

Biden's Warsaw Speech Is Both Electoral Manifesto and Political Vision

by Riccardo Alcaro

When US President Joe Biden stepped on the podium in Warsaw to deliver his speech on Russia's war against Ukraine, he looked confident.¹ Not so much of Ukraine's ultimate victory – though he pledged US support for that outcome to materialise. He looked confident that his Ukraine policy is part of a broader fight for the defence of democracy that the United States can neither neglect nor elude. Persuading the Americans that this is a cause worth fighting for apparently is how Biden has come to frame his presidency and, most likely, his re-election bid.

Incremental approach, steady conviction

Overall, the Biden Administration's management of the war has been

¹ White House, *Remarks by President Biden Ahead of the One-Year Anniversary of Russia's Brutal and Unprovoked Invasion of Ukraine*, Warsaw, 21 February 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/21/remarks-by-president-biden-ahead-of-the-one-year-anniversary-of-russias-brutal-and-unprovoked-invasion-of-ukraine>.

competent. The decision to share intelligence about Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion plans first with the US's European allies and then publicly paid off. Russia was deprived of a grey area to spread disinformation while the US and European governments could prepare a coordinated response.² Since the war started, the US Administration has gradually but steadily increased military assistance to Ukraine and strengthened further coordination with European countries, especially on sanctions on Russia.³

² Julian E. Barnes and Adam Entous, "How the U.S. Adopted a New Intelligence Playbook to Expose Russia's War Plans", in *The New York Times*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/23/us/politics/intelligence-russia-us-ukraine-china.html>.

³ Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, "How Much Aid Has the U.S. Sent Ukraine? Here Are Six Charts", in *CFR Articles*, updated 22 February 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/node/244167>; Kristin Archick, "Russia's War Against Ukraine: European Union Responses and U.S.-EU Relations", in *CRS Insights*, updated 6 February 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11897>.

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Biden has been overly careful to adjust US military supplies to Ukraine to events on the ground so that risks of escalation between Russia and NATO would be minimised. With hindsight, Biden could have offered Kyiv greater and speedier support. Yet this argument neglects the fact that the US president had to build up consensus – of the US public, in Congress and amongst allies – on potentially escalatory measures gradually, testing Putin's undefined red lines step by step.⁴

Perhaps Biden's incremental approach has reflected an equally gradual realisation that the war in Ukraine is part of a larger, historical challenge that he, as president, is called on to answer. Or perhaps this was his conviction from the start. Either way, he has now decided to turn that conviction into his broader political vision – and electoral manifesto.

A visit, a speech and multiple audiences

Biden's Warsaw speech on 21 February 2023 and even more so his historic visit to Kyiv the previous day⁵ are part of a single political initiative targeting both Washington's international interlocutors and the US public at large.

⁴ W.J. Hennigan, "World Leaders Condemn Putin's War, Nuclear Threats Amid Pressure Campaign Against Russia", in *Time*, 16 November 2022, <https://time.com/6233822>.

⁵ White House, *Statement from President Joe Biden on Travel to Kyiv, Ukraine*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/02/20/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-travel-to-kyiv-ukraine>.

Biden's physical presence in Kyiv has been the most tangible show of US solidarity with Ukraine. It has made clear to America's European allies that the Biden Administration expects their support for Ukraine to continue. It has warned Putin that, for as long as Biden sits in the Oval Office, US policy will not change and therefore any hope to outlast Western support for Ukraine is misplaced. Finally, it has conveyed the message that Biden most likely wants to make central to his political agenda.

The US president's visit to an invaded country was quite an extraordinary feat, given the security conditions of his trip were significantly lower than the usual standard for presidential travels.⁶ With his Warsaw speech, he has given the images of him strolling around Kyiv's city centre side by side with President Volodymyr Zelensky a specific political meaning – a meaning Biden hopes the US public will embrace, now and in 2024.

A manifesto for re-election

Speaking just a couple of hours before Biden, President Putin had depicted the war in Ukraine as an existential struggle against a West – that is, an America – invariably keen on destroying Russian power.⁷ The contrast with Biden's speech could not be more strident. In the US president's account, the Ukraine

⁶ "How Biden's Wartime Visit to Kyiv Came Together", in *CNBC News*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/21/how-bidens-wartime-visit-to-kyiv-came-together.html>.

⁷ Russian Presidency, *Presidential Address to Federal Assembly*, 21 February 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>.

war is not the result of a somewhat “neutral” geopolitical competition, as if the clash between great powers were the unavoidable consequence of the logic of power supposedly dominating international relations.

The United States, Biden insisted, does not want the ruin of Russia. US support for Ukraine is about opposing the imperialist dreams of an autocratic regime whose ultimate project is to debase all that comes with democracy: not just electoral processes but political pluralism, a free press, an independent judiciary, respect for minorities and individual rights, as well as the rejection of wars of conquest.

This is the message upon which, in all likelihood, Biden will build his re-election campaign in 2024. According to this narrative, Biden's election in 2020 coincided with the defeat of democracy's internal threats, epitomised by the illiberalism espoused by Donald Trump and his devotees. In 2024, Biden will insist that the vigilance over and defence of democracy shall be extended to external threats. Biden's answer to Republicans who lament the “blank cheque” nature of US support to Ukraine is that, on the contrary, it is actually an investment in the future of democracy.⁸

A vision for a president

Biden's “electoral” manifesto reflects a specific vision that he has inherited

⁸ Dan McLaughlin, “No ‘Blank Check’: Ron DeSantis Enters the Ukraine Debate”, in *National Review*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/no-blank-check-ron-desantis-enters-the-ukraine-debate>.

from his Cold War experience and that, evidently, he believes it is necessary to re-affirm today: interstate competition always originates from the nature of political regimes, especially when great powers are involved.

Biden must be all too aware that the dividing line between democracy and autocracy by no means overlaps with the one separating US allies and rivals from each other. Certainly, not all democracies are aligned with the United States on Ukraine – as the cases of Brazil,⁹ South Africa¹⁰ and India¹¹ (still the world's largest democracy, in spite of the backsliding trend of recent years) attest. Similarly, US partnerships extend to countries run by despotic and brutally repressive regimes such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Even in the Western camp, some democracies have experienced regression, most notably Hungary,¹² the same Poland¹³ exalted

⁹ Simone Preissler Iglesias, “Lula Intensifies Brazil's Diplomatic Push for Peace in Ukraine”, in *Bloomberg*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-24/lula-s-plan-for-peace-in-ukraine-starts-to-gain-global-traction>.

¹⁰ Hamza Mohamed, “Why South Africa Continues to Be Neutral in Ukraine-Russia War”, in *Al Jazeera*, 24 January 2023, <https://aje.io/p2rkl5>.

¹¹ Juhee Singh Verma and Sangita Dutta Gupta, “Russia-Ukraine War: India's Balancing Act”, in *The Hindu Business Line*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/article65198617.ece>.

¹² European Parliament, *MEPs: Hungary Can No Longer Be Considered a Full Democracy*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137>.

¹³ sveta Petrova and Senem Aydın-Düzgit, “Democracy Support without Democracy: The Cases of Poland and Turkey”, in *Carnegie Articles*, 15 January 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/83485>.

by Biden in Warsaw and most recently the US's eternal ally Israel, which has moreover repressed basic human rights of millions of Palestinians for decades.¹⁴

A vision construed on the dichotomy between democracy and autocracy is therefore hardly going to strike any chord beyond the Euro-Atlantic area.¹⁵ After all, most non-Western countries (and some Western countries too) do not want to be drawn into great power competition. And yet the democracy vs autocracy divide is no mere rhetorical artefact – certainly not for Biden.

The hypocritical double standard with which all too often the United States and its allies apply lofty principles does not devalue those principles, and therefore must not devalue the defence of them. The principles that the United States defends in Ukraine – this is Biden's core message – are not just abstract ideas, they have informed for years a system of interstate relations in Europe based on the peaceful resolution of international disputes, institutionalised cooperation and the socialisation of peoples from different countries. Russia's conquests in Ukraine would directly threaten this system in Europe and indirectly undermine its legitimacy elsewhere in the world.

¹⁴ Peter Beinart, "You Can't Save Democracy in a Jewish State", in *The New York Times*, 19 February 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/19/opinion/israel-democracy-protests.html>.

¹⁵ Timothy Garton Ash, Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "United West, Divided from the Rest: Global Public Opinion One Year into Russia's War on Ukraine", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 22 February 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=101735>.

Biden's vision, imbued as it is with the "ideology of democracy", points to a "geo-political" space in the literal sense, that is, a geographical area organised on the basis of politically accepted norms and rules. Whether these norms and rules are inspired by democratic principles or imperial dreams is a matter of political choice. Interstate conflict emanates from those choices, not from the unavoidable clash of empires. Biden has made his own choice and hopes that the US public will do the same.

Looking ahead

Biden's Warsaw speech included some inspiring passages – Kyiv that still stands tall, proud, strong – and lots of references to the deceptive power of autocracies and the hidden strength of democracies.

That rhetorical simplicity that captures an epoch in two or three words was largely absent, though. There was no "Ich bin ein Berliner!", John F. Kennedy's pledge in West Berlin of continuous US commitment to Europe after the construction of the Wall, or Ronald Reagan's "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!", again in West Berlin, this time right before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

And yet, if the bet that his political vision can be merged with his re-election bid pays off, Biden's speech will become equally significant.

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