

# Bipartisan pressure mounts for US to do more in Ukraine amid frustration over Polish jets

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## Polish Ambassador to the US: Sanctions on Moscow should 'last for a decade' 16:19

**(CNN)** — After two weeks of unity surrounding the Biden administration's [swift and sweeping response to Russia's invasion](#) of Ukraine, patience is quickly thinning on Capitol Hill, with Republicans -- and even some Democrats -- challenging the administration to go further to help Ukrainian allies under attack.

The tension comes as the administration has exhausted some of its most obvious tools to rein in Russian aggression. Debilitating sanctions, humanitarian aid, military support and diplomatic efforts have all been used in conjunction with Europe in the lead-up to and opening days of Russia's war, which slowed but has not stopped Moscow's [assault on Ukrainian cities and civilians](#). Now there are mostly hard choices ahead as the US weighs whether to take even further steps amid risks of escalating tensions between Russia and NATO.

On Thursday, lawmakers in multiple committee meetings criticized the Biden administration's decision to [reject a Polish offer to send fighter jets](#) to Ukraine through the United States and a German air base. Several senators on the Foreign Relations Committee blasted the administration for not acting immediately to help facilitate the transfer, questioning how the administration had made that decision after initially appearing to back it earlier in the week.

"It's not clear why we are standing in the way," Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, a Democrat from New Hampshire, told CNN about the US position that it would not be appropriate to send Poland planes so that it could transfer its own aircraft to Ukraine.

"It's coming across as indecision and bickering among members of the administration, which is not helpful to the cause and not helpful to the administration," she said.

The public airing of frustrations underscores the tension over how to respond to a war that the US [has flatly said it will not enter](#) because Ukraine is not a member of NATO and doing so would risk a broader war between Russia and NATO. The US and other NATO countries have provided weapons like anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine, but the Biden administration has drawn the line at steps that some lawmakers have advocated for, such as a no-fly zone, which US officials warn could put the US military in the position of shooting down Russian planes.

One Democratic lawmaker told CNN that the response to date in Congress overall has been quite unified, especially given how the two parties in the House have been at each other's throats for the past year. Now that the easy moves to punish Russia have been taken, the lawmaker noted, there's going to be a natural tension between the White House and members of Congress, who don't "really need to worry so much around the particulars of jets flying from Ramstein into Russian-controlled airspace."

"It is the White House's job to think seriously about that," the lawmaker said.

Even some of the President's closest allies have signaled they'd like to do more to help Ukraine.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said during her weekly news conference Wednesday that while she wasn't a military expert, she hoped the administration would find a way to help boost Ukraine's air power after she spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

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"Myself, when I see those tanks, that 40 miles of tanks, I'd like to take out those tanks. I mean, I think that having more planes might be useful, but I'm not a military strategist," she said. "I hope that we can get to a place where the MiGS, which are the kinds of planes they have been depending on,

can go to Ukraine, the F-16s especially if you have an excess of them can go to Poland."

Another Democratic lawmaker said the push from Capitol Hill can be useful even if the steps aren't supported by the Biden administration, noting that both the US and European countries have taken steps in response to Russia's attacks that had seemed impossible just days before they happened: Germany froze [the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project](#) from Russia, Switzerland joined in with sanctions and several European countries have provided lethal aid to Ukraine.

"It's always a little late, but it comes," the lawmaker said. "Unless there's an off-ramp here, this thing continues, and you start to see them move toward the things they weren't going to consider."

## The Pentagon ramps up its position

The Pentagon said Wednesday that it opposed the transfer of the Polish fighter jets through the German air base because such a move would be "high risk," warning that the intelligence community assessed it "may be mistaken as escalatory and could result in significant Russian reaction that might increase the prospects of a military escalation with NATO."

In a sign of the concern about the reaction on Capitol Hill, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Mark Milley was making calls to a number of members of Congress on Thursday, according to Sen. Kevin Cramer, a Republican

"A number of members are talking to him today," Cramer told CNN.

Lawmakers have questioned why the administration was drawing the line at providing Ukraine with fighter jets when the US is already giving Ukraine anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles that are being used against Russian forces.

In the Senate Intelligence Committee on Thursday, Sen. Tom Cotton, an Arkansas Republican, said the situation amounted to a "fiasco," pressing Director of National intelligence Avril Haines about why the administration was pointing to the intelligence community as the reason it did not support the transfer of fighter jets.

"Here's my opinion. You don't have new intelligence. This is opinion, and in many cases, this is policy makers who are looking to intelligence community to provide them cover for their hesitancy," Cotton said.

Over the last several days, members have come to see a split between Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken on whether the administration should approve a potential transfer of aircraft to Poland that would allow that country to send planes directly to Ukraine. Sen. Jim Risch of Idaho, the top Republican on Foreign Relations, told CNN it was an "embarrassing" division.

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"The first branch of government is almost unanimous on this. I don't know who is against this up here, but it's embarrassing for the second branch of government to be divided. This is a job for the President of the United States. He needs to step up.

Knock heads together and get everybody in the same place," Risch said. "We really need to do that. This is a matter of life and death."

Risch said the Pentagon's explanation that a jet transfer could be perceived as escalatory by the Russians is "nonsense."

"We're taking their yachts, we're taking their vacation properties, we are giving the Ukrainians all the arms we can give them. It is foolish to say this is somehow going to aggravate them more. That's nonsense," he said.

Sen. Richard Burr, a North Carolina Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, referred to comments Blinken had made on Sunday saying the US had given the "green light" to Poland to send the jets -- questioning why things changed when Poland proposed giving them to the US through Germany.

"When the US publicly gives Poland a green light to transfer aircraft, and then changes their mind when the aircrafts have transferred off of our space, our geography, as a member of NATO as well, and we say that that would make it escalatory, but if Poland transferred, we didn't consider it to be escalatory, then I draw this conclusion: This is a policy decision. It's a policy decision made by the administration," Burr said. "And I remind all of you at the table: Intelligence is never supposed to influence policy."

The Pentagon has pushed swiftly back against efforts to send Poland replenishment planes, arguing that other weapons would be more strategic in deterring the Russians, but even those arguments have been met with stiff resistance.

"The administration just told us they think Ukraine needs other things more and would be more effective in the battlefield. In theory, that means that you have the United States government deciding what the military strategy should be for Ukraine," said Sen. Rob Portman, an Ohio Republican. "Ukraine wants planes. They have made a decision."

Providing air support for Ukraine is just one of the latest sticking points to emerge. When the Biden administration released its first round of sanctions last month the day after Russia's attack on Ukraine, many Republican and Democratic lawmakers said they did not go far enough, calling for removing Russia [from the SWIFT international financial messaging system](#) and a US ban on importing Russian oil.

Several days later -- with emotional prodding from Zelensky in messages from Kyiv -- the Biden administration acted in conjunction with European countries initially opposed to remove Russia from SWIFT. Earlier this week, the US acted on its own to ban Russian oil imports, which make up a smaller amount of US energy purchases than in Europe.

But that step came as members of Congress had also moved to pass legislation that would [ban Russian oil, natural gas and coal imports](#) to the US, in a legislative debate where the administration had intervened. Republicans argued the bill had been watered down before passing the House of Representatives. In the Senate, the bill faces a potentially arduous road where Republicans and Democrats alike have said they'd like to strengthen provisions in the House-passed legislation before approving it in their own chamber, potentially challenging the White House's position once again.

It's a delicate balance for many Democrats, who have watched the horrors in Ukraine unfold but are also trying to give the White House room to maneuver on an evolving and ever-complicated geopolitical threat.

"I generally trust the administration's decision-making," Sen. Chris Murphy, a Democrat from Connecticut, told CNN. "I think this is a time when we should get behind the administration rather than constantly second-guessing."

Lawmakers have noted the role that Zelensky has played in pushing the US and its allies in Europe to do more. Zelensky held a call with all members of Congress last Saturday, where he urged the US to ban Russian oil imports and to provide Ukraine with fighter jets. The Democratic lawmaker said the timing of Zelensky's plea was masterful -- made at the same time that many lawmakers were in their districts and attending pro-Ukraine rallies with constituents urging the US government to do something about the horrors of Russia's attacks on Ukrainian civilians.

Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Robert Menendez on Thursday questioned the US assessment that the Ukrainians mainly need air defense capabilities right now.

"I don't understand why we are not working expeditiously to facilitate planes to Ukraine," the New Jersey Democrat said, asking the Pentagon official at the hearing, "So you are saying they don't need airplanes?"

*CNN's Kylie Atwood contributed to this report.*



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