

Hezbollah and the Russia-Iran Link

di Seth Cropsey e Harry Halem

The failed Iranian missile attack against Israel on Tuesday demands a powerful response. The Biden administration must support Israel's effort to deter, or if necessary defeat, Iran and its proxies. The missile attack should convince the U.S. that it faces linked threats in Europe and the Middle East: Russia and Iran both aim to challenge American power. Washington unfortunately has ignored the link between these two adversaries and thus is also alienating two crucial U.S. partners, Ukraine and Israel, and disrupting their ability to strategize. For all its talk, the Biden administration is failing at alliance management.

The Mossad was likely behind last month's spectacular attack on Hezbollah, which involved destroying the Iranian proxy's pagers to cripple its communications. The next day Hezbollah's walkie-talkie radios exploded. The Israel Defense Forces later killed several high-ranking Hezbollah officers and hit 100 or so Hezbollah rocket launchers. Rather than supporting its ally's attempt to deter an enemy and return its people to their homes in northern Israel, the U.S. reacted with dismay. Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned against escalation and seemed to imply that Israel's action could make the process of reaching a Gaza cease-fire "more difficult" or even "derail it."

Last Friday the IDF struck Hezbollah's central command post in Beirut, killing Hassan Nasrallah, the terrorist organization's leader, and incapacitating its chain of command. The White House's response on Saturday reiterated Washington's commitment to de-escalation, both in Gaza with Hamas and in Lebanon with Hezbollah.

Israel last month recovered the bodies of six hostages Hamas had executed, including American-Israeli dual national Hersh Goldberg-Polin. Again the U.S. responded

poorly: Although President Biden appropriately said he was “devastated and outraged,” Washington remained committed to negotiating with Hamas.

The same week Israel found the murdered hostages, Russia launched missiles against Ukraine, hitting the country’s electrical grid and civilian population. The attacks killed dozens in a hospital in Poltava, in central Ukraine, and four members of a family in the western city of Lviv (only the father survived).

Israel and Ukraine are improbably but inexorably linked. Russia’s war against Ukraine is one front in a broader contest for Eurasian mastery. The Ukrainian military thus far has doggedly held off its larger, wealthier, more technologically capable foe with a combination of initiative, ingenuity and grit. But for Ukraine, defeat would mean obliteration.

Israel’s war against Hamas is also only the most visible portion of a wider war—in this case, with Iran. The Islamic Republic seeks to eliminate the Jewish state politically, forcing Israel to abandon its Jewish character and thereby compelling a mass exodus of Israeli Jews. Iran would kill whoever remained.

Israel, like Ukraine, has fought its enemies with craftiness and determination. But these wars have scarred every Ukrainian and Israeli family and transformed both countries psychologically.

One disturbing point of convergence is that both Jerusalem and Kyiv are navigating the crushing weight of American incompetence. The Biden administration insists that its crowning foreign-policy achievement has been maintaining alliances. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is supposedly stronger and more united than at any point since the Cold War. But unity within NATO alone isn’t enough to secure American interests in Europe.

The key to European security is the relationship between the European powers and Russia. This makes Ukraine central. It’s the largest wholly European country by territory, has a population of about 38 million, is important to global production of food, oil and fertilizer, and dominates the Black Sea’s northern coastline. A Russia-controlled Ukraine would provide the Kremlin with crucial resources, population and territory. Combined with Russian dominance over Belarus, probable control over

Moldova, and de facto control of Georgia, this political-economic unit would be strong enough to take on the U.S. and Europe in a protracted contest of wills. If Russia gains control of the Danube River's mouth, it could isolate NATO's vulnerable Black Sea members. The U.S. thus has a national interest in Ukrainian victory.

The Middle East is more complex. Iran seeks to dominate the region and lead a powerful Islamist coalition. The Gulf states have decided to sit on the sidelines, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ending direct competition for regional power with Iran last year. As a result, the Iran-Israel antagonism is central to the region's destiny. Iranian domination of the Middle East would create a great U.S. power rival on the Eurasian landmass. The U.S. thus has a national interest in Israeli victory.

Yet America refuses to grasp what victory might mean for its allies, or to help create the conditions where victory can be achieved.

In Europe the Biden administration pursues an untenable policy paradox. On the one hand, the White House drip-feeds aid to Ukraine; on the other, it restricts how Ukraine can attack Russia. This forces Ukraine to fight a brutal conflict. Washington also refuses to discuss tangible security guarantees, including NATO membership, with Kyiv. Ukraine gains nothing in talks with Russia—or even in floating concessions on territory or alliance memberships—since the U.S. hasn't provided long-term support for negotiations.

U.S. constraints, rather than Kyiv's lack of imagination or political malpractice, have prevented Ukraine from articulating a theory of victory.

In the Middle East, the Biden administration insists on a similar paradox. It provides materiel to Israel. But it demands that Israel accept a cease-fire in Gaza—portrayed as temporary, but inevitably permanent, until Hamas violates it again—without attempting to solve Israel's core security issue or Iran's growing power and malign intentions.

As a result, Israel is frozen. Because of Iranian defensive capacity and U.S. restraints, Israel can't strike Iran directly apart from targeted assassinations. And it has been restrained from eliminating the threat on its northern border because of American

fear of escalation. But a cease-fire would be capitulation, as it would be made on Hamas's terms: withdrawal from Gaza, acceptance of Hamas expansion into the West Bank, and permanent Hezbollah threats from the north.

As with Ukraine, U.S. constraints have prevented Israel from articulating a theory of victory.

The U.S. clearly has an alliance-management problem. Washington apparently hasn't reviewed its regional interests in Europe or the Middle East, even after its intelligence failures in February 2022 and October 2023. Nor has it sought to assuage Israeli or Ukrainian concerns of short-term vulnerability or long-term isolation.

Ukraine and Israel can articulate remarkably similar theories of victory. Both Israel and Ukraine must outlast their adversaries and demonstrate their resolve to fight a long, brutal contest. During this contest, they must impose costs on their adversaries, making the price of offensive warfare prohibitive. Ultimate security arrangements and borders are secondary; strategic exhaustion is the only way to win a great-power war.

The U.S. must also demonstrate its ability to endure and sustain a long war. Public condemnations of Russia, Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah and insistence that the U.S. will support Ukraine "as long as it takes" are no substitute for tangible actions toward those ends. Iran and Russia are pursuing strategies of exhaustion because they believe the U.S. will eventually break.

Mr. Cropsey is president of the Yorktown Institute. He served as a naval officer and as a deputy undersecretary of the Navy and is author of "Mayday" and "Seablindness."
Mr. Halen is a senior fellow at Yorktown.