

Ukraine: Biden's Timing

by GWYNNE DYER

A great many people are glad that US President Joe Biden has finally agreed that Ukraine can be supplied with modern Western aircraft – specifically F-16s – but they are still cross about his procrastination and worried that he has waited too long. From Ukraine's point of view, they do have a case.

Ukraine's dwindling fleet of elderly ex-Soviet combat aircraft cannot provide adequate air support to the country's long-awaited counteroffensive this summer. They are too few and too old to survive against the full array of Russian anti-aircraft missiles and the much larger numbers of Russian fighters (although those are also old).

The F-16s would change that narrative. They, too, are old (first operational squadron 1980), but their electronics have been continuously updated, and in practice, they are a full generation ahead of the Russian fighters they would confront. In air combat, that usually means grotesquely lopsided kill ratios in favour of the aircraft with the better electronics.

However, the White House is talking of a minimum of three to six months to train Ukrainian pilots on the F-16, and it is still being coy about how many F-16s will actually be handed over to the Ukrainians and when.

Whereas the Ukrainian counteroffensive has to happen in the next four months, or else it risks being slowed to a halt by the autumn rains. Was Joe Biden unaware of this? Of course not. It's just that he has his own list of priorities, and Ukraine comes third.

Priority One is not blundering into a nuclear war with the Russian Federation. Biden has been in active politics through most of the Cold War era, and he remembers that avoiding direct fighting between the United States and the Soviet Union was quite literally an existential issue.

That reality hasn't changed, even though today's Russia is smaller and much less powerful than the old Soviet Union. Moscow still has thousands of nuclear weapons, and those must be respected. So while Biden supports Ukraine's sovereignty, he will do nothing that startles Vladimir Putin into a nuclear overreaction.

That is why the US president has been so cautious in upgrading the categories of weapons he and his NATO allies provide to Ukraine. The pattern has been that he lets Ukraine have some kind of NATO weapons system (American howitzers with longer ranges, say), and then waits for the Russian reaction.

The Russians threaten bloody murder, draw a new red line NATO must never cross, and hint at nuclear weapons use. But they don't actually do anything. So after a couple of months, Biden moves onto the next category of NATO weapons – the HIMARS rocket launchers, in this example – and waits again. And so on, through half a dozen rounds.

We have arrived at combat aircraft, the last item on Biden's list, so now the time pressure moves to the other side. Biden's second priority, obviously, is being re-elected to the presidency eighteen months from now. For that, he needs a convincing Ukrainian victory and a satisfactory end to the war within the next fifteen months.

After two generations of pointless, lost foreign wars from Vietnam to Afghanistan, Americans are dubious about the benefits of foreign military adventures. It helps Biden greatly that no Americans are being killed in Ukraine, but the war there is still unpopular with the voters and getting more so.

Biden would be offering an open goal to Donald Trump (or some other Republican rabble-rouser, if Trump is in jail by then) if the war in Ukraine is still raging in November 2024. He has to get it finished before that, so the Ukrainians will soon get their F-16s.

It's been the same balancing act right from the start. Biden is obviously cutting it very fine, but has he actually miscalculated? We shall find out in the next few months, but he may have a card up his sleeve. It might not really be three to six months before the Ukrainians have operational F-16s.

There is reason to believe that some Ukrainian pilots have already been trained on fourth-generation fighters (not necessarily F-16s) by friendly European countries, though not by the United States. Ukrainian Air Force Command has also quietly called for veteran F-16 pilots and ground crews from other countries to join up and help in the transition.

The actual planes could come sooner than Washington's timetable suggests because the actual donors of the F-16s will be smaller European NATO members like Denmark and the Netherlands. These are countries that have taken the lead in weapons deliveries to Ukraine in the past, and they might do so again.

A decisive Ukrainian military victory, Biden's third priority, is still far from guaranteed, but Ukrainian air superiority over the front, at least, may be within reach.