

Opinion **US foreign policy**

America's brittle consensus on Ukraine

Pressure on Biden to negotiate with Putin is bound to grow

EDWARD LUCE



Ukraine supporters march in Washington, where the White House says it will be Kyiv's choice how the war ends — which will be true until it is not © Nathan Posner/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Edward Luce YESTERDAY

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“Diplomacy” is a taboo word in American politics right now. The speed at which progressive Democrats this week disowned their call for Joe Biden to talk to Russia is testament to that. Only Ukraine can decide when and how this war will end, the lawmakers insisted. The group was clearly shell-shocked by the savagery of condemnation from their own side.

Yet they were guilty only of speaking out too soon. Wars end in one of two ways: with the unconditional surrender of one party or in a negotiated settlement. As the world's equal largest nuclear power, Russia's full capitulation is almost unimaginable. That means the west and Ukraine will eventually have to negotiate an end to this war. That moment has not arrived. But it is probably nearer than most people think.

It would be madness to open ceasefire talks with Vladimir Putin at a time when Ukrainians are recapturing territory. Today's urgency is for the west to give Ukraine enough firepower to regain Kherson and what they can of the Donbas before winter. The stronger Ukraine's military position next spring, the likelier Putin's “partial mobilisation” will fail to reverse the war's direction.

But the situation on the ground — the American ground. that is — will have changed a

lot between now and then. Two big factors will weigh on when Biden will try to bring this war to an end. The first is Republicans' probable capture of one or both chambers of Congress in midterm elections in two weeks. Kevin McCarthy, the likely next Speaker of the House of Representatives, [has warned](#) that Republicans will not provide a "blank cheque" for Ukraine's self-defence.

Fifty-seven House Republicans and 11 senators voted against the \$40bn Ukraine aid package earlier this year. That money is depleting fast. In the Republican quest to make a scorched earth of Biden's presidency nothing will be sacrosanct, including Ukraine's military pipeline. The pro-Putin wing of the Republican party remains a minority. But almost every Republican will back McCarthy's likely efforts to impeach Biden and hold the US debt ceiling hostage to their demands. It is naive to assume the Ukraine consensus would survive what both US parties see as an existential battle for the republic.

The second is that the US will be entering a recession. Economists are virtually unanimous that America will not escape that fate in 2023. This will pose an acute threat to Biden's — or to another Democratic nominee's — chances of defeating Donald Trump, or a Trump-like Republican, in 2024. Congressional Republicans will be working in tandem with the recession to darken Biden's electoral clouds. As the 2024 reckoning looms, Ukraine's fate will take a back seat to America's.

The imperatives confronting Ukraine and Biden are still the same. The faster Ukraine can roll back Russia's military, the better for everyone. Biden and the US's allies still have a window to tilt the advantage further in Ukraine's favour. But American and Ukrainian interests will diverge as 2024 looms. Critics of the US-led coalition say they are fighting Russia down to the last Ukrainian. Yet as both paymaster and quartermaster, America's support is indispensable. Fiscal metrics do not capture the real cost of a war that is stoking the inflation that is so harmful to Democratic prospects. The White House maintains it will be Ukraine's choice how this war comes to an end. That will be true until the moment it is not.

The question remains why Democrats are so quick to shut down debate in their ranks. The intensity of liberal hawkishness has caught even the White House by surprise. The answer has as much to do with the US republic's uncertain future as with Russia's threat to European peace. These spectres are stamped with the faces of Trump and Putin. Biden framed his democracy versus autocracy line on the campaign trail to highlight Trump's threat to US democracy. Trump's "semi-fascist" leanings (in Biden's words) are even more menacing today than they were when he lost the election. There are hundreds of Republicans on the ballot who back Trump's claim

election. There are hundreds of Republicans on the ballot who back Trump's claim that Biden stole the presidency.

The return of Trump in 2024 would be Putin's ultimate get out of jail free card. In the past eight months, Putin has united the west and forged a lasting sense of Ukrainian nationhood. His ineptitude has been epic. But peak western unity has probably been reached. Democracy's biggest existential stakes are still in the US. In addition to surrender or deal, war has a third outcome — indefinite suspension. The hotter [America's politics](#) becomes, the greater the temptation to freeze Ukraine's.

edward.luce@ft.com

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