

The Big Read **War in Ukraine**

## What is America's end-game for the war in Ukraine?



The US is trying to provide effective military support to Kyiv while keeping the support of allies worried about a long conflict

Felicia Schwartz in Washington and Amy Kazmin in Rome 12 HOURS AGO

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Shortly before Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in February, General Mark Milley, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, gave a pessimistic view of the prospects. One possible outcome, he told a closed congressional hearing, was that Kyiv could fall within 72 hours.

Speaking on Monday, after three months in which the Ukrainians have not only fended off the initial assault on the capital but are holding their own in a grinding ground war in the south east of the country, Milley struck a very different note.

The US, he said, would continue supporting the [Ukrainian war](#) effort because it was important to demonstrate that “the big can’t just destroy and invade the weak and the small”. And as for how the war might end, Milley said it was for the Ukrainians to decide “the end state inside the boundaries of Ukraine”.

Ukraine’s successes on the battlefield have prompted an almost triumphalist mood in some parts of Washington in recent weeks. In contrast to the gloom of the early days of the conflict, some leading politicians and officials now see the opportunity to deliver a decisive blow to Russia.

Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the House, said after a visit to Kyiv and a meeting with President Volodymyr Zelensky that America stands “with Ukraine until victory is won.” US defence secretary Lloyd Austin said “we want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can’t do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine.”

Washington has lined up an unprecedented \$54bn in aid since the war began to sustain the fight for months to come. Most of that was approved last week, when US President Joe Biden signed legislation that will funnel \$40bn more to the war effort, including about \$20bn in military assistance.





Joe Biden takes a selfie with US troops stationed in Poland, who are helping to reinforce Nato's eastern flank © Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images

But behind the confident rhetoric, there is much less clarity about what Washington actually believes can and should happen in Ukraine. There is little detail about what a strategic defeat for Russia would actually look like or what sort of territorial settlement the US might end up encouraging the Ukrainians to accept.

According to recently drafted internal talking points from the US National Security Council viewed by The Financial Times, Washington “seeks a democratic, sovereign, and independent Ukraine” and aims to make sure Russia’s effort to dominate Ukraine “ends in a strategic failure”.

“We are focused on giving Ukraine as strong a hand as possible on the battlefield to ensure it has as much leverage as possible at the negotiating table,” according to the talking points.

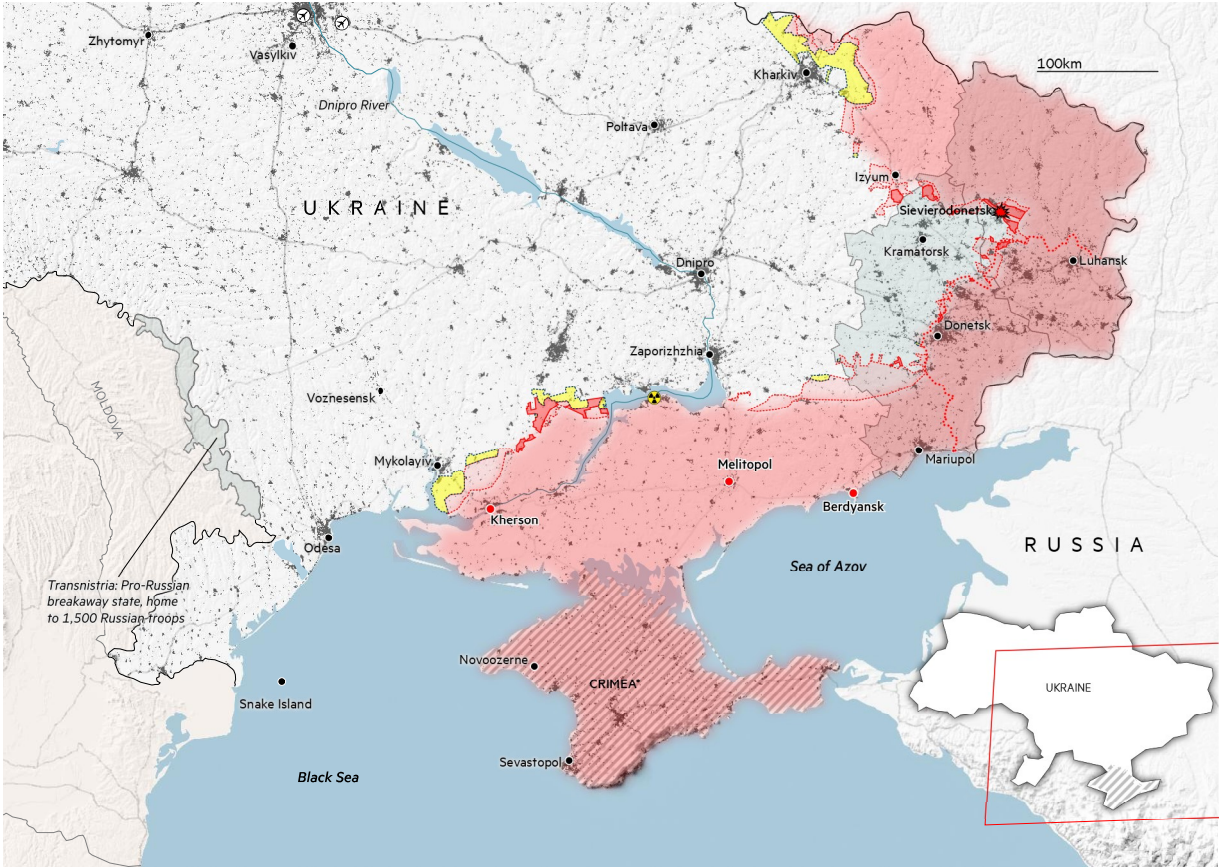
Some analysts say that the administration may be keeping elements of its war aims deliberately vague.

“The goal is to ensure that Russia fails in its [aggression against Ukraine](#) . . . what’s not exactly clear is, how do you define failure?” says Steven Pifer, a former US ambassador to Ukraine and William Perry Fellow at Stanford University. “To maintain a degree of flexibility, they’re not going to want to go too far down into detail on that.”

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## Latest troop movements and locations of attacks

- Russian military presence
- Ukrainian-claimed counter-offensive
- Under Russian control
- Nuclear power plant
- Russian-claimed control
- Assessed Russian advance
- Airfield
- Populated areas



Source: Institute for the Study of War, AFJ's Critical Threats Project, WorldPop, ET research • Updated 9am GMT

Source: [Institute for the Study of War](#), [AUS Critical Threats Project](#), working paper, FT Research • Updated 7am GMT  
May 27

\* Crimea was annexed by Russia in 2014 but this is not recognised by the international community © FT

The Biden administration is now trying to conduct a delicate balancing act. It wants to provide effective military support to Ukraine and avoid any impression that it is trying to push it into eventual compromises on territory that would create political problems in Kyiv.

But at the same time, it is trying to hold together an international coalition in support of Ukraine that includes some European allies who worry loudly and openly about the impact of a long protracted war, both on Ukraine and its society and on their own economies.

In recent weeks, the leaders of France, Germany and Italy have all made statements encouraging some sort of ceasefire and negotiated settlement.

And while all the members of the international coalition insist that the final decisions on war aims lie with the Ukrainians, they know that Kyiv's ability to keep fighting depends heavily on the weapons and financial assistance it receives — most of all from the Americans.

“The Europeans wish they knew what was America's end game plan, because the idea of Russia losing — or not winning — has not been defined,” says Stefano Stefanini, Italy's former ambassador to [Nato](#).

## Heavy weapons

The significant new American assistance signals Washington's commitment to Ukraine for the long haul. But it is also being carefully calibrated.

The US has sent billions of dollars of heavy weapons into Ukraine, and officials said they are discussing additional Ukrainian requests as they plan how to distribute the newest package.

Ukrainian forces see longer range fire as critical in a fight that is becoming one of attrition, where both sides are shelling each other with heavy artillery and sustaining heavy losses.

The US has pledged dozens of American-made 155mm howitzers — which have a longer range and are more accurate than standard Russian canons. The majority have arrived in Ukraine and are beginning to be used on the battlefield, US defence

officials said.

The administration faces domestic political pressure to go further. Rob Portman, a Republican senator from Ohio, and other senators have called on the administration to send multiple launch rocket systems, which are the subject of active debate.



Ukrainian soldiers carry out maintenance on American-made 155mm howitzers in the Donetsk region © Ivor Prickett/New York Times/Redux/eyevine

“We’ve got to be sure that we are giving them what they actually need,” he said earlier this week. “We cannot delude ourselves into thinking that if we stop providing certain systems like MLRS that somehow we will therefore not be provoking Russia and that President [Vladimir] Putin will gracefully acknowledge that gesture and somehow cease his assault or lessen his assault on Ukraine.”

Ukrainian officials have repeatedly asked for longer range weapons such as HIMARS, a type of rocket launcher that fires in rapid salvos. However, the US hasn’t made a decision on that system yet and one Congressional official said the administration has been hesitant to send them. Such a move has support in the Pentagon and the state department and a decision could come next week.

The Biden administration doesn’t want to see US military aid used to help Ukraine attack inside Russia and it is not providing targeting information for senior Russian military leaders in the field, officials said.

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The careful deliberations over weapons is part of a broader discussion in Washington about what a “strategic defeat” for Russia actually means.

US officials argue that Russia will be left weaker after the war no matter how it unfolds, particularly because of the global sanctions and export controls that will continue to weaken its economy.

Chris Coons, a Democratic senator from Delaware and a member of the Senate foreign relations committee, says “Putin has already lost in a larger strategic sense”.



Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg at a ceremony to mark Sweden and Finland's application to join the military alliance © Johanna Geron/Pool/AFP/Getty Images

Sweden and Finland have both submitted applications to Nato, and Coons said they have strong bipartisan support in the Senate, which must back the applications before the president signs off. American officials have said they see Turkey's concerns about the new entrants as something that can be addressed in talks with Ankara rather than an insurmountable obstacle.

“Russia is going to be weakened regardless of what happens in the war,” says Samuel Charap, a senior political scientist at the Rand Corporation. “Russia is going to be isolated, impoverished, surrounded by more Nato with a much weaker military and a global nariah in a lot of ways.”

Some of the most important news of the day.

However, despite the setbacks that the Russian military campaign has suffered, US officials say that it still has the ability to significantly weaken Ukraine, by pressing ahead with a protracted conflict that will keep the country in financial crisis. Russia's blockade of the Black Sea ports has essentially halted Ukrainian grain exports in a significant blow to world food supplies.

## Keeping the allies onboard

Many of Washington's European allies share the same fears about a prolonged war.

So far the United States has kept Nato and other partners together. Avril Haines, the director of national intelligence, recently told Congress that Russia's President Putin is banking on the notion that such unity will eventually fall apart.

"He is probably counting on US and EU resolve to weaken as food shortages, inflation, and energy prices get worse," she said.

However, some cracks have started to show as the Ukraine war has created new faultlines in Europe, with states like Poland and the United Kingdom in some cases getting out ahead of where Washington is, while France, Italy and Germany have preached more caution.

"There are disturbing voices appearing within Europe demanding that Ukraine should acknowledge the demands of Russia. I want to say clearly that only Ukraine has the right to decide about itself," Polish President Andrzej Duda told the Ukrainian parliament last week.

He appeared to be referring to recent calls from other European countries to press ahead with peace proposals.

French president Emmanuel Macron caused consternation in Kyiv when he urged western capitals in a speech in Strasbourg on May 9 to "never give in to the temptation of humiliation nor the spirit of revenge" when it comes to dealing with Russia. But at the same time he said it was up to Ukraine to determine the "conditions of negotiations" with Moscow.







Polish president Andrzej Duda, who says only Ukraine has the right to decide its future, meets Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv © ABACA/Reuters

Macron stressed the need for a ceasefire even though Kyiv is urging its allies to supply it with more heavy weapons so that it can launch a counter-offensive and push Russian forces back to the positions they occupied before the invasion on February 24, and possibly out of Ukrainian territory altogether.

Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi told Biden in a May meeting that Italy wants to see a ceasefire to prevent further humanitarian suffering as well as the resumption of political dialogue to settle outstanding issues between Russia and Ukraine.

“In Italy and in Europe now, people want to put an end to these massacres, this violence, this butchery. And people think about what we can do to bring peace,” said Draghi. “People think that — at least they want to think about the possibility of bringing a ceasefire and starting again some credible negotiations . . . I think we have to think deeply on how to address this.”

These tensions are sharpest over the question of what sort of territorial settlement could potentially end the war.

Ukraine has bristled at suggestions that it should conclude a ceasefire with Russia before it has reclaimed all of its lost territory — thus codifying Russia's gains.

Ukrainian officials have mused about recapturing Donbas and even Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014, in a counteroffensive if the west supplies enough weaponry.





Ukrainian soldiers assist comrades near the frontline in the Donbas region. Both sides are shelling each other with heavy artillery and sustaining heavy losses © AFP/Getty Images

Some politicians in Ukraine responded angrily this week when Henry Kissinger, the former US secretary of state, suggested Kyiv might have to give up territory in order to end the suffering of a prolonged war. Pursuing the war beyond the situation that existed at the start of the invasion “would not be about the freedom of Ukraine, but a new war against Russia itself”.

However, in an interview with Ukrainian television last week, Zelensky suggested Kyiv would be satisfied with the pre-invasion status quo. “I’d consider it a victory for our state, as of today, to advance to the February 24 line without unnecessary losses. Indeed, we are yet to regain all territories as everything isn’t that simple. We must look at the cost of this war and the cost of each deoccupation,” said Zelensky.

He suggested recently that a Russian withdrawal to those lines could create the conditions for peace negotiations, though he said he sees no Russian interest in negotiations.

Washington appears to be somewhere in the middle of its European allies, as officials are not pressing for an immediate return to peace talks but are also more cautious than some about potential escalation.

American officials have at times been annoyed with the tough talk from UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and foreign secretary Liz Truss, who gave a speech in April

calling to push Russia out of “the whole of Ukraine”.

They have bristled at British calls for more aid or a more muscular response when the US has been the largest provider and has moved mass amounts of assistance into Ukraine at record speeds.

“The British are actually a step out in front of the Americans, they keep looking over their shoulder to make sure they are being followed,” said Jeremy Shapiro, research director of the European Council on Foreign Relations.



Foreign secretary Liz Truss has annoyed some American officials with her tough talk when the US feels it is doing a lot of the heavy lifting © Victoria Jones/PA

Increasingly diplomats and analysts are debating how far Ukraine will go as the war drags on. America's promises to leave the final borders up to Ukraine have left some allies uneasy, analysts said.

Stefanini, Italy's former ambassador to Nato, expresses concern at the lack of clarity over the eventual objectives. “Does it mean getting back to the pre-February 24 situation? Does it mean rolling back the territorial gains that Russia made in 2014? Does it mean regime change in Moscow?” he asks. “Nothing of that is clear.”

Charap, of the Rand Institute, said the US and Ukraine's interests are aligned on the war's outcome, but that could change in the months ahead.

“If they decide victory looks like something the US finds to be hugely escalatory, our interests may diverge. But we’re not there yet,” he said.

European countries also fear that the looming food crisis from the Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports — to stop grain exports — will devastate the fragile nations of Africa and the Middle East, fuelling a new wave of migration to Europe.

“No European would want a never-ending war that bleeds Russia white but maintains a continuous situation of instability next door,” Stefanini said. “Europeans wish for a peaceful settlement as soon as acceptable conditions are met.”

*Additional reporting by Max Seddon in Kyiv and Ben Hall in London*

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