

# Bipartisan lawmakers ramp up calls on Biden to give Ukraine weapons, fighter jets

By [Amy B Wang](#)

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A growing number of U.S. lawmakers ratcheted up pressure on President Biden on Sunday to increase military aid to Ukraine, including sending fighter jets and air defense systems that the administration rejected last week.

The public calls from both Republicans and Democrats to answer Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's urgent pleas for air assistance come as the Biden administration declined an offer from Poland to deliver MiG-29 airplanes to Ukraine for fear such a move could be interpreted by the Russians as an escalation of the United States' role in the war.

The bipartisan push underscores the growing hawkishness among many leaders on Capitol Hill, who have been urging Biden to do more to help Ukraine defend itself against Russian attacks as the war rages into its third week.

“[Russian President] Vladimir Putin and the Russians seem to be saying everything is escalatory. And yet they're escalating every single day by coming into Ukraine with these weapons,” Sen. Rob Portman (R-Ohio) said Sunday on CNN's “State of the Union.”

“This is an illegal — this is a brutal — totally unprovoked attack,” he added, emphasizing the horrors of civilian targets hit. “So, as they escalate, what the Ukrainian people are asking for is just the ability to defend themselves.”

Portman was part of a four-person bipartisan delegation of senators who traveled to Poland on Sunday who called on the White House to send air assistance to Ukraine, arguing that the country increasingly needs help to push back Russian forces. The others on the trip were Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.), a staunch supporter of former president Donald Trump; moderate Democrat Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.); and Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), one of the more liberal members of the Democratic caucus.

Portman argued that because Putin has already declared other forms of U.S. military aid escalatory, sending planes to Ukraine would not risk intensifying the conflict.

Separately, 58 members of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus on Sunday again urged the Biden administration to try to facilitate the fighter jet deal with Poland, as well as to provide Ukraine with other air defense systems, including drones and surface-to-air missiles.

“Russia’s advantage in this domain could soon develop into air dominance if the Ukrainians do not receive necessary military aid,” the caucus members, who are evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, said in a new statement. “We commend the Polish government for taking proactive steps to deliver MiG-29 jets to the Ukrainian Air Force. We urge assistance to help facilitate this deal, commit to replenishing our allies’ fleets with American-made aircraft and help advance the transfer of [other] aircraft to Ukraine as well.”

The entreaties by both Democrats and Republicans on the White House come as Russia has continued to escalate its attacks in Ukraine. In addition, Russia has turned to China for military equipment and aid in the weeks since it began its invasion of Ukraine, U.S. officials familiar with the matter told The Washington Post, a move that could draw in a major world power into the conflict.

Russian forces are closing in on Kyiv and, early Sunday, unleashing missile attacks on a military facility a mere 15 miles from the border with Poland, a NATO member country. The strikes killed at least 35 and injured 134, and intensified fears that NATO could be drawn into a direct conflict with Russia.

Speaking from near the Poland-Ukraine border on Sunday, Portman said the bombing of the military facility in western Ukraine was close enough to be heard on the Polish side.

Ukrainians, he added, badly needed air defense systems to have better control over the skies for a “fighting chance” at winning the war. Portman also noted the United States has already provided shoulder-fired Stinger missiles and military helicopters to Ukraine, as recently as January.

“And those are directly from the United States. In this case, this would be Poland providing these airplanes, which are Soviet-style planes, old planes, MiG-29s,” Portman, a co-chair of the Senate Ukraine Caucus, said on CNN.

The White House has defended its decision to decline Poland’s offer, saying there were “a range of logistical operational challenges” that would come with delivering the warplanes.

Poland had said it was ready to deploy all of its MiG-29 jets to the Ramstein Air Base, an American military facility in Germany, but the Pentagon struck down the proposal, saying fighter jets departing from a U.S. or NATO base could be seen as an escalation of tensions with Russia. The Kremlin also warned on Saturday that convoys carrying U.S. or NATO weapons into Ukraine would be “legitimate targets” for attack.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan said Sunday that Biden had consulted with NATO allies and military advisers and “ultimately determined that the risk/benefit analysis of flying planes from NATO bases into contested airspace over Ukraine did not make sense.” Biden has, however, been in contact with Zelensky about providing other anti-air systems, he said.

Klobuchar did not explicitly criticize the Biden administration on Sunday. But, breaking with most other Democrats, she said she would still like to see the United States send fighter planes to Ukraine, even if they weren’t the specific MIG-29 jets discussed.

“At some point, there’s been so much focus on these planes, especially these particular planes, that they themselves could become a target,” Klobuchar said on CNN’s “State of the Union.”

She suggested that other effective weapons like drones and Javelins would also help Ukrainians in their fight. “One of the things we have to remember is, this is all about air defense,” she said.

Klobuchar said she had spoken with Biden 10 days ago to make her position clear, but understood that “things shift” in wartime. She stressed that there were negotiations about military aid that could and likely were happening outside of the public view for security reasons.

“I still don’t rule out having planes at some point,” Klobuchar said. “But, again, you take one day at a time and make the best defense system decisions. And that can’t always be discussed on the air, or you would be giving Vladimir Putin the road map to what NATO wants to do here to help protect Ukraine.”

Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on CBS's "Face the Nation" on Sunday that the debate over the Polish fighter jets last week reminded him of a ping-pong game, with the two sides hitting a ball back and forth in what, to him, was a "diplomatic mystery."

"We have no time for this kind of ping-pong diplomacy. We need planes to save lives of our people," Kuleba said.

Ukrainian officials have continued their pleas for the United States and its NATO allies to help enact a "no-fly zone" over Ukrainian airspace, a move the allies have thus far rejected, also out of fear it would be seen by Russia as an escalation into a wider war.

But those who have urged more military support for Ukraine argue that the war and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine are already rapidly intensifying. An American journalist, Brent Renaud, was fatally shot while reporting outside of Kyiv, and Russian forces reportedly kidnapped a second mayor.

Republicans have for weeks pushed for more sanctions, earlier, and have accused Biden of responding to Putin from a position of weakness.

Though some GOP support for NATO eroded during the Trump administration — led by the former president's public disdain for the NATO alliance — many Republican lawmakers have been quick to criticize Biden for doing too little, too late, to lead his European allies.

"The world needs the Biden administration to be flying this plane," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said Thursday, arguing that supporting Ukraine is not a provocation. "Too often it feels like the plane is flying them."

Democrats so far have defended Biden's approach to the crisis, saying that Biden has succeeded in uniting the world to oppose Putin and rally support for Ukraine.

"I don't know that it's constructive for us to continue to try to manage this crisis day to day," Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) said last week. "I think there is a bit of a blind momentum around this question of, more and more and more. That is not always connected to what Ukraine actually needs to defend themselves."

Sullivan acknowledged Sunday that Russia's bombing of the military base in western Ukraine suggested Putin would likely ramp up his invasion.

"What it shows is that Vladimir Putin is frustrated by the fact that his forces are not making the kind of progress that he thought that they would make against major cities, including Kyiv," Sullivan said. "That he is expanding the number of targets that he is lashing out [at] and that he is trying to cause damage in every part of the country."

Sullivan reiterated on “Face the Nation” Biden’s insistence that U.S. military forces would not be drawn into fighting Russian troops on Ukrainian soil, but if Russian attacks spread to Poland or another NATO ally, that would “bring the full force of the NATO alliance to bear in responding.”

When it came to reports that Russia may be preparing to use chemical weapons to attack Ukraine, Sullivan declined to specify if that would be a new “red line” for increased U.S. intervention.

“Sitting here before you today, I’m not going to go further than what President Biden said on Friday, which is that the Russians would pay a severe price if they were to move forward with chemical weapons,” Sullivan said.

*Mike DeBonis, Ellen Nakashima and Christopher Rowland contributed to this report.*

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President Volodymyr Zelensky said [food and medical supplies](#) for the besieged southern port city of Mariupol, where hundreds of thousands of civilians are [trapped behind](#) Russian lines, was set to arrive Sunday afternoon. Russian forces continued to bombard Ukrainian cities, making “limited but notable” gains in a drawn-out campaign to capture the capital, Kyiv, a senior NATO official [said](#).

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