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# country report

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## Ukraine and Israel: International Crises in the Election Campaign of a War-Weary USA

An Analysis One Year Ahead of the Election in November 2024

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U.S. President Joe Biden calls it an "inflection point in history": The wars between Russia and Ukraine and between Hamas and Israel challenge American foreign policy - at a time when many Americans prefer to focus on their own country. This tension is shaping the upcoming election campaign.

It was only Joe Biden's second speech from the Oval Office, a speech to the world, but above all to his own people. The Democrat gave the TV address in October immediately after his trip to the Middle East - and he posed the central question on both Israel and Ukraine himself: "I know these conflicts can seem far away. And it's natural to ask: Why does this matter to America?" In his response, the President assessed support for both countries as critical to U.S. national security: "History has taught us that when terrorists don't pay a price for their terror, when dictators don't pay a price for their aggression, they cause more chaos and death and more destruction." The president stated that American leadership is what holds the world together, and that American alliances are keeping America safe.<sup>1</sup>

Biden sought to unify the American people as global defenders of democracy, assessed Jenna Ben-Yehuda, vice president of the Atlantic Council.<sup>2</sup> Daniel Fried, a US assistant secretary under President George W. Bush, called the address a promotion for an "internationalist agenda": "It's a tough case to make to a skeptical US public, with

cynical isolationism coming back as a political force for the first time in generations."<sup>3</sup> Republican presidential candidates and senators have been fueling these isolationist tendencies for months, especially regarding Ukraine.

### „America First“ on the Rise

In January, Donald Trump criticized on the social media platform Truth Social: "The good old USA 'suckers' are paying a VAST majority of the NATO bill, & outside money, going to Ukraine. VERY UNFAIR!"<sup>4</sup> During a campaign appearance in July, he called on Republicans in congress not to release any more aid. He accused President Biden of dragging the U.S. into a global conflict because his family has business interests in Ukraine - an accusation that the ex-president had already voiced during his term in office and which has not been substantiated to date.<sup>5</sup> In October Trump said, that when he is at the White House, the entire world would know that America is strong and safe, "that we are going to take care of our people and take care of the men and women of our country, and we are not going to worry

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-states-response-to-hamas-terrorist-attacks-against-israel-and-russias-ongoing-brutal-war-against-ukraine/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react-to-bidens-inflection-point-address-on-ukraine-and-israel/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> <https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/109620741365180385>

<sup>5</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/trump-republicans-impeachment-ukraine-pennsylvania-c22cda6a5f6783b5f6a1123b724ebaff>

about the rest of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Trump's former National Security Adviser John Bolton claimed that in a second Trump term, there would almost certainly be an American withdrawal from NATO.<sup>7</sup>

Trump's challenger Ron DeSantis also repeatedly voiced criticism. He said in a presidential primary debate, that it would be in the American interest to end this war: “We are not going to have a blank check. We will not have U.S. troops. We are going to make the Europeans do what they need to do.” He accused the current U.S. administration of funding Ukrainian government spending, “meanwhile, our own country is being invaded.” That is an allusion to the refugee situation on the border with Mexico.<sup>8</sup> Republican Senator JD Vance's criticism of the Biden speech followed this line of thinking. He wrote that it's “disgusting” how Biden tries to sell his “disastrous Ukraine policy” using “dead children in Israel”.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, former U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley said the Russian war of aggression was “bigger than Ukraine”. It is a war about freedom, “and it's one we have to win.”<sup>10</sup> Former Vice President Mike Pence also advocated continued support for Ukraine. This, he said, was in the interest of the United States.<sup>11</sup> In the presidential primary race however, Pence and Haley have so far failed to score points with their plea for further aid to Ukraine; Pence has since withdrawn his candidacy.

Instead, everything points to Donald Trump prevailing in the primaries. The ex-president is considered to have the best chance of winning the nomination compared with his Republican rivals. Since declaring his candidacy again, Trump has been leading in polls by a wide margin. Double-digit percentage points regularly separate him from the next-place candidate, Ron DeSantis.

Other contenders, such as Nikki Haley or Vivek Ramaswamy, currently achieve only single-digit approval ratings in most polls.<sup>12</sup> If the two likely candidates, Biden and Trump, square off in the general election, a neck-and-neck race can be expected.<sup>13</sup> According to the latest polls (“Generic Congressional Vote”), the Republican Party is tied with the Democrats in voter favor.<sup>14</sup>

Should the Grand Old Party (GOP) win with Donald Trump in November of next year, fears of a renewed clouding of transatlantic relations are well-founded, given the ex-president's statements so far. However, his supporters are preparing even more significant course corrections, not only regarding future Ukraine policy.

### New “Troops” and “Burden Sharing”

In their criticism of the policies pursued by the current U.S. government, Donald Trump and his Republican competitors for the presidential candidacy are getting arguments from the “Project 2025”. The project had already caused a stir internationally in the summer. The conservative Heritage Foundation is cooperating on this project with more than 70 organizations. The declared goal is to prepare the next conservative government in such a way that a Republican president can start immediately (“to be ready on Day One”).<sup>15</sup> “Project 2025” is drawing up lists of loyal employees for a new government, as well as concrete plans and concepts for all areas of government work. The core of the effort is a paper of over 800 pages entitled “Mandate for Leadership – the Conservative Promise.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.c-span.org/video/?530983-1/donald-trump-campaigns-wolfeboro-nh>

<sup>7</sup> <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/4136979-bolton-trump-second-term-nato/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://thepavlovictoday.com/read-second-republican-debate-transcript-september-27-2023/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://x.com/JDVance1/status/1715160252268593305?s=20>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-nikki-haley-ukraine-support-2024-election/32445633.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/mike-pence-grilled-support-ukraine-tucker-carlson-rcna94321>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2024/president/us/2024\\_republican\\_presidential\\_nomination-7548.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2024/president/us/2024_republican_presidential_nomination-7548.html)

<sup>13</sup> [RealClearPolitics - Election 2024 - General Election: Trump vs. Biden](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2024/generic_congressional_vote-7969.html)

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/2024\\_generic\\_congressional\\_vote-7969.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/2024_generic_congressional_vote-7969.html)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dailysignal.com/2023/10/04/how-project-2025-is-gearing-up-for-next-conservative-presidential-administration/>

<sup>16</sup> [2025 MandateForLeadership FULL.pdf \(thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com\)](https://www.amazonaws.com/media/thf/MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf)

Personnel policy plays an important role, as is also evident in the chapters on security and foreign policy. The accusation: "The bureaucracy is notoriously unfriendly to conservative ideas."<sup>17</sup> The authors call for a rigorous review of general and flag officer promotions, to prioritize military competencies over "polarizing" issues such as climate change or „manufactured extremism“. The employees of the State Department are accused of being largely "left-wing" and of being opposed to the political agenda of a conservative president. For this reason, ambassadors, for example, must be vetted as quickly as possible and, if necessary, recalled.

In security policy, the authors repeatedly emphasize the need for burden sharing and reciprocity. U.S. allies would have to assume much more responsibility for their conventional defense. To that end, the authors argue, NATO must be reshaped so that allies provide the bulk of the conventional forces needed to deter Russia. For nuclear deterrence, allies could continue to rely on the United States. The goal, they write, is to reduce U.S. forces in Europe and increase defense spending by NATO member countries to two percent or more.

The authors call for trade agreements between the EU and the U.S. to be "comprehensively" reviewed "to assure that U.S. businesses are treated fairly and to build productive reciprocity."<sup>18</sup> Increased transatlantic trade could also free Europe from its dependence on China.

The People's Republic is perceived as the greatest threat to the United States. The communist party has been "at war" with the USA for decades: „Beijing presents a challenge to American interests across the domains of national power, but the military threat that it poses is especially acute and significant."<sup>19</sup>

The threat from Russia is viewed in a more nuanced way. The authors acknowledge that there

are differing views among American conservatives about how much Russia and its aggression in Ukraine affect American security interests. They offer a compromise between the camps that rejects both "isolationism and interventionism." In their view, U.S. military engagement must fall within U.S. interests, be fiscally responsible, and protect American freedom and sovereignty. With respect to Ukraine, continued U.S. involvement would have to be affordable, limited to military assistance, and follow a clearly defined national security strategy that does not endanger American lives. Ukraine's economic needs should be taken care of by the European allies.

This paper has rightly been studied by diplomats and journalists in recent weeks because it gives indications of what policy might look like under a Republican president after an election victory. At the same time, it is important to remember that these are proposals from experts (albeit influential ones). President Trump was known to disregard expert advice during his first term. As early as 2017, British analyst John Lloyd noted that Donald Trump does not practice traditional diplomacy but treats each foreign policy issue as a separate event, "and reacts to it according to his mood."<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the "Project 2025" is by no means met with undivided approval among Republican experts and representatives of well-known conservative think tanks. Geoffrey Kabaservice of the Niskanen Center criticized plans to replace federal administration employees on a large scale: This is nothing less than „an attempt to eviscerate government and replace it with Trump stooges." The deeper problem, Kabaservice says, is that "Republicans still don't like the idea of expertise." Kevin Kosar, a scholar at the conserva-

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.heritage.org/political-process/commentary/5-things-you-can-do-right-now-help-dismantle-the-federal-bureaucracy>

<sup>18</sup> [2025\\_MandateForLeadership\\_FULL.pdf](#) (thf\_media.s3.amazonaws.com), page 187.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, page 93.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-trump-diplomacy-100days-commentary/commentary-the-danger-of-trumps-mood-based-diplomacy-idUSKBN17T3GW>

tive American Enterprise Institute, said, the biggest problem with this new agenda is just how "murky" it really is, not to mention its end goal.<sup>21</sup>

Criticism from within their own ranks is likely to roll off the backs of the "Project 2025" supporters - for them, the future course of a U.S. policy determined by the Republicans has long been clear. Nevertheless, it would be disastrous for Germany and Europe to base their own hopes and fears about future U.S. foreign policy positions and priorities solely on whether Donald Trump returns to the White House, another Republican wins, or Joe Biden is re-elected. On the contrary, foreign countries would be well advised to adjust to changes, irrespective of the outcome of the presidential election. After all, focusing too narrowly on the future president and his civil servants in the Washington government apparatus would ignore two decisive influencing factors: the majorities in U.S. Congress and public opinion.

### Fragile Majorities in the Capitol

In November 2024, voters will not only decide on the future president and vice president but also on 34 of the 100 Senate seats and all 435 seats in the House of Representatives.

When it comes to money, the House of Representatives has the say in Congress. The bills on the size of the national budget and the national debt, the use of tax revenues, and the distribution of financial resources among the various departments, which are passed by a majority of the members of the House of Representatives, must then be confirmed by the Senate before they come into effect. Without the approval of both chambers of Congress, the U.S. administration's hands are tied when it comes to additional government spending or cutting funding that has already been approved.

In this respect, it is crucial that the U.S. administration can depend on reliable majorities in both chambers of Congress. For the period after

the presidential election and for U.S. foreign policy, therefore, much depends on whether the future president's party has a majority in both chambers or, as is currently the case, only in one of the two chambers or, under certain circumstances, in neither chamber. While it has been more common for new presidents to start their term with majorities in both the House and Senate, that usually changed in the first midterm elections. For example, Republican Donald Trump and Democrats Barack Obama and Bill Clinton began their terms with majorities of their respective parties in both chambers; but, in each of these presidencies, at least one chamber changed after the first two years of government.<sup>22</sup> An example of the foreign policy effects of such a "divided government" is the budget negotiations a few weeks ago: The administration failed with its demand for additional aid for Ukraine due to the resistance of the Republican majority in the House of Representatives.

For all possible constellations, however, it is also important how close the respective majorities are. After all, "party discipline" cannot be assumed throughout, neither in the Senate nor the House of Representatives, and neither among the Democrats nor among the Republicans. With narrow majorities, even a few dissenters in their own ranks can crush any legislative initiative. For example, the Biden administration's multi-billion dollar "Build Back Better" package was defeated by opposition from two Democratic senators. The fate of Kevin McCarthy as Speaker of the House of Representatives was sealed by only eight opponents from his own ranks, despite a Republican majority.

According to political scientist Daniel Drezner, in a second term Trump would be supported by congressional Republicans who are "far more Trumpish in their outlook than the old-guard GOP leadership of five years ago."<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the "pre-Trump GOP" has not disappeared, analyzed political columnist Jonathan Martin. This is particularly evident in the Senate. The result,

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/09/19/project-2025-trump-reagan-00115811>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/02/03/single-party-control-in-washington-is-common-at-the-beginning-of-a-new-presidency-but-tends-not-to-last-long/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/bracing-trump-possible-return-allies-rivals>

he said, is a party split into two wings. Republicans in Congress "may be roommates, but they're not married."<sup>24</sup>

On foreign policy, the differences became clear in March, when both Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis advocated limiting aid to Ukraine. Republican senators in particular publicly disagreed. Marco Rubio, vice chair of the Intelligence Committee, said that it was in the interest of national security to provide more assistance to Ukraine. Senator Lindsey Graham wrote on social media: "To those who believe that Russia's unprovoked and barbaric invasion of Ukraine is not a priority for the United States – you are missing a lot."<sup>25</sup>

According to the current polls, it is completely open whether Joe Biden or Donald Trump will be able to prevail in November of next year – being the two likely candidates. Before the Republicans hold their nominating conventions in July and the Democrats in August, the presidential candidates must first win the primaries in the states, starting in January. The decisive factor for victory in November will not be a majority of all votes cast, but a majority of votes in the electoral college. The actual election campaign is concentrated on a few particularly hotly contested swing states. There, the results have been extremely close in recent years. In the swing states, just 100,000 votes more or less can decide who governs the country in the future. For Congress, too, there is nothing to suggest that either the Republicans or the Democrats will win a landslide victory with comfortable majorities next year.

If Donald Trump were to be reelected to the White House, but the Republicans were to fall short of a majority in the Senate, Project 2025 would quickly reach its limits. After all, candidates for ambassadorial posts and important administrative positions must be confirmed by the Senate. And despite his considerable powers, a U.S. president cannot decide on his own about withdrawing troops from Europe. This would cost money, which would have to be approved by Congress. Conversely, Joe Biden would also have

to make compromises if he won the election. The left wing of his Democratic Party is still holding back on criticizing the billions of dollars in military aid and arms deliveries to Ukraine. However, increasing resistance from within the party's own ranks is foreseeable.

But the Biden administration already faces another problem in its foreign and security policy engagement: public opinion. It is the second influencing factor that foreign countries must urgently consider, regardless of the outcome of the presidential election in a year's time, with an understanding of possible changes and new priorities in U.S. foreign policy.

## Ukraine Aid Increasingly Unpopular

Only those who sufficiently mobilize their own supporters in the crucial swing states have a chance of winning the election in November 2024. The mood in society and public opinion are therefore decisive for the positioning of candidates in the deeply polarized U.S. media democracy. Foreign policy has played a minor role for many decades. For some years now, however, it has not only been falling even further behind overall, but the differences in opinion between supporters of the Democratic and Republican parties have also been increasing.

As recently as 2021, according to a Pew Research Center survey, about half of U.S. Americans thought the government should pay less attention to problems abroad and focus on challenges at home. The other half felt it was best for the future of the U.S. to be actively involved in world affairs. Since the survey was conducted, the percentage of those who are skeptical of the country's foreign policy involvement has risen steadily. While 60 percent of participating Democratic voters continue to favor active involvement in world affairs, about 70 percent of Republicans now favor reducing U.S. international involvement.<sup>26</sup> The poll numbers for Ukraine aid are particularly critical: According to an October Morning Consult poll, only 23 percent of registered voters believe

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/10/18/gop-party-house-speaker-00122371>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.axios.com/2023/03/14/senate-republicans-criticize-desantis-ukraine-aid>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/05/10/americans-hold-positive-feelings-toward-nato-and-ukraine-see-russia-as-an-enemy/>

that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is among the top five foreign policy issues facing the United States. Among Democrats, 30 percent hold this view, and among Republicans, only 15 percent.<sup>27</sup> When comparing the top 3 foreign policy issues that Democratic and Republican supporters consider important, terrorism is the only commonality: for Republicans, the top 3 are immigration, terrorism, and drug smuggling; for Democrats, climate change, terrorism, and preventing another pandemic.

The assessment of the situation in Ukraine has changed over the course of a year: In the early days of the Russian invasion, about 62 percent of Americans still thought the U.S. should get more involved. Now, a slim majority say the U.S. has done enough.<sup>28</sup>

In the election campaign, Republican candidates are positioning themselves as advocates for those who want the U.S. foreign policy commitment to Ukraine to take a back seat to other challenges, especially illegal immigration. As a result, they currently find support primarily in the 35-64 demographic and among people without college degrees. Older voters over the age of 65, on the other hand, are by a majority (58 percent) in favor of continuing aid. Especially in the hotly contested swing states, where every single vote counts, eligible voters who have registered as independents play a crucial role. Of these, 44 percent believe Congress should provide additional funding for Ukraine. The figure is well below that of Democratic voters (69 percent), but well above that of Republicans (28 percent).<sup>29</sup>

As much as Joe Biden can (still) rely on majority support from the ranks of the Democrats, he will have to make a concerted effort to win the votes of independents in the election campaign. The Republican presidential candidates cannot ex-

clude the independents either; since Hamas's attack on Israel, however, they have had to explain themselves, even within their own ranks. While isolationists and "America First" advocates may oppose additional aid to Ukraine, Israel is a different matter for important Republican voter groups.

Donald Trump asserted that Israel has never had a better friend in the White House than during his presidency. He said, during his administration, there was peace in the Middle East thanks to his Abraham Accords - now there is war in Israel: "What a difference a president makes, isn't it amazing?"<sup>30</sup> In almost the same breath, Trump sharply criticized Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a campaign event, calling Lebanon's Hezbollah "very smart." Both Mike Pence and Ron DeSantis strongly disagreed.<sup>31</sup> President Biden's resolute support for Israel, on the other hand, was met with unusual approval even among Republican politicians.<sup>32</sup> Democratic strategists now hope that he can demonstrate foreign policy competence with his active crisis management.<sup>33</sup>

Presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy accused other Republicans of reacting with "hysteria rather than rationality." He, too, supported aid to Israel, but at the same time spoke of a "selective moral outrage." In the medium term, he said, he wants to ensure as president that Israel is no longer dependent on American support. Former Vice President Mike Pence accused Ramaswamy and other Republican contenders of not wanting to help Israel sufficiently. He explained his own support with his Christian faith.<sup>34</sup> This stance is particularly widespread among evangelical Christians in the USA. They are an important group of voters for the Republicans. The online magazine Axios sees Hamas' attack on Israel as a "test" for the growing "America First" movement within the Republican Party.<sup>35</sup> Although Hamas's attack on

<sup>27</sup> <https://pro.morningconsult.com/trackers/public-opinion-us-foreign-policy>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/04/politics/cnn-poll-ukraine/index.html>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/republicans-are-turning-against-aid-to-ukraine/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.c-span.org/video/?530983-1/donald-trump-campaigns-wolfboro-nh>

<sup>31</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-criticized-calling-hezbollah-smart-talked-potential-risk/story?id=103941138>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/republicans-splinter-israel-politics-biden-trump-rcna120330>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/21/politics/fault-lines-biden-2024-israel/index.html>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/10/18/us/politics/republican-candidates-2024-israel.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.axios.com/2023/10/13/israel-gop-america-first-test-trump-desantis-2024>

Israel has provided additional arguments for advocates of U.S. international leadership, the majority of the country's population will remain wary

of war regardless of the outcome of the presidential election.

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