

# Austin's assertion that US wants to 'weaken' Russia underlines Biden strategy shift

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**Washington (CNN)** — As Russia's invasion of Ukraine has transformed into a grinding war of attrition with no meaningful peace deal in sight, the US and its allies have begun to

That message was delivered most clearly on Monday, when Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin told reporters after a trip to Ukraine's capital city of Kyiv that "we want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine."

A National Security Council spokesperson said that Austin's comments were consistent with what the US' goals have been for months – namely, "to make this invasion a strategic failure for Russia."

"We want Ukraine to win," the spokesperson added. "One of our goals has been to limit Russia's ability to do something like this again, as Secretary Austin said. That's why we are arming the Ukrainians with weapons and equipment to defend themselves from Russian attacks, and it's why we are using sanctions and export controls that are directly targeted at Russia's defense industry to undercut Russia's economic and military power to threaten and attack its neighbors."



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Austin says US wants to see Russia's military capabilities weakened

US officials traveling with Austin said that the message is one that he planned to reiterate, according to a senior administration official. Russia coming out of the conflict weaker than before is an idea that other Biden administration officials have referenced. US officials, however, had previously been reluctant to state as plainly that the US' goal is to see Russia fail, and be militarily neutered in the long term, remaining cautiously optimistic that some kind of negotiated settlement could be reached.

One eastern European official told CNN that mentality was incredibly frustrating. "The only solution to this is for Ukraine to win," he said.

The shift in strategy has come about over the past few weeks, evidenced by a growing tolerance for increased risk with the more complex, western weaponry being sent in, and is a reflection of the belief that Putin's goals in Ukraine would not end if he manages to seize part of Ukraine, as they didn't after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, a British diplomat said.

dormant, logic would dictate there's more road to run in this. So therefore what you can take off the battlefield in this window is not only a short-term win it's also a longer term strategy as well."

Now, there is a growing realization among US and Western officials – especially after the Russians' massacre of civilians in the Ukrainian town of Bucha – that Russia needs to be hurt so much economically and on the battlefield that its aggression is stopped for good, US and Western officials told CNN.

"So it has already lost a lot of military capability," Austin said. "And a lot of its troops, quite frankly. And we want to see them not have the capability to very quickly reproduce that capability."

Biden administration officials are optimistic that that is an achievable goal, sources told CNN. Administration officials and congressional sources said they believe that the continued military support to Ukraine could result in significant blows to Russia that will impair their long-term military capabilities, strategically benefiting the US.



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Already, the US has begun to send heavier and more sophisticated equipment to Ukraine that it had refrained from providing in the past, including 72 howitzers and Phoenix Ghost tactical drones.

"The way we are looking at this is that it's making an investment to neuter the Russian army and navy for next decade," said a congressional source familiar with the ongoing military assistance to Ukraine.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Monday that while "obviously right now the war is in Ukraine," the US and its allies are "are also looking to prevent (Russia) from expanding their efforts and President Putin's objectives beyond that too."

## A delicate 'balancing act'

Officials noted, though, that the US and its allies are carefully threading a needle when it comes to penalizing Russia – both because of the collateral damage harsh sanctions could have on the global economy, and because of the risk that Putin could lash out if he is backed too far into a corner.

certainly a balancing act that needs to be taken into consideration” when punishing the country, “whether it’s in the sanctions space or in the military and intelligence support space.”

This person added that while the US still assesses that Putin’s red lines for use of nuclear weapons haven’t changed, “one of those red lines is regime stability,” they said – meaning that Putin could lash out if he feels his rule is seriously threatened.



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A US official said separately that he believes Austin’s comments were not helpful for that reason, and because it could play into the Russian propaganda line that NATO and US support for Ukraine is a power play.

The goal is not to tell the Russians that “no matter what, the US and NATO are going to weaken you,” this official said, but rather that the West will aim to punish Russia as long as it is at war with Ukraine.

A State Department spokesperson said that the sanctions the US and its allies have put in place are “all in response to Putin’s war of aggression in Ukraine. They are intended to prevent Putin from buying more ammo, guns, missiles – to stop him from funding his war machine, to stop the killing. They are also intended to punish those who actively support Putin’s unprovoked, brutal war. This is not about harming the Russian people.”

It is still unclear what the US would do about the sanctions if Russia reached a meaningful peace deal with Ukraine and withdrew its forces. Multiple sources told CNN that in that scenario, the US would likely consider lifting some sanctions, in a show of good faith, while keeping others. The US and allies, including the UK, have also been weighing the feasibility of a “snapback” mechanism that would allow them to quickly reimpose the sanctions should Moscow violate any agreements reached with Kyiv, the sources said.

But with the conflict still raging and the prospects of a peace deal looking increasingly dim, those options are a very long way off from being implemented, officials said.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in March that Russia’s change in behavior must be “irreversible” before the US considers lifting sanctions.

“They will want to make sure that anything that’s done is, in effect, irreversible, that this can’t happen again, that Russia won’t pick up and do exactly what it’s doing in a year or

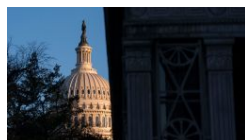
## Shifting concerns about escalation

Russia's poor performance and significant losses on the battlefield have contributed significantly to the US' increasingly emboldened posture, officials said.

Whereas Washington had been previously concerned that sending heavy artillery might be viewed as a provocation, Biden has announced billions of dollars in new shipments of tanks, missiles and ammunition over the past month, an indication that some initial worries about escalating the conflict have waned.

The US is also preparing to train Ukraine's armed forces on more state-of-the-art, NATO-capable weapons systems, Austin told reporters on Monday – a move that will allow the US and its allies to provide more powerful weapons to Ukraine more quickly, since those systems are more readily available than the Soviet-era equipment the west has had to scrounge for to date.

“There are a number of shifts happening simultaneously,” the British diplomat said. “One is looking at future capabilities and that's related to the artillery and more modern weaponry. Two, let's take out what's on the battlefield.”



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Biden himself has been steadily ratcheting up the rhetoric in describing Putin – going from calling him a war criminal to saying he cannot remain in power to accusing him of committing genocide – despite worries among some of his advisers the language could cause Putin to lash out.

But the President has downplayed those concerns in private, according to people familiar with the conversations, saying that articulating what is plainly evident is more important than risking possible escalation. And he has underscored that Russia's military capabilities don't appear as strong as the US once believed.

Ambassador Nathan Sales, who until 2021 served as acting under secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights at the State Department, said the “bottom line” is that “a weaker Russia means a more stable world,” and that the US should prepare for its Russia policy

“As long as Putin is calling the shots, Russia is going to be a malign actor,” he said. “And

“a prolonged period” of its Russia policy being aimed at limiting its ability “to cause mischief around the world.”

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