

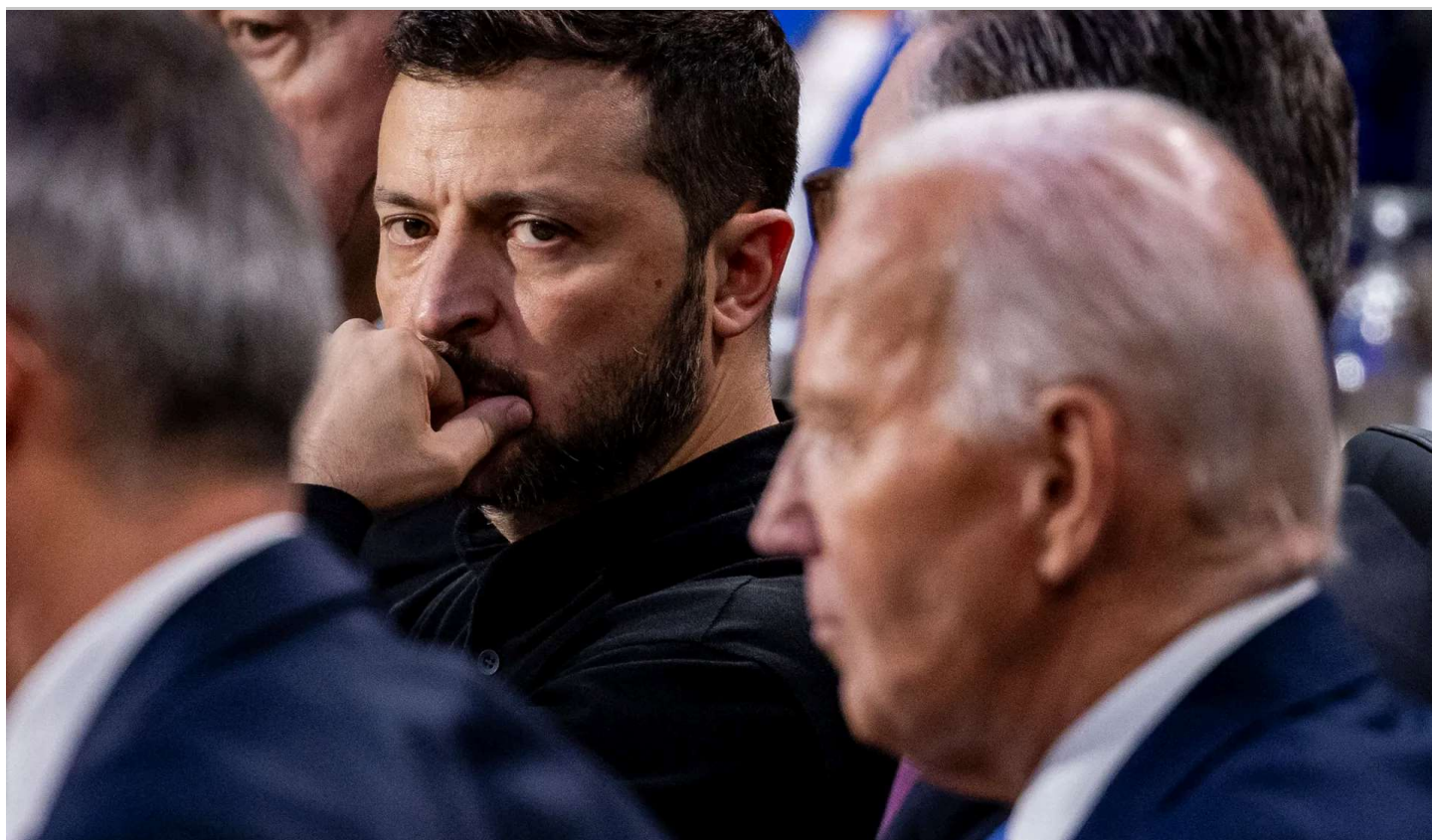
POLITICS BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

# Why Biden's Ukraine Win Was Zelensky's Loss

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and President Joe Biden attend a meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council during the NATO 75th anniversary summit in Washington, on July 11, 2024. Samuel Corum—AFP/Getty Images

BY SIMON SHUSTER X

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**W**hen Russia invaded Ukraine nearly three years ago, President Joe Biden set three objectives for the U.S. response. Ukraine's victory was never among them. The phrase the White House used to describe its mission at the

time—supporting Ukraine “for as long as it takes”—was intentionally vague. It also raised the question: As long as it takes to do what?

“We were deliberately not talking about the territorial parameters,” says Eric Green, who served on Biden’s National Security Council at the time, overseeing Russia policy. The U.S., in other words, made no promise to help Ukraine recover all of the land Russia had occupied, and certainly not the vast territories in eastern Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula taken in its initial invasion in 2014. The reason was simple, Green says: in the White House’s view, doing so was beyond Ukraine’s ability, even with robust help from the West. “That was not going to be a success story ultimately. The more important objective was for Ukraine to survive as a sovereign, democratic country free to pursue integration with the West.”

That was one of the three objectives Biden set. He also wanted the U.S. and its allies to remain united, and he insisted on avoiding direct conflict between Russia and NATO. Looking back on his leadership during the war in Ukraine — certain to shape his legacy as a statesman — Biden has achieved those three objectives. But success on those limited terms provides little satisfaction even to some of his closest allies and advisers. “It’s unfortunately the kind of success where you don’t feel great about it,” Green says in an interview with TIME. “Because there is so much suffering for Ukraine and so much uncertainty about where it’s ultimately going to land.”

For the Ukrainians, disappointment with Biden has been building throughout the invasion, and they have expressed it ever more openly since the U.S. presidential elections ended in Donald Trump’s victory. In a podcast that aired in early January, President Volodymyr Zelensky said the U.S. had not done enough under Biden to impose sanctions against Russia and to provide Ukraine with weapons and security guarantees. “With all due respect to the United States and the administration,” Zelensky told Lex Fridman, “I don’t want the same situation like we had with Biden. I ask for sanctions now, please, and weapons now.”

The criticism was unusually pointed, and seems all the more remarkable given how much support the U.S. has given Ukraine during Biden’s tenure—\$66

billion in military assistance alone since the February 2022 Russian invasion, according to [the U.S. State Department](#). Combine that with all of the aid Congress has approved for Ukraine's economic, humanitarian, and other needs, and the total comes to around \$183 billion as of last September, according to [Ukraine Oversight](#), a U.S. government watchdog created in 2023 to monitor and account for all of this assistance.

Yet Zelensky and some of his allies insist that the U.S. has been too cautious in standing up to Russia, especially when it comes to granting Ukraine a clear path to NATO membership. "It is very important that we share the same vision for Ukraine's security future – in the E.U. and NATO," the Ukrainian president said [during his most recent visit](#) to the White House in September.

During that visit, Zelensky gave Biden a detailed list of requests that he described as Ukraine's "victory plan." Apart from calling for an invitation to join NATO, the plan urged the U.S. to strengthen Ukraine's position in the war with a massive new influx of weapons and the permission to use them deep inside Russian territory. Biden had by then announced that he would not run for re-election, and the Ukrainians hoped that his lame-duck status would free him to make bolder decisions, in part to secure his legacy in foreign affairs. "For us his legacy is an argument," a senior member of Zelensky's delegation to Washington told TIME. "How will history remember you?"

The appeals got a mixed reception. On the question of Ukraine's NATO membership, Biden would not budge. But he did sign off on a number of moves that the White House had long rejected as too dangerous. In November, the U.S. allowed Ukraine to use American missiles to strike deep inside Russian territory. And in January, the Biden administration imposed tough sanctions against the Russian energy sector, including the "shadow fleet" of tankers Russia has used to export its oil.

While these decisions fell short of what Zelensky wanted, they helped Biden make the case during the last foreign-policy speech of his tenure that the U.S. had met its goals in defending Ukraine. He remained careful, however, not to promise that Ukraine would regain any more of its territory, or even survive to the end of this war. Russian President Vladimir Putin "has failed thus far to subjugate Ukraine," Biden said in [his address at the State Department](#) on Jan.

13. “Today, Ukraine is still a free, independent country, with the potential — the potential for a bright future.”

The future that Zelensky and many of his countrymen have in mind is one in which Russia is defeated. But in rallying the world to the fight, the implication Biden embedded in his own goals was that defending Ukraine against Russia is not the same as defeating Russia. So it is not surprising if that goal remains far from Zelensky’s reach.

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