

The war before the mid-terms: red flags for America's political future

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The US is moving toward the mid-term elections under conditions that no longer look like normal democratic competition. Abroad, the Ukraine war is being pushed into a new phase, Iran is an on-again-off-again switch remaining a live trigger point, China is testing missiles while



using minerals and diplomacy to test the Indo-Pacific order, and energy markets continue to signal how quickly one regional war can become a global economic event. At home, President Trump's attempt to return the US to its older constitutional and political operating system is colliding with entrenched interests that benefit from permanent crisis.

The red flags are now visible. Russia's latest barrage on Kyiv, coming on the eve of a NATO summit, was not merely another battlefield event. It was a message to the alliance and Ukraine's patrons that escalation has become the language of the conflict. Reports said Russian strikes came immediately before NATO leaders gathered to discuss Ukraine and defence spending.

Executive Summary

The central danger before the mid-terms is the attempts to use foreign-policy crises narrow America's - specifically Trump and his administration's - political choices. A wider war, or even a sustained war scare, would allow the permanent security class to argue that domestic political disruption is irresponsible, that Trump must be constrained, and that Congress must remain aligned with the interventionist consensus.

Ukraine is the most obvious theatre. Prime Minister Mark Carney's meeting with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the G7 Summit confirmed that Canada is not stepping back.

Ottawa said Canada had provided \$2.8 billion in military assistance to Ukraine this year alone, renewed Operation UNIFIER, and imposed sanctions on more than 3,400 individuals and entities, and more than 600 vessels since 2014. Canada has also announced a further \$2.3 billion infrastructure loan tied to frozen Russian assets.

This matters because European leaders are not simply defending Ukraine; they are also defending their own political survival. The EU model has been failing for decades: high debt, weak productivity, overregulated industry, energy insecurity, demographic decline and welfare promises that cannot be funded for much longer. A long war gives them an emergency explanation for stagnation. It allows them to blame Moscow, defence requirements and sanctions blowback for a financial reckoning that was already fast approaching.

Zelenskyy is now all in with Europe and NATO. His government's escalatory decisions, including long-range strikes and demands for stronger air defences, are designed to keep the alliance locked in. The problem is that every move meant to strengthen Ukraine also risks pushing Vladimir Putin toward the very position Russian hardliners have demanded: stop fighting a limited war and go all out. If Moscow concludes that NATO is no longer a supplier but a direct strategic participant, the war could very well widen quickly.

The Indo-Pacific is another red flag. China's rare ICBM test into the Pacific alarmed regional powers and signalled that Beijing is willing to demonstrate strategic reach at moments of global disorder. The missile launch has been described as stirring security concerns in a region already tense over China's territorial claims and rivalry with the US. China has also warned against a Japan-India economic security agreement, after Tokyo and New Delhi moved to deepen co-operation in semiconductors, critical minerals and artificial intelligence. Beijing's warning that such co-operation 'should not target a third party' shows how economic-security blocs are becoming pre-war architecture.

Critical minerals are a further warning light. China's stalling of Japan-bound exports of key materials demonstrates that supply chains can be weaponised without a shot being fired. In a crisis, the West's dependence on Chinese-controlled inputs would become a strategic vulnerability, not a market inconvenience.

Then there is Iran. Trump's warning that there would either be a deal with Iran or the US would "*finish the job*" turned energy markets and Asian equities sharply lower.

OPEC+ later moved to raise output quotas as Middle East tensions eased, but the Iran conflict had produced an energy crisis, disrupted Strait of Hormuz traffic, and driven Brent crude near \$120 before prices fell back. That is precisely the kind of shock that can be used to override domestic political debate.

Conclusion

The pre-mid-term danger is not one isolated war. It is convergence. Ukraine pressures Russia. Iran pressures energy. China pressures the Pacific and supply chains. Europe pressures Washington to remain committed. Canada, under Carney, is positioning itself as a major funder and enforcer of the Ukraine war effort. Each front can be described as separate, but politically they serve the same function: keeping Trump on the back foot.

For Trump, the congressional outcome is decisive. If he wins the Senate and/or Congress, he has a pathway to force the bureaucracy, the courts, the intelligence community and the foreign-policy establishment back under political control. If he does not, one of two outcomes becomes plausible.

The first is that Trump is forced to become a modern-day Abraham Lincoln: a president governing through a national fracture, using the full weight of executive authority to preserve the Union against institutional resistance, elite defiance and possible state-level obstruction. The second is darker. If millions of Americans conclude that elections no longer change policy, that war is being used to nullify their vote, and that the political system cannot correct itself, then civil conflict becomes thinkable.

The red flags are not subtle. War abroad is being normalised as the organising principle of politics at home. The mid-terms may therefore decide more than control of Congress. They may decide whether the US returns to constitutional politics or enters a period in which foreign war and domestic rupture become indistinguishable.

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