

Opinion **US foreign policy**

## The return of American isolationism

Ousting of Kevin McCarthy as Republican speaker is bad news for Ukraine

**EDWARD LUCE**



The removal of Kevin McCarthy and Republicans' continued support for Donald Trump puts support for Ukraine at risk © FT montage/Reuters/Getty Images/AP

**Edward Luce** YESTERDAY

Volodymyr Zelenskyy says there is no “expiration date” on Ukraine’s willingness to fight Russia. But it is becoming increasingly hard to ignore the potential shelf life of America’s support for his cause.

Matt Gaetz, the ultra-Maga lawmaker who led the move on Tuesday to eject Kevin McCarthy as Republican Speaker, cited an alleged secret side deal McCarthy made with Joe Biden to keep funding Ukraine. This was in spite of the fact that McCarthy had struck \$6bn in Ukrainian aid from last weekend’s deal to keep the US government open. It capped a bleak few days for Zelenskyy. Even assuming the next Speaker is sympathetic to Ukraine, they would be in an even weaker position than McCarthy.

The Republican party has been moving in Russia’s direction for a while. More than eight in 10 Republican voters now [support candidates](#) — Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy — who would sever aid to Ukraine. Roughly half of Americans likewise want to pull the plug. For the first time since the 1920s, Americans are likely to be given the option next year of putting an isolationist in the White House. That would be a fateful choice.

The “isolationist” label is often misused. It does not automatically mean neutrality in

fights between foreigners, though that sentiment was a feature of the US republic at its birth. It can also mean bias towards one side. Charles Lindbergh, who headed the America First Committee in the early stages of the second world war, made his sympathies for Nazi Germany plain. All kinds of supporters — pacifists, big business and anti-Semites — flocked to his banner.

Today's rising isolationism is not about even-handedness between Russia and Ukraine; its driving force comes from [Republicans](#) in sympathy with Russia's Vladimir Putin. The others are getting sidelined or pushed out. In an effort to keep his job, McCarthy refused Zelenskyy's request to address Congress when he was in Washington two weeks ago. Last Saturday, Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate leader, tried to pass a separate bill that would have reinstated the Ukrainian funding. He was blocked by Republican colleagues.

America's two parties broadly agree that China poses the main challenge to US hegemony. Russia, however, is a real-time arsonist in the western neighbourhood. US isolationism's roots were about avoiding entanglements with Europe. It did not have much to say about the rest of the world. Lindbergh volunteered in the Pacific after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. The country's postwar isolationists, led by Senator Robert Taft, opposed Nato's creation in 1949 yet were outraged by America's failure the same year to stop China's communist revolution. "Who lost China?" was an isolationist rallying cry. A similar pattern is visible today. Isolationist Republicans say the Ukraine war is diverting America's focus from the true threat in China. Ramaswamy refers to Zelenskyy as "their Pope" — pointing at pro-Ukraine colleagues. Beijing, on the other hand, wants to turn Americans into "Chinese serfs".

The imminent threat assessment points to Moscow. Putin has been explicit about his [plans to re-establish the \*russky mir\* \(Russian world\)](#). He dismembered Georgia in 2008, seized Crimea in 2014, launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and then annexed four Ukrainian regions. The last time Chinese forces invaded another country was Vietnam in 1979; it went badly. Today's most overblown fears about China's designs sound more like a replay of the 1950s McCarthyite "red scare" than a balanced appraisal of America's current risks.

History tells us that isolationists usually fail. But they can alter its course for key stretches of time. The Senate defeat of Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations in 1920 removed America from Europe's chessboard for two decades. Regimes that posed deep threats to America filled the vacuum. Then, like today, Americans understandably thought that Europe should put its own house in order. America has supplied the lion's share of western equipment and intelligence to Ukraine. Few.

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however, would bet on Europe stepping into an isolationist America's shoes.

To keep the US in the game, Biden must somehow wangle enough Republican votes in the coming weeks to replenish [Ukrainian funding](#). The absence of a big Ukrainian military breakthrough makes his job that much harder. So does the fact that the Maga base nowadays demonises Zelenskyy almost as much as it does George Soros. Then there is next year's presidential election. An America Firster in the White House could sink Ukraine's prospects. Trump, as ever, is the Hail Mary that Putin is seeking.

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