



Bipartisan Congressional War Drums Are Beating Again

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The fastest, most reliable way to foster bipartisanship in Congress (as well as the media, and the foreign policy blob) is to demonize the foreign threat *du jour* and then advocate a very hardline policy toward that alleged existential threat to the American republic. The latest example is how establishment types in both the Republican and Democratic congressional delegations are uniting to push the Biden administration into adopting an uncompromising stance toward Russia over the Ukraine issue, even at the risk of war with a country that possesses more than 2,000 nuclear weapons.

In mid-January, a bipartisan group of seven senators traveled to Ukraine to meet with that country's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, and assure him of Washington's strong commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's increased military deployments. The group consisted of Rob Portman (R-OH) Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Chris Murphy (D-CT), Kevin Cramer (R-ND), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Roger Wicker (R-MS) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CT). Shaheen said in a tweet that the meeting should have made clear to the Kremlin that "Putin will not be allowed to target our Eastern European partners and allies w/o consequences." Shaheen had already introduced legislation, along with her colleagues John Cornyn (R-TX), Ben Cardin (D-MD), and the ultra-hawkish Wicker, to "expedite" U.S. military aid to Kyiv. During the delegation's trip to Ukraine, Sen. Murphy told reporters that his goal was to convey the message that despite division in Washington politics, Republicans and Democrats are united in support for "serious, unprecedented crushing sanctions on Russia" if it moved against Ukraine.

Other statements and actions by members of Congress on both sides of the political aisle echo the bipartisan position that Washington needs to support Ukraine and confront Russia. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) is prodding the Democratic Party caucus to fast-track a bill that would provide more security assistance to Kyiv and lay the foundation for imposing stronger economic sanctions on Russia. Influential House Republicans are pushing their own legislation, the Guaranteeing Ukrainian Autonomy by Reinforcing its Defense Act, or GUARD Act, aimed at accomplishing the same goals. One of the sponsors, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), the GOP's ranking member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a statement: "Vladimir Putin must take note that Congress will not stand for the reconstitution of Russia's sphere of influence

nor the abandonment of Ukraine and our other NATO allies and partners in Central and Eastern Europe,"

Over in the Senate, Sen. Robert Menendez and 25 colleagues have introduced a bill, the Defending Ukraine Sovereignty Act of 2022, which is very similar to the House measure. Jingoism is alive and well in both chambers of Congress.

We've witnessed the two major parties close ranks to embrace hawkish initiatives on numerous other occasions over the decades. Bipartisan belligerence has remained depressingly consistent and usually pushes normal partisanship to the sidelines. Many Republicans who normally portrayed Bill Clinton as a little more than debauched closet socialist nevertheless had no problem embracing the wars he launched in the Balkans. Bob Dole, the leader of Republicans in the Senate and the GOP's nominee in the 1996 presidential election, was an especially vocal lobbyist for the Clinton administration's military interventions in both Bosnia and Kosovo.

Bipartisan collaboration for war reached its zenith following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. There was a nearly total lack of opposition to the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) legislation, which Congress passed barely a week after the attacks. The 2001 AUMF was a dangerous blank check grant of power to the executive, but the Senate passed the measure by voice vote, and the House approved it 420 to 1, with Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) being the only opponent.

The Democratic Party's congressional delegation did split when George W. Bush led the drive to war to oust Saddam in 2003, unlike the Republicans who overwhelmingly backed the president's course. But a sizable contingent of Democrats endorsed his military action, and many more merely took the position that the administration should give more time for international weapons inspectors to do their jobs before the United States resorted to force. The October 2002 vote authorizing the use of military force against Iraq passed the House of Representatives 296-133. The Senate vote was an even more lopsided 77-23. Only 6 Republican House members and one GOP senator (Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island) voted against the authorization.

To some extent, the hawkish exception to partisanship even extended to the attitudes Democrats displayed toward Donald Trump when he launched missile strikes against Syria in April 2017 in response to the Assad regime's alleged use of chemical weapons. Although some Democrats quibbled that Trump should have consulted Congress first, they expressed almost no criticism of the attack itself. Sen. Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) stated that "making sure Assad knows that when he commits such despicable atrocities he will pay a price is the right thing to do." Hillary Clinton even advocated a more aggressive policy toward Assad going beyond the chemical weapons issue. "I really believe that we should have, and still should take out his airfields and prevent him from being able to use them to bomb innocent people." She also repeated her call for the United States to impose a "no-fly" zone to ground Assad's air force. Predictably, congressional Republicans overwhelmingly endorsed Trump's action.

Given that track record, it is unsurprising that the hawkish perspective now dictates the stance of most Republicans and Democrats in Congress with respect to the Ukraine issue and US policy toward Russia. Neither party accurately reflects the views of voters, however. A *YouGov* poll

taken in late December 2021 found that only 27 percent of respondents believed that the United States should be willing to fight a war with Russia if the Kremlin launched an invasion of Ukraine. Yet members of a powerful bipartisan congressional coalition endorse policies that have an alarming potential to trigger such a war. In doing so, they are betraying the people they purport to represent.

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