

Biden Personally Delivers New Instructions to Zelensky on Visit to Kiev

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The lightning visit of US President Joe Biden to Ukraine and the new military aid offered to the country aims to reverse the advances made by Russia in recent months. It also demonstrates that the US is desperately trying to prolong the conflict for as long as possible. However, to serve as a warning that the Kremlin is prepared to take every measure to ensure Russia's security, Russian President Vladimir Putin suspended his country's participation from START III (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty).

US President Joe Biden made a surprise visit to Kiev on February 20, a gesture of political, emotional and obviously military support for Ukraine. In meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky, the US president announced a new military aid package that will include \$500 million worth of artillery ammunition, anti-tank systems and aerial surveillance radars.

More importantly though, Biden made the personal visit to Zelensky to ensure that he remains steadfast to the war effort and not capitulate. For Biden, Ukraine is nothing more than a state to be used and abused in the hope of weakening Russia.

It is for this reason that he said in Warsaw on February 21 that "Ukraine will never be a victory for Russia," a disingenuous claim since Ukraine continues to lose territory and be demilitarized. Biden also accused his Russian counterpart of having a "craven lust for land and power [which] will fail."

In fact, Biden's speech in Poland was so venomous that he mentioned the Russian president by name 10 times, a significant figure considering that Putin, for his part, did not name his American counterpart once during his own lengthy address from Moscow on February 21.

In the same speech, Putin announced Moscow's suspension from participating in START III, the only remaining major nuclear arms control treaty between Russia and the US. This

suspension should be considered a first warning to the West for its provocative policies.

“I am forced to announce today that Russia suspends its participation in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. I repeat, it does not withdraw from the treaty, no, it suspends its participation,” Putin said in front of the Russian Federal Assembly.

On the same day, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that the decision to suspend Moscow’s participation in the treaty is “reversible,” adding that “Washington must show political will, make conscientious efforts for a general de-escalation and create conditions for the resumption of the full functioning of the Treaty and, accordingly, comprehensively ensuring its viability.”

The ministry urged “the American side to do just that. Until then, any of our steps towards Washington in the context of START are absolutely out of the question.”

It must be stressed that suspending the treaty is not withdrawing from it. Rather, it should be considered that Putin is warning the West that Moscow can escalate the conflict if provocations continue. However, Biden’s visit to Kiev and his speech in Warsaw demonstrates that Washington has no immediate intentions of de-escalating tensions with Moscow.

In his speech, Putin also reiterated that Russia was trying to avoid military conflict in Ukraine but that the West had been pushing one on purpose. It was obviously in Russia’s interest to avoid conflict, but Moscow was left with no choice but to conduct a special military operation because of Kiev’s unrelenting pursuit of NATO membership and persecution of minorities, including Russian-speakers. Given that the West continues to support Ukraine against Russia, there is a possibility that Putin will make the decision to withdraw from the treaty entirely.

None-the-less, Moscow’s announcement that it suspended its participation in START III received surprising expressions of hope from Washington and London that it will return to it swiftly. This demonstrates just how much importance the West places in the agreement, especially since Moscow has 5,977 nuclear warheads as of 2022, the largest stockpile of nuclear warheads in the world. Russia’s stockpile is in fact larger than the American stockpile, which is the second largest with 5,428 warheads.

At the same time, CNN reported that US officials were wary to announce that this would handicap Moscow’s ability to build its nuclear program.

“I wouldn’t want to offer an assessment as whether that has overstretched them to the point that they would be precluded in some way from taking steps to develop their nuclear arsenal but ... they’ve got a lot of problems on their hands,” a US official told CNN.

None-the-less, what Biden’s visit to Kiev and Putin’s suspension from START III demonstrates is that the war in Ukraine is unlikely to end in the short term and will probably wage on for most of the year. It appears that the US remains committed to supporting Ukraine, especially as Zelensky continues to enthusiastically receive instructions, even now directly from the US president himself.

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