

Opinion **Geopolitics**

America and a crumbling global order

Political division and turmoil at home are undermining US leadership overseas

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How many international conflicts can one superpower handle at the same time? The Biden administration is currently trying to deal with wars in the Middle East and Europe, while preparing for a surge in tensions between China and Taiwan.

All this is taking place under the lengthening shadow of Donald Trump. His possible return to the White House poses profound questions about the future of US democracy and the country's role in the world.

The combination of all these events is creating a palpable sense of tension and foreboding in government offices in Washington. It is not just the sheer number of crises coming at the Biden administration, but the fact that many are heading in the wrong direction — the [wars in Ukraine](#) and the Middle East, for example. And the polls look bad for Biden.

The [foreign crises](#) could come to a head quite fast. “The next three months could determine the next few years,” is how one senior US official puts it. A prominent Democrat worries that “by January, we could be talking about how Joe Biden lost Ukraine”.

New funding for the Ukrainian military and its civilian institutions is [stuck in Congress](#). The Biden administration seems confident that money for Kyiv will

ultimately be agreed. But if financial assistance is not passed before the end of the year, Ukraine could feel the effects on the battlefield within weeks.

Attempts to agree a fresh package of EU money for Ukraine are also stalled by [wrangling](#) in Brussels. Senior US military officials are warning Congress that, if funding for the country is cut and Putin makes substantial progress in the war as a result, Russia could be threatening the Baltic states by the end of 2024.

In the coming weeks, Russia is [expected](#) to launch an intense bout of attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure in the hope of crippling the country's power supply and winter heating. Moscow tried the same thing last winter and failed. But the Russians now have many more drones and missiles, thanks to Iran, North Korea and ramped-up domestic production. Ukrainian air defences are looking threadbare in places and could be overwhelmed.

The precariousness of Ukraine's situation is getting less attention than it should because of the Middle East. The Biden administration is paying a heavy political price, at home and abroad, for its support for Israel. The US is now putting public [pressure](#) on Israel to change its military tactics in Gaza and to kill fewer Palestinian civilians.

But American concerns extend well beyond Gaza. The Biden administration still feels that it is dangerously close to a wider regional war that would drag in the US. [Attacks](#) on shipping by the Houthis, an Iran-backed militia in Yemen, might create the incident that leads to escalation.

There are also powerful voices in Israel who argue that, after the October 7 terror attacks, Israel can no longer tolerate the presence of Hizbollah, another heavily armed Iran-backed militia, on its northern border. But a war between Israel and Hizbollah could be much more intense than a conflict with Hamas.

There is some resentment in Washington that Israel is insisting it will make its own decisions about military operations, while relying on US muscle in the background. "The Israelis are playing with house money," as one US official puts it. But, after October 7, there remains a deep reluctance to put serious pressure on Israel to change course.

Dispatching American aircraft carriers and missile defence systems to the Middle East means that they are not available for other trouble spots. That has implications not just for Ukraine but also for east Asia.

The current expectation in Washington is that the Taiwanese presidential election on

January 13 will be won by [Lai Ching-te](#), who is regarded in Beijing as a dangerous separatist. If China responds to a Lai victory with threatening displays of military strength, that could easily provoke a new crisis.

There is cautious optimism that Beijing's initial response to a victory by Lai will concentrate on economic and political pressure. But, over the course of the year, China could take its military intimidation of Taiwan to new levels, particularly if the US looks distracted and weakened by events in Ukraine and the Middle East.

The fact that China will be closely watching Ukraine and Gaza illustrates the linked nature of all these crises. Western officials believe Russia, China, Iran and North Korea are working together much more closely than before. The Russians are now dependent on Chinese economic support and are almost unrestrained in military collaboration with North Korea and Iran.

With the US presidential election less than a year away, all these international crises feed into American politics. Trump will take every opportunity to accuse Biden of presiding over an era of weakness and retreat, citing Afghanistan, Ukraine, Gaza and the Taiwan Strait.

A chaotic and divisive US election — with Trump as the central figure — will contribute powerfully to that impression of US weakness and decline. China, Russia and Iran will relish asking how America can promise to defend democracies overseas, when its own democracy is in so much trouble at home. Unfortunately, it is a good question.

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