towards escalation. In marked contrast to US post-Vietnam history, America's liberal consensus is today at least as gung-ho as on the conservative right. Some of this is in reaction to Donald Trump's admiration for Putin. The contrast between Biden's "democracy versus autocracy" message in Poland this weekend and Trump's conspiratorial 2018 Helsinki meeting with Putin plays strongly among Democrats. For the first time since the early cold war, when Republicans were split between isolationists and internationalists, US liberals are at least as hawkish as conservatives.

In such a climate, it would be politically excruciating for the Biden administration to agree to any "reset" with Russia while Putin remains in power. Talk of offering Putin diplomatic "off ramps" and face-saving exits from the Ukrainian quagmire look less and less plausible. Herein lie potential western divisions. Since Biden has made it clear the US will not intervene directly in Ukraine, the underlying message is that the west will fight Russia down to the last Ukrainian.

The implication is also that America will find it very hard to underwrite any deal with Putin. Parts of Europe — notably Poland and the Baltic states — are considerably more resolute than others, such as Germany. Nevertheless, as the war continues, and Europe absorbs millions more refugees and suffers lower economic growth, the gap between America's implicit red lines and what much of Europe will tolerate could become a problem.

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