

America's Roving Goals for Ukraine

Recent developments indicate a shifting goalpost.

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In a joint statement with French President Emmanuel Macron on December 1, President Joe Biden [reiterated his vow](#) of "continued support for Ukraine's defense of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, including the provision of political, security, humanitarian, and economic assistance to Ukraine for as long as it takes." A week later, Secretary of State Antony Blinken restated the American mantra of "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine."

But U.S. goals have shown signs of shifting. There have been three shifts, gradually growing, with the most significant almost imperceptibly whispered on December 7, when Secretary of State Blinken suggested for the first time that the "territorial integrity" part of Biden's vow may be flexibly open to interpretation.

The Biden administration has long [ruled out](#) the idea of pushing or even nudging Ukraine to the negotiating table." But then in early November, after [talks with Moscow](#), National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan [showed up in Kiev](#) for talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. At those [talks](#), Sullivan "raised the need for a diplomatic resolution to the war" and privately [pushed Zelensky](#) to "signal an openness to negotiate with Russia and drop their public refusal to engage in peace talks unless President Vladimir Putin is removed from power."

That was the first shift. The Biden administration went from ruling out nudging Ukraine to negotiate to pushing Ukraine to negotiate.

The second shift came only days later. Zelensky yielded to the U.S. nudge, [urging](#) the international community to "force Russia into real peace talks." But he established [preconditions for talks](#), including "restoration of [Ukraine's] territorial integrity...compensation for all war damage, punishment for every war criminal and guarantees that it will not happen again," which effectively negated the offer to negotiate.

Publicly, the U.S. continued to insist that everything was up to Ukraine: nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine. But, privately, U.S. officials began to [say](#) that “they believe that Zelensky would probably endorse negotiations and eventually accept concessions, as he suggested he would early in the war.”

And that was the second shift. Western officials began suggesting that Zelensky compromise.

The reference to Zelensky “early in the war” seems to have been a reference to Zelensky’s previous willingness to negotiate the status of the disputed eastern territories. Even before the war, in December 2021, Zelensky said he was [willing to negotiate](#) to avert conflict: “I do not rule out a referendum on Donbass in general. It might be about Donbass, it might be about Crimea.” He was [still open](#) to “compromises in Crimea” by March 8, after the war had begun. At that point Zelensky was still “ready to hold a dialogue with Russia on security guarantees, on the future of the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions [and] Crimea.” Although he said that “We cannot recognize that Crimea is the territory of Russia,” he also said, “But we can discuss with Russia the future of Crimea and Donbas.” He added that “Ukraine is ready to hold a dialogue with Russia on...the future of the occupied territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.” Three weeks later, Zelensky was still [defining his goal](#) as Russia withdrawing to positions they held before the invasion.

After pressure from the U.S. and U.K., all that changed. As Zelensky’s November preconditions for talks indicate, he began insisting on the full restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. That includes the Donbas and Crimea. In his address to the G20 on November 15, Zelensky [again insisted](#) that Russia must withdraw “all Russian troops from the territory of Ukraine” and that there must be full “restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity.”

In the second shift, U.S. officials began suggesting a return to the very openness to compromise that they had consistently discouraged. *TheWall Street Journal* [reports](#) that “Two European diplomats briefed on the discussions said Mr. Sullivan recommended that Mr. Zelensky’s team start thinking about its realistic demands and priorities for negotiations, including a reconsideration of its stated aim for Ukraine to regain Crimea, which was annexed in 2014.” A Western European official said, “We are saying to the Ukrainians that it is up to them to decide when to do it,” but then added, “But it might be a good idea to do it sooner.”

And that U.S. recommendation that Zelensky think about “realistic demands and priorities for negotiations” set off the tremors that led to the third, and most surprising, shift.

The U.S. and its NATO allies have long insisted that the goal is to restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity and to punish and weaken Russia. Blinken has [appealed](#) to the international principle that “The borders and territorial integrity of a state cannot be changed by force” and affirmed “unwavering support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, extending to its territorial waters.”

But, on December 7, Blinken subtly modified that message. Blinken suggested for the first time, in a whisper that was barely heard, that the “territorial integrity” part of Biden’s vow may be flexibly open to interpretation.

Blinken hinted that, while leaving the choice of maintaining their wider goals up to Ukraine,

the U.S. was narrowing its goals. Blinken [told](#) the *Wall Street Journal* that

Our focus is on continuing to do what we've been doing, which is to make sure that Ukraine has in its hands what it needs to defend itself, what it needs to push back against the Russian aggression, to take back territory that's been seized from it since February 24th, to make sure as well that it has the support economically and on a humanitarian basis to withstand what's happening in the country every single day.

The surprising line Blinken slipped in after "to take back territory that's been seized from it" was the addition of the words "since February 24th." That three-word addition seems to imply that, when negotiations finally start, the U.S. could settle for Russia maintaining sovereignty over Crimea and even parts of the Donbas. Anything beyond that is up to Ukraine. A senior State Department official [told](#) the *Post* that "how far Ukraine pushes south and east is a future decision for Kyiv."

And the U.S. is not alone. Its Western allies repeated Blinken's new formulation. The *Post* reports that "Some Western officials said Tuesday that the status of Crimea and the Donbas should be up for negotiation in eventual talks between Moscow and Kyiv." One Western official said that "The longstanding issues of Crimea and the status of the Donbas might be something which are spoken about thereafter."

British officials expressed "the absolute minimum needed for Russia to demonstrate it is serious about negotiating" as their willingness to "withdraw to positions that it occupied on Feb. 23, before the reinvasion."

Germany said they will support whatever red lines Ukraine draws but added that "they believe it is unrealistic to expect that Russian troops will be fully expelled from all the occupied territories, and they think that an attack on Crimea would be potentially an escalation that could prompt the Kremlin to use weapons of mass destruction."

Sullivan's prior suggestion that Zelensky start thinking about realistic demands and priorities, including Crimea, and several Western allies repeating the new formulation, suggests that Blinken's three-word addition was not a slip of the tongue. If that is so, it suggests the possibility that the U.S. and its NATO allies are shifting to a position of openness to the possibility of a ceasefire, one where Russia remains in Crimea and the area of the Donbas that it controlled prior to the war, with the final status of those territories negotiated at some later date.

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