

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

Ukraine has crossed Moscow's and Washington's red lines

Zelenskyy is prepared to ignore Russia's nuclear threats. But the Biden administration is still wary of escalating the war

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With its Kursk offensive, Ukraine has not only crossed Russia's borders. It has also crossed red lines set in Washington.

Ever since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the US has insisted that its goal is to help Ukraine defend its territory and survive as a sovereign state. Any suggestion that the war could be taken into Russia has been regarded as dangerous.

In the aftermath of the Kursk incursion, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine has been [contemptuous](#) of the restraints that America has placed on Ukraine's war efforts, denouncing the "naive, illusory concept of so-called [red lines](#) regarding Russia, which dominated the assessment of the war by some partners". That view, said the Ukrainian president, has now "crumbled".

But has it? The difference between the caution in Washington and the risk-taking in Kyiv reflects not just a difference in analysis about how far Vladimir Putin can be pushed. It is also a reflection of a subtle difference in war aims.

At the start of the conflict, President Joe Biden set his administration two goals. The first was to support Ukraine. But the second was to avoid world war three. If forced to choose between those two aims, the US would clearly choose the latter.

But Ukraine is fighting for its survival. It would accept direct US involvement in a war with Russia. According to a recent [book](#) by David Sanger, Biden even suggested to his aides that Zelenskyy might be deliberately trying to draw America into a third world war.

As a result, there is a different appetite for risk in Washington and Kyiv. The US has been consistently cautious about the kinds of weapons it supplies to Ukraine. When HIMARS long-range missiles were first supplied to Ukraine, the Biden administration placed limits on how far they could be fired. It was only in May that Washington gave [permission](#) for US-supplied weaponry to be used against targets just inside Russia. Those prohibitions are still in place, although the Ukrainians are pushing hard for them to be lifted.

The difference in the tolerance for risk between America and Ukraine is reflected within Europe. Countries that are close to the frontline and feel directly threatened by Russia — such as Estonia and Poland — have pushed to give Ukraine more advanced weapons and more latitude to use them. Germany has consistently been much slower to act.

The Ukrainians have long complained that the caution of their most powerful allies means that they are being asked to fight with one hand behind their back. Russia is free to strike deep inside Ukraine, but Ukraine is forbidden from punching back.

Both the Ukrainian and US governments say that the Biden administration was not informed of the Kursk offensive before it took place. Although it is clearly in America's interests to deny direct involvement in planning an attack on Russian soil, that seems to be true.

With the Kursk offensive, the Ukrainians have taken a leaf out of Israel's book — by taking military action that has not been approved in Washington. The assumption by both Ukraine and Israel is that, if the action is successful, it will receive retrospective approval by America. If it fails, the US will ultimately help them deal with the consequences.

For the moment, there is cautious optimism in Washington about the Kursk offensive — although doubts remain about whether Kyiv's forces can hold the ground they have taken, and withstand Russian attacks in eastern Ukraine.

But even Ukrainian success is unlikely to lead to the US throwing caution to the winds. The Americans are still intent on avoiding a direct conflict with Russia and still take the threat of nuclear conflict seriously.

The US knows that Putin has publicly threatened to use nuclear weapons and that Russia has consistently practised their use in military exercises. In 2022, US intelligence intercepts picked up frequent and sometimes detailed conversations between Russian military officials about going nuclear.

It is possible that some of those conversations were intended to be overheard. Nonetheless, the Americans took Russia's public threats and private chatter seriously enough for Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security adviser, to warn Russia of "catastrophic consequences" should it go nuclear.

The Americans point to that warning by Sullivan to refute the idea that they simply folded in the face of Russian threats. Rather than respecting Russia's red lines, the US and its allies have gradually tiptoed over them — testing how far Putin could be pushed through gradual escalation.

Some western analysts believe that the Kursk offensive has now decisively debunked Putin's nuclear threats. Phillips O'Brien of the University of St Andrews [argues](#) that invading Russia "has always been the last assumed red line of nuclear weapons usage — and the Ukrainians are marching . . . right across it."

But the US does not believe that the last red line has been successfully crossed. Biden's advisers continue to think that — if Putin believed his regime was on the point of total defeat — the Russians could resort to the use of nuclear weapons. When the Ukrainians complain that their allies are scared of the idea of victory, they have a point.

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