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AN INDEFINITE WAR OF ATTRITION: THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S STRATEGY FOR THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the outgoing US Biden administration's strategy for the Russo-Ukrainian War and the prospects of its revision under the incoming Donald Trump administration. Building on Stephen Kotkin's characterisation of this strategy as an "indefinite war of attrition", the author addresses questions about the origins and the meaning of this strategy, alternatives to it proposed by its critics, and its alignment with the broader US grand strategy, offering answers as to whether Biden's decision to allow Ukraine to use long-range weapons against Russia signifies a strategic shift and what options Trump has to end the war. Analysing Biden's approach to Ukraine throughout his presidency within the framework of the US grand strategy of liberal hegemony and its corresponding policy towards Russia, the paper concludes that the strategy of an indefinite war of attrition—which offers neither Ukrainian victory nor a compromise peace—is consistent with the liberal-hegemonic primary objective to weaken Russia and remove it from the ranks of great powers and remains unchanged with Biden's latest decisions. For the Trump administration to contribute to resolving the conflict, an approach combining "interventionist" and "isolationist" perspectives on the current strategy is essential.

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Introduction

On November 17, 2024, outgoing President of the United States, Joseph Biden, reportedly authorised the Ukrainian military to use US long-range weapons, in particular Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), against targets deep within the internationally recognised territory of the Russian Federation. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky neither confirmed nor denied these reports, stating, "The missiles will speak for themselves" (*Reuters* 2024). And indeed, they spoke: two days later, the Ukrainians used ATACMS to strike a Russian arsenal in the Bryansk region, potentially opening a new chapter in the Russo-Ukrainian War that has been raging since February 24, 2022. Biden's controversial decision came amidst the Russian military offensive along nearly the entire frontline, including portions of Russia's own Kursk region that Ukraine had recently occupied during a cross-border incursion, where Moscow deployed several thousand North Korean troops as support. Furthermore, this decision came less than two weeks after Donald Trump's stunning victory in the US presidential elections over Biden's Vice President, Kamala Harris.

During his campaign, Trump repeatedly vowed to end the war if elected, and following the elections, several of his closest associates publicly condemned Biden's move (Roth 2024). Before the elections, the Biden administration had been hesitant to authorise the use of these missiles, already supplied to Ukraine, for strikes deep into Russia. With this authorisation in place, a question arises about how it aligns with the outgoing administration's broader strategy towards the Russo-Ukrainian War. The purpose of this paper is to discuss this and other issues, such as what kind of strategy this is and since when it has been used, what goals it seeks to accomplish and how it fits into the larger US grand strategy, what alternatives to this approach have been put forth by both the "left" and the "right," and, lastly, what strategic options the incoming Trump administration has for keeping its promise to bring peace to Ukraine.

First, I agree with historian Stephen Kotkin (2024) that Biden's strategy for the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is most aptly described as an "indefinite war of attrition". I also argue that this approach has been in place at least since Russia's withdrawal from the Kiev battlefield in the spring of 2022. The core of this strategy involves robust and growing, yet deliberately limited, US and Western military support to Ukraine. This aid is sufficient to sustain Ukraine's resistance and prevent Russian victory. However, it falls short of enabling Ukraine to win decisively, whether by expelling Russian forces from its internationally recognised territory or even rolling back Russian gains to the February 2022 line of contact. Kotkin himself represents the "interventionist" critics of this strategy, who contend that the US should do more to ensure a swift Ukrainian victory

over Russia, arguing that this is the only way to end Ukrainian suffering and compel Russia to abandon its imperial ambitions in Ukraine.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are the "isolationist" critics, who argue that the US has already done too much to fuel the conflict. They believe the war should not rank high among US priorities and advocate for pressuring Ukraine to accept a compromise peace with Russia. The third section of this paper focuses on the debate between these interventionist and isolationist perspectives. In the fourth section, I argue that this debate notwithstanding, Biden's strategy for Ukraine aligns seamlessly with the long-standing US grand strategy of liberal hegemony and its corresponding policies towards Russia. The concluding section summarises the findings and explores the strategic options available to a new Trump administration, should it genuinely seek to secure a durable peace in Ukraine. However, before delving into these discussions, it is essential to examine what Biden has actually done in this war. That includes analysing his approach to the pre-war crisis, shifts in expectations and strategy during the early stages of the war, and whether his "lame-duck" decision to escalate with long-range weapons signifies a new strategic shift.

What Has Biden Done About Ukraine?

It would not be an exaggeration to say that US foreign policy, throughout Biden's presidency, was mainly defined by addressing a renewed Ukrainian crisis. In March 2021, less than two months after his inauguration, Russia began a massive military build-up near Ukraine's border, citing a recently completed military exercise to justify it. This followed an escalation in fighting between the Ukrainian army and the forces of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. Confronted with uncertainty over whether Russia was preparing to invade Ukraine, Biden chose to give US-Russian relations, recently additionally strained by issues such as another round of alleged Russian interference in US elections, cyberattacks, and the treatment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, one more chance. He invited President Putin to a bilateral summit, an offer Putin accepted while simultaneously announcing a partial withdrawal of troops from the Ukrainian border. The two leaders' summit held in Geneva in June 2021 resulted in an agreement for both nations to continue cooperation in areas of mutual interest, most notably strategic stability. In a gesture unprecedented in recent US diplomacy, Biden referred to Russia as a "great power", recognising the importance of the status of the Russian leadership and offering a glimmer of hope for a "reset light" in relations between Washington and Moscow (Trapara 2021).

For a brief period, it seemed that the threat of a reignited conflict in Ukraine had been averted, as the Russian military build-up seemed less about Ukraine

specifically and more about pressuring the West for concessions (Lee 2021). However, in October and November, Russian troops did not withdraw following the conclusion of the "Zapad" military exercise, starting another massive build-up instead. US intelligence soon uncovered Kremlin plans for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, forcing the Biden administration to reassess its approach.

Once intelligence reports about the impending invasion arrived, a two-pronged response was adopted. The administration took immediate steps to deter Putin while simultaneously preparing for the possibility that deterrence would fail. The deterrence consisted of two key components. First, intelligence was shared with US allies, Ukraine, and the international public to send a clear message to Russia that its plans had been uncovered, thereby placing moral pressure on Putin (Plokhy 2023, 144). Second, the US issued warnings of unprecedented sanctions from a unified West if Russia proceeded with the invasion. However, one measure was explicitly ruled out: deploying US troops to Ukraine, which would risk direct involvement in a war with Russia. This approach aligned with the guidance of General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who outlined the key objectives in the event of war: "don't have a kinetic conflict between the US military and NATO with Russia; contain war inside the geographical boundaries of Ukraine; strengthen and maintain NATO unity; empower Ukraine and give them the means to fight" (Bick 2024, 144-145; Plokhy 2023, 143-144).

At the time, however, no one anticipated the scale and duration of the conflict that would eventually unfold. The same intelligence that predicted an invasion also suggested the war would last only a few weeks, with Kiev quickly falling, followed by regime change and Russian occupation of most of Ukraine (Plokhy 2023, 144; Bick 2024, 150; Mahnken and Baker 2024, 191-192). Against this backdrop, one must ask: what exactly did the Biden administration mean by "empowerment" of Ukraine, and what "means to fight" did it envision providing?

The most plausible answer was the option of backing armed resistance in occupied Ukrainian territories. This strategy was developed by an interagency "Tiger team", created on the initiative of the National Security Advisor to assess potential scenarios and offer recommendations (Bick 2024, 146). The support envisioned primarily involved weapons already familiar to Ukraine, such as Javelin anti-tank missiles and Stinger anti-aircraft systems—tools well-suited for guerrilla warfare. This approach closely mirrored the US strategy of aiding anti-Soviet insurgents in Afghanistan during the 80s (Plokhy 2023, 144-145). This plan deeply frustrated Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and his advisors. Throughout the crisis, culminating in the 2022 Munich Security Conference just days before the war, Zelensky repeatedly criticised the US for issuing warnings of an invasion without providing Ukraine with the means to defend itself effectively (Plokhy 2023, 146-148).

The Biden administration would soon have an opportunity to test its chosen approach. After rejecting Moscow's ultimatums on "security guarantees" in December and failing to restrain Putin through its own and its allies' diplomatic efforts, it received confirmation on February 24, 2022, that its intelligence regarding Russia's three-pronged, full-scale invasion of Ukraine was accurate. Yet within days, the second part of the intelligence assessment—that Russia would quickly and easily win the conventional war—proved entirely wrong. The resilience of the Ukrainian people and military exceeded both Putin's and Biden's expectations, prompting Washington to reassess its strategy again.

The shift in US strategy did not occur immediately. Frustrated by Western reluctance to provide more direct support, including the refusal of a request for a no-fly zone over Ukraine, the Ukrainian government expressed its readiness to negotiate with Russia from the first day of the invasion. The Russians also showed openness to diplomacy once it became clear that their blitzkrieg to capture Kiev and force regime change had failed. Several rounds of negotiations were held in Belarus and Istanbul, with both parties making substantial concessions and agreeing on a communiqué based on Kiev's pledge to neutrality in exchange for firm multilateral security guarantees while leaving territorial issues aside. However, the negotiations collapsed by late April. Official diplomacy then fell silent for the next two and a half years.

There are several overlapping explanations for the failure of these talks. The first is that neither side was genuinely committed to ending the war and instead used the negotiations to buy time for military regrouping while seeking to shift blame for the failure onto the other party. The second is that Ukraine faced a moral dilemma in continuing negotiations after reports of the alleged massacre of civilians by Russian forces in Bucha (near Kiev) came to light. The third is that Russia's withdrawal from the Kiev front bolstered Ukrainian confidence, increasing its belief that victory was achievable. Finally, Western reluctance to provide firm security guarantees to Ukraine, coupled with encouraging Ukrainians to continue fighting, may have played a role. Russian officials would later repeatedly claim that Ukraine was influenced to quit diplomacy by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who publicly stated that he did not believe in negotiations with Russia before visiting Kiev a few weeks before the collapse of the talks (Charap and Radchenko 2024).

The failure of diplomacy and Russia's abandonment of its plan to capture Kiev ushered in a new phase of the conflict: a prolonged war of attrition in Ukraine's east and south with Russia's apparent objective shifted to seizing as much territory as possible. It was during this phase that Washington ultimately decided to provide Ukraine with more substantial military and financial support, enabling it to confront Russian forces in conventional warfare. The first results of this reversed strategy became evident within months. While Russia initially

made gains in the Donbas region, primarily thanks to its superior artillery firepower, Kiev gradually regained momentum. Using advanced US weaponry, including the HIMARS artillery systems delivered in the summer of 2022, Ukraine managed to halt Russian advances and even launch successful counteroffensives in the Kherson and Kharkov regions.

The shift in US strategy becomes evident when comparing Biden's speeches and actions during the initial and later stages of the war. On the first day of the invasion, he stated, "Although we provided over 650 million dollars in defensive assistance to Ukraine just this year… our forces are not and will not be engaged in the conflict with Russia in Ukraine", adding that "history has shown time and again how swift gains in territory eventually give way to grinding occupations, acts of mass civil disobedience, and strategic dead-ends", and cautioning that "the next few weeks and months will be hard on the people of Ukraine" (The White House 2022a). These remarks make it clear that Biden initially anticipated providing military assistance for guerrilla warfare on territory swiftly occupied by Russia.

Just two weeks later, Biden's tone significantly changed: "We will make sure Ukraine has weapons to defend against an invading Russian force… But we already know Putin's war against Ukraine will never be a victory" (The White House 2022c). In the second week of March, Biden approved $1 billion in security assistance to Ukraine, more than he had allocated since the start of his term. While this aid consisted primarily of Javelins and Stingers, a new package requested from Congress in late April included a much broader range of weapons (The White House 2022d; The White House 2022f). The signing of the "Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022" on May 9 to "support the government of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people in their fight to defend their country and their democracy against Putin's brutal war" marked the final step in transitioning to a strategy focused on supporting Ukraine in a conventional war of attrition against the invading Russia, rather than planning for occupation and subsequent resistance (The White House 2022g).

But how long was this war of attrition meant to last? Did Biden's assertion that Putin's war would never be a victory imply that Ukraine would be supported sufficiently to achieve its own victory and expel the invading forces as quickly as possible? Biden and his associates often repeated that support for Ukraine would continue for "as long as it takes". However, this raised the question: as long as it takes to achieve what? Ukrainian battlefield successes in the second half of 2022 prompted Putin to double down by annexing four Ukrainian regions, pursuing a partial mobilisation, and launching an aerial campaign against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure. Yet none of these moves enabled significant Russian advances on the frontline, nor did they crush the fighting morale of Ukraine's leadership, army, or people. In 2023, the observers awaited a major Ukrainian counteroffensive in the east and south of the country,

aimed at expelling the invaders and concluding the war with a decisive Ukrainian victory. Western (including US) military support was crucial for this effort, yet it ultimately proved insufficient to break through Russia's multilayered defences, and the counteroffensive ended in disaster. The US contributed to this by a visible pattern: despite spending tens of billions of dollars, Washington consistently delivered qualitatively new weapons, such as F-16 fighter aircraft, Abrams battle tanks, or ATACMS ballistic missiles, i.e., too little and too late to make a decisive impact (Schake 2024, 164-165; Feaver and Inboden 2024, 291).

The 2024 election year further complicated US military aid, reducing it to a start-stop process dependent on partisan bargaining in Congress and the pressures of the presidential campaign. Biden authorised Ukraine's use of ATACMS in Russian territory only after the elections and significant new Russian territorial gains. That brings us to the first research question: does Biden's decision represent a shift to a new strategy? The evidence suggests otherwise. Once again, the assistance arrived too late and in insufficient quantities to shift the war decisively in Ukraine's favour. The first use of ATACMS prompted Russia's retaliatory strikes by its similar means without any meaningful reversals on the battlefield. If supplied to Ukraine in larger quantities alongside similar European weapons, ATACMS might slow Russia's offensive temporarily and delay negotiations, thereby prolonging the war of attrition. This indicates that the Biden administration's strategy remains fundamentally unchanged. However, this strategy will persist only until January 2025, when President-elect Donald Trump takes office. With his inauguration, a new approach to the Ukraine conflict may emerge, potentially influenced by critics of Biden's strategy. The next section examines their perspectives.

The Critics: The Interventionists vs. Isolationists' Debate

Once it became evident that the Biden administration's strategy for the Ukraine conflict was leading to an indefinite prolongation of the war of attrition, it drew criticism from many quarters. Critics pointed to the immense suffering it inflicted on Ukraine and the substantial costs it imposed on the US. However, these critics are divided on how Washington could expedite the war's conclusion compared to the current approach. Should the US increase and expedite its military support to enable Ukraine to achieve a decisive victory on the battlefield? Or should it take an opposite approach: curtail its support to Kiev and pressure it to seek a negotiated peace with Russia? I categorise proponents of these conflicting views as *interventionists* and *isolationists*.[2] That said, Biden,

[2] Feaver and Inboden (2024, 297) use a similar categorisation, with *internationalists* instead of *interventionists*.

himself, can still be considered an interventionist, albeit a "constrained" one, because his "overriding goal in Ukraine is not to see Russian forces ejected from the occupied territories but to minimise the risk of a Russian attack on the United States or a NATO ally" while weakening Russia by "bloodletting" (Harris, Marinova, and Gricius 2023, 4).

Stephen Kotkin, the scholar who described Biden's strategy as an indefinite war of attrition, is among its most vocal interventionist critics. He argues that continuing the current strategy, "even if Western support at sufficient scale were to continue without interruption", causes "too much new damage daily" to Ukraine while failing to secure "a durable armistice on favourable terms" for it, given that everything that "appears to be on offer from Putin" is "Ukrainian recognition of Russian annexations as well as permanent infringement on Ukrainian sovereignty in its freedom to choose international alignments" (Kotkin 2024, 25). What the US is essentially doing is "renting" Ukraine's land army to degrade Russian military capacities (much like it "rented" the Red Army and Chinese forces to weaken Germany and Japan during World War II), thus "instructing Ukraine to suffer land-war-scale casualties against Russia, a land power par excellence with a regime that does not value human life", which Kotkin (2024, 32-33) does not see as a "persuasive strategy".

Instead, he advocates for securing "an armistice and an end to the fighting as soon as possible" alongside "an obtainable security guarantee and European Union accession"—"in other words, a Ukraine, safe and secure, which has joined the West" (Kotkin 2024, 24). To achieve this, Kotkin (2024, 26-30) proposes opening a "political front" against Putin through innovative tactics rather than relying on the largely ineffective pro-Western liberal opposition. He suggests supporting nationalist and conservative defectors from Putin within Russia's military and security ranks, "who have concluded, correctly, that the war is badly damaging Russia", and might be willing to agree to an "armistice without annexations or sovereign infringement on Ukraine, for Russia's sake". This strategy does not necessarily have to mean a regime change but rather a credible threat to pressure Putin into signing an armistice favourable to Ukraine, Kotkin (2024, 30-31) concludes.

Unlike Kotkin, most other interventionist critics mainly advocate for significantly more robust military support to Ukraine as a key to achieving a decisive victory. Coffey and Rough (2024, 2) attribute the failure of Ukraine's 2023 counteroffensive to "congressional delays and White House indecisiveness". Instead, they propose a "strategy of courage", which would involve supporting Kiev not for "as long as it takes" but "until Ukraine wins", in particular by providing it with long-range weapons, enabling it to pursue "a Crimea-first strategy" aimed at reclaiming the peninsula, and inviting Ukraine to join NATO (Coffey and Rough 2024, 2-9). Jensen and Tingle (2024, 5) similarly criticise the current approach,

which "calls for slowly increasing Ukraine's resources and capabilities while bleeding Russia" and "may be enough to prevent a decisive Ukrainian loss, but is insufficient for victory". However, their solution offers little beyond the recommendation to supply Ukraine with long-range weapons to target Russian strategic assets (Jensen and Tingle 2024, 10-11).

Michael McFaul (2023) also emphasises the importance of long-range weapons as part of a broader solution to replace the current strategy of "incrementalism", advocating in addition for more sanctions against Russia and increased economic assistance to Ukraine, expressing hope for a decisive Ukrainian victory as early as 2023. Anne Applebaum (2024) sets forth a particularly ambitious goal: an unambiguous victory, achieved through timely deliveries of advanced weaponry to Ukraine and hybrid warfare against Russia on multiple fronts. According to this scholar, only a military defeat "can persuade the Russians themselves to question the sense and purpose of a colonial ideology that has repeatedly impoverished and ruined their own economy and society, as well as those of their neighbours, for decades", while "another frozen conflict" or a "face-saving compromise" "will not end the pattern of Russian aggression or bring permanent peace" (Applebaum 2024, 93).

Finally, Kori Schake (2024, 157) also contends that the Biden administration's strategy "was principally concerned about limiting American risk, not maximising Ukraine's ability to restore its people's security and country's territorial integrity", and was devised to "provide extensive but limited support to Ukraine for as long as it takes". Although this author does not explicitly call for sending US troops to Ukraine, she suggests expediting the war's conclusion, among other measures. Such a scenario can be "read between the lines" from her insistence that the US should be less risk-averse and concerned about escalation compared to Russia, "that would lose its war of aggression even more quickly should it draw Washington and its allies into direct participation" (Schake 2024, 167).

A typical isolationist argument is presented by a group of British and American scholars and diplomats in their open letter to Western leaders, published in the *Financial Times* in July 2024.[3] They contend that, in light of Russia's recent military gains in Donbas and the low probability of its expulsion from occupied territories, a negotiated settlement of the war in Ukraine has become urgent. "Seizing peace before it's too late", they argue, would allow Ukraine to retain its independence with minimal territorial concessions while enabling the West to avoid the risk of a nuclear conflict with Russia: "The longer the war continues, the more territory

[3] The signatories of this letter are Lord Skidelsky, Sir Anthony Brenton, Thomas Fazi, Anatol Lieven, Jack Matlock, Ian Proud, Richard Sakwa, and Christopher Granville.

Ukraine is likely to lose, and the more the pressure for escalation up to a nuclear level is likely to grow" (Skidelsky et al. 2024).

Another common isolationist perspective assigns primary responsibility for the war to the US and the West, asserting that their policies threatened Russia's security and provoked it into conflict with Ukraine. John Mearsheimer is perhaps the most prominent proponent of this view. He goes to great lengths to absolve Putin of blame for the war, instead placing responsibility on Biden, whom he accuses of being "unwilling to eliminate that threat through diplomacy" and of recommitting "to bringing Ukraine into NATO in 2021" (Mearsheimer 2022, 12). According to Mearsheimer (2022, 13), Biden "reacted to the outbreak of the war by doubling down against Russia", committing himself "to decisively defeating Russia in Ukraine and employing comprehensive sanctions to greatly weaken Russian power". This author argues that the neutralisation is the only solution for the Ukrainian leaders "to spare their country further harm", though he doubts that ultra-nationalists in Ukraine and the Biden administration would accept such a compromise (Mearsheimer 2022, 23-24). He is also deeply concerned about the risk of the US and NATO being dragged into direct conflict with Russia, warning that nuclear escalation remains a real possibility (Mearsheimer 2022, 24-26).

Charap and Priebe (2023) echo these concerns, arguing that avoiding a prolonged war in Ukraine should be a top US priority, given the high risks of escalation into a NATO-Russia conflict or use of nuclear weapons, maintaining that a political settlement leading to a durable peace serves American interests better than a temporary armistice. To achieve this, they propose a series of US policy options, from clarifying the future aid to Ukraine through US and allied commitment to Ukraine's security and neutrality to establishing conditions for relief of sanctions against Russia, criticising Biden for failing to make any moves to push the warring parties towards negotiations (Charap and Priebe 2023, 20-25). Similarly, Yazini April (2023, 4) criticises Biden's "hawkish approach" to Russia, advocating for a "dove approach of dialogue and peace" (2023, 4). For such an approach to work, "US and Western acceptance of their role in fanning the fire and Russia's hemispheric influence is essential" (April 2023, 3-4).

The common argument shared by both interventionists and isolationists—that the Biden administration's approach prolongs Ukraine's suffering and imposes costs on the US while not guaranteeing that Russia will not win the war—is a valid critique, regardless of the soundness of divergent alternatives they propose. However, from the perspective of broader US policy towards Russia, which is rooted in the grand strategy of liberal hegemony adhered to by the Biden administration (and supported at least by most of the interventionist critics), this strategy is understandable. This warrants a more detailed analysis, which I develop in the next section.

Liberal-Hegemonic Roots of Biden's Ukraine Strategy

The Biden administration has never officially declared an indefinite war of attrition as its strategy towards the Russo-Ukrainian War. The conclusion about the existence of such a strategy is drawn from the scale, quality, and timing of US military support to Ukraine, which has effectively resulted in such a war, as well as from the critiques of various observers regarding Washington's approach. This section upgrades that argument, demonstrating that if Biden indeed chose this strategy, it aligns with his ideological background and the circumstances prevailing in the war at the time the decision was made.

Unlike his predecessor (and successor) Donald Trump, whose grand strategy was incoherent (if he even had one), Biden adheres to the long-standing grand strategy of liberal hegemony, which has dominated US foreign policy during the post-Cold War era. Barry Posen (1984, 13; 2014, 1) defines grand strategy as "a political-military, means-ends chain, a state's theory of how it can best 'cause' security for itself", or, more succinctly, "a nation state's theory about how to produce security for itself". The grand strategy of liberal hegemony builds on Woodrow Wilson's earlier idea of making "a world safe for democracy", which suggests that liberal-democratic domestic orders in the US and other Western countries cannot be secure unless a supportive world order is established—one in which democracies can survive and thrive, like "eggs in eggs' carton" (Ikenberry 2020, xi). Over time, the US foreign policy establishment came to believe that the only global order that could guarantee this objective was the one of American hegemony, and the unipolar international distribution of power at the end of the Cold War bolstered Washington's conviction that such an order was feasible.

Achieving true global hegemony, however, would eventually require the elimination of other independent great powers by reducing their status to lesser powers that would align their foreign policies with Washington and recognise the US as a world leader. This would effectively transform the international system from an anarchic to a hierarchic one. Given that Russia is one of the two remaining great powers (the other being China) in the post-Cold War era, continuous US efforts to encircle and weaken it while refusing to treat it as an equal partner or acknowledge its sphere of influence are understandable within the framework of this strategy. So far, the US has not been successful in reaching its final goal, and the strategy of liberal hegemony has faced significant criticism for being overly ambitious and ideologically driven, with Posen (2014) and his realist colleagues (Layne 2006; Mearsheimer 2018; Walt 2018) arguing against its feasibility and desirability. Nevertheless, it has endured a series of setbacks and the Trumpian challenge, continuing into Biden's presidency.

Biden's intent to steer US foreign policy back towards liberal hegemony was already evident in his *Foreign Affairs* article, published before he was nominated as a presidential candidate. In the article, Biden (2020) strongly criticised Trump for abandoning US allies and partners, launching "ill-advised trade wars", abdicating American leadership, and turning away from democratic values. Instead, Biden (2020) pledged to "renew US democracy and alliances, protect the United States' economic future, and, once more, have America lead again". He further states that if the US does not lead, either someone else will—"but not in the way that advances our interests and values, or no one will and chaos will ensue". Less than two months into office, Biden signed *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* to replace Trump's *National Security Strategy* until a new one could be issued. The core idea emphasised in this document is that "our world is at an inflection point in history", "in the midst of a fundamental debate" about its future direction, centred on the question of whether "democracy can still deliver for our people and for people around the world, or "autocracy is the best way forward" in the times of "accelerating global challenges" (The White House 2021).

These statements clearly indicate Biden's commitment to liberal hegemony. Yet, the profound challenges for US foreign policy and democracy he emphasised have introduced a note of tactical pragmatism, making a rhetorical acknowledgement of Russia as a great power and an attempt at a "reset light" possible (Trapara 2021, 124-125). Nevertheless, diplomacy requires reciprocity—Russia's decision to invade Ukraine necessitated further adjustments but also presented a new opportunity to revive an embattled grand strategy of liberal hegemony.

Biden's speeches at the onset of the Russian invasion reveal a clear connection between the US response to the war and its overarching grand strategy. On the first day of the invasion, he declared, "America stands up to bullies. We stand up for freedom. This is who we are". He also outlined the anticipated consequences of the war for both Russia and the West: "The United States and our allies and partners will emerge from this stronger, more united, more determined, and more purposeful… And Putin's aggression against Ukraine will end up costing Russia dearly—economically and strategically. We will make sure of that. Putin will be a pariah on the international stage" (The White House 2022a).

In his State of the Union address in March 2024, Biden emphasised his own efforts to maintain and strengthen Western unity in the face of Putin's aggression, which he framed as an attack not just on Ukraine but on the entire democratic world: "Like many of you, I spent countless hours unifying our European allies", he said. According to Biden, the result is that "in the battle between democracy and autocracies, democracies are rising to the moment,

and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security". He predicted that "when the history of this era is written, Putin's war on Ukraine will have left Russia weaker and the rest of the world stronger", asserting that Americans are "the only nation on Earth that has always turned every crisis we've faced into an opportunity" (The White House 2022b).

Speaking at the Royal Castle in Warsaw, Poland, at the end of March, Biden explicitly invoked the term "free world", describing the war in Ukraine as "a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force". While denying that NATO enlargement is "an imperial project aimed at destabilising Russia", he reiterated expectations of severe economic repercussions for Russia due to sanctions and, for the first time, hinted at regime change, stating, "Vladimir Putin's aggression has cut you, the Russian people, off from the rest of the world, and it's taking Russia back to the 19th century… For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power" (The White House 2022e).

The statements above provide reliable indicators of Biden's liberal-hegemonic worldview as it pertains to the Russo-Ukrainian War. First, his narrative frames the conflict as part of a larger democracy-autocracy divide, with the US upholding democracy as a core purpose of its engagement in international politics, including its involvement in Ukraine. Second, Biden emphasises a multilateral approach, portraying the US as the indispensable leader of a coalition of democracies and other nations that adhere to a "rules-based order". His rhetoric is steeped in the spirit of American exceptionalism (Ostrowski 2022). Third, Biden stresses the necessity of weakening Russia and altering its behaviour to ensure the security of the "free world".

This framework is echoed in Biden's 2022 *National Security Strategy*, which was delayed and revised to address the implications of the war in Ukraine. The document leaves no doubt about the administration's grand strategy: "Around the world, the need for American leadership is as great as it has ever been. We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order… We will not leave our future vulnerable to the whims of those who do not share our vision for a world that is free, open, prosperous, and secure" (The White House 2022h).

One of the leading proponents of liberal hegemony, Robert Kagan (2022), articulated the stakes for the US in Ukraine with striking clarity. He wrote that "the defence of Ukraine is (indeed) a defence of the liberal hegemony", arguing that "the natural trajectory of history in the absence of American leadership has been perfectly apparent: it has not been toward a liberal peace, a stable balance of power, or the development of international laws and institutions", but "great-power conflict and dictatorship have been the norm throughout

human history, the liberal peace a brief aberration. Only American power can keep the natural forces of history at bay".

But how does Biden's strategy of an indefinite war of attrition fit into all this? In fact, it fits quite neatly. The grand strategy of liberal hegemony suggests that the primary US objective in Ukraine should be weakening Russia, with the ultimate goal of eliminating it from the ranks of great powers—a shift that, in time, should be accepted by Russia's ruling elite. This is envisioned as essential for safeguarding democracy and maintaining a "rules-based order" (Trapara and Jović Lazić 2024). We have already seen that the Biden administration's initial plan was an Afghan-style support to an armed resistance by Ukrainians following an anticipated Russian success in occupying their territory. When the Russian army failed to achieve this expected outcome, it was natural that Washington was reluctant to pursue either a swift diplomatic solution or to supply Ukraine with military means of sufficient scale and quality promptly to achieve a quick battlefield victory. Either option would have left Russia's core capabilities intact and undermined the rationale for imposing harsh economic sanctions on Russia, enforcing its diplomatic isolation, and strengthening Western unity. Instead, a protracted conventional war promised to drain Russia's capabilities in a similar way guerrilla warfare would, only without allowing the initial occupation of Ukraine.

This approach became part of a broader strategy of "containment 2.0" aimed at Russia, with an anticipated outcome similar to the one its first, Cold War edition, had—the collapse of Moscow's sphere of influence and, ultimately, regime change (Trapara 2022). That said, I do not argue that Biden's policy towards Ukraine is an entirely immoral or cold-hearted approach to fighting against Russia "to the last Ukrainian". While it may appear that way on the surface, two mitigating factors should be considered. First, Ukrainians are not fighting Russia because Americans have instructed them to but because they are defending their own nation; thus, a war of attrition is, to some extent, their choice. Second, and more importantly, the war of attrition is also Putin's choice, which paradoxically provides the US with a strong justification for its strategy (Veebel and Ploom 2023, 72).[4] Let us not forget that it was Putin, not Biden, who initiated this war. On the contrary, Biden's preferred strategy before the invasion was to deter Putin and prevent the conflict altogether.

Nevertheless, the strategy of an indefinite war of attrition has its limits. One is rooted in common sense: a large-scale conventional war cannot continue indefinitely. Sooner or later, the fighting capabilities of one or both parties will

[4] As Mihajlo Kopanja (2023) said, neither the US nor Russia (and Ukraine) initially planned for the war of attrition, but they all opted for it once the conflict inadvertently escalated.

become depleted. Russian capabilities, however, show no signs of nearing exhaustion, not to mention the slow and inefficient impact of economic sanctions, cracks in diplomatic isolation, and failure of attempts to politically destabilise Russia. It is then unsurprising that voices calling for an alternative approach have grown louder, especially following the 2024 presidential election victory of Donald Trump—a leader who has never been enthusiastic about liberal hegemony. Consequently, the narrative around achieving peace in Ukraine has gained prominence. But what can Trump exactly do to bring peace? That is the remaining question that has to be addressed in the concluding section.

Conclusion: How Can Trump End the War?

Stepping down in January 2025, the Biden administration leaves behind an unresolved military conflict between Russia and Ukraine just a month before its third anniversary. As this paper has demonstrated, the administration significantly contributed to this outcome by employing a strategy of an indefinite war of attrition rather than equipping Ukraine with the means to secure a decisive battlefield victory or pursuing a compromise peace, as suggested by interventionist and isolationist critics of this strategy, respectively. A "lame-duck" November 2024 decision to allow Ukraine to use US long-range weapons against targets within Russian territory did not signify a fundamental shift in this approach. The primary objective of this strategy was to weaken Russia as much as possible through a protracted conventional war, serving a broader, long-term goal of removing Russia from the ranks of great powers—a goal neatly aligned with the grand strategy of liberal hegemony. However, the war of attrition has thus far failed to achieve its intended outcomes. Russia has neither suffered the desired military and economic exhaustion nor experienced political destabilisation. On the contrary, Russian forces maintain the initiative along the entire frontline, while Ukrainian resilience and Western resolve are approaching their limits. In this context, a new US president with a different vision step in, at moments promising to end this war within no more than 24 hours. Even more intriguingly, both warring parties seem to heed his call, engaging in discussions about a negotiated peace for the first time in two and a half years.

At first glance, Trump appears to align with the isolationist camp among Biden's Ukraine approach critics. During his September televised presidential debate against his election rival Kamala Harris, he outlined his main arguments for ending the war. Claiming that the war would never have begun if he had been president, he stressed the need to halt the killing in Ukraine (exaggerating by mentioning "millions" of lives lost) and to prevent potential escalation into World War III against a nuclear-armed country (Hoffman 2024). He has been reiterating these points throughout his campaign and the post-election period. Yet, let us

go back to the remark that diplomacy requires reciprocity. While the US is not a direct participant in the conflict, it can wield significant influence over Ukraine as its primary supporter. But what about Russia? What if Putin interprets Trump's efforts to bring Ukraine to the negotiating table as a sign of weakness—an appeasement that would "invite" him to engage in further aggression?

The reasoning Trump used in the aforementioned debate to argue that the war would never have started under his leadership cited the weakness Biden allegedly showed Putin with "the worst withdrawal" from Afghanistan (Hoffman 2024). One of the key foreign policy principles from Trump's first term, encapsulated in his 2017 *National Security Strategy*, was "peace through strength" (The White House 2017). This is the same phrase Zelensky used in his congratulatory message to Trump following his election victory: "I appreciate President Trump's commitment to the 'peace through strength' approach in global affairs. This is exactly the principle that can practically bring just peace in Ukraine closer" (Fornusek 2024). That is also where interventionist arguments converge with isolationist perspectives, offering a potentially unique path forward.

For a compromise peace initiative to succeed, it is not sufficient to merely adopt isolationist arguments and acknowledge the necessity for Ukraine to abandon its plans for a battlefield victory. To be honest, such a victory was evidently never a viable option under Biden's strategy of an indefinite war of attrition. It is also essential to deter Putin from further aggression and from seeking his own victory. This requires careful signalling to Russia that certain measures proposed by interventionists could be employed if it refuses to freeze its invasion at the line of contact acceptable to Ukraine, proceeds to claim more territory, or demands unacceptable terms that would undermine Ukraine's independence.

Despite Trump and his associates' criticism of Biden's ATACMS decision, they could still leverage its potential withdrawal as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Russia while simultaneously threatening to provide additional quantities of these and similar weapons if the talks fail. To demonstrate a genuine resolve to achieve peace through strength, Trump might even flirt with an option Biden never considered, and which even the most interventionist critics of his strategy were reluctant to endorse—a threat to deploy US and allied troops to areas of Ukraine behind the frontline that would serve as a deterrent to further Russian advances. The idea of peacekeeping troops in Ukraine has already been floated by Zelensky and some European leaders (Basmat 2024). While it is hardly imaginable that Putin would accept NATO forces along the line of contact as part of a negotiated solution, the possibility of their arrival without his approval could still be used to pressure Russia into making concessions on other matters. At the same time, isolationist arguments offer useful "carrots" for Russia that could be paired with interventionist "sticks", such as the partial lifting of economic sanctions

and easing diplomatic isolation. In conclusion, there is no simple way out of a three-year-long war of attrition that has deeply embittered both Russo-Ukrainian and Russia-West relations. Recognising that such a war should not have been allowed to occur in the first place and that a revision of US strategy towards it is essential for achieving peace is a constructive starting point.

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RAT IZNURIVANJA NA NEODREĐENO:
STRATEGIJA BAJDENOVE ADMINISTRACIJE PREMA RUSKO-UKRAJINSKOM RATU

Apstrakt: U ovom članku istražuje se strategija odlazeće administracije SAD Džozefa Bajdena prema Rusko-ukrajinskom ratu, kao i izgledi za njenu izmenu pod novom administracijom Donalda Trampa. Nadovezujući se na karakterizaciju ove strategije koju nudi Stiven Kotkin, kao „rata iznurivanja na neodređeno", autor razmatra poreklo i značenje ove strategije, alternative koje nude njeni kritičari, kao i njeno uklapanje u širu američku veliku strategiju, te nudi odgovore na pitanja je li Bajden odlukom da Ukrajini dozvoli upotrebu naoružanja dugog dometa protiv Rusije izmenio strategiju, kao i koje opcije Tramp ima da zaustavi rat. Nakon analize Bajdenovog pristupa Ukrajini u toku njegovog mandata u kontekstu američke velike strategije liberalne hegemonije i njoj odgovarajuće politike prema Rusiji, u članku se zaključuje da je strategija rata iznurivanja na neodređeno – koja ne nudi ni ukrajinsku pobedu, ni kompromisni mir – u skladu sa prvenstvenim liberalno-hegemonističkim ciljem slabljenja Rusije i njenog uklanjanja iz redova velikih sila, te da ostaje nepromenjena nakon najnovijih Bajdenovih odluka. Da bi Trampova administracija doprinela razrešenju sukoba, neophodan joj je pristup koji bi kombinovao „intervencionističke" i „izolacionističke" poglede na aktuelnu strategiju.

Ključne reči: Džozef Bajden; Rusko-ukrajinski rat; rat iznurivanja; velika strategija SAD; liberalna hegemonija; intervencionizam; izolacionizam; Donald Tramp.