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After the Fall: How US policy on Ukraine may change after the Midterms

The earthquake in American politics is probably good news for Ukraine. President Trump's ambition for normalisation with – and appeasement of – Russia now faces serious obstacles. The reassumption of unambiguous support for Kyiv, though, is still subject to US political infighting.



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The stunning victory of the Democratic Party in the US midterm elections was driven primarily by domestic economic concerns. But the consequences of that victory and the repudiation of the

presidency of Donald Trump that it represents will have immense significance for the Euro-Atlantic alliance and for Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

The scale of the majorities the Democrats have attained in the Senate (as many as 56 Senators out of 100) and in the House of Representatives (approximately 260 out of 435 seats) gives the party's leadership scope for manoeuvre and marginalises the influence of a handful of far-left legislators, whose influence on foreign and security policy will likely be insignificant. Additionally, the Democratic victory means that the legislative committees that deal with foreign affairs, defence, and appropriations will be in the hands of longstanding Atlanticists and advocates of military and economic aid for Ukraine. Just as importantly, the rebuilding of a bipartisan pro-Ukraine and pro-Atlanticist foreign policy will be aided by the fact that the Republicans who will serve as ranking minority members of the defence and foreign affairs committees understand that Russia poses a direct threat to Euro-Atlantic security. A spirit of bipartisanship on national security issues could be aided by an emerging fight over the direction of a post-Trump Republican Party that will pit traditional national security Republicans against MAGA-linked isolationists.

The ideal would be for the new Congressional leadership to convince President Trump to abandon his policy of cooperation with Russia and shed his hostility to European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. But if such efforts fail – a distinct possibility – there are numerous legislative mechanisms by which the Congress can work to shift Ukraine policy and reinforce US commitments to its longtime allies.

How it could work

One such mechanism is the linking of funding for specific aims to larger pieces of legislation that are top priorities for the president. This could mean, for example, that new funding for Ukraine's military needs or the enforcement of sanctions against Russia could be attached to the annual omnibus US defence appropriation or crucial domestic budget financing. In such a circumstance, if the main bill meets many of the President's policy objectives, it is unlikely he would exercise his veto power.

In the Senate, such a tactic would require more than the House's simple majority to invoke cloture (the process of consent by at least sixty Senators to move a bill to a full vote). With as many as 56 votes in hand, moving and amending legislation would require the support of just a handful of moderate Republicans, many of whom have disagreed with Trump's approach to Russia, Ukraine, and the rest of Europe. Some of these moderates, who were heretofore silent, may today feel freer to act and speak out as Trump's power wanes. The key Republican Senate voices on national security, Senators Roger Wicker and James Risch, are staunch Atlanticist supporters of Ukraine, as is the current Republican Senate leader, John Thune.

While much will depend on the emerging fight over the heart, soul, and direction of the Republican Party post-Trump, there is also the prospect that the Congress will occasionally muster bipartisan two-thirds supermajorities on key issues to override a Trump veto. In addition to military and economic aid to Ukraine, such veto-proof majorities could emerge in support of a cut-off of funding for the war on Iran, and agreement to annul or reverse Trump's economically harmful (and inflationary) tariffs.

There are further reasons to anticipate a potential shift in the Administration's Russia and Ukraine policies. The main cheerleaders for Trump's pro-Russia tilt, Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff, are likely to come under pressure from legislative committees investigating their commingling of personal business interests with diplomacy. Already, emerging Democratic leaders such as Georgia Senator Jon Ossoff have made economic relationships with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Russia the subject of sharp rhetorical attacks and suggested that commercial interests and personal gain are having a pernicious influence on US foreign policy interests.

Pre-election polling showed that corruption and conflicts of interest within the Trump inner circle were among the main issues that led to the Republican defeat. Democrats – as well as Republicans who seek to loosen their party from Trump's grip – will likely use committee investigations and transform this issue into a cudgel in their efforts to ameliorate the President's foreign policy tilt. Democratic legislators have made it clear that they favour the renewal of some direct military and economic aid for Ukraine. Unless there is a breakthrough in Trump's thus far feckless efforts to broker an end to the war, such legislative efforts are likely to come to fruition as the National Defense Authorization Act is debated and shaped by the current "lame duck" session.

What will Russia do now?

Russia is already sensing the coming power shift. In the days since the seismic shift in US politics, its media has spoken of the likelihood that the power shift may derail Trump's plans for US-Russia economic cooperation. There is a sense that the next two months represent a narrowing window of opportunity to broker an end to the war on terms favourable to the Kremlin.

This means that the coming weeks will be yet another test of Putin's intentions. If he does not seek to strike a rational peace deal now, he will face a far more difficult US policy environment in 2027. Polls show the US public sympathises with Ukraine and is hostile to Putin's Russia. This will engender confidence in the Democratic Party hawks and their ambitious Republican counterparts.

In this context, recent reports of attempts by President Trump to negotiate a wide-ranging European security agreement with Russia as part of a broader solution to the war in Ukraine are likely to meet with overwhelming opposition by the new Congress.

Conclusion

For the last two years, Trump has pursued an erratic foreign policy that has eroded the trust of traditional US allies in the democratic world and undermined Europe and Ukraine as they face an increasingly violent Russia. Now these policies will face more criticism and pushback by the Democratic majority as well as by moderate Republicans who are today emboldened to speak and act more clearly in support of the Atlantic alliance amid Trump's growing unpopularity.

Trump will continue to wield significant power in this sphere and can, if he so chooses, attempt to pursue disruptive and destructive policies. His appointment of MAGA hardliner Stephen Miller as his new chief of staff points to a combative end to his presidency. But the return of the Democrats to power, the re-emergence of Atlanticist Republicans, and the re-engagement of the legislative branch as an important counterweight to executive power in the shaping of US policy are likely to check Trump's worst excesses and to begin the gradual process of rebuilding trust among democratic allies in the reliability of the United States.