

# [***Opinion: Biden needs to get real with Ukraine and Israel***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BWM-SSV1-DY7V-G005-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

April 26, 2024 Friday 10:21 PM GMT

Copyright 2024 Cable News Network All Rights Reserved

**Length:** 1307 words

**Byline:** Opinion by Mark Hannah

**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The $95 billion [*military aid package President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/24/politics/biden-signs-foreign-aid-bill/index.html) signed Wednesday was a feat of tough-minded negotiation to get funding to Ukraine and Israel after months of congressional horse-trading. But if the aid inflates those countries' war aims, it could discourage the kind of tough-minded negotiation that is the only way to end their wars.

Biden is right to help democratic countries confront their illiberal enemies. [*Israel*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/06/middleeast/israeli-hostage-families-war/index.html) and [*Ukraine*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/24/europe/ukraine-russia-invasion-thursday-intl/index.html) suffered terrible crimes of aggression. But lofty expressions of unconditional support can paradoxically hurt the countries they are meant to help by hindering the kind of negotiated peace that saves civilian lives and restores stability.

The funds might motivate Ukraine and Israel to pursue unwinnable victories: the full restoration of Ukraine's borders and reclamation of Crimea, and the destruction of Hamas, respectively. In international ***politics*** and armed conflict, fraught as they are with mutual distrust and competing views of fairness, sometimes countries can't achieve justice - they can only achieve peace.

The new infusion of aid gives the US a lot of leverage with Ukraine and Israel. Washington has largely refused to exercise its leverage thus far, but it must do so now or peace in the near future doesn't stand a chance.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to maintain that "total victory" [*over Hamas*](https://www.weku.org/npr-news/2024-03-22/netanyahu-wants-total-victory-over-hamas-what-would-that-even-look-like) is the only outcome he will accept. But as the war grinds on, Israel reports having killed fewer than half of [*Hamas' fighters*](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68745681) while its tunnel network hasn't been completely dismantled, indicating the group can likely sustain an insurgency against Israel for the foreseeable future. And even if it were possible to destroy Hamas, that outcome could prove to be a catastrophic success when images of the accompanying civilian devastation fuel ever more radicalization among Palestinians and stirs angry Arab publics who pressure their leaders to scuttle [*Arab-Israeli normalization efforts*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-arab-normalization-agreements-0c4707ff246c0c25d1ca001f8b1e734a).

Similarly, the [*Ukrainian government insists*](https://www.nbc4i.com/news/ap-top-headlines/ap-ukraine-gets-a-big-boost-of-us-aid-it-still-faces-a-long-slog-to-repel-russia/) it will continue fighting until it regains all of the territory it has lost, including Crimea, which [*Russia illegally annexed*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/17/europe/crimea-russia-annexation-anniversary-intl-cmd/index.html) in 2014, and there is no sign the US administration is pushing it to reconsider. But as Gen. Mark Milley, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told me a year ago, "neither side is likely to achieve their complete political objectives through military means" so "it will probably end somewhere, somehow at a negotiating table." And that was before Ukraine [*lost some of its best troops and equipment*](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/15/us/politics/ukraine-leopards-bradleys-counteroffensive.html) in last summer's highly anticipated offensive, which [*failed*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/04/ukraine-counteroffensive-stalled-russia-war-defenses/) to strike a knockout blow to Russia.

To its credit, the administration seems clear-eyed enough to privately [*acknowledge*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2024/01/26/ukraine-war-plan-biden-defense/) Ukraine's chances for retaking additional territory are slim. But there is still no public indication the US is trying to lay the groundwork for a negotiated settlement. Signaling American resolve can preserve Ukraine's bargaining position, but it risks convincing Ukraine to reject a reasonable peace deal - if one is eventually offered - and continue fighting in pursuit of morally righteous but unattainable goals.

Likewise, while the administration [*has ramped up humanitarian aid to Gaza*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2024/03/07/background-press-call-on-humanitarian-aid-for-gaza-ahead-of-the-state-of-the-union/), encouraged negotiations to get Hamas to release Israeli hostages and [*called for the Palestinian Authority*](https://www.voanews.com/a/biden-palestinian-authority-should-ultimately-govern-gaza-west-bank-/7360900.html) to administer Gaza, it could do more to convince Israel to fundamentally rethink its destabilizing goals. The Biden administration should publicly and privately convey to Israel's leaders that their current strategy is unlikely to succeed and undermines regional security.

There will be at least a few objections to orienting American policy toward the best possible outcomes in these conflicts - achieving peace and stability in the near term - rather than the unrealistic goals of our partners.

War has a way of eliciting worldviews organized around simplistic binaries. After the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, then-[*President George W. Bush declared*](https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html) that every country had to decide: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." When Biden [*spoke of the war in Ukraine*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-unites-states-response-to-hamass-terrorist-attacks-against-israel-and-russias-ongoing-brutal-war-against-ukraine/), Americans were told we faced a choice between offering Kyiv unconditional support or "withdrawing" from the conflict and letting Putin "erase" Ukraine. But these kinds of Manichean views that divide the world into evil aggressors and righteous victims do not make impossible military victories any more achievable.

Some people will say that the US can't simply tell Ukraine and Israel, both sovereign countries, what to do. Indeed, this has largely been Biden's public position, [*evident in his mantra*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/11/14/remarks-by-president-biden-in-a-press-conference-bali-indonesia/) "nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine" and in the State Department's [*insistence*](https://twitter.com/kenklippenstein/status/1762236613415797119) that "the United States doesn't dictate to Israel what it must do."

These countries do have agency - but so does the United States. American involvement in assisting these nations' war efforts gives it the right and responsibility to share the course of each conflict in ways that protect its interests. The US can respect Ukraine's and Israel's agency without subjugating its own.

In Ukraine, this doesn't mean threatening the withdrawal of aid, which would weaken its battlefield and negotiating position. Instead, the US could have enforced the restrictions it had already made (on [*Abrams Tanks*](https://apnews.com/article/us-m1-abrams-tanks-ukraine-russia-249de5c301a9bf83b5f3ac2182076a02), [*F-16s*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-ukraine-f16-decision-russia-64538af7c10489d7c2243dadbad31008), [*cluster munitions*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/07/07/bidens-complicated-history-cluster-munitions/) and [*long-range missiles*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/24/politics/us-secretly-sent-long-range-missiles-to-ukraine/index.html)) or it could now materially support diplomatic efforts as enthusiastically as military efforts. However, the recent aid package includes long-range missiles, or ATACMS, which suggests Ukraine is readying an [*offensive against Crimea*](https://www.npr.org/2024/04/24/1246839045/biden-signs-95-billion-military-aid-package-for-ukraine-israel-and-taiwan). For a year and a half, Biden judiciously refused to send these to Ukraine, calling them a "[*red line*](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/17/us/politics/biden-ukraine-atacms-weapons.html)" for Putin, who might use nuclear weapons were Crimea attacked.

In Israel, putting conditions on military aid is a better idea. The US [*did use leverage*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/06/politics/biden-netanyahu-israel-gaza-war-phone-call-details/index.html) after an Israeli military strike killed aid workers from World Central Kitchen - with sources telling CNN that Biden warned Netanyahu that the US would reconsider how it's supporting Israel's war unless Israel allowed for more humanitarian aid in Gaza. After that, Israel acceded to the ultimatum and, per a reported demand by Biden, publicly announced the change that day. Unfortunately, there's little evidence the president has kept up the pressure. When the aid package passed Congress, a pro-Israel lobbying group [*cheered*](https://twitter.com/AIPAC/status/1783118703288054242) that the security assistance came "with no added conditions."

One historical example illustrates how the US might use its leverage with Netanyahu today. After Israel encircled the Egyptian military in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger flew to Tel Aviv and pressured Prime Minister Golda Meir to enact a ceasefire. Egypt's attack was, like that of Hamas, an unprovoked and surprise act of aggression. [*Kissinger feared a victory*](https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/09/document-of-the-week-henry-kissinger-dreaded-all-out-israel-victory-in-yom-kippur-war/) by the Soviet-backed Arab states. But recently declassified documents show he also feared an all-out Israeli victory.

[*Kissinger*](https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v25/d250) wrote that "from an Israeli point of view, it is no disaster to have the whole Arab world radicalized and anti-American, because this guarantees our continued support. From an American point of view, it is a disaster." Kissinger advised that the US needed "to be taken even more seriously" by Israel, and "our insistence on a more politically oriented policy cannot go unheeded." This advice rings even truer today.

Fundamentally, negotiated settlements are often morally unsatisfying. Russia shouldn't be allowed to invade a sovereign country and get away with it. Israel has the right to defend itself. But too narrow a focus on what's morally just obscures an appreciation for what's strategically possible. What's possible, in both Ukraine and Gaza, is peace.

Opinion by Mark Hannah

TM & © 2024 Cable News Network, Inc., a Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

**Load-Date:** May 14, 2024

**End of Document**