

Opinion – Biden Should Visit Moldova

Written by Wilder Alejandro Sánchez

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WILDER ALEJANDRO SÁNCHEZ, NOV 13 2023

Several global crises will keep the United States government busy throughout 2024, such as the war in Ukraine, the war between Israel and Hamas, and ongoing tensions with China. Domestically, 2024 is an election year, with Joe Biden's Republican opponent yet to be determined. While addressing these crises and domestic developments, Washington must simultaneously reinforce partnerships with erstwhile peripheral countries whose relevance to global affairs has grown in recent years—for example, the Republic of Moldova. While 2024 will be a hectic year, a historic visit by President Biden to Moldova's capital, Chisinau, is advisable.

Washington and Chisinau have had generally cordial but not relations since the country obtained its independence in the early 1990s. For example, Washington is one of the five participants of the 5+2 initiative to resolve Moldova's "frozen conflict" with the separatist region Transnistria. As a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Washington and Europe commenced an eager engagement with Moldova, currently led by pro-Europe President Maia Sandu. In April 2022, just two months after the war in Ukraine started, Washington and Chisinau relaunched the US-Moldova Strategic Dialogue. A more recent Dialogue occurred in March 2023 in Chisinau; the joint statement highlights that Washington "stands together with Moldova by supporting its long-term democratic and economic reform efforts, as well as its sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Washington's support for Chisinau includes financial support. The 2023 Dialogue explains, "since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the United States has made available nearly \$320 million in new economic, security, and humanitarian assistance to help Moldova manage these impacts of the war." Financial assistance is necessary for Moldova's energy security; the country has historically depended on energy deliveries from Russia's Gazprom and is currently diversifying its energy suppliers.

In August, Washington transferred light weapons (machine guns, unmanned aerial vehicles, and personal protection equipment) to the Moldovan military. A Special Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) and the US North Carolina National Guard have helped the Moldovan armed forces improve their capabilities and training to become a more professional army by 2030. In 2023, the North Carolina NG and the Moldovan armed forces celebrated three decades of close collaboration via the US National Guard's State Partnership Program. Meanwhile, the Moldovan Ministry of Defense explained in October how an SFAB is training the "Stefan cel Mare" Motorized Infantry Brigade to improve the latter's capabilities.

Moldova has a small military, particularly compared to other armed forces in the region, with a limited defense budget, and Article 11 of the constitution bans it from entering into military alliances. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Defense aims for the armed forces to become more well-prepared and capable, and the US military is an essential partner in achieving this objective.

The US Congressional Research Service notes that the US Department of the Treasury has imposed sanctions on some Moldovan citizens due to their relations with Moscow, including the oligarch and politician Ilan Shor, his now-banned Shor Party, "and other individuals for 'acting as instruments' of Russia's efforts to destabilize Moldova and 'return [it] to Russia's sphere of influence.'" Vladimir Plahotniuc, the former leader of the Democratic Party, which governed Moldova from 2016 to 2019, is now under US sanctions.

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Since the war commenced, Sandu has become somewhat of a traveling president: she routinely visits European capitals or welcomes regional heads of state to increase Moldova's partnerships, trade, and support from European neighbors. Recent meetings include Portugal's President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, the President of the Swiss Confederation Alain Berset, and the European Commission's President Ursula von der Leyen, apart from her meetings during the United Nations General Assembly in September. In June, Moldova also hosted the second summit of the European Political Community (EPC).

Moldova-US high-level meetings have also occurred. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Moldova in March 2022, and he also met with then-Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita in August 2022 in Washington, DC. USAID Administrator Samantha Power visited the country shortly after the war commenced to understand the influx of Ukrainian refugees. Moreover, President Sandu met with Vice-President Kamala Harris in December 2022 in Washington, DC. She also met President Biden in February 2023, during a conference in Warsaw, and at the UN General Assembly in New York in September. During the Warsaw meeting, President Sandu reportedly invited President Biden to "revisit" Moldova, as he visited the country in 2011 as Vice President. The US President should accept that offer.

As the War in Ukraine approaches its second anniversary, a resolution is not in sight. The Moldovan government is very aware of the Russian government's interests in bringing Moldova (a former member of the Soviet Union) back to Moscow's sphere of influence and control. Chisinau has warned about Moscow attempting to organize a coup against President Sandu. Moreover, pro-Russia political parties have been banned, and Chisinau has even established an anti-disinformation center. In early November, the EU Commission recommended that accession negotiations begin with Moldova (and Ukraine), a huge diplomatic victory for Moldova and Sandu's administration.

The 2022 US National Security Strategy mentioned the importance of Ukraine's Western neighbor's stability and prosperity. Though Moldova is only mentioned once in the 48-page document, Chisinau is discussed positively. "We will support the European aspirations of Georgia and Moldova and their commitment to important institutional reforms," explains the Strategy.

US members of Congress have also pushed for legislation to strengthen bilateral relations. In August, Representatives Deborah Ross (NC-02) and Mike Lawler (NY-17) introduced the *US-Moldova Defense Partnership Act* to help Moldova modernize its armed forces. "The bill directs the State Department to maximize funding available to Moldova through the European Recapitalization Incentive Program to assist the country in meeting its defense needs and to support its transition away from Russian-produced military equipment," explains the bill. As this analysis has highlighted, US-Moldovan relations are evolving, particularly in areas like "justice sector and anti-corruption reforms, human rights, promoting a pluralistic media environment and rights-respecting media policies to counter disinformation, energy diversification and resilience, defense modernization and transformation," according to the joint statement issued after the March 2023 Strategic Dialogue.

What also needs to occur is a US presidential visit to Chisinau, a symbolic but meaningful example of how all branches of the US government, including the executive, support Moldova's problematic situation and efforts to develop, strengthen itself, and achieve EU membership. President Biden does not have to visit Chisinau solely to meet with President Sandu; he can take the opportunity to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other heads of state of the Greater Black Sea region. A potential "Declaration of Chisinau" about US-Moldova or US-Black Sea relations would increase the little country's international image. Such a visit would also be timely, as Moldova is scheduled for presidential elections in late 2024. President Sandu could use more diplomatic victories to convince her population to support her, not a pro-Moscow party.

Finally, if a Biden visit does occur, we can expect Moscow and pro-Moscow organizations in Moldova to carry out a disinformation campaign about the objectives of this hypothetical visit. A recent analysis by the Irregular Warfare Initiative by Dr. Olga Raluca Chiriac and Dr. Dan Dungaciu explains how the "Russian [irregular warfare] playbook that focuses on people, stokes social divisiveness, exacerbates identity politics, and drives legal expedencies will attain Russian goals if left unchecked." Thus, a US presidential visit to Chisinau to strengthen bilateral ties will be used to disinform the Moldovan population, promoting lies about Western imperialism, the militarization of Moldova or

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the “Romanization” of the country, to agitate Moldovans (including Gagauzia and the separatist Transnistria region). If President Biden visits Chisinau, the Moldovan government must have a media strategy to counter disinformation.

A consequence of the war in Ukraine has been a significant increase in the Republic of Moldova’s international image. Led by President Sandu, the small European state has resisted pressure from Moscow and carried out a foreign policy aimed at becoming a member of the European Union. Bilateral relations between Washington and Chisinau have been generally cordial since Moldova became independent in the early 1990s. The War has fomented closer ties, including high-level meetings, defense cooperation, and critical financial assistance. President Biden’s visit to Chisinau can take bilateral relations to a well-deserved next level.

About the author:

Wilder Alejandro Sánchez is president of Second Floor Strategies, a consulting firm in Washington, D.C. He is an analyst who monitors defense, geopolitical, and trade issues across the Western Hemisphere, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. He has monitored Moldovan affairs for over a decade.