

US House approves Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan aid, threatens TikTok

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Online Desk: The US House of Representatives on Saturday approved long-delayed military aid to Ukraine in a rare show of bipartisan unity, while also bolstering Israel and Taiwan defenses and threatening to ban Chinese-owned TikTok.

The four bills in the \$95 billion package were overwhelmingly approved in quick succession, though they leave the future of Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson in some doubt as he seeks to fend off angry far-right detractors.

US President Joe Biden said in a statement the legislation would “deliver critical support to Israel and Ukraine; provide desperately needed humanitarian aid to Gaza, Sudan, Haiti and other locations... and bolster security and stability in the Indo-Pacific.”

He praised lawmakers who came together across party lines “to answer history’s call.”

Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky welcomed the \$61 billion earmarked for his country, saying the military and economic assistance would “save thousands and thousands of lives.”

Not surprisingly, Russia took the opposite view.

“It will further enrich the United States of America and ruin Ukraine even more, by killing even more Ukrainians because of the Kyiv regime,” said presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov, state news agency TASS reported.

The US Senate will take the bill up on Tuesday. Senate leader Chuck Schumer indicated his chamber would act quickly, saying in a statement Saturday that “the finish line is now in sight ... America will deliver yet again.”

The bills are the product of months of acrimonious negotiations, pressure from US allies and repeated pleas for assistance from Zelensky.

The United States has been the chief military backer of Ukraine in its war against Russia, but Congress has not approved large-scale funding for its ally for nearly a year and a half, mainly because of cross-aisle bickering.

Biden and Democratic lawmakers in Congress have been pushing for a major new weapons package for Ukraine for months.

But Republicans, influenced by the party’s presidential candidate Donald Trump, have been reluctant to provide funding to Kyiv for the drawn-out conflict.

The financing of the war has become a point of contention ahead of a presidential election in November that is expected to pit Biden against Trump once again.

Johnson, after months of hesitation, finally threw his support behind the aid package for Ukraine.

“To put it bluntly, I’d rather send bullets to Ukraine than American boys,” Johnson said.

Biden spoke with Johnson and his Democratic counterpart Hakeem Jeffries after Saturday's vote to "thank them for their leadership and putting our national security first," the White House said.

The handful of far-right Republicans who had threatened to engineer Johnson's ouster if he pressed the Ukraine vote appeared to back away Saturday, at least temporarily.

"I'm actually going to let my colleagues go home and hear from their constituents" about their anger over the vote, congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said on CNN.

The Ukraine bill also allows Biden to confiscate and sell Russian assets and provide the money to Ukraine to finance reconstruction, a move that has been embraced by other G7 nations.

– TikTok ban? –

At Biden's request, some \$8 billion under one bill would be used to counter China through investment in submarine infrastructure and boosting competition with Beijing on projects built in developing countries.

Several billion dollars would be devoted to weapons for Taiwan. The first of the bills passed Saturday would force social media platform TikTok to divest from its Chinese parent company ByteDance or face a nationwide ban in the United States, where it has around 170 million users.

Western officials have voiced alarm over the popularity of TikTok with young people, alleging that it is subservient to Beijing and a conduit to spread propaganda — claims denied by the company.

TikTok sharply denounced the bill, saying it "would trample the free speech rights of 170 million Americans, devastate seven million businesses, and shutter a platform that contributes \$24 billion to the US economy annually," a TikTok spokesman said.

A total of \$13 billion in military assistance has been allocated for America's historically Israel in its war against Hamas in Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the "much appreciated aid bill" showed strong support for Israel and "defends Western civilization."

The money will essentially be used to reinforce Israel's Iron Dome air defenses.

More than \$9 billion will be earmarked to address "the dire need for humanitarian assistance for Gaza as well as other vulnerable populations around the world," the legislation says.

Officials of NATO, the European Union and Germany welcomed passage of the Ukraine bill in the House.