

## **The Future of American Aid to Ukraine**

### **I. Overview**

The present paper focuses on the indispensable nature of the US military and financial aid to Ukraine during the full-on-invasion stage of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Later on, it describes the trends in American politics which threaten the continuation of American aid to Ukraine. It concludes by emphasizing the need for a new European defense structure and a substantially larger EU financial engagement in the conflict. The conclusions of the present policy paper can be summarized as follows:

- The USA has been the largest military contributor to Ukraine so far. Without its aid, it is improbable that Ukraine would have been able to mount such a resolute resistance to Russia's invasion.
- The current dispute in the United States Senate concerning the billions of dollars in aid to Israel and Ukraine will likely be resolved in 2024 at the price of Democrat concessions.
- In the future the USA will be less involved in Europe and more hawkish in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific, regardless of the results in the 2024 United States presidential election.
- Countries in Europe need to take urgent action towards building up their defense forces and cyber security networks, while increasing energy independence and aid to Ukraine.

### **II. The essence of the problem**

#### **1. The importance of foreign supplies to the Ukrainian war effort**

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was met with fierce Ukrainian resistance. From the very onset of the war, the Western world rallied up support for Ukraine by providing diplomatic pressure, humanitarian aid, financial aid and arms while targeting Russia's ability to finance the war by imposing a variety of sanctions. Without this aid it is unlikely that Kyiv would have been able to hold the aggression, let alone inflict casualties to Russia of that magnitude.

During the early months of fighting, the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) managed to halt and partially repulse the initial Russian attack. Russian forces, however, gained ground in the southern regions of Ukraine and created a much-needed land-bridge to annexed Crimea. 2023 saw the pace of the war change and no major alterations occurred on the fronts. The armed confrontation turned into a war of attrition with both parties becoming increasingly exhausted from material and personnel losses.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates vary, but most agree that both sides lost thousands of pieces of equipment and sustained hundreds of thousands of casualties.

Given the circumstances, Western aid is a *conditio sine qua non* for the Ukrainians. Without NATO weapons, troop training, and aid they would find themselves mismatched due to Russian numerical superiority. Financial contributions have been equally as important to Kyiv, as the expected budget deficit for the fiscal year 2024 is a staggering \$42 billion, owing to a 22% of GDP defense bill.<sup>2</sup>

From the point of view of the Moscow, the so called ‘Ukraine fatigue’ could be the only viable exit option. Russia has found itself stuck in an expensive military quagmire with no sight of tactical victory. In the meantime, sanctions strangle its economy, casualties rise and AFU receives more weapons. For that reason, it has engaged in a hybrid strategy with a goal of diminishing Western support for Ukraine with its eyes on the 2024 U.S. presidential election.

## **2. The size of the American aid.**

The most generous donor in terms of military aid has, by far, been the USA with \$43.9 billion in aid to Ukraine since Jan. 2022.<sup>3</sup> With its contribution the USA outpaces the arms supplies of Germany, the EU institutions, the UK and Canada combined.<sup>4</sup> Cash-wise the USA has provided some significant \$25 billion.<sup>5</sup> For comparison, the Cold War American assistance to the Afghani mujahedeen against the Soviets amounted to \$3.2 billion.<sup>6</sup>

The combined American aid to Ukraine since 2022 comes out at about \$70 billion. This colossal figure has been castigated by certain Republican legislators, who seek to discredit the Biden Administration in an attempt to win the White House in 2024 and gain favor with their own voter base.

## **III. The near future of American aid**

Republican political backlash has led to a conundrum in the Senate on the latest American foreign aid bill. The total cost of Biden’s funding request is pegged at just over \$110 billion<sup>7</sup> and all Republican senators voted ‘no’, with the majority of them citing the concerning situation in the Mexican border. They make the argument that it is senseless for the USA to send such a sum in foreign aid with thousands of illegal border crossings occurring each day, accompanied by a dramatic rise in fentanyl trafficking. US Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) summed up his party’s position – no foreign aid bill until measures are taken to restrict Mexican

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Finance of Ukraine, 09 Nov 2023, *Parliament of Ukraine adopts State Budget for 2024*, accessed 22.12.2023, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/verkhovna-rada-ukrainy-pryiniiala-derzhbiudzhzet-na-2024-rik>;

<sup>3</sup> Trebesch et al. (2023) ‘The Ukraine Tracker’ Kiel Institute for the World Economy

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Feifer, G. *The Great Gamble. The Soviet War in Afghanistan*. HarperCollins e-books. 2009. p.131  
\$3.2 billion amounts to approx. \$9.9 billion adjusted for inflation (December 2023)

<sup>7</sup> \$61 billion of that sum will be allocated for Ukraine.

border crossings.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, a lot of Republican legislators actually support aid to Ukraine, as shown by their media statements. In the end, a deal will likely be reached after Democrat concessions on the Mexican border issue are made, as senators from both sides claim progress on the negotiations. This, however, is not expected to happen until early next year, which will gravely endanger Ukraine on the battlefield.<sup>9</sup> Matters are made worse by European leaders also failing to agree on a \$54 billion package for Ukraine, after a veto by Hungary.

It is important to note that this particular tactic – political blackmail in Congress – is nothing new in American politics. Republican legislators managed to force major concessions out of their Democrat counterparts in the debt-ceiling deal – a cap on non-defense spending in 2024 and 1% increase in 2025. What connects the foreign aid bill and the debt-ceiling bill is that they have been useful tools for Republicans to push their legislative partisan interests, while mobilizing their voter base for the coming elections.

On the subject of elections, Former President Donald Trump seems to be the evident Republican candidate for the presidential battle in 2024, as the gap between him and Florida governor Ron DeSantis increasingly widens.<sup>10</sup> As of Dec 2023, polls show that Trump also holds an advantage against Biden.<sup>11</sup> This raises the question – what would happen to the aid for Ukraine should Trump be inaugurated again?

The former president has taken his trademark approach by claiming that he would end the war in Ukraine ‘*in 24 hours of being elected*’, which has concerned many, who fear Trump would force Ukraine to accept the current territorial *status quo*.

While some assume that the statement is merely a part of Trump’s anti-establishment rhetoric, a dangerous precedent has been set in Trump’s withdrawal from Afghanistan<sup>12</sup> and Syria, which left regional American allies in shambles. In regard to Ukraine, a leaked phone call showed Trump pressure Zelenskyy into investigating the Biden family while holding aid as a bargaining chip. Trump did actually provide weapons for Ukraine during his presidency, but only after being

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<sup>8</sup> Republican leader Mitch McConnell News Room, 14.12.2023, *Senate Cannot Claim To Address National Security Without Restoring Border Security*, accessed 22.12.2023, <https://www.republicanleader.senate.gov/newsroom/remarks/senate-cannot-claim-to-address-national-security-without-restoring-border-security>

<sup>9</sup> The White House Briefing Room, 04.12.2023, *Letter to Congressional Leadership Regarding the Need for Urgent Action to Support Ukraine’s Defense*, accessed 22.12.2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2023/12/04/letter-to-congressional-leadership-regarding-the-need-for-urgent-action-to-support-ukraines-defense/>

<sup>10</sup> FiveThirtyEight Interactives Latest Polls, last updated 21.12.2023, accessed 22.12.2023, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/2024/national/>

<sup>11</sup> FiveThirtyEight Interactives Latest Polls, last updated 21.12.2023, accessed 22.12.2023, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-general/2024/national/>

<sup>12</sup> The final troop withdrawal occurred during the Biden presidency, but by 2021 the Trump administration had reduced the troops to 2,500 – the lowest number since 2001.

convinced by his advisors. When he took hard stances against American adversaries, it was against Beijing and Teheran, and not Moscow. This tendency will probably continue in the case of a new Trump presidency, owing to the general electoral attitude of his support base.<sup>13</sup>

Even though Trump is notorious for being unpredictable, the most realistic scenario seems to be one in which support for Ukraine diminishes in the case of a Republican win in 2024. A strong bipartisan effort in Congress could circumvent Trump's reluctance to aid Ukraine, but that seems more and more unfeasible in light of the ongoing process of polarization of American politics.

#### **IV. American aid in the years ahead**

The Russian Federation is a foremost and direct concern for European security. No matter who is elected U.S. president in 2024, there are a few ongoing trends in American politics, which European nations should beware of in the coming years.

The focus of American military and financial might has shifted towards the People's Republic of China (PRC). The American 2022 National Defense Strategy recognized the PRC as the 'most comprehensive and serious challenge to US national security'.<sup>14</sup> Although the same document characterized Russia as an 'acute threat'<sup>15</sup> funds will naturally be relocated in the Indo-Pacific. The USA will seek to create new alliances and bolster existing ones for the sake of creating an anti-China coalition. Recent Chinese hostilities against Taiwan will only accelerate this process. Other NATO allies in the regions will understandably also shift focus.

In the Middle East, the Israeli-Iranian proxy conflict is also intensifying. The Israeli army intervened in Gaza with its ground force while the risk of armed confrontations with other pro-Iran proxies remains. As one of the most vital US allies on the globe, Israel is likely to receive increasing amounts of aid from D.C.

There is an all-time high level of distrust and unfavorable views between Republicans and Democrats in America.<sup>16</sup> This major gap can only translate into more friction between the parties in Congress and all across the political space. This means that bipartisan cooperation will become an increasingly rare sight.

The presented combination of factors shows no bright future for future US aid to Europe and Ukraine. Even though the USA manifestly recognizes Russia as a threat, other pressing needs

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<sup>13</sup> Andy Cerda, Pew Research, 08.12.2023, *About half of Republicans now say the U.S. is providing too much aid to Ukraine*, accessed 22.12.2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/12/08/about-half-of-republicans-now-say-the-us-is-providing-too-much-aid-to-ukraine/>

<sup>14</sup> United States Department of Defense, 27.10.2023, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, accessed 22.12.2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> The Economist, 17.08.2022, *How Democrats and Republicans See Each Other*, accessed 22.12.2023, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/08/17/how-democrats-and-republicans-see-each-other>

shift its focus away from the Old Continent. Meanwhile, European nations do not seem to be preparing for a change in American foreign policy as only six EU member-states spent more than 2% of GDP on defense in 2021.<sup>17</sup>

## **V. Final thoughts**

European overreliance on the USA for protection seems to have finally shown its flaws. American detachment from the Old Continent, continuous European energy dependence from Russia and Kremlin's hybrid warfare campaigns will create a perfect storm for European security which could very well turn out to be an insurmountable challenge.

To protect itself from Russian hybrid aggression Europe needs to urgently increase military spending, create a common security network, accelerate aid to Ukraine before American support begins to dwindle and facilitate work towards a higher-degree of energy independence. There is no arguing that this will come at a high monetary cost. A Russian win in Ukraine, however, is a worst-case scenario for the security of the continent, as this will only embolden future Russian hybrid aggression with Moscow's grand idea being the revision of the post-Cold war *status quo*. With that being said, the price for guaranteeing security shall be paid sooner, rather than later.

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<sup>17</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute ( SIPRI ), *World Bank Data - Military expenditure (% of GDP) – European Union*, accessed 22.12.2023. – <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=EU>