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## The GOPs Ukraine policy must balance responsibility and pragmatism

BY MICHAEL ALLEN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 05/08/23 3:00 PM ET

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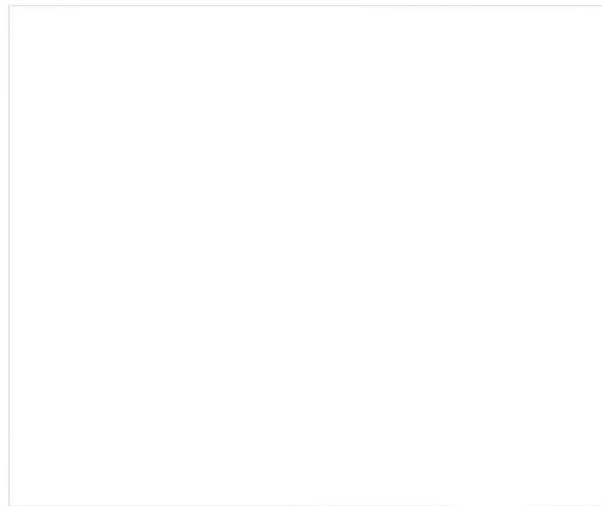


The war in Ukraine is entering a critical phase. A Ukrainian spring offensive will soon begin. This summer, Congress will consider additional funding and GOP presidential campaigns will begin in earnest. Of intense interest will be the Republican Party's attitude toward the war and what that portends about America's role in the world, especially in Asia. While polls generally indicate a decline in support for Ukraine among Republicans, they also show that Republicans think that a Russian victory would adversely affect U.S. interests.

How should the GOP respond to voters distressed about ill-defined foreign military commitments yet also concerned about the implications of a Russian victory?

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The GOP should adopt a balanced approach — no blank check but also no going overboard by seeking drastic reductions in assistance to Ukraine. Abandoning Ukraine would be a gift to Putin, whose strategy is premised on Western weakness. Cutting funding would also be contrary to U.S. national security interests. While Russia's battered conventional military force may not threaten NATO today, a weaker Ukrainian force would be less of a bulwark against future Russian aggression. A Russian military further degraded by Ukraine enables a fuller shift to a larger contest with China sooner.

While not renouncing Ukraine, the GOP should repudiate Biden's "as long as it takes" formulation on U.S. support. While it served its early purpose of signaling U.S. resolve, it has outlived its usefulness. Biden's declaration triggers legitimate concerns about endless foreign commitments, hurting U.S. support for Ukraine.

Ukrainian vulnerabilities once he has reconstituted his military. The more durability, the sooner the U.S. can safely turn to Asia without fear of a quick relapse into hostilities in Ukraine. Critics will crave specificity but should consider that this new formulation would be an improvement over President Biden's vague desired end-state, enunciated in February in Warsaw, that "Ukraine will never be a victory for Russia. Never."

A frequently mooted alternative, early peace talks, would be premature. Ukrainian public opinion is strongly in favor of evicting the Russians from their territory. For now, the Russians, although they have suffered brutal losses, seem poised to drag along. Because neither party feels beaten and both believe they have cards to play, peace talks are not ripe. Even if it were possible to impose a settlement on Ukraine, its artificiality would likely yield frequent outbreaks of fighting drawing U.S. attention back to the conflict.

Most of all, the GOP should consider the repercussions in Asia of giving up on Ukraine. U.S. Asia policy is to corral a coalition to stand up to China and deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Abandoning Ukraine, especially after we have invested American prestige, would be fatal to these efforts. Giving up on Ukraine but promising "we'll mean it next time" for Taiwan will not strengthen deterrence in Asia. Would-be coalition allies would scatter, justifiably doubting U.S. reliability on Taiwan. States in the region would make their own accommodations with China at the expense of the U.S. Safeguarding U.S. strategic interests in Asia begins with a defeat to China's Russian partner, thereby demonstrating U.S. resolve and determination to see it through.

The GOP also cannot ignore U.S. politics. Putin may be calculating that a new U.S. president would scale back support for Ukraine. Without the U.S., much of the European assistance for Ukraine would collapse. While condemning the Europeans may be deserved, it will take years of U.S. shepherding before the Europeans consistently "step up" to meet their pledges to Ukraine and their obligations to NATO. The GOP should avoid precipitating a rush for the exits that would inadvertently rescue Putin. Pulling support might convert existing battle lines into new borders allowing Putin to claim a sort of victory. This would play directly into a U.S. political narrative that the GOP has gone soft on Russia. With such an outcome, no amount of China tough talk could resurrect the GOP as a credible national security party in time for the 2024 elections.

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The GOP should also consider how to set up a possible new Republican president for success by, at the very least, funding Ukraine through the end of 2024. This would give a new commander in chief flexibility to orchestrate an end to the war. Besides, military experts think Ukraine needs at least two more years (link) to have a reasonable chance to retake territory seized by Russia since February 2022. Also, a new Ukrainian offensive is about to begin. To maximize battlefield success, the Ukrainians have waited for new equipment, more trained units and better ground conditions before resuming efforts to retake their territory. Republicans should consider that Ukrainian battlefield momentum may hasten genuine discussions with Russia about ending the war.

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But funding Ukraine and keeping options open does not mean giving President Biden a pass. The GOP should lambaste the Biden administration for piecemealing military assistance, thereby unnecessarily prolonging the war. The House GOP should exercise fierce oversight of the Biden administration and hold the secretaries of State and Defense accountable for the expenditure of U.S. funds. Also, Republicans should pursue claims of corruption in Ukraine as the responsible stewards of U.S. taxpayers.

With a Republican House, a closely divided Senate and a spirited presidential campaign in the offing, the GOP will have a significant say on Ukraine policy. Republicans should proceed carefully. Their decisions will be taken as a signal of whether the U.S. will maintain leadership in the world or turn away from its historical responsibilities and focus inward. Success in Europe would reverberate throughout Asia and signal that the U.S. can lead a much broader contest with China.



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*Michael Allen is the former special assistant for national security affairs to President George W. Bush and the former majority staff director of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.*

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