

The President's News Conference With President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine
December 12, 2023

President Biden. Please have a seat.

President Zelenskyy, it's an honor to welcome you back to the White House.

When President Putin launched his brutal total invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 and Russian tanks rolled over the border toward Kyiv, there were those who thought Ukraine wouldn't survive for a month. So no one—no one—should forget that for you to be here today—again today, nearly 2 years later, and for Ukraine to be standing strong and free is an enormous victory already.

Putin has failed—failed—in his effort to subjugate Ukraine. The brave people of Ukraine have defied Putin's will at every turn, backed by the strong and unwavering support of the United States and our allies and partners of more than 50 nations—50 nations—in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. And Ukraine will emerge from this war proud, free, and firmly rooted in the West, unless we walk away.

The American people can be and should be incredibly proud of the part they played in supporting Ukraine's success. We'll continue to supply Ukraine with critical weapons and equipment as long as we can, including \$200 million I just approved today in a critical needed equipment: additional air-defense interceptors, artillery, and ammunition.

But without supplemental funding, we're rapidly coming to an end of our ability to help Ukraine respond to the urgent operational demands that it has. Putin is banking on the United States failing to deliver for Ukraine. We must, we must, we must prove him wrong.

The United States and Congress must, as I asked last week in this—it's stunning that we've gotten to this point. You know, we need to fully appreciate—fully appreciate—how it's wrong—how this is being viewed around the world and being used by Russia.

Russian loyalists in Moscow celebrated when Republicans voted to block Ukraine's aid last week. The host of a Kremlin-run show literally said, and I quote: "Well done, Republicans! That's good for us," end of quote. Let me say that again. This host of a Kremlin-run show said: "Well done, Republicans! That's good for us." That's a Russian speaking.

If you're being celebrated by Russian propagandists, it might be time to rethink what you're doing. History will judge harshly those who turn their back on freedom's cause.

Today, Ukraine's freedom is on the line. But if we don't stop Putin, it will endanger the freedom of everyone almost everywhere. Putin will keep going, and would-be aggressors everywhere will be emboldened to try to take what they can by force.

Mr. President, I'll not walk away from Ukraine, and neither will the American people. A clear bipartisan majority of people across the United States and in Congress support your country. They understand, as I do, that Ukraine's success and its ability to deter aggression in the future are vital to security for the world at large.

And I have repeatedly made clear, from our first day in office, we also need Ukraine to make changes to fix the broken immigration system here—we also need Congress to make the changes to fix the broken immigration system here at home.

My team is working with Senate Democrats and Republicans to try to find a bipartisan compromise both in terms of changes in policy and provide the resources we need to secure the border.

Compromise is how democracy works. And I am ready and offered compromise already. Holding Ukraine funding hostage in an attempt to force through an extreme Republican partisan agenda on the border is not how it works. We need real solutions.

I also asked Congress for funding for Israel to take on Hamas and confront multiple other threats backed by Iran in the wake of the October 7 assault.

National Security Adviser Sullivan will travel to the region this week and meet with the Israeli war cabinet, as I have met with, to emphasize our commitment to Israel as well as the need to protect civilian life and ensure more humanitarian assistance flows and reaches into Gaza for Palestinian civilians.

Secretary Austin will also travel to the region this week to step up the international efforts to protect the free flow of commerce through the Red Sea.

The entire world is watching what we do, so let's show them who we are. America stands for freedom today, tomorrow, and always. America stands against tyranny and against oppression, and America stands with the people of Ukraine.

Thank you again for being here today, Mr. President, and thank you for everything Ukraine is doing to hold the line for liberty in the world.

The floor is yours, Mr. President.

President Zelenskyy. Thank you very much, Mr. President, dear journalists.

I'm glad to be here and personally thank you and tell you how Ukraine values what we've achieved together defending life and freedom.

In Ukraine, we are fighting for our country and freedom and, also—in Europe, we say, "for our freedom and yours." And this motto resonates not only in our country, not only in our hearts, not only in Ukraine, but also in Poland and Baltic States, Moldova, and others. When freedom is strong in one country, it is strong everywhere. When it burns in one soul, it presents its merits to others.

Ukraines have twice—Ukrainians have twice led revolutions this century defending freedom. For nearly 2 years, we have been in a full-scale war, the biggest—the biggest—since World War II, fighting for freedom.

We stand firm. No matter what Putin tries, he hasn't won any victories. Thanks to Ukraine's success—success in defense—other European nations are safe from the Russian aggression, unlike in the past. Ukraine can now tackle the Russian dictatorship so our children and other nations won't have to shed their blood and sacrifice lives defending against Russian aggression.

We've already made significant progress. We've shown that our courage and partnership are stronger than any Russian hostility. And we have freed 50 percent of the territories Russia occupied after February 24. And we won the Black Sea and are reviving our economy.

Thanks to maritime exports, Ukraine's 5-percent economic growth this year proves our effective partnership. And we've shown no Russian missiles can overdo the powerful American Patriot systems. Thank you very much.

And even during war, we are reforming our country and strengthening our institutions. Today President Biden and I discussed how to increase our strengths for next year.

First, air defense and destroying Russian logistics on Ukraine's land. Mr. President, thank you very much for your supporting—supporting us and in these areas—like our victory in the Black Sea.

We aim to win the air battle, crushing Russian air dominance. This will intensify our ground advantages in 2024 with our control of the skies. Who controls the skies controls the war's duration.

And today I would like to thank, of course, for yet another significant defense package with our defenders value very much.

Second, yesterday I met with American defense company leaders. They advised us on how to make our defense industries work faster and more effectively. Thank you, President Biden, for this important initiative we started with you.

Together, Ukraine and America can strengthen democracy's arsenal. And this is vital for other free nations and the U.S., as it involves your companies, technologies, and technology advancement and job creation.

And it is important to note that two-thirds of Americans support for Ukraine remains and works in the United States.

Third, I informed Mr. President that Ukraine has fulfilled all the recommendations of the European Commission regarding the preparation for a decision to start negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU. And we constantly communicate with European leaders about our joint steps, sanctions, and political efforts to pressure Russia.

American leadership is crucial. It's keeping this unity together, a unity that serves the entire free world. And I thank America for new sanctions. And today we discussed Putin's further isolation and making him pay for his aggression.

It's very important that, by the end of this year, we can send very strong signal of our unity to the aggressor and the unity of Ukraine, America, Europe, the entire free world. Everything we talked about today will help us in the year 2024.

Today's discussions in the White House and in Congress, across both parties and both Chambers, with the Speaker were very productive. And I thank you for the bipartisan support.

As we approach Christmas, on behalf of all our Ukrainian families separated by war and all sons and daughters on the front, Ukraine's greatest wish is to near this war's victorious end. No one—no one but Putin—wants a prolonged war.

We dream of a Christmas in the peacetime, of course. And we are working to turn our battlefield success into peace. And we are heading there together with you and thanks, of course, to your support.

Thank you very much, Mr. President. Thank you, America.

Slava Ukraini.

President Biden. Thank you. Look, we're going to alternate asking questions. We're going to ask a total of—each ask two questions. And I will ask the first question—I will ask—I will recognize the first question asker. *[Laughter.]*

I'll ask you a question to you all too. *[Laughter]*

But, Danny Kemp *[Agence France-Presse]*.

Ukraine's Military Operations Against Russia/U.S. Assistance to Ukraine

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. For President Biden, Ukraine's counteroffensive has stalled in recent months, Congress is blocking aid, and Vladimir Putin appears ready to just wait things out. So what is the strategy for the U.S. and Ukraine next year to try and turn this around? And if that fails, at what point do you say to Ukraine, as a friend, that it is perhaps time to start looking at peace talks?

And for President Zelenskyy, welcome back to Washington. Can I ask you: Did you hear what you wanted to hear from Congress and from President Biden? And—or are you, indeed, more worried than when you got here? Thank you very much.

President Biden. Well, let me answer the question first. Let's put this in perspective. Remember how far Ukraine has come. Russia has failed—failed thus far—in trying to erase Ukraine from the map and subsume it into Russia. Ukraine has taken back more than 50 percent of its territory seized since February of '22. And it's pushed back Russian—the Russian Navy so Ukraine can export grain and steel to the world through the Black Sea.

And thanks to the incredible courage of the Ukrainian people and the bipartisan support from our Congress—but it's not just American support. There are more than 50 countries—50 countries—helping Ukraine with military, economic, and humanitarian assistance. Fifty.

The burden sharing: The U.S. has put up \$75 billion, and our allies and partners have put up \$100 billion. And more than 90 percent of our security assistance to Ukraine is being spent in the United States to provide weapons for Ukraine and replenish our stockpiles and build our industrial base.

We need to ensure Putin continues to fail in Ukraine and Ukraine to succeed. And the best way for that—to do that is to pass the supplemental.

President Zelenskyy. Yes. Yes. Can I answer it in Ukrainian? Please.

[At this point, President Zelenskyy spoke in Ukrainian, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

Thank you. First of all, I would like to add to the words of Mr. President Biden about successes. I think that these were not easy successes. Nonetheless, they were quite serious. They were serious steps forward. Indeed, we gained victory on the sea. We've destroyed ships of the Russian Federation. We throw the remnants of their fleet to Russian territorial waters.

Yes, they have something in the Black Sea in the vicinity of our temporarily occupied Crimea, but we are going to proceed this activity.

Now, our guys destroyed 20,000 of Wagner mercenaries. These are serious terrorists who were amassing everywhere on African Continent, in Syria, in Ukraine. There were a lot of mass. And nucleus of this terroristic organization is not existing anymore.

Yes, we had a lot of problems, but nonetheless we were able to do this. Moreover, Russia were not able to seize any part of our territory—any village, any town. I am not talking about large cities. And we are going to proceed with this.

It is—goes without saying that we have objective; we have clear plan. But if you allow me, I am not able to tell you in public on the details of 2024 operations.

If I heard what I want, I've heard a lot. Surely, I told what I wanted to. I feel and experience the support from President Biden administration, from Senators. And we've been talking with the Speaker.

I got the signals; they were more than positive. But we know that we have to separate words and particular result. Therefore, we will count on particular result.

Thank you.

President Biden. Your turn to ask a question.

[President Zelenskyy spoke in English as follows.]

President Zelenskyy. Yes, sorry.

President Biden. I mean to recognize someone.

[President Zelenskyy called on a reporter in Ukrainian.]

Ukraine's Military Operations Against Russia

Q. Thank you for my taking my question. Dmytro Anopchenko, Ukrainian Television, U.S. correspondent. Many Republican voices doubt the ability of Ukraine to win the war. Senator Vance recently even told that Ukraine need to cede some territories to stop fighting.

[The reporter spoke briefly in Ukrainian; no translation was provided. He resumed speaking in English as follows.]

To be very honest, have you even considered such a step to cede the territories to stop fighting?

And, Mr. Biden, could you please clarify the policy and—of your administration, the strategy of your administration on Ukraine? Is it about helping the country to defend itself or to win the war? Because it's obviously such a difference.

President Zelenskyy. I will begin. Okay.

[President Zelenskyy briefly addressed the reporter, and the reporter replied, in Ukrainian; no translation was provided. President Zelensky then spoke in Ukrainian, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

So first question to me. So your question is if we are ready to give up our territories?

[The reporter spoke in Ukrainian; no translation was provided. President Zelenskyy's response was then translated by an interpreter as follows.]

President Zelenskyy. The question is not only about our words or thoughts. The question is about for what we are ready and for what we are not. How Ukraine is able to give up its territories, that's insane, to be honest.

We are mentioning God very often. This is not about Christianity. We have our people there. We have our families there. We have children there. That's part of Ukrainian society, and we are talking about human being.

They are being under tortures, they are being raped, and they are being killed. And those voices which offers to give up our territories, they offers as well to give up our people. That's not a matter of territory. That a matter of lives of families, of children, of their histories.

I don't know whose idea it is. But I have question to these people: if they are ready to give up their children to terrorists. I think no.

President Biden. We want to see Ukraine win the war. And, as I've said before, winning means Ukraine is a sovereign, independent nation and—that can afford to defend itself today and deter further aggression. That's our objective.

Trevor [Trevor Hunnicutt], Reuters—with Reuters.

U.S. Assistance to Ukraine

Q. Thank you, sir. First, a question for both of you. Given the Republican skepticism of the Ukraine effort, do you worry that a second term for President Trump would be the end of an independent Ukraine? That's for both of you.

And then for you, President Biden: Just an update, if you could, on the situation in Gaza on the reports that Israel has begun flooding Hamas tunnels. And just the offensive in southern Gaza generally, how long do you think that operation should last? Thank you.

President Biden. Well, first of all, with regard to political support for Ukraine, there is a strong bipartisan political support for Ukraine. A small number of Republicans who don't want to support Ukraine, but they don't speak for the majority of even the Republicans, in my view.

We're in negotiations to get funding we need. Not to promise—not making promises, but hopeful we can get there. I think we can.

And you're right. The world is watching what we do, which would send a horrible message to an aggressor and allies if we walked away at this time. And it would hurt our national security.

Did you want me to answer the other question as well with regard to——

Q. Yes, please.

President Biden. Say it again.

Israel's Military Operations in Gaza/Hamas/Civilian Casualties in Gaza/Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza

Q. Sorry. So the question was just if you could talk a little bit about the Gaza operation, Israel flooding Hamas tunnels, and if you've had conversations with Bibi Netanyahu about how long that operation should last.

President Biden. Well, I have had conversations with Bibi Netanyahu, and I want to make sure that we don't forget what we're doing here. We have to support Israel because they're an independent nation that's being—I mean, the brutality, the inhumanity, the way in which Hamas treated the Israelis and—I mean, raping and burning and beheading. I mean, it just—just beyond comparison—beyond comparison and—to anything else that I've seen since I've been here, and I've been around for a long time.

But I think that we have made it clear to the Israelis and they're aware that the independence—the safety of innocent Palestinians is still of great concern. And so the actions they're taking must be consistent with attempting to do everything possible to prevent innocent Palestinian civilians from being hurt, murdered, killed, lost, et cetera.

And look, it doesn't lessen their responsibility, going after Hamas, to innocent Palestinians and—and Hamas. Look, we've—we have a responsibility to protect citizens and ensure they have access to humanitarian assistance. That's why I've worked so hard with our Arab friends, as well as the Israelis, to get humanitarian assistance into Israel, literally getting up to 140 trucks loaded with gear, loaded with food, loaded with everything that is needed by the Palestinians, including fuel.

So, you know, Israel has stated its intent to fulfill these responsibilities. It's very difficult.

With regard to the flooding of the tunnels, I'm not at liberty—well, there is assertions being made that they're quite sure there are no hostages in any of these tunnels. But I don't know that for a fact. I do know that, though, every civilian death is an absolute tragedy.

And Israel has stated its intent, as I said, to match its words with a—its intent with word—with actions. That's why I was—that's what I was talking about today.

Question three. I guess I asked that—no, I just asked that.

Q. He hasn't answered.

President Biden. It's your turn.

President Zelenskyy. My turn.

Q. Let him answer.

President Biden. Your turn.

[President Zelenskyy spoke in Ukrainian, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter as follows.]

President Zelenskyy. So, addressing your question very quickly, I've been talking a lot with representatives of both parties. Both Democrats and Republicans proved full-fledged support. And we will see. But before this, we have always been trusting in support of our strategic partner, the United States, and we will consider that it will continue in this way. And Ukraine will not remain alone against such a critical terrorist as the Russian Federation.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Q. Thank you so much. My name is Yaroslav Dovgopol for News Agency Ukraine. Next summer, the United States will host an anniversary NATO summit in Washington, DC, which—which raises a lot of hope, especially for Ukraine. President Zelenskyy, what does the Ukrainian side expect from this summit? And do you hope to hear direct invitation for Ukraine to join the alliance?

And, President Biden, under what conditions is the United States ready to support the initiative of inviting Ukraine to be member of NATO? Thank you.

[President Zelenskyy spoke in English as follows.]

President Zelenskyy. Thank you for your question. I will answer very quickly on this very complicated question.

We are not allies—until now, we are not members—we are allies, but we are not members—members of NATO. So that's why I think I will pass this question to—*[laughter]*—our big friend, President Biden. *[Laughter]*

President Biden. Well, look, I'm very proud of how strong and unified NATO has become. And now it's even larger. I—Putin wanted the Finlandization of NATO when I met with him in Geneva right after I was elected. And he's gotten the NATO-ization of Finland instead.

And NATO will be in Ukraine's future. No question about that. But if we—as said we said in Vilnius, Ukraine will become a member of NATO when all allies agree and conditions are met. Right now we have to make sure they win the war.

And you know, we launched the joint declaration of support alongside President Zelenskyy and the G-7 leaders in Vilnius, outlining a long-term commitment to supporting Ukraine's defense needs.

We also hosted a defense industry conference last week here in DC to get that critical work done. So it's a step at a time.

Thank you all very, very much.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre. This concludes the—thank you, everybody. Thank you, everyone. This concludes the press conference. Thanks, everybody. Thanks, everybody.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 5:01 p.m. in the Indian Treaty Room of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Officer Building. In his remarks, the President referred to Olga Skabeeva, presenter and political commentator, Russia 1 state-owned television channel; and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. President Zelenskyy referred to Speaker of the House of Representatives J. Michael Johnson. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 13.

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