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Opinion

The U.S. won't back down from the challenge of Putin and Hamas

By Joe Biden November 18, 2023

Today, the world faces an inflection point, where the choices we make — including in the crises in Europe and the Middle East — will determine the direction of our future for generations to come.

What will our world look like on the other side of these conflicts?

Will we deny Hamas the ability to carry out pure, unadulterated evil? Will Israelis and Palestinians one day live side by side in peace, with two states for two peoples?

Will we hold Vladimir Putin accountable for his aggression, so the people of Ukraine can live free and Europe remains an anchor for global peace and security?

And the overarching question: Will we relentlessly pursue our positive vision for the future, or will we allow those who do not share our values to drag the world to a more dangerous and divided place?

Both Putin and Hamas are fighting to wipe a neighboring democracy off the map. And both Putin and Hamas hope to collapse broader regional stability and integration and take advantage of the ensuing disorder. America cannot, and will not, let that happen. For our own national security interests — and for the good of the entire world.

The United States is the essential nation. We rally allies and partners to stand up to aggressors and make progress toward a brighter, more peaceful future. The world looks to us to solve the problems of our time. That is the duty of leadership, and America will lead. For if we walk away from the challenges of today, the risk of conflict could spread, and the costs to address them will only rise. We will not let that happen.

That conviction is at the root of my approach to supporting the people of Ukraine as they continue to defend their freedom against Putin's brutal war.

We know from two world wars in the past century that when aggression in Europe goes unanswered, the crisis does not burn itself out. It draws America in directly. That's why our commitment to Ukraine today is an investment in our own security. It prevents a broader conflict tomorrow.

We are keeping American troops out of this war by supporting the brave Ukrainians defending

their freedom and homeland. We are providing them with weapons and economic assistance to stop Putin's drive for conquest, before the conflict spreads farther.

The United States is not doing this alone. More than 50 nations have joined us to ensure that Ukraine has what it needs to defend itself. Our partners are shouldering much of the economic responsibility for supporting Ukraine. We have also built a stronger and more united NATO, which enhances our security through the strength of our allies, while making clear that we will defend every inch of NATO territory to deter further Russian aggression. Our allies in Asia are standing with us as well to support Ukraine and hold Putin accountable, because they understand that stability in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific are inherently connected.

We have also seen throughout history how conflicts in the Middle East can unleash consequences around the globe.

We stand firmly with the Israeli people as they defend themselves against the murderous nihilism of Hamas. On Oct. 7, Hamas slaughtered 1,200 people, including 35 American citizens, in the worst atrocity committed against the Jewish people in a single day since the Holocaust. Infants and toddlers, mothers and fathers, grandparents, people with disabilities, even Holocaust survivors were maimed and murdered. Entire families were massacred in their homes. Young people were gunned down at a music festival. Bodies riddled with bullets and burned beyond recognition. And for over a month, the families of more than 200 hostages taken by Hamas, including babies and Americans, have been living in hell, anxiously waiting to discover whether their loved ones are alive or dead. At the time of this writing, my team and I are working hour by hour, doing everything we can to get the hostages released.

And while Israelis are still in shock and suffering the trauma of this attack, Hamas has promised that it will relentlessly try to repeat Oct. 7. It has said very clearly that it will not stop.

The Palestinian people deserve a state of their own and a future free from Hamas. I, too, am heartbroken by the images out of Gaza and the deaths of many thousands of civilians, including children. Palestinian children are crying for lost parents. Parents are writing their child's name on their hand or leg so they can be identified if the worst happens. Palestinian nurses and doctors are trying desperately to save every precious life they possibly can, with little to no resources. Every innocent Palestinian life lost is a tragedy that rips apart families and communities.

Our goal should not be simply to stop the war for today — it should be to end the war forever, break the cycle of unceasing violence, and build something stronger in Gaza and across the Middle East so that history does not keep repeating itself.

Just weeks before Oct. 7, I met in New York with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The main subject of that conversation was a set of substantial commitments that would help both Israel and the Palestinian territories better integrate into the broader Middle East. That is also the idea behind the innovative economic corridor that will connect India to Europe through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel, which I announced together with partners at the Group of 20 summit in India in early September. Stronger integration between countries

creates predictable markets and draws greater investment. Better regional connection — including physical and economic infrastructure — supports higher employment and more opportunities for young people. That’s what we have been working to realize in the Middle East. It is a future that has no place for Hamas’s violence and hate, and I believe that attempting to destroy the hope for that future is one reason that Hamas instigated this crisis.

This much is clear: A two-state solution is the only way to ensure the long-term security of both the Israeli and Palestinian people. Though right now it may seem like that future has never been further away, this crisis has made it more imperative than ever.

A two-state solution — two peoples living side by side with equal measures of freedom, opportunity and dignity — is where the road to peace must lead. Reaching it will take commitments from Israelis and Palestinians, as well as from the United States and our allies and partners. That work must start now.

To that end, the United States has proposed basic principles for how to move forward from this crisis, to give the world a foundation on which to build.

To start, Gaza must never again be used as a platform for terrorism. There must be no forcible displacement of Palestinians from Gaza, no reoccupation, no siege or blockade, and no reduction in territory. And after this war is over, the voices of Palestinian people and their aspirations must be at the center of post-crisis governance in Gaza.

As we strive for peace, Gaza and the West Bank should be reunited under a single governance structure, ultimately under a revitalized Palestinian Authority, as we all work toward a two-state solution. I have been emphatic with Israel’s leaders that extremist violence against Palestinians in the West Bank must stop and that those committing the violence must be held accountable. The United States is prepared to take our own steps, including issuing visa bans against extremists attacking civilians in the West Bank.

The international community must commit resources to support the people of Gaza in the immediate aftermath of this crisis, including interim security measures, and establish a reconstruction mechanism to sustainably meet Gaza’s long-term needs. And it is imperative that no terrorist threats ever again emanate from Gaza or the West Bank.

If we can agree on these first steps, and take them together, we can begin to imagine a different future. In the months ahead, the United States will redouble our efforts to establish a more peaceful, integrated and prosperous Middle East — a region where a day like Oct. 7 is unthinkable.

In the meantime, we will continue working to prevent this conflict from spreading and escalating further. I ordered two U.S. carrier groups to the region to enhance deterrence. We are going after Hamas and those who finance and facilitate its terrorism, levying multiple rounds of sanctions to degrade Hamas’s financial structure, cutting it off from outside funding and blocking access to new funding channels, including via social media. I have also been clear that the United States

will do what is necessary to defend U.S. troops and personnel stationed across the Middle East — and we have responded multiple times to the strikes against us.

I also immediately traveled to Israel — the first American president to do so during wartime — to show solidarity with the Israeli people and reaffirm to the world that the United States has Israel's back. Israel must defend itself. That is its right. And while in Tel Aviv, I also counseled Israelis against letting their hurt and rage mislead them into making mistakes we ourselves have made in the past.

From the very beginning, my administration has called for respecting international humanitarian law, minimizing the loss of innocent lives and prioritizing the protection of civilians. Following Hamas's attack on Israel, aid to Gaza was cut off, and food, water and medicine reserves dwindled rapidly. As part of my travel to Israel, I worked closely with the leaders of Israel and Egypt to reach an agreement to restart the delivery of essential humanitarian assistance to Gazans. Within days, trucks with supplies again began to cross the border. Today, nearly 100 aid trucks enter Gaza from Egypt each day, and we continue working to increase the flow of assistance manyfold. I've also advocated for humanitarian pauses in the conflict to permit civilians to depart areas of active fighting and to help ensure that aid reaches those in need. Israel took the additional step to create two humanitarian corridors and implement daily four-hour pauses in the fighting in northern Gaza to allow Palestinian civilians to flee to safer areas in the south.

This stands in stark opposition to Hamas's terrorist strategy: hide among Palestinian civilians. Use children and innocents as human shields. Position terrorist tunnels beneath hospitals, schools, mosques and residential buildings. Maximize the death and suffering of innocent people — Israeli and Palestinian. If Hamas cared at all for Palestinian lives, it would release all the hostages, give up arms, and surrender the leaders and those responsible for Oct. 7.

As long as Hamas clings to its ideology of destruction, a cease-fire is not peace. To Hamas's members, every cease-fire is time they exploit to rebuild their stockpile of rockets, reposition fighters and restart the killing by attacking innocents again. An outcome that leaves Hamas in control of Gaza would once more perpetuate its hate and deny Palestinian civilians the chance to build something better for themselves.

And here at home, in moments when fear and suspicion, anger and rage run hard, we have to work even harder to hold on to the values that make us who we are. We're a nation of religious freedom and freedom of expression. We all have a right to debate and disagree and peacefully protest, but without fear of being targeted at schools or workplaces or elsewhere in our communities.

In recent years, too much hate has been given too much oxygen, fueling racism and an alarming rise in antisemitism in America. That has intensified in the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks. Jewish families worry about being targeted in school, while wearing symbols of their faith on the street or otherwise going about their daily lives. At the same time, too many Muslim Americans, Arab Americans and Palestinian Americans, and so many other communities, are outraged and hurting,

fearing the resurgence of the Islamophobia and distrust we saw after 9/11.

We can't stand by when hate rears its head. We must, without equivocation, denounce antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of hate and bias. We must renounce violence and vitriol and see each other not as enemies but as fellow Americans.

In a moment of so much violence and suffering — in Ukraine, Israel, Gaza and so many other places — it can be difficult to imagine that something different is possible. But we must never forget the lesson learned time and again throughout our history: Out of great tragedy and upheaval, enormous progress can come. More hope. More freedom. Less rage. Less grievance. Less war. We must not lose our resolve to pursue those goals, because now is when clear vision, big ideas and political courage are needed most. That is the strategy that my administration will continue to lead — in the Middle East, Europe and around the globe. Every step we take toward that future is progress that makes the world safer and the United States of America more secure.