

WHAT'S NEXT

Policy Recommendations from the George W. Bush Institute

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GETTING UKRAINE RIGHT



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GETTING UKRAINE RIGHT

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The Trump Administration and the new Congress have an opportunity to achieve in Ukraine what the previous administration was unable to do – help Ukraine win the war that Russia started. While the Biden Administration deserves credit for the sanctions regime imposed on Russia and the assistance it has provided to Ukraine, its painfully slow decision-making process on Ukrainian weapons requests, its restrictions on the use of certain weapons systems inside Russia, and its failure to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join NATO offer the new U.S. administration opportunities to get Ukraine right.

Led by President Vladimir Putin, Russia has created the greatest security crisis on the European continent since World War II. Several like-minded regimes – especially China, Iran, and North Korea – have come to Moscow's rescue. The best way to prevent World War III, as President Donald Trump has indicated he'd like to do, is to help Ukraine stop Russia.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The Trump Administration should prioritize support for a Ukrainian victory by accelerating provision of robust military assistance to Kyiv
- The United States and its allies should reenforce existing economic sanctions on Russia and impose new, effective ones
- The United States, together with NATO allies, should extend an invitation for Ukraine to join the Alliance
- The international community should prioritize the prosecution of Russia's war crimes

Russian forces [gained more Ukrainian land](#) in the fall of 2024 than they had since the full-scale invasion began in February 2022. Russian bombing of Ukrainian cities, civilian targets, and energy centers picked up pace, as Ukraine faced a shortage of air defense systems. The arrival of more than 10,000 North Korean forces on top of invaluable help from Iran and China expanded the conflict to third parties, while also revealing difficulties Russia is having in finding enough troops for the invasion. More than [700,000](#) Russians have been killed and wounded in the fighting, and Putin is reluctant to order another mobilization.

Ukraine also has suffered terribly, but shows few signs of giving up. Russian gains in the fall are relatively meager compared with the overall size of Ukraine's territory. In August 2024, Ukrainian forces conducted a surprise offensive into Russia's Kursk region, capturing significant terrain and Russian prisoners of war that were exchanged for Russian-held Ukrainian POWs. Despite Russian efforts to impose regime change, the democratically elected Ukrainian government led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is still standing, and Ukraine's [economy is rebounding](#). But the 2024-2025 winter may be especially challenging for Ukrainians. Uncertainty about continued Western support also weighs on Ukrainians.

Halting Western support for Ukraine would endanger Ukraine's independence as well as risk a wider war. Ukraine is the place where the battle between democracy and authoritarianism is unfolding, and how we respond will have implications for Taiwan and other hotspots around the world.

The Trump Administration should prioritize support for a Ukrainian victory by accelerating provision of robust military assistance to Kyiv

The Trump administration should accelerate much-needed military assistance to Ukraine, while encouraging allies in Europe and Asia to ramp up their assistance.

Ukrainians have never asked the United States to send troops to fight in this war, but they do desperately need our military assistance. The goal of such assistance from the United States and our other allies should be the expulsion of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory, or, at minimum, positioning Ukraine into the strongest possible negotiating position, should it decide to pursue that path. The majority of Ukrainians [reject the idea](#) of territorial concessions to Moscow and are confident that Ukraine can prevail, though they are [getting war weary](#). Since they are the ones doing the fighting, their views should overcome any so-called fatigue with the war in the West.

Congressional approval of \$60 billion in assistance in April 2024 was crucial, but delays in passage damaged Ukraine's morale and ability to fend off Russian offensives. This [allowed Russia to gain momentum](#) on the ground that the Ukrainians have not yet been able to reverse.

Fully lifting restrictions on Ukraine's ability to fire long-range missiles deep into Russia would help Ukraine eliminate other high-value Russian military targets, [hundreds of which](#) are in range of the U.S.-provided Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS). The outgoing administration eased, but did not lift, the restrictions. Russian rhetoric that doing so could trigger the use of tactical nuclear weapons is designed so the West will keep the restrictions in place.

The Trump Administration should streamline and expedite weapons decision-making and surge military aid to Ukraine. Ukraine must be able to stabilize the front and repeat the successes of its 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. Only then is a reasonable end to the war a satisfactory possibility, preferably through Russian military defeat and withdrawal or legitimate peace talks, with Ukraine in a strong negotiating position.

In contrast, freezing all aid to "force" Zelenskyy to the negotiating table would risk [disastrous consequences](#) for U.S. and European national security and a humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine. It would be capitulation by the West, even while Ukraine would continue to fight for its freedom and survival because it has no other choice. Slow dripping the aid in the hope that Ukraine hangs on long enough to exhaust the Russians into a "negotiated settlement" would be unwise. This is also not viable, because Putin is [planning for a long war](#) aimed at the full subjugation of Ukraine and the disintegration of the Western-led global order, not a temporary truce or peace on neutral terms.

Our European allies are stepping up to lead on [Ukraine aid](#) and are now Ukraine's largest provider. They can and should do more. Other democratic allies in Asia, including Australia, Japan, and South Korea, are stepping up as well. Leadership from the United States remains vital to helping Ukraine achieve victory and a just and sustainable peace, while stressing the need for greater burden-sharing.

The United States and its allies should reenforce existing economic sanctions on Russia and impose new, effective ones

The United States and its allies should impose new and effective economic sanctions against Russia and seek to end reliance on Russian fossil fuels. They also should impose secondary sanctions against Russia's enablers, as well as seize, not just freeze, Russia's assets held in Western financial institutions.

After the full-scale invasion, the White House [said](#) in March 2022 that it had imposed "unprecedented" sanctions on Russia. The immediate impact was [indeed painful](#): The Russian ruble declined sharply, the Russian stock market tanked, and hundreds of Western companies [left Russia](#).

But since then, the Russian economy has [adjusted and persevered](#), as the Kremlin learned to effectively evade sanctions, found willing non-Western suppliers for critical goods and technologies, and rapidly put the Russian economy on a [war footing](#). The longer-term damage the sanctions and war are doing to Russia's economy will be severe – but so far, the policy has not had the desired impact to change Russia's calculus. Regrettably, some major U.S. partners, such as India, Thailand, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates have emerged as willing or unwilling [sanctions evasion hubs](#) for Russia's military-industrial base.

The West must make sweeping changes to Russia sanctions policy, beginning with tighter enforcement of existing measures. While the European Union has [dramatically lowered](#) its fossil fuel dependency on Russia since 2022, the EU's total gas imports from Russia still constitute a hefty 15% of the total today. EU imports of Russian crude oil and refined petroleum products tell a [similar story](#). All told, the EU's fossil fuel imports from Russia still contribute [about \\$1 billion a month](#) into the Kremlin's coffers – which is a massive contribution to Russia's war effort. U.S. supplies should replace Russian sources.

While the United States [stopped](#) all oil, liquefied natural gas, and coal purchases from Russia immediately after the full-scale invasion, it continues to import other [critical minerals](#), including [low-enriched uranium](#) (LEU) for which American companies still pay around \$1 billion annually to the Kremlin. In May 2024, more than two years after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Congress finally [passed legislation](#) prohibiting LEU imports from Russia, but the implementation period does not start until 2028. In November 2024, Russia announced that it had [restricted](#) uranium exports to the United States in retaliation.

Despite the post-invasion stabilization, the Russian economy is showing signs of [significant strain](#), with key indicators such as the interest rate and labor supply approaching critical breaking points. The West must use this moment to increase pressure.

The United States should pursue bold new initiatives, including [dramatically lowering](#) the \$60 oil price cap set by G7 countries to buy Russian oil, [establishing "shadow-free" zones](#) to rein in Russia's illicit shipping fleet, and [cracking down hard](#) on transshipment hubs and other sanctions evasion. Greater implementation of secondary sanctions may lead the Kremlin into policy choices that are more favorable to Ukraine and the West.

The West should also seize frozen Russian assets in Western financial institutions and also use interest derived from these funds [to provide financial aid](#) to Ukraine. After causing such tremendous devastation to Ukraine, Russia should never see any of the estimated \$300 billion in assets ever again. Instead, Russia must be forced to pay for what it has done, and these funds, already under Western control, are the logical and best place to start.

The United States, together with NATO allies, should extend an invitation for Ukraine to join the Alliance

Inviting Ukraine to join NATO would clearly signal to Putin that he doesn't exercise a veto over Ukraine's future and might accelerate an end to the war, since Putin would know his efforts had failed.

Joining NATO was Ukraine's top priority in Zelenskyy's October 2024 peace plan. He and [most Ukrainians](#) believe that Ukraine will never be truly secure unless it has the security guarantees that come with membership. NATO member states' reluctance to include Ukraine reflects uncertainty over how to extend security protection when Ukraine remains at war with Russia. One option: extending the protection [only to territory Ukraine controls](#). Offering an invitation to Ukraine today would not mean membership tomorrow and would give the Alliance time to determine how to deploy Article 5 security guarantees credibly.

Some allies' concerns that a NATO invitation would provoke Russia seem overblown since Russia has already launched the bloodiest war on the European continent since World War II. Delaying an invitation risks incentivizing Putin to continue his war and demoralizing the Ukrainian people.

The international community should prioritize the prosecution of Russia's war crimes

The United States, its allies, and global institutions such as the United Nations, should prioritize the prosecution of Russia's pervasive war crimes, including against Ukrainian children and prisoners of war.

The war in Ukraine is not only a geostrategic challenge, but an ongoing humanitarian disaster. Russian forces committed numerous [crimes against humanity](#) in the early days of the full-scale invasion in temporarily occupied cities like Bucha, Irpin, Izyum, and Kherson. Today, they continue to [commit war crimes](#) in areas Russia occupies across eastern and southern Ukraine, with the intention of erasing Ukrainian national identity entirely.

Russian forces [routinely execute and torture](#) Ukrainian prisoners of war – a grave war crime under international law. Russia has also persecuted Christians in Ukraine, and, by its own admission, has abducted [more than 700,000 Ukrainian children](#), a crime for which the International Criminal Court (ICC) in March 2023 [issued arrest warrants](#) against Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's so-called commissioner for children's rights. The international community must change course and prioritize holding Russia accountable for its heinous crimes against Ukrainians.

The new administration has an opportunity to help Ukraine to victory. The stakes are not only about Ukraine. This war is now a global conflict between freedom and autocracy that risks ballooning into World War III if Putin is not stopped, as the entry of North Korean troops into the conflict illustrates. The European and Asian theaters have long become inextricably linked. As President George W. Bush said during his second inaugural address in 2005, "The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world." This remains as true today as it was 20 years ago.



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