

# RS

## ‘New Right’ takes it back to old pre-neocon roots, starting with Ukraine

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For a time, it seemed as if Russia’s war in Ukraine would set the foreign policy debate among conservatives back to 2003. Opposition to the Kremlin dated back to the Cold War. The country was understandably repulsed by President Vladimir Putin’s aggression against a weaker neighbor. Republicans in Congress instantly saw President Joe Biden as weak, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as strong.

The Republican template of running against Democrats who are soft on Russia goes back decades. Inflation, high gas prices, and spikes in violent crime had the GOP thinking Biden had brought back all the old chestnuts that helped them make Jimmy Carter one-term president and Reagan a two-time winner.

That isn’t exactly how things have happened, however. When Biden recently sought a new aid package for Ukraine that the Democratic-controlled Congress made even bigger, the dissents came not from the peacenik left but the populist and libertarian right.

Yes, opposition to the \$40 billion bill that Biden promptly signed into law was a minority position. But zero Democrats in either chamber of Congress voted against it. All 11 no votes in the Senate and 57 in the House came from Republicans.

The Republican arguments against the legislation were a mixture of standard fiscal conservatism, concerns about escalating the war or drawing the United States and its allies directly into it, and the belief that “America First” meant myriad pressing domestic concerns should take precedence over sending our tax dollars to a foreign land. As usual, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., took the lead.

But Paul wasn’t alone. Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., used the bill as a jumping off point to repudiate neoconservatism in Compact, a new publication of the populist right. “Not so long ago, Republicans said they had sworn off nation-building,” he wrote, citing the failure of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. “But apparently not,” Hawley continued. “Now nation-building is back with force, with a massive aid package to Ukraine that makes that country a US client state. Up next: a debate over expanding NATO.”

Soon there were reports that the conservative-libertarian coalition that has for over a decade sought to defang the GOP hawks are seeing this as their big moment. And they have as unlikely allies some of the biggest guns in the conservative movement, including new Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts.

“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, saying that the new head of the venerable think tank that helped arm the Ronald Reagan revolution was shifting its gears closer to those of the Cato Institute and Koch network.

“Roberts said Heritage’s rank and file donors have generally come down firmly on the restraint side of the foreign policy fight,” *Axios* stated.

In an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, Roberts positioned the “conservative minded Americans” somewhere between neocons and “isolationists,” and called Ukraine an opportunity to have the kind of debate the right should have had after the Cold War but didn’t.

“The war in Ukraine may finally force conservatives into the intramural foreign policy debate they have put off for more than 30 years,” Roberts wrote. “Heritage is committed to President Ronald Reagan’s belief in ‘peace through strength.’ Today, conservatives differ over how to apply that maxim.”

Strikingly, Roberts called for a place at the table for populist and libertarian critics of the Beltway foreign policy consensus. Was conservatism well served by accusing skeptics of the Iraq War of ‘hating their country?’” he asked, linking to David Frum’s long-ago screed against the antiwar right. “Or accusing amnesty opponents of racism? Calling TARP-doubters ‘nihilists?’”

At an Intercollegiate Studies Institute event in Washington, D.C., Roberts even said that parts of the conservative fusionist coalition (the Cold War warriors) might have to accept that an interventionist foreign policy is too expensive for the current moment.

Even conservative voices who are far more sympathetic to the neoconservatism of decades past recognize older conservative tendencies are starting to reassert themselves. Weekly Standard alum Matthew Continetti pointed out that Presidents Calvin Coolidge and Donald Trump shared a skepticism of “overseas entanglements” that during the Cold War, and certainly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, seemed quaint to many Republicans.

“Mr. Trump’s views now dominate the Republican Party. For anyone who grew up with the GOP of Ronald Reagan, the two Bushes and John McCain, this can be strange and bewildering,” he writes in his new book *The Right: The Hundred Year War for American Conservatism*. “But in many respects, it’s a return to the principles of the 1920s, of Coolidge and his predecessor Warren Harding.”

There were rumblings of these principles before, especially in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Pat Buchanan won millions of votes as the top conservative alternative

to the Republican establishment in 1992 and 1996. He opposed not only the disastrous war in Iraq that would come later, in 2003, but the earlier, seemingly successful one in 1991.

Even in Buchanan's third, least successful run for the White House in 2000, his presence on the ballot and influence on the conservative foreign policy debate throughout the 1990s, when many rank-and-file Republicans opposed Bill Clinton's bombing of Serbia over Kosovo, forced George W. Bush into such locutions as "exit strategies" and "a humble foreign policy."

The 9/11 attacks intervened, and subsequently so did the United States in the Middle East with near (though not quite) unanimous support on the right. Just six Republicans in the House voted against authorizing the Iraq war, joined by the liberal Lincoln Chafee in the Senate.

As that war went south, dissent finally began to emerge — first quietly in the person of Sen. Chuck Hagel, a Nebraska Republican who voted for the authorization of force and would later serve as secretary of defense under a Democratic president who had opposed it, then loudly in Rep. Ron Paul of Texas, who was one of those six Republican no votes. A fellow Texan, then House Majority Leader Dick Armey, later publicly regretted his vote for the war, as did the "freedom fries" crusader himself, Rep. Walter Jones of North Carolina.

But Paul's Republican presidential campaigns in 2008 and 2012 received more votes than former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's. They also demonstrated there was a future for antiwar conservatism and right-libertarianism. In between those runs, his son Rand was elected to the Senate. The Tea Party split on foreign policy.

Trump may not have been as principled as the Pauls and he made some bad national security hires. But he said many of the right things about foreign policy and had a far greater hold over the Republican faithful than Ron Paul or even Pat Buchanan. Under Trump's watch, the top conservative pundit in America, rounding into his prime in terms of influence, opposed wars even more than the then-president.

Many of these trends have continued post-Trump. Time will tell if they accelerate. The early results after the withdrawal from Afghanistan did not look encouraging. Jim DeMint, who by the end of his tenure as a Republican senator from South Carolina voted to repeal the Iraq war authorization, tried to nudge Heritage in a more libertarian- and populist-friendly direction as the think tank's president. It did not end well.

Divisions also loom over China. Many on the new right would like to see the U.S. turn its attention away from Europe and the Middle East in order to direct more of its focus on Beijing. "The key question is how expanding the European alliance will help Washington confront our most serious foreign-policy challenge — the rise of China — and build our strength at home," Hawley wrote.

Hawley said much the same thing about China in a letter to the Trump Defense Department in favor of Afghanistan withdrawal. "The American people deserve an end to this war," he wrote. "They deserve to know their sons and daughters will not be put in harm's way unless it is absolutely necessary. And they deserve to see their tax dollars actually being used to defend

them — from Chinese domination, above all — or reinvested at home, in their families and communities.” Conservative realists are split on how to deal with China.

But as Biden has moved from cautious talk about “small incursions” into Ukraine that might not merit much of a transatlantic response to something that looks much closer to a U.S. proxy war with Russia, it has been easy for Republican intervention skeptics to oppose him and for ambitious political opportunists inside the GOP to join them.

Pro-restraint currents on the right have to be weighed against the neutering of the antiwar left that often occurs under Democratic presidents. It is easy to forget that half the Democrats in the Senate — including Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Chuck Schumer, Harry Reid, and, yes, Biden — voted to follow Bush into war in Iraq. The Republican resistance on Russia-Ukraine is stronger, but the bipartisan consensus still remains hawkish.

How this all shakes out is anyone’s guess, and won’t be entirely decided by philosophical debates. But at least conservatives are having one, in a way that seemed unlikely back in 2003.