



Can chaotic Washington manage looming crises?

Special to the AAS

The 118th Congress of the United States got off to a chaotic start in the first week of January, raising serious questions about Washington's ability to address the domestic and global crises as they escalate in 2023.

For the first time since 1860, the House of Representatives failed to elect a Speaker until the fifteenth ballot. To win on that ballot, California Republican Kevin McCarthy had to make so many concessions to an ultra-right-wing bloc within his own party, that it remains to be seen whether he will be able to survive.

Among the most challenging concessions: Any single member of the Republican caucus in the House can call for his resignation, a procedure called a "motion to vacate", triggering an immediate vote. The radical wing of the GOP will be holding a gun to McCarthy's head for the next two years, particularly since he agreed to appoint three members of the Freedom Caucus to the House Rules Committee. That committee controls which bills are allowed to reach the House floor for a vote, and has historically been one of the most powerful weapons in the hands of a Speaker.

In the midterm elections of November 2022, the Republicans took back the majority in the House, but by a narrow margin. Republicans have 222 seats, Democrats have 212 seats, and there is one vacant seat due to the death of Virginia Democrat Donald McEachin after his re-election. A special election will take place on 21 February to replace him. In recent years the district has been solidly Democrat, with McEachin winning re-election with 64 percent of the vote in November.

A bill requires 218 votes to pass the House. McCarthy cannot afford to lose five votes.

The populist, anti-government Freedom Caucus, which blocked McCarthy's election as Speaker for nearly five days, has 44 current members of the House, giving them a significant ability to block legislation of which they disapprove. Most members of the Freedom Caucus supported Donald Trump and backed his false claims of massive vote fraud in the 2020 elections. An extremist core within the Caucus actively defended the 6 January 2021 assault on the US Capitol and several have been under Justice Department investigation over possible material support to the rioters.

Prospects for legislative gridlock are thus very high, at a time when the world is facing the danger of world war, a looming sovereign debt crisis, ongoing supply chain disruptions, and global food shortages. Alarm has been voiced, including in a widely circulated article by a former deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund, that dozens of developing countries face default on their sovereign debt in 2023 because of rising interest rates and inflation of energy and food costs.

First test: the debt ceiling

On 12 January Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen informed Speaker McCarthy that the Federal government will reach its debt ceiling within days. Congress must either waive the ceiling or authorise additional spending to avoid default on its debt, as well. Yellen made clear that Treasury is prepared to take emergency measures to delay a default, but that Congress must act soon or risk jeopardising the full faith and credit



Kevin McCarthy is sworn in as Speaker of the House, finally. Photo: AFP/Olivier Douliery

of the US dollar. Early June is a drop-dead deadline, according to Yellen, after which the Treasury will have no accounting tricks left for avoiding default.

Among the concessions that McCarthy made to secure his election as Speaker, however, was a pledge to refuse any increase in the debt ceiling that is not offset by significant budget cuts.

As serious a matter as the debt of the United States is, there are other, equally pressing issues the Biden Administration and the new Congress face. These include continued funding for the current government in Ukraine. The Biden Administration will no longer have a blank check from Congress for funding the Ukrainian military and government. There is now the possibility of a long-overdue check on excessive Executive Branch usurpation of power in this regard, even as the Biden Administration remains committed to an endless flow of weapons and cash to Kiev "for as long as it takes". During the last Congress, efforts to establish an inspector general to oversee the weapons pipeline and money flows to Ukraine were blocked, but such an appointment is expected to be re-introduced early in the new Congress.

Another concession McCarthy made to secure the vote was a reduction in defence spending by US\$75 billion. The fiscal year 2023 defence budget that passed both Houses of Congress in December was US\$847 billion—exactly US\$75 billion above the FY2022 defence budget. The 2022 level is already well over half of federal budget discretionary spending.

Bipartisan China-bashing

The only issue where clear bipartisan majorities in both Houses of Congress exist is the drive for confrontation with China. On 10 January, in its second piece of legislation, the House voted by an overwhelming bipartisan vote, 365-65, to establish a Select Committee on China. Wisconsin Republican Mike Gallagher, a virulent critic of China, will chair it. Upon being named, Gallagher told reporters: "We're going to be looking big picture. What are the immediate things we need to do in order to prevent World War III from breaking out over Taiwan? And then what are the long-term investments we need to make to win this new Cold War with Communist China?"

Former CIA analyst Elissa Slotkin, now a House Democrat from Michigan, is actively seeking to be named the ranking Democrat on the new committee.

The race to confront China, while moving closer to a NATO war with Russia, is madness. The question for the Biden

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Administration and the 118th Congress is whether there is any possibility of bipartisan cooperation on issues other than the drive for war.

On 4 January, as McCarthy was in the middle of his desperate horse-trading, President Biden and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell travelled to Covington, Kentucky to celebrate the construction of a new bridge with funds from the bipartisan infrastructure bill, which passed the Congress and was signed into law in 2021. Biden and McConnell served together in the Senate for decades. With a razor-thin Democratic majority in the Senate, and with the potential

for gridlock in the House, the Biden-McConnell joint appearance was presented by the White House as a signal that Biden is prepared to negotiate with Republicans for a limited legislative agenda, even as the 2024 presidential campaign is about to kick off.

Biden tried to highlight the visit: "It sends an important message to the entire country: we can work together. We can get things done. We can move the nation forward if we just drop a little bit of our egos and focus on what is needed for the country."

Easier said than done.