

When Biden Says ‘As Long As It Takes,’ What Does Ukraine Hear?

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*In his [State of the Union Address](#) on February 7, **President Joe Biden** once again told Ukraine that “America...will stand with you as long as it takes.”*

In case the world didn’t hear, Biden moved to a more dramatic stage and repeated the words. Speaking from Kiev, where he met with Ukrainian **President Volodymyr Zelensky**, Biden [spoke](#) again of America’s “unwavering and unflagging commitment to Ukraine’s democracy, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.” He promised that “that support will endure.”

But though Biden spoke the words loudly on an international stage, that may not be what Zelensky heard.

What is Zelensky to hear when Germany loudly promises tanks made by a manufacturer who [says](#) the Leopard 2 tanks can’t be delivered until 2024 at the earliest?

Zelensky has been [urgently requesting](#) fighter jets: “We have freedom, give us wings to protect it.” But what does Zelensky hear when French **President Emmanuel Macron** [says](#) that the “allies must prioritize equipment that will be the most useful, and fastest, for Ukraine to achieve its end goal” and that “[t]here is no way that fighter planes can be delivered in the next few weeks?”

What does Zelensky hear when one of his strongest backers, Poland’s **President Andrzej Duda**, [says](#) that a “decision today to donate any kind of jets, any F-16...is a very serious decision and it’s not an easy one for us to take?” Duda explained that “this poses serious problems if we donate even a small part of them anywhere, because I don’t hesitate to say we have not enough of these jets” and that sending fighter jets “requires a decision by the Allies anyway, which means that we have to make a joint decision.” That joint decision is vetoed for now by Biden who [says](#) the U.S. will not send fighter jets and by Germany who [says](#), “The question of combat aircraft does not arise at all.”

What is Zelensky to hear when NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg [says](#) that NATO's "defence industries [are] under strain" because, "The war in Ukraine is consuming an enormous amount of munitions, and depleting Allied stockpiles. The current rate of Ukraine's ammunition expenditure is many times higher than our current rate of production?" What does Ukraine hear when U.S. **Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin** [says](#) that the U.S. is "working with the Ukrainian soldiers" so "that they'll require less artillery munitions?" How does that sound to Ukraine especially as EU foreign affairs chief **Josep Borrell** [warns](#) that the war will be over in "a matter of weeks" if the "shortage of ammunition" is not "solved quickly?"

Most importantly, what did Zelensky hear when CIA **Director William Burns** met with him secretly in January and [told](#) him that "at some point assistance would be harder to come by?" The delivery of that message has now been confirmed both by U.S. officials familiar with the meeting who spoke to *The Washington Post* and [by two Ukrainian officials](#) who spoke to *Politico*.

We know what Zelensky heard because people familiar with the meeting said Zelensky walked away from the meeting with the impression that he could rely on U.S. assistance through the summer but that he was "less certain about the prospects of Congress passing another multibillion-dollar supplemental assistance package as it did last spring."

The delivery of that message has reportedly persisted. A senior administration official [told](#) *The Washington Post* on February 13 that "we will continue to try to impress upon them that we can't do anything and everything forever."

The impression has reportedly persisted, too, despite Biden's recent visit and assurance. One of Zelensky's advisors [says](#) that Kiev is worried because they think that "both on Capitol Hill and in the administration, there are people who are looking to calibrate security assistance to incentivize the Ukrainians to cut some sort of deal."

The crucial word in the Ukrainian advisor's concern is "calibrate." Calibration is an idea that has appeared twice.

The first is in the very context Kiev fears. Kiev worries that the Biden administration may seek to calibrate security assistance to incentivize Ukraine to negotiate an end to the war. That precise idea was hinted at in a January report by the influential RAND corporation. In a section on policy options the United States has to overcome as impediments to negotiations, the report says that "a belief that Western aid will continue indefinitely" is "a primary source of Kyiv's optimism that may be prolonging the war" and discouraging Ukraine from negotiating. The report considers the very solution Kiev fears: "...the United States could decide to condition future military aid on a Ukrainian commitment to negotiations."

Biden says that American support will endure for as long as it takes. But Ukraine's confidence is undercut by a different message they are hearing.

That message is being clearly communicated to them. Weapons aid to Ukraine could be calibrated in a second way. The same *Washington Post* [article](#) that said that Ukraine is being told that the U.S. "can't do anything and everything forever," also hinted at calibration as the solution. "The frank discussion in Kyiv last month," the report says, "reflected an effort by the Biden administration to bring Ukraine's goals in line with what the West can sustain."

Biden's words are meant to very publicly portray U.S. support for Ukraine as enduring for as long as it takes. But a very different message may be being delivered to Kiev. The message that was first delivered by CIA Director Burns, and has continued to be pressed upon them, may be, as Kiev worries, that weapons aid can't go on forever and may have to be calibrated to what the West can sustain and toward the goal of negotiating an end to the war.

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Featured image: April 14, 2022, Kyiv, Ukraine: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, during an interview with BBC reporter Clive Myrie for BBC Television from the situation room, April 14, 2022 in Kyiv, Ukraine. (Credit Image: © Ukraine Presidency/Ukraine Presi/Planet Pix via ZUMA Press Wire)

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