

Slow Ratcheting Up of Ukraine Aid Lays Out Welcome Mat to China in Taiwan | Opinion

Jamil N. Jaffer & John Poulson - Newsweek

As Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to kill civilians in order to break the will of the Ukrainian people, the allied decision to provide hundreds of main battle tanks to Ukraine could fundamentally change the course of the conflict, giving Ukraine the boost it needs to push the Russians out of eastern Ukraine and perhaps even to retake Crimea.



A Leopard 2 A6 main battle tank carries out manoeuvres during a visit by German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius to the Bundeswehr's Panzerbataillon 203 tank squadron on February 1, 2023 in Augustdorf, Germany. Germany will supply the armed forces of Ukraine with Leopard 2 tanks and has begun training Ukrainian tank crews. Other European countries, including Spain, Finland, Norway and Poland, are also planning to provide Ukraine with Leopards soon, for a total of approximately 80 tanks, with more to be added later. © Sascha Schuermann/Getty Images

While this critically important decision has rightly been lauded, we ought not be fooled into thinking that our efforts in Ukraine have been a triumph. To the contrary, when our adversaries look at our approach to Ukraine, they don't see bold moves, they see hesitance, delay, and weakness at every turn.

The sad reality is that while there is no doubt that the weaponry we've supplied has been critical to Ukraine's battlefield success, had the White House and our friends in Europe provided these weapons much earlier, we might well have deterred the Russian invasion or, at a minimum, enabled Ukrainian forces to actually win this war.

To be sure, the Biden administration gets credit for keeping the allied coalition strong on sanctions and leading the way on pouring billions of dollars of military equipment into the fight.

Yet the reality is that much of this aid came only after it became clear that Ukrainian forces were dramatically more capable and motivated than expected, and that the Russian forces were drastically underprepared and ill-supplied for the fight.

Indeed, the key story of this war has not been bold allied support, but the slow drip of more (and better) weapons into the fight, even as Russia killed more than 7,000 civilians, [including more than 400 children](#), and decimated Ukraine's infrastructure.

The Biden White House's hesitation to act before Feb. 24 had a clear source: the fear that overly aggressive support might cause the Russians to lash out, provoking the invasion itself. Of course, we knew this wasn't true long before the war began.

The intelligence community [repeatedly told the White House](#) about Russian intentions; they planned to invade, provocation or not. And despite the Biden administration's public campaigning and admittedly novel strategy of announcing Russia's attempted fakery to the world, this did little to dissuade Putin.

Other than public pleas for peace, the unconvincing threat of sanctions, and failed diplomacy, the White House had no real deterrent strategy, and certainly not one that leveraged America's hard power. Publicly providing Ukraine with key weapons ahead of time would have made American resolve clear to Putin in the only language that he understands: raw strength. This didn't happen and, to no surprise, Putin attacked anyway.

And yet even then we dithered. The allies couldn't agree on what weapons to supply and when. It took months for the United States to begin supplying the [critically important HIMARS missile systems](#) and nearly a year to get to main battle tanks.

Indeed, the White House only got there after it was shamed into it by new [UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's announcement](#) to provide British tanks. Even now, there remain debates within the White House about whether we ought provide [even more capable missile systems](#) and we continue to [resist providing fighter jets](#) that could take the fight to the Russians.

Allowing Putin to dictate the terms of the conflict since the onset (and more broadly since 2014), the White House has leaned back instead of forward, and our adversaries unquestionably see this less-than-convincing stance. For every article that lays out the hand-wringing in the White House over escalation, and each time the administration trots out its weak-kneed "[integrated deterrence](#)" approach ([ably taken apart by Republican Rep. Mike Gallagher](#) of Wisconsin), we face allies who see us as itinerant and adversaries who are increasingly unafraid of us.

And so, while many pundits on cable news have applauded Biden's actions, the reality is that we are in a proxy war in Ukraine specifically because his integrated deterrence failed miserably.

The consequences of this indecisiveness are not limited to Eastern Europe. Undoubtedly, the Chinese are watching as they consider their next steps against Taiwan. Already, one prominent American military leader has assessed that

the Chinese could take action as soon as 2025, and while this may be forward leaning, it certainly isn't far off.

What the Chinese have taken from the Ukraine conflict that the United States and our allies aren't steadfast in our support of those who have turned to us, and that we prefer slow escalation—and only when our team is winning—to bold moves.

As a result, they have learned that the right approach is to strike fast and crush the opposition because the West won't move quickly, particularly where, as in the Taiwan Straits, we don't have enough forward forces to put up an immediate fight.

None of this, of course, is new news. Even prior to the Ukraine conflict, much ink had been spilled about the need for an [effective deterrence plan](#) for Taiwan. Whereas the [Biden Administration's policy](#) can be described as waffling at best, [Xi Jinping has clearly signaled the China's intentions](#) for reunification by force if necessary.

The hesitate-first foreign policy of the Biden team makes clear the United States would vacillate before deciding whether to arm Taiwan to the teeth to do battle and certainly before committing American forces to the fight. This invites the Chinese to employ a blitzkrieg strategy, overwhelming Taiwan via air, land, and sea long before the United States could mobilize any effective response.

Given the unique supply chain challenges presented by operating in the Taiwan Strait, it is imperative that any attack against Taiwan be deterred with a strong and immediate response from the United States, in conjunction with our key regional allies in Japan, South Korea, and Australia, in order to blunt a Chinese attack and prevent a swift victory.

That requires forward-deployed forces of a level that the United States has been thus far unwilling to commit. In certain ways, the pre-Taiwan scenario is much like the pre-Ukraine scenario: if the United States fails to provide the right kind of weaponry and Pre-position forces ahead of an invasion, the odds of deterring said invasion are zero.

So, rather than exchanging congratulatory high-fives for doing what we should have done a year ago in Ukraine, we ought learn the right lesson and get ahead of China in the Taiwan theatre now.