



## Republicans plot foreign intervention pullback

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Republican lawmakers — following former President Trump's lead — are working with a wide range of conservative groups to pull back American support for Ukraine, the Middle East and Europe, officials tell us.

**Why it matters:** With the GOP poised to retake control of the House and perhaps the Senate next year, this contingent could grow substantially. Trump is backing candidates who's explicitly broken with Republican foreign policy orthodoxy.

**Driving the news:** Eleven Senate GOP "no" votes on a \$40 billion Ukraine aid package last week was the clearest sign the new coalition's influence is expanding.

- Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), who led the Senate opposition, huddled in his office with several of the coalition's key players before the House voted on the measure earlier this month.
- They included representatives from the Koch political network, Cato Institute, populist-oriented group American Moment and the American Conservative magazine, according to a person who attended.
- "Promoting a realist foreign policy agenda has always been a priority of Dr. Paul's, which is why he has been holding meetings with interested groups and fellow members for years and will continue to do so in the future," a Paul spokesperson told Axios.

**Why it matters:** They discussed messaging and strategy on Ukraine but also U.S. foreign policy more generally.

- The source described the atmosphere as upbeat, with Paul seeing the Ukraine vote as a catalyst for self-described "realist" elements in the party seeking to pull the U.S. back from deeper military involvement in Europe, the Middle East and elsewhere.
- It comes as the Biden administration escalates U.S. involvement in Somalia, a move that members of the new GOP coalition anticipate fighting.

**Republican leadership** has sought to downplay the influence of this new bloc of members pushing "restraint" in foreign policy, describing it as a marginal faction that still represents a small minority.

- Its backers in Congress and in groups forming an outside policy infrastructure say they're more aligned with core Republican voters and donors, and, crucially, with Trump, a singular force in the party.

**What they're saying:** "We're going to come out on the back end of this — probably in a period of months, but certainly by 2024 — with a strong conservative and libertarian consensus about a more restrained, but still very robust, American foreign policy," said Kevin Roberts, who late last year took over as president of the conservative Heritage Foundation.

- Objections to the Ukraine bill fell into three categories: strategic differences over America's policy role in world affairs, procedural objections to the bill's speedy passage through Congress and concerns the money could be better put to use domestically.
- "Every Congressman had their own public reason for voting no, but I don't think you would have seen this expanded coalition if it wasn't for a genuine reassessment of American foreign policy happening in the Republican conference," one operative involved in the effort told Axios.

**How we got here:** Momentum for more restrained foreign posture grew out of the Trump administration — and is being sustained with systemic efforts.

**Policy:** Heritage is consciously shifting gears on foreign policy, with an eye toward less military involvement in Europe and more attention on China in particular, Roberts told Axios in an interview.

- That aligns it with Koch's Stand Together and Concerned Veterans for America, and to a degree with more libertarian groups such as Cato and FreedomWorks.
- Roberts said Heritage's rank and file donors have generally come down firmly on the restraint side of the foreign policy fight.
- Newer organizations are also adding voices to that coalition. Former Trump budget director Russ Vought, a Heritage alum, was highly active in the Ukraine aid fight via his new organization, the Center for Renewing America.

**Media:** Tucker Carlson is considered the voice of the so-called realist right, and his top-rated Fox News primetime show routinely questions U.S. aid for Ukraine and foreign military entanglements more generally.

- Former Trump strategist Steve Bannon is also an influential voice in the space.
- The American Conservative's presence at the Paul meeting underscored its continued influence among those segments of the right. A newer publication, Compact, has also added an influential voice on the populist right.

**Personnel:** American Moment, founded in 2020, works to staff congressional offices — and potentially a future Republican administration — with more populist-oriented staffers.

- The group organized a conference in March, dubbed Up From Chaos, that people in that camp described as a watershed moment for the coalition.

**Fundraising:** Tech mogul Peter Thiel is bankrolling political efforts for more populist candidates.

- His highest-profile beneficiary, Republican Senate nominee J.D. Vance in Ohio, is a leading GOP critic of Ukraine aid efforts. Another Thiel-backed Senate candidate to watch is Republican Blake Masters in Arizona.
- Sources also identified venture capitalist David Sacks as a key voice in the donor community. He gave the keynote speech at American Moment's conference in March.

**Between the lines:** In the context of Ukraine, this movement is skeptical of — or simply opposed to — greater U.S. commitments as the country battles a Russian invasion.

- Members of the bloc say the Senate vote and its House companion's 57 Republican nays show its position is gaining steam. They point in particular to no votes from Sen. Roger Marshall (R-Kan.) and from Republican Study Committee chair Rep. Jim Banks, (R-Ind.), seen as a contender for House leadership.
- In an emailed statement, Marshall cited the Biden administration's lack of strategic clarity. A Banks spokesperson referred Axios to a radio interview in which he said that \$40 billion should instead go towards addressing domestic issues such as inflation and immigration.

**What to watch:** The new coalition's influence will soon be put to the test when the Senate votes on Finland's and Sweden's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

- The measure is unlikely to draw nearly as much opposition as the Ukraine aid bill.
- Heritage continues to support NATO expansion, and the America First Policy Institute, a nonprofit run by Trump alumni, has also backed the move by Finland and Sweden. Meanwhile, Vought's group, the Center for Renewing America, opposes the move.

**The bottom line:** The coalition nonetheless sees momentum. Dan Caldwell, vice president of foreign policy for Koch network group Stand Together, tells Axios, "I am expecting to see most of these groups heavily involved in future debates over NATO expansion, increasing America's military presence in Europe, and ending our endless wars in Iraq, Syria and Somalia.

- "We might not agree on every individual issue, but I think we all share a sense that the foreign policy that was dominant on the right prior to Trump was not making America safer and was becoming increasingly unpopular with the GOP base."