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No. 017/2024 dated 13 February 2024

US Faces Serious Security and Strategic Risks if It Abandons Ukraine

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SYNOPSIS

*In the United States, Republicans have held up crucial aid to Ukraine for months while calling for border security reforms, ostensibly aiming to use these issues against President Joe Biden in the November election. While presidential candidates have leveraged foreign policy crises for their own ends in past races, **KEVIN CHEN XIAN AN** argues that gambling with the fate of Ukraine could create serious security and strategic risks for the United States.*

COMMENTARY

It took months for the US Senate to negotiate a national security deal that would address southern border security, aid for Ukraine, and other critical issues, and less than a day for Republicans to effectively bury it.

Since mid-2023, Republicans have demanded that aid for Ukraine be tied to border security measures as border crossings hit a record high. Senate Democrats have agreed to these demands. A US\$188 billion Senate bill, unveiled in early February 2023, would have [allocated](#) US\$20.23 billion for border security measures and limited the number of migrants entering the United States. It would also have included US\$60.1 billion in aid for Ukraine, US\$14.1 billion in security assistance for Israel, US\$10 billion for humanitarian assistance for civilians in conflict zones, and US\$4.8 billion to support Indo-Pacific partners against an assertive China.

However, US House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) declared that the Senate bill would be “dead on arrival” if it reaches the House, saying that it does not do enough

to address border issues. Unsettled by a chorus of similar statements from House Republicans, Senate Republicans turned against the bipartisan bill, preventing its passage. The Senate has since advanced a US\$95 billion aid package for Ukraine and Israel, but its future remains uncertain.

Speaker Johnson's rejection of the bill has been [described](#) as a plan by supporters of former President Donald Trump to kill two birds with one stone. The lack of a border security deal would prevent President Joe Biden from addressing a key issue in an election year, while the blocked aid to Ukraine could tarnish one of his key foreign policy successes.

This is not the first time American politicians have used foreign policy as a political tool in an election year, but the risks to American security and strategy have never been higher. Even if the revised aid deal is passed, one of America's main political parties has shown that it is willing to prioritise political gain over European security. Pro-Trump Republicans may triumph in the November election but at a heavy price.



A mobile fire unit from the National Guard of Ukraine shooting at Russian drones, January 2024. In the United States, opposition from House Republicans has delayed the passage of crucial aid for Ukraine. Yet, abandoning Ukraine would create serious security and strategic risks for the United States, regardless of which political party triumphs in the November election. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Not a New Occurrence

Two presidential candidates have been accused of leveraging or worsening foreign policy crises to benefit their election campaigns: Richard Nixon in 1968, and Ronald Reagan in 1980.

Nixon was recorded [giving instructions](#) to Anna Chennault, a well-connected Republican fundraiser, to persuade South Vietnamese leaders to delay a peace deal until after the 1968 election. The Chennault Affair [ultimately thwarted](#) then-President

Lyndon B. Johnson's efforts to reach a peace deal, contributing to the defeat of Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey.

Twelve years later, a similar situation unfolded as 52 Americans were held captive in Iran. While then-President Jimmy Carter endeavoured to negotiate their release, associates of Ronald Reagan embarked on a Middle Eastern tour with a [message for Iranian leaders](#): to not release the hostages before the election. The continued plight of the hostages contributed to Reagan's electoral victory.

These past cases showcased the lengths that presidential candidates will go to secure victory.

A Mistake of "Historic Proportions"

Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns recently [warned](#) that it would be an "own goal of historic proportions" for the United States to abandon Ukraine. On one hand, he was speaking from the perspective of the relatively low cost of aiding Ukraine, at less than 5% of the US defence budget, considering the damage they have inflicted on Russian forces. On the other hand, he hinted at serious security and strategic risks the United States could face if it abandons Ukraine.

As European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell said, Europe's ["own security is at stake"](#) in Ukraine. Observers have [warned](#) that not only would a defeated Ukraine create a serious refugee crisis for Europe, but a triumphant President Vladimir Putin would likely be emboldened to attack other European countries. This would draw the United States into a broader conflict in Europe, and if Washington declines to intervene, it will call into question the very foundation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

As it stands, the outlook on Ukraine appears grim. With the United States [running out](#) of approved financial aid for Ukraine in January 2024, the [artillery gap](#) between Ukrainian and Russian forces has worsened. Russian forces have slowly made inroads into the town of Avdiivka despite punishing losses, while [massing tanks](#) and artillery to retake Kharkhiv. Ukraine is putting up fierce resistance, but its situation has been described as ["extremely serious"](#).

Even if Ukraine fights Russia to a stalemate, the continued delay in aid to Ukraine poses broader strategic risks for US credibility. As Burns [noted](#), "No one is watching US support for Ukraine more closely than Chinese leaders."

Though the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 was rife with tactical mistakes, experts [generally agreed](#) with its strategic logic. A continued slowdown of [Western aid](#) in Ukraine, however, would reinforce a narrative of American weakness. Adversaries may interpret this as a perfect moment to pursue their own aggressive agendas, adding to a growing list of crises from the Red Sea to the Taiwan Strait. Partners and allies from Europe to the Indo-Pacific would be forced to reassess whether American support can be counted on in a crisis, or if it will wilt under political pressure at home.

Pro-Trump Republicans could reclaim the White House by sabotaging the Biden administration's foreign policy. But regardless of who wins the November election, the 2025 world order may not be so accommodating towards US security engagement or interests.

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