

Biden's Lack Of Strategy On Ukraine Shows He's Got None For U.S. Either

The White House said this week it [plans to release up to 180 million barrels of oil](#) from strategic reserves, a million barrels a day for 180 days, to help bring down near-record gas prices that were climbing before Russia's invasion of Ukraine but have since spiked. It will be the largest release of oil from the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve since it was established in the early 1970s, and it probably won't work.

The specific reasons it probably won't work — congestion on the Gulf Coast, a possible reduction in supply from Saudi Arabia and other oil producers, the fact that 180 million barrels over the next six months isn't enough to offset the loss of Russian oil exports — are not as important as what the announcement tells us about the Biden administration's plan for Ukraine and how it fits into an overarching national security strategy for the United States.

What it tells us is this: Biden has no plan for Ukraine, and no overarching national security strategy for the United States.

The forthcoming release of oil is not unique in this respect. It's just the latest in a string of seemingly haphazard, impromptu policies and pronouncements from the Biden administration that have sown confusion among our allies and projected weakness and indecision to the wider world.

Some fault Biden for not doing more to help the Ukrainians, some for

doing too much and risking open war with a nuclear power. What these critics should share, though, is the belief that Biden's contradictory signals over the past month — halfhearted and [constantly shifting military aid to Ukraine](#), the absence of any off-ramps for Russia, total economic war on Moscow, virtually no effort to facilitate or encourage negotiations — have been perhaps more dangerous than any clear and consistent policy might have been.

As the war drags on, this problem is getting worse, not better — more chaos, less clarity. Consider the past week's fusillade of so-called "gaffes" during Biden's trip to Europe. He told members of the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division in Poland they would see the bravery of Ukrainians "when you're there," suggesting U.S. troops would soon be going into Ukraine.

He said the U.S. would respond "in kind" if Moscow used chemical weapons in Ukraine, implying we would launch a chemical weapons attack on Russia. Then in his big Warsaw speech he blurted out that Russian President Vladimir Putin "cannot remain in power," which sent White House aides scrambling to clarify that no, Biden was not announcing a policy of regime change in Russia, he was just saying Putin can't be allowed to invade his neighbors. (But then on Monday, Biden said he makes "no apologies" for his statement and he's "not walking anything back.")

At this point, no one is sure what the Biden administration's plan is to help end the war in Ukraine, what it thinks a stable peace might look like, or even if regime change in Moscow is really off the table as a matter of White House policy. Biden has announced no conditions for the easing of sanctions on Russia, articulated no vision for how Ukraine might "win" or what that might look like, and with each new Biden

“gaffe” the window for the United States to take the lead in a negotiated political settlement narrows.

All this suggests Biden has no idea what the American national interest is or what our national security strategy should be — in Ukraine or anywhere else. He seems only to have a vague sense that large and powerful countries should not invade their smaller and weaker neighbors. But when they do, how should America respond? What goals or national interests should guide our response? What should our priorities be? Biden and his advisors don’t seem to know.

They had better figure it out. The Ukraine war heralds a new era in geopolitics, one in which rival powers like China will press their claims and pursue their ambitions with every tool they have. It’s not enough anymore to hide behind the platitudes of a “stronger-than-ever NATO alliance,” as if that alone encompasses the American national interest. It’s not enough to insist, as then-Secretary of State John Kerry did when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, that “you just don’t in the 21st century behave in 19th-century fashion by invading another country on a completely trumped up pretext,” as if just wishing it would make it so.

What we need now is that which we have least: clarity and resolve. We need clarity about our chief adversary, China, and the resolve to prioritize containment of China above all else.

Elbridge Colby [noted recently in Time](#) that a return to global military dominance, such as the United States enjoyed in the “unipolar moment” after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is not feasible now even with increased military spending. While we do need to spend more on defense, he says, what we need above all is a strategy that

prioritizes "being able to deny China, our greatest challenge by far, the ability to subordinate Taiwan or another U.S. ally in Asia, while enabling us also to modernize our nuclear deterrent and sustain our counterterrorism efforts."

If news reports about the Biden administration's recently completed, classified version of the National Defense Strategy are accurate, then we're in trouble. According to Foreign Policy, the administration apparently delayed rolling out its national security and defense strategies because the Pentagon was making [last-minute tweaks in light of the war in Ukraine](#), "suddenly shifting focus from a U.S. defense strategy that had eyes on China."

Shifting our focus from China is one thing we should *not* do. The war in Ukraine has underscored the need for a clear-eyed assessment of what the United States can and can't do overseas, and what the national interests really are. We can condemn Moscow's predation on its neighbor and work to ease the suffering of the Ukrainian people while also recognizing that our great security challenges aren't in eastern Europe but in the Asian Pacific.

Indeed, we need not just a defense strategy to contain China but an economic strategy as well. That includes policies aimed at U.S. corporations that do business in China, allies that trade with China, and indeed a wholesale reassessment of global trade and global supply chains. China is in effect our only peer competitor, and without a laser-like focus on containing Beijing, even if it means letting Europe take more responsibility for its own security, we will likely find ourselves before long watching another large country invade a smaller one.

If that happens, let's hope we have people in the White House who

won't be caught by surprise, wondering what to do, and making it up as they go along.

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