
Ukraine, the Middle East, and electoral variables: US moves while awaiting peace

The unfolding scenario, which has seen Washington play a leading role, offers a glimpse into the extent to which US domestic politics will have a decisive impact on the dynamics of the war that is currently taking centre stage in the international spotlight. **Zelensky's visit was intended as a signal to those who noted the failure of the counter-offensive in recent weeks, in addition to Ukrainian leader's difficulties at home - caught between criticism from the military leadership and the declining consensus of his people, one third of whom, according to Bloomberg data, favours ending what has become a deadlocked war.** But the message was aimed primarily at US leaders, especially Congress, which has rejected White House attempts to fund the war with more than \$100bn: a rejection that amounts to a "Christmas present" for Putin, says Zelensky. This is also Biden's view, who is well aware that his presidential candidacy is in jeopardy if he goes to the polls with the shame of the Ukrainian collapse in his pocket. This is enough for him to pass all the blame on to the Republicans. In vain, it seems, as the Grand Old Party stands its ground and reiterates the need to focus spending on domestic priorities, most notably, combating immigration through visa and citizenship reform legislation. At the same time, Biden knows that he cannot afford to take a cavalier approach to the issue now that Trump is leading in the polls. Indeed, the temptation to pander to voters sensitive to these issues while hoping to get the Republicans to refinance the war would expose him to the risk of losing the left-wing vote. Rumours of a draft agreement with Russia to end the conflict remain in the background (for the White House it should in any case be postponed until after the presidential elections), including a freeze on the territorial configurations determined by the conflict, Ukraine's military neutrality and Kyiv's EU accession talks. In this respect, the statement made by Biden at the press conference, with Zelensky at his side, points to a potential breakthrough. According to the US President, Kyiv's NATO membership is now out of the question, given the lack of unanimous agreement among its members and other requirements: what is needed now is to allow the Ukrainian armed forces to continue fighting. But these were not the premises of the statements made over the past months, nor were they the premises before Moscow's invasion, which in January 2022 still thundered against Stoltenberg's and Blinken's remarks concerning Ukraine's membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. **The European Council will discuss EU integration and war refinancing in the coming hours. On the table is another EUR 50 billion to be allocated under the 2024-2027 budget, in addition to a further EUR 20 billion under the so-called European Peace Facility.** But despite Ursula von der Leyen's favourable attitude, Washington knows that it can hardly expect more from Europe. NATO's increased military spending (to be raised to 2% of GDP in 2024), to which many EU member states belong, is not compatible with the lowered ceiling caused by economic stagnation. Bulgaria and Slovakia have taken the first step by cancelling planned deployments, while Europe's leading chancelleries stand idly by. In this respect, the EU is paying for the overlapping burdens of NATO commitments: expenditure items that are currently a burden both in terms of European alignment with Washington and because of the membership fees decided by NATO. But above all, the EU is paying for its heteronomy, its political inconsistency and the internal antagonisms that keep the majority of the EU's partners in check, fearing that they could become a lightning rod for other parties if they fail to comply with Washington's instructions, while quietly wishing to see alternatives to what is decided on the other side of the Atlantic.

Consensus on Kyiv's EU membership is not a given.

Several countries identify with the concerns expressed by Orbán about whether the promises of Europeanisation made by Western leaders who encouraged Euromaidan in 2013-14 (when Ukraine was neither at war nor in a state of bankruptcy as it is today) can be fulfilled. Citing reports that

Ukraine's socio-economic and institutional conditions would jeopardise EU agricultural and cohesion policies, the Hungarian leader announced his rejection of the fast-track procedure. But the €10 billion in frozen EU funds that Brussels has just released to Budapest could change Hungary's mind, perhaps with a compromise solution: "yes" to accession, but no fast track. Apart from these haggling negotiations, if Kyiv's presence in the EU were to provide an incentive to pursue paths of skilful resolution, so long as Kyiv-Moscow escalations are not imported, integration could encourage an alternative route to an *ad libitum* conflict. But this too presupposes overcoming the above-mentioned heteronomy and inconsistency. Evidence of this can be found in the ongoing tragedy in the Middle East, where the European stance in the UN General Assembly on the ceasefire was once again evident. At the 27 October session on a humanitarian ceasefire, there were 120 votes in favour, 14 against and 44 abstentions. In the 12 December resolution, the number of votes in favour rose to 153, while the number of votes against fell to 10 (Israel, USA, Czech Republic, Austria, Papua New Guinea, Micronesia, Guatemala, Liberia, Nauru, Paraguay). The 23 abstentions reflect the unease of European governments caught between following Washington's lead and the mounting global outcry over the massacre of civilians (which has now reached 18,000, including 7,000 children). By any measure, Washington's initiative on the Middle Eastern front remains decisive. It is now less afraid of a large-scale escalation of the conflict, which has so far been averted by US deterrence in the region, by the Sunni petro-monarchies' substantial disengagement from the Palestinian issue, and by Israel's and Iran's prudent reluctance to confront each other head-on. The White House is now more concerned about the erosion of its soft power. Global public opinion abhors double standards when it comes to international humanitarian law. The UN Assembly vote was unequivocal, albeit ineffectual (it would have been different in the Security Council vote had it not been blocked by the US veto). No less worrying is the growing pro-Palestinian sentiment throughout US society, especially among the younger voters on whom Biden relies. These two critical variables explain the strong criticism that the president has just addressed to Netanyahu, warning him against the strategic suicide that lies ahead, and urging him to sack the extremists in his government and accept a two-state solution, which the Israeli leader has once again ruled out in recent days. Israel is alienating the support of the world, according to Biden. This alienation is indeed costing the White House a lot of money, with major repercussions at home. Developments in US domestic politics on the Ukrainian and Palestinian issues will reflect the extent to which they are intertwined with the global agenda as a whole.

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