

Waiting for Biden's Definition of Victory in Ukraine

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Global Research, February 13, 2023

[Indian Punchline](#) 9 February 2023

Region: [Europe](#), [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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There was an air of magical realism in the [daylong visit to Kiev](#) last Friday by the EU's policy commissioners comprising the executive branch of the group — the so-called College — led by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

At the end of the day in Kiev on Friday, during a joint press conference in Kiev with President Volodymyr Zelensky, all that the EU's super bureaucrats would promise was that "Ukraine's future is in the EU."

However, as the BBC reported, "Typically, it takes years for countries to join — and the EU has declined to set a timescale, describing the sign-up process as "goal-based." It all depends now on what sort of Ukraine emerges out of the war.

Surely, there is a pall of gloom in the western media lately about the [war storms gathering on the horizon](#). A Ukrainian military officer told the BBC that the Russian forces have occupied a third of the highly strategic Bakhmut city, the hub of the so-called Zelensky Line in Donbass. Since then, there have been reports of more Russian successes. The Ukrainian defence line is cracking through which an elephant can pass to the steppes en route to the Dnieper River.

An [AP report](#) quoting Ukrainian officials in Kiev says, "Russian forces are keeping Ukrainian troops tied down with attacks in the eastern Donbass region as Moscow assembles additional combat power there for an expected offensive in the coming weeks." Reuters too reports that Russian forces have been advancing "in relentless battles in the east. A regional governor said Moscow was pouring in reinforcements for a new offensive that could begin next week."

Writing for Bloomberg, Hal Brands at the American Enterprises Institute, drastically trims the Biden Administration's priorities to "reluctance to further inflame Putin's ire." Hal sums up: "Washington's goal is a Ukraine that is militarily defensible, politically independent and economically viable; this doesn't necessarily include retaking difficult areas such as the eastern Donbass or Crimea."

There is no more talk about destroying the Russian “war machinery” or an insurrection against the Kremlin and a regime change.

Two recent think tank reports that appeared in the US last month — [Avoiding a Long War](#) by the Rand Corporation (affiliated to the Pentagon) and [Empty Bins](#) by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies — epitomise a rude awakening.

The Rand Corporation report starkly warns that given the NATO countries’ indirect involvement in the war — “breathtaking in scope” — keeping a Russia-NATO war below the nuclear threshold is going to be “extremely difficult.”

It introduces another chilling thought that a protracted war in Ukraine, which “many” in the Beltway subscribe to as a means to degrade the Russian military and weaken the Russian economy, “would also have consequences for US foreign policy,” as the US’ ability to focus on other global priorities — particularly, competition with China — will remain constrained.

The Rand report argues that “Washington does have a long-term interest in ensuring that Moscow does not become completely subordinated to Beijing.” The report concludes that the paramount US interest lies in avoiding a long war, since “the consequences of a long war — raging from persistent elevated escalation risks to economic damage — far outweigh the possible benefits.”

The report presents a frank assessment that “it is fanciful to imagine that it [Kiev] could destroy Russia’s ability to wage war.” Its most astounding finding, perhaps, is two-fold: firstly, the US does not even share Ukraine’s drive for retrieving “lost” territories”; and, secondly, that it is in the American interest that Russia remains independent of China with a measure of strategic autonomy vis-a-vis the US-China rivalry.

On the other hand, the CSIS report, authored by the well-known strategic thinker Seth Jones (formerly at the Rand) is a wake-up call that the US defence industrial base is grossly inadequate for the “competitive security environment that now exists.” The report has a chapter titled *Ukraine and the Great Awakening*, which underscores that the US arms supplies to Ukraine have “strained the [US] defence industrial base to produce sufficient quantities of some munitions and weapon systems.” Jones represents the duality of the US military-industrial complex, which is disinterested in the objective of the war in Ukraine as such.

His grouse is that the US defence industrial base — including the munitions industrial base — is not currently equipped to support a protracted conventional war, although, as the UK newspaper [Sunday Times wrote last week](#), “All wars spawn profiteers, and the Ukraine conflict is no exception... The enormous supply of western arms to Ukraine has bolstered all weapons manufacturers, mainly in restocking Nato’s own arsenals and fulfilling the big orders from countries now spending more on defence....In the US, Lockheed, Raytheon and Northrop are among the big arms and jet fighter manufacturers with bulging order books.”

The Rand and CSIS reports appeared at a time when the war has reached a tipping point. Thus, within the last month, the US has [announced](#) three of the largest aid packages to Ukraine in a sign of ongoing support as the war nears its one-year mark. And on Friday, the Biden Administration announced yet another new Ukraine security package worth approximately \$2.2 billion that includes longer-range missiles with a range of 90 miles for the first time.

Herein lies the paradox. On February 1, four senior Defense Department officials [reportedly told](#) the US House Armed Services Committee lawmakers in a classified briefing that the Pentagon doesn't believe Ukraine has the ability to force Russian troops out of the Crimean peninsula. After the briefing, the House Armed Services Chair Mike Rogers (R-Ala.) asserted in an interview that the war "needs to end this summer."

Senator Rogers said:

"There's a school of thought ... that Crimea's got to be a part of it. Russia is never going to quit and give up Crimea... What is doable? And I don't think that that's agreed upon yet. So I think that there's going to have to be some pressure from our government and NATO leaders with Zelensky about what does victory look like. And I think that's going to help us more than anything to be able to drive Putin and Zelensky to the table to end this thing this summer."

This is the first time that a top US political personality has called for a timeline for the war. It came as no wonder, as Senator Bob Menendez the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who presided over the hearings on Ukraine on January 26 — also addressed the core issue in a question for the record to the US Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland who was testifying.

The influential senator bemoaned that Washington has "no definition of victory," and sought an answer from Nuland, who was rendered speechless. But it must have rankled her, for, at the fag-end of the hearing, she volunteered a reply: "If we define winning as Ukraine surviving and thriving as a cleaner democratic state, it can, it must, it will." Period.

Nuland fudged. But that is also what [President Biden did](#) in his State of the Union address on Wednesday by sticking to his tiresome mantra — that the US will support Ukraine for "as long as it takes." That said, significantly, Zelensky has taken off for a tour of major European capitals to discuss what could possibly constitute peace.

Indeed, all this is a far cry from [Von der Leyen's rhetoric](#) as she set out for Kiev last week:

"With the visit of the College to Kyiv, the EU is sending today a very clear message to Ukraine and beyond about our collective strength and resolve in the face of Russia's brutal aggression. We will continue supporting Ukraine for as long as it takes. And we will continue to impose a heavy price on Russia until it ceases its aggression. Ukraine can count on Europe to help rebuild a more resilient country, that progresses on its path to join the EU."

There is something that either Von der Leyen doesn't know about, or doesn't want to talk about. Meanwhile, Biden seems closer to her than to Rand and the CSIS or Senator Menendez and Nuland — leave alone Republican Senator Rogers. That must be an optical illusion.

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Featured image: A Ukrainian soldier adds wood to a fire to stave off the bitter cold, Bakhmut, Donbass

(File photo)

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