

The Overstretch Dilemma: Navigating the Precarious Balance of US Foreign Aid

Written by Andrew Latham and Raymond Yu

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/11/09/the-overstretch-dilemma-navigating-the-precarious-balance-of-us-foreign-aid/>

ANDREW LATHAM AND RAYMOND YU, NOV 9 2023

In the throes of a rapidly evolving global landscape, the United States finds itself at a crossroads, navigating the delicate balance between domestic obligations and international commitments. The recent military engagements in Ukraine and the spike in hostilities in Gaza have cast a glaring spotlight on what historian Paul Kennedy termed as 'imperial overstretch', where the nation's global ambitions are being tested against the backdrop of finite resources and political will. This concept rings truer than ever as the US endeavors to uphold its strategic interests in disparate regions. On one hand, there's the pressing challenge of countering Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, with Ukraine serving as a pivotal battleground. On the other, the enduring alliance with Israel pulls the US into the maelstrom of Middle Eastern politics, especially in light of the recent Gaza hostilities.

These dual crises not only exemplify the multifaceted nature of US military aid but also underscore a larger narrative of a superpower grappling with its role on the world stage amidst burgeoning fiscal and political pressures at home. The juxtaposition of robust aid to Israel against the backdrop of a contentious aid package for Ukraine presents a nuanced tableau, reflecting the broader dilemma of resource allocation amid diverging geopolitical priorities. The labyrinth of military aid, intertwined with domestic political discourse and an increasingly scrutinized budget, lays bare the complex machinations of a nation striving to honor its global commitments while staying the course on the home front.

The US Congress, in a bid to uphold commitments to Ukraine, orchestrated four spending packages amassing to \$113 billion following Russia's incursion. A significant chunk of this, around \$53 billion, was designated for military and civil aid by May 2022. This robust financial foray was aimed at various domains including military equipment, migration, refugee assistance, energy, and countering disinformation. Yet, as the fiscal year 2024 looms, the budgetary ramifications of these decisions are surfacing with a vengeance. The Pentagon's allocation of more than \$16.8 billion in aid to Ukraine, including substantial military equipment like High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems and anti-armor systems, has left Army budget planners in a quandary. The dilemma of whether to restock or upgrade the US Army's own reserves amidst these allocations is a stark reflection of the broader resource allocation conundrum.

Parallelling this, the recent escalations in Gaza invited a robust US response. President Biden's pledge of unwavering support to Israel, marked by military aid replenishment and strategic military movements, delineates the challenges of managing multiple global crises simultaneously. The discussions that ensued, revolving around balancing aid between Israel and Ukraine, are further complicated by legislative hurdles and the political dynamics within the US. Proposals to amalgamate aid packages for both allies aimed to secure bipartisan support, yet they unveil the intricacies of navigating foreign aid amidst a polarized political arena.

The economic imprints of these global crises are far from insular. The war in Ukraine orchestrated a "massive and historic energy shock" to the markets, slowing economic growth, with potential ripple effects on US economic and foreign policies. The broader economic repercussions underscore the interconnectedness of global crises and their impact on domestic fiscal landscapes.

The pulse of public sentiment reverberates through this complex narrative. Support for arming Ukraine has seen a

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perceptible decline among both Democrats and Republicans. This cautious populace, wary of further military engagements abroad, mirrors a broader national introspection on the sustainability of current foreign aid dynamics. Senator Chris Murphy highlighted the House's readiness to support both Israel and Ukraine aid. This was not a bipartisan consensus. Conversely, a group of GOP Houses did oppose to their continuous aid to Ukraine, compared to the ubiquitous lean on support for Israel. These contrasting viewpoints from key political figures could be woven into the narrative to showcase the diversity of opinions within the US political spectrum regarding military aid.

Despite the divergence, a general decline in the public support to Ukraine is observed. The figure in Democrats has decreased from 61% to 52% and the Republicans are experiencing similar situation from 39% of support to 35 %, indicating less public support for further military engagement. Another study also shows that 4 out of 10 people show no support to Ukraine's continuous aid. These all indicated a decline in the general support of foreign military engagement. Moreover, the White House's recent announcement of a \$200 million aid, coupled with an acknowledgment of the nearing aid conclusion, portrays a realistic depiction of the situation. The sentiment echoed by the White House reflects a nationwide contemplation of the sustainability and implications of the US's global military engagements.

The failed \$6 billion aid package for Ukraine is but a microcosm of the broader fiscal challenges that loom. It's a tangible manifestation of the imperial overstretch concept, where the strain between domestic resource allocation and global commitments is palpable. The distinction between U.S. foreign aid to Israel and Ukraine underscores the strategic priorities and the geopolitical calculus at play. Israel has been a long-standing ally of the U.S. in the Middle East, a region rife with complex political and military dynamics. The unwavering support for Israel, as reiterated by President Biden, aligns with a historical policy stance stretching back half a century. The U.S.-Israel relationship is bolstered by a significant military aid package, notably a 10-year deal agreed upon in 2016, entailing \$38 billion to cover annual grants. This military assistance underscores the U.S.'s vested interest in Israel's security and stability, which, in turn, serves as a linchpin for U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East.

On the other hand, Ukraine, a nation grappling with Russian aggression, has emerged as a frontline state in the broader U.S. strategy of countering Russian expansionism. Post-invasion, the U.S. took a leading role in fortifying Ukraine through military equipment, training, economic aid, and a suite of diplomatic support aimed at thwarting Russia's offensive maneuvers. However, contrasting the robust and enduring military support to Israel, the aid to Ukraine, although substantial, reflects a more reactive stance to emerging geopolitical exigencies, with some times being irresolute in providing the most advanced arms to Ukraine.

Conversely, the U.S.'s military backing for Israel, particularly highlighted during the recent Gaza hostilities, underscores a longstanding strategic partnership as stated. President Biden's unyielding support manifested in additional military assistance to replenish assets like the Iron Dome, and significant military posturing with the deployment of the USS Gerald Ford aircraft carrier group to the Eastern Mediterranean, showcasing a robust show of force aimed at deterring regional adversaries like Iran and Hezbollah from escalating the conflict further, largely differ from the commitment that US put in the Ukraine stage, both from military commitment and size of the militaries that are sending to the region.

It is noticeable that U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin affirmed the Pentagon's readiness to continue aid to both nations despite the distinct challenges they face. For Ukraine, aid has been instrumental in repelling Russian forces, orchestrating counteroffensives, and pushing frontlines eastward. The Biden administration alone has contributed nearly \$44 billion in security aid to Ukraine since Russia's invasion. In Israel's case, the swift aid, including key munitions and Iron Dome interceptors, aimed at protecting Israeli citizens from Hamas's rocket attacks, exhibited the U.S.'s prompt response to safeguard its ally .

However, the contrasting pace and nature of aid reflect not only the U.S.'s strategic priorities but also the political and fiscal dynamics at play. For instance, a \$24 billion request for more Ukraine assistance has seen delays, whereas aid for Israel tends to pass swiftly through bipartisan support. Moreover, the aid's financial dimension, especially towards Ukraine, echoes a growing concern amid some U.S. citizens, where public support for arming Ukraine has seen a decline. The scenario underscores the U.S.'s overstretch dilemma, where the balance between domestic resource

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allocation and global commitments is increasingly scrutinized, the difficulty in reaching every corner of the world of their concern, showcasing a nuanced policy landscape the U.S. navigates in its foreign aid disbursements amid a complex global geopolitical matrix.

The concomitant unfolding of the Gaza hostilities and the Ukraine crisis has laid bare the U.S.'s overstretch dilemma. Each crisis, with its unique geopolitical ramifications, demands a hefty toll on U.S. resources and political capital. The contrast in aid dynamics between Israel and Ukraine reflects not merely a resource allocation challenge but a deeper strategic prioritization conundrum. The U.S., while steadfast in its support for Israel, is navigating a precarious balance in Ukraine, a theater where the stakes are high, and the fiscal and political ramifications are profound. While the US also need to keep in mind, in the Indo-Pacific theatre, the biggest perceived rivalry China, will take many of the attention of the US global policy directives.

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