





BIDEN'S REMARK ON PUTIN STIRS ANXIETY Among Western Allies

President Biden's remark that Vladimir Putin 'cannot remain in power' marks escalation in verbal attacks on Russian president



President Biden's Saturday speech in Warsaw included an off-the-cuff remark about Russia's leader.

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Updated Mar. 27, 2022 9:36 pm ET

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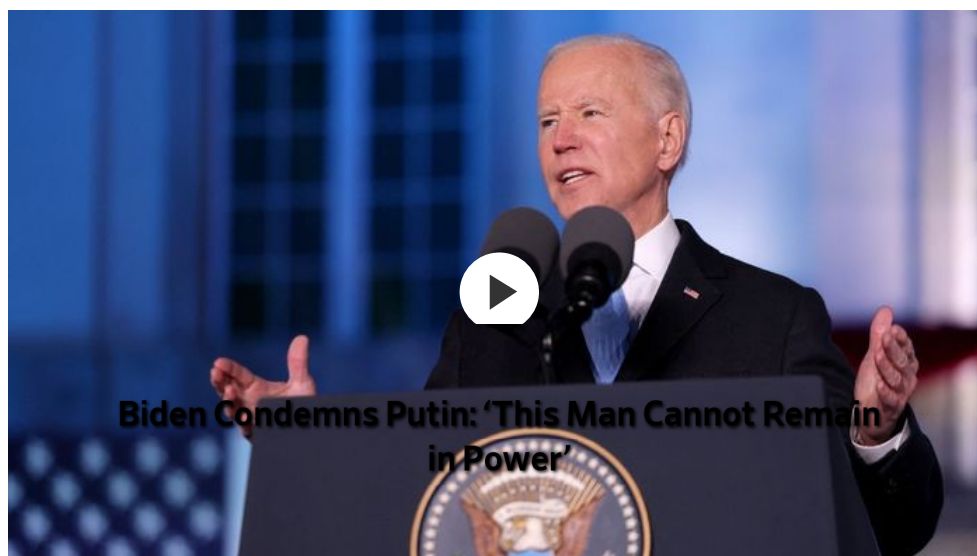
WASHINGTON—President Biden's remark that Russian President Vladimir Putin "cannot remain in power" came under fire for muddying U.S. policy and threatening to undermine diplomatic efforts to end [the war in Ukraine](#).

Administration officials and Democratic lawmakers said Sunday the off-the-cuff remark was an emotional response to the president's interactions in Warsaw with [refugees](#)—some of whom had fled [violence in Mariupol](#), a Ukrainian southern port city under [weekslong Russian bombardment](#) and attacks on civilians.

Julianne Smith, the U.S. ambassador to North Atlantic Treaty Organization, said on CNN's "State of the Union" that Mr. Biden's comments were "a principled human reaction to the stories that he had heard that day."



issue his strongest condemnation of Mr. Putin to date. “For God’s sake, this man cannot remain in power,” Mr. Biden said at the [conclusion of his speech](#).



President Biden said in Warsaw Saturday that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine had ignited a “new battle for freedom” between democracies and autocracies. The speech closed out the president’s European tour designed to show the West’s united support for Ukraine. Photo: Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

On Sunday, in response to a reporter’s question, Mr. Biden denied he was seeking regime change in Russia.

Still his remark—which Moscow dismissed—marked an escalation in Mr. Biden’s verbal attacks on the Russian president, after previously calling him a butcher and [war criminal](#). It is also the latest example of his penchant for going off script, overshadowing his intended message and prompting White House aides to clarify his words.

Mr. Biden’s aides, who were caught off guard by his comments, scrambled to play down their meaning and impact. White House officials said they still believed Mr. Biden’s trip and speech was a success, even as some lawmakers and analysts said the remarks could complicate matters.

“It reminds us that message discipline has its virtues,” former CIA director and retired four-star general David Petraeus said Sunday on ABC News, while adding that Mr. Biden’s words would likely rattle Mr. Putin. “It was reportedly very clearly an unscripted moment...And, you know, it will cause some challenges down the road.”

Sen. Jim Risch of Idaho, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said Mr. Biden’s comments were a “horrendous gaffe” that undermined an otherwise well-crafted speech. “I think most people who don’t deal in the lane of foreign relations don’t realize that those nine words that he uttered...would cause the kind of eruption that they did.” Mr. Risch told CNN on



Russian President Vladimir Putin has accused the West of attempting to 'cancel' Russia.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL KLIMENTYEV/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“This administration has done everything they can to stop escalating. There’s not a whole lot more you can do to escalate than to call for regime change,” Mr. Risch added. “That is not the policy of the United States of America. Please, Mr. President, stay on script.”

Meanwhile, a close American ally, French President Emmanuel Macron, worried that Mr. Biden’s comment Saturday and calling Mr. Putin “a butcher” could also complicate diplomatic efforts to end the war.

“I wouldn’t use this type of wording because I continue to hold discussions with President Putin,” Mr. Macron said in an interview with France 3 TV. “We want to stop the war that Russia has launched in Ukraine without escalation—that’s the objective.”

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European diplomats warned too that Mr. Biden’s comments could threaten Western efforts to keep lines of communications with Moscow open. Still, they said Mr. Biden’s remarks don’t endanger any current peace talks, since Russia has shown little inclination to engage seriously in such negotiations.



keep on pushing and trying to overhaul” the Ukrainian government.

Top Biden administration officials hadn't yet heard directly from allies expressing concern about the comment since the president's speech, a person familiar with the matter said Sunday afternoon.

‘We want to stop the war that Russia has launched in Ukraine without escalation.’

– French President Emmanuel Macron

Ukraine's deputy Prime Minister Olga Stefanishyna praised Mr. Biden's speech. “It was really important to have the sense of an international leadership and an understanding of the tragedy which is happening there for us,” Ms. Stefanishyna said on ABC's “This Week.”

For his part, Mr. Putin has long believed the U.S. and its allies are bent on overthrowing him, U.S. officials have said, and is convinced that Washington was behind 2011 mass protests in Russian cities, the biggest of his tenure. In [a speech on Friday](#), he accused the West of attempting to “cancel” Russia.

Some analysts warned that the U.S. president's remark could strengthen Mr. Putin's hand at home, causing Russians to rally around him and an invasion they may not otherwise support.

“It's not the aim of Western policy to get rid of a president of a nuclear-armed nation,” said Olga Oliker, program director, Europe and Central Asia, at International Crisis Group. “That is why the White House walked it back. No, they don't like [Vladimir Putin](#) and Vladimir Putin doesn't like them. But the goal is to get Russia to leave Ukraine and to put an end to the war.”

It wasn't clear if Mr. Biden's statement was designed to send a message to Mr. Putin and the international community, or simply a verbal misstep.

Earlier this year, the White House had to respond to Mr. Biden's comments when he suggested the response from Western allies might be more muted if Russia were to carry out a “minor incursion” into Ukrainian territory. The remarks were criticized by some as potentially playing down Russian aggression, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky responded at the time that “there are no minor incursions.”

The administration also was forced to reiterate that there was no change in official policy of “strategic ambiguity” toward Taiwan when Mr. Biden said in October that the U.S. would come to the island's aid if it was attacked by China.



Russia despite its efforts to isolate Mr. Putin on the global stage. One person familiar with his speech said the comment in question wasn't in the prepared remarks.



Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, 'We do not have a strategy of regime change in Russia, or anywhere else, for that matter.'

PHOTO: JACQUELYN MARTIN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

"The president's point was that Putin cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbors or the region," an official said. "He was not discussing Putin's power in Russia, or regime change."

Mr. Biden's top diplomat, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, amplified the same point Sunday to reporters in Jerusalem.

"We do not have a strategy of regime change in Russia, or anywhere else, for that matter. In this case, as in any case, it's up to the people of the country in question, it's up to the Russian people," he said.

Mr. Blinken emphasized that the Biden administration's policy is to maintain strong support for Ukraine in the face of the war with Russia.

Mr. Biden's political allies also came to his defense. Sen. Mark Warner, a Democrat from Virginia and Chairman of the Senate's Intelligence Committee, said it was the Russian president who was trying to overturn a country's leadership.

"There is one individual that's trying to make regime change in Europe. And that's Vladimir Putin trying to change the regime in Ukraine," he told CNN's "State of the Union."



roles for President George H.W. Bush during the Gulf War and President George W. Bush during the war in Iraq, said Mr. Biden's comment about the Russian president "made a difficult situation more difficult and a dangerous situation more dangerous," according to his [Twitter](#) account.

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He [later tweeted](#): "Good to see @POTUS walking back comments & making clear regime change not US policy. As Yitzhak Rabin pointed out, "you don't make peace with friends; you can only make peace with enemies." And for now, ending the war in Ukraine & avoiding escalation must be our priorities."

Warsaw—where Mr. Biden was speaking—has become the center of [Europe's largest refugee crisis](#) since World War II. More than 300,000 people from Ukraine have arrived in the capital since Russia's invasion, a population that would amount to every sixth resident in the city if they stayed. Overall, more than 3.7 million people have fled Ukraine, the United Nations said, with over 2.2 million arriving in Poland.

The U.S. president also stayed across the street from the central train station that has become packed with refugees arriving from the war, with many sleeping on blankets on its floor.

The comment came at the end of Mr. Biden's trip to Europe that was intended to demonstrate the West's united support for Ukraine and against its invasion.

In meetings this week of NATO, the Group of Seven major economies and the European Union, Mr. Biden and other leaders together backed more military, financial and humanitarian assistance for Ukraine after Mr. Putin launched a full-scale invasion on Feb. 24.

But the unity among the Western leaders also began to show its limits, with differences emerging over how far to press their campaign of economic sanctions, particularly on targeting Russian energy exports.

Mr. Biden acknowledged in his speech Saturday that it was going to become more challenging for the U.S. and its allies to stick together as the war continued. "We must remain unified today and tomorrow and the day after and for the years and decades to come," Mr. Biden said. "It will not be easy. There will be cost, but it's a price we have to pay."

—Courtney McBride in Jerusalem, Warren P. Strobel in Washington, Laurence



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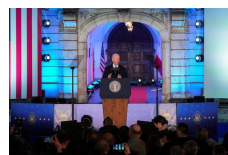
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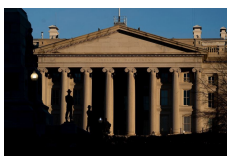
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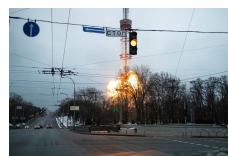
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