

Systemic Chaos:

One Year of US-Russian Talks on Ukraine

Abstract

Europe is facing a strategic dilemma. The United States is no longer willing to commit itself unconditionally to the defence of Europe or to uphold the international legal order. In the many rounds of talks with Moscow on the fate of Ukraine, Trump's envoys represent neither the interests of Ukraine nor those of Europe. At the same time, only Washington holds the military power to effectively deter Russia and prevent renewed Russian aggression in the aftermath of a ceasefire agreement. For Europe, therefore, there is currently no alternative to keeping the US on board as the pivotal power centre of NATO.

But Europe can and must do much more itself. For example, its economic leverage to prevent third-party states from circumventing sanctions is far from exhausted. Tougher action against Moscow's shadow fleet of oil tankers is the right thing to do. Europe needs a new approach to military and defence policy cooperation, coordinated military build-up, including the creation of a European defence community based on the 'coalition of the willing' which includes Great Britain and Canada.

1. One Year of US-Russian Talks on Ukraine with no results

The record of a year of talks between Washington and Moscow aimed at ending the war against Ukraine is bleak. Ukraine's negotiating position has not improved since Trump II, but rather deteriorated considerably. On the table is a peace and economic package consisting of several documents, based on a "20-point plan" from the end of December.¹ The latter is a partially toned-down version of the scandalous 28-point plan from the US, which became public in November and largely reflected Putin's war aims. The documents, as of end of January, reflect the partial consensus with the US that the Europeans and Ukrainians achieved after raising their massive concerns against the "28 points." The 20 point-plan forms a starting point, albeit a volatile one given Trump's erratic behaviour, for the ongoing talks with Moscow.

The territorial issue remains a key point of contention between the US and Europe. Should Russia be granted political and military control of the parts of the Donbas not yet occupied by Moscow? The US, which wants to accommodate Putin here, would thereby open a gateway for Moscow's military to advance into Ukraine's heartland.

The security status of Ukraine after the war will be a pivotal point for European security as well. Last year, Zelensky yielded to pressure from Trump and declared his willingness to conditionally renounce the pursuit of NATO membership enshrined in the Ukrainian constitution. Instead, security guarantees are being discussed, equivalent to the mutual defence clause under Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which are intended to deter Moscow from another attack on Ukraine.

¹ Zelensky reveals full 20-point peace plan draft backed by Ukraine, US. In: 'The Kyiv Independent', 24.12.2025. <https://kyivindependent.com/zelensky-reveals-20-point-peace-plan-draft-backed-by-ukraine-us>

Crucial for their effectiveness will be, above all, direct US participation, comprehensive electronic monitoring of the ceasefire line, and the deployment of NATO troops on Ukrainian soil.

Currently there is no indication that Putin is ready to engage into serious negotiations and halt his aggression. Despite intensive talks with Washington, Moscow is intensifying its ground attacks along the front line and brutally bombing the country's energy infrastructure throughout the freezing cold and darkness of winter. Putin will continue to wage war, as long as he can expect to achieve his goal of Ukraine's total subjugation and a military intimidation of the Europeans. He is using the talks with Washington, for the time being, as a welcome stage to portray himself as a peace-loving and negotiating "partner" on equal footing with the US, while denouncing Ukraine and the Europeans as opponents of peace, a tactic that resonates with Europe's right-wing populist parties.

For Trump's invitation of Russia to the negotiating table, Ukrainians and Europeans are paying a double price. The exclusive negotiating format between close confidants of both presidents meets Putin's desire for Russia's diplomatic rehabilitation and keeps Ukraine and the European Union out.

In terms of content, Washington's position also aligns closely with Russian war aims. For Trump, based on his apparent fundamental sympathy for Putin, everything seems negotiable. His guiding motives are to reinforce his self-image as a peacemaker and to open up new business opportunities for the US economy. He presents himself as an outside "mediator," even though the US remains the central axis and powerhouse of the Transatlantic Alliance.

Ukraine and the Europeans, represented by a "coalition of the willing" led by, among others, Germany, France, and Great Britain, are repeatedly compelled to intervene in an attempt to prevent Trump from unilateral erratic actions. With the Berlin Summit on December 14/15, 2025, and a high-level meeting in Paris with US participation on January 6,² Europe took the initiative and introduced a "multinational force for Ukraine" and a mechanism for monitoring a ceasefire under US auspices. The supporters of the Paris Declaration, including the US, are offering "binding commitments" to secure the ceasefire, which are also intended to include the use of military force. Details are not known so far.

Meanwhile, Russia explicitly rules out the deployment of NATO troops near its border and within Ukraine. Furthermore, the US itself is doing everything in its power to undermine the credibility of any guarantees Washington might offer. Trump's territorial claims to Greenland in open breach of international law, and his open contempt of the rules-based international order (as "cloud castle abstractions" as spelt out in the US National Defense Strategy of January 23) are undermining the Transatlantic Alliance.

The US's illegal attack on Venezuela and its claims to Greenland without excluding the use of military force are perfect opportunities for Putin. Indirectly, Trump's rude actions legitimize Russia's claims to rule and dominance in the post-Soviet space — a mirror image of Trump's approach towards the US-reserved "Western Hemisphere" encompassing North and South America as defined in the National Security Strategy of November 2025.

² Paris Declaration – 'Robust Security Guarantees for a Solid and Lasting Peace in Ukraine', issued by France. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/01/06/robust-security-guarantees-for-a-solid-and-lasting-peace-in-ukraine-statement-of-the-coalition-of-the-willing-issued-by-france/>

Against this backdrop, the world is far away from a settlement for Ukraine, which should at least be based on:

- the confirmation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty,
- the establishment of the current front line as the contact line for a ceasefire, categorically excluding any legally binding territorial cession,³
- solid and legally binding security guarantees.

This policy paper will offer a critical review of one year of US-Russian meetings on Ukraine. It will demonstrate how closely aligned Trump and Putin are in their understanding of rule, power, and geopolitical spheres of influence. The equivalent of the Western Hemisphere, i.e., the American continent, is Putin's concept of the "Russian world", i.e., the post-Soviet space. It is therefore not surprising that the US 28-point plan, even if drafted wholly or partly in Moscow, reflects genuine thinking of the Trump administration. A subsequent comparison of the National Security Strategy with the Russian Federation's foreign policy concept reveals a high degree of ideological affinity, a finding confirmed by a look at the [US National Defense Strategy](#) published on January 23.

How credible are future US security guarantees to secure a ceasefire or "peace deal" given Trump's geostrategic affinity with Putin? And what room for manoeuvre and options remain for Europe — "with, without, or against the US"⁴?

2. Fatal Push for a "Deal": The US 28-Point Plan

The US positions on territorial issues, Ukraine's NATO membership perspective, and security guarantees were outlined very early on, on February 12, 2025, by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at a meeting of NATO's Ukraine Defence Contact Group in Brussels. Even at this early stage, the initial proposal largely accommodates Putin's war aims⁵:

- No return of Ukraine to its pre-2014 borders (Putin: *recognition of Crimea, the "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, and the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions as parts of the Russian Federation*),
- No NATO membership (Putin: *neutral, non-aligned, and nuclear-weapon-free status for Ukraine, its demilitarization and denazification*),
- Substantially increased European participation in the financial and military support of Ukraine (Putin: *no claim to compensation against Russia for war damages*),
- No deployment of US troops or US peacekeepers in Ukraine (Putin: *no deployment of foreign troops or military infrastructure in Ukraine*),

³ Including an Article 5-like mechanism involving the US, monitoring of the ceasefire and military support for Ukraine.

⁴ See Sabine Fischer/Margarete Klein/Janis Kluge: 'Russia policy without, with or against the USA? What works and what doesn't.' In: Barbara Lippert / Stefan Mair (eds.), 'With, without, against Washington: Redefining Europe's relations with the USA', SWP Study 3, Berlin January 2026, 31-35.

⁵ Putin presented his war aims, addressed directly to Kyiv, at a conference in the Russian Foreign Ministry on June 14, 2024, the eve of the international Ukraine conference on the Bürgenstock in Switzerland (June 15-16), which was boycotted by Russia. The statements by Putin in italics are based on this source: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/7428>

- no peacekeeping under NATO command⁶ (Putin: see above).

With this, Trump gave up three of Ukraine's central negotiating objectives from the outset: Restoration of territorial integrity, a NATO membership perspective, and the deployment of US troops to deter Russia from renewed attacks. There is no indication whatsoever of an effort to establish a negotiating position vis-à-vis Moscow commensurate with the security interests of Ukraine and Europe.

The first written, outlined US proposal for a "**peace deal**," which Trump's envoy Steve Witkoff presented to the Europeans in Paris on April 17,⁷ is based on precisely these parameters, but goes even further in accommodating Russia on the territorial issue and on sanctions:

- Provision of "robust" security guarantees not by the US, but by European states and "willing non-European states",
- Ruling out Ukraine's accession to NATO, while "permitting" its pursuit of EU membership,
- International legal ("de jure") recognition of the annexation of Crimea. "De facto" recognition of Russian control over Luhansk and the Russian-occupied parts of the Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions.
- Lifting of all sanctions imposed on Russia since 2014.

The demand for a "permanent ceasefire" is new, but its modalities and entry into force (ahead of, during, or only after the negotiations?) are not specified and therefore remain purely declaratory. The promise that Ukraine will be "fully rebuilt and financially compensated" also remains unsubstantiated without any indication as to the scope of compensations or the states liable to pay. The only points specifically addressed by formal agreement are the US minerals agreement with Ukraine and economic cooperation with Russia in energy and other industrial sectors. The point regarding the lifting of all sanctions imposed on Russia since 2014 is also unequivocally concrete.

The **US 28-Point Plan** from November 2025⁸ strengthens Putin's position and is a further blow to Zelenskyy's negotiating position. Moreover, it lays claim to US and Russian access to Russian sovereign assets frozen in Europe, which would complicate the enforcement of future compensation payments from Russia to Ukraine and bring the Europeans to the brink of division.⁹ The plan is an update of the Witkoff paper from April 17 and, like the latter, is guided by

⁶ <https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4064571/hegseth-calls-on-nato-allies-to-lead-europes-security-rules-out-support-for-ukr/>

⁷ Russia-Ukraine Deal Framework. <https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-peace-deal-proposals-set-out-by-us-talks-paris-2025-04-25/>

⁸ Reports suggesting that the plan might have been written entirely or partially by Russia were denied by Foreign Minister Rubio on November 23, 2025, in a post on the platform "X": "The peace proposal was authored by the U.S. ... It is based on input from the Russian side. But it is also based on previous and ongoing input from Ukraine."

⁹ The Europeans' original plan to use the frozen Russian central bank assets of around €210 billion directly as collateral or a source of loans failed due to resistance from Belgium, the host country of Euroclear, one of the world's largest clearing systems for international securities, which holds a large portion of Russia's assets. Instead, the EU is granting Ukraine a €90 billion loan for the years 2026-2027 based on EU bonds in which Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia are not participating. Ukraine will only have to repay the loan after receiving reparations. Whether the EU itself can access the Russian assets if necessary has been considered but not decided. See the conclusions of the European Council meeting of 18 December 2025, EUCO 24/25, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/peunwedz/de-20251218-european-council-conclusions.pdf>

the Hegseth parameters of February 12. However, in key areas, it goes even further in accommodating Russia¹⁰:

- **Security Guarantees:** Ukraine is promised “reliable security guarantees” (Point 5). However, it remains unclear who is supposed to provide these guarantees. The Europeans are not explicitly mentioned. Separately (Point 10), an undefined “US guarantee” is proposed, for which the US is to receive “compensation.” This is a declaratory omission that implicitly only reiterates that securing the peace agreement is not the responsibility of the Americans and therefore falls to the Europeans. Unlike in the Witkoff paper, there is no longer any mention of a ceasefire or the commencement of negotiations for its implementation.
- **The geopolitical dimension:** A halt to NATO’s “expansion” in exchange for Russia’s promise to refrain from invading “neighboring countries” (Point 3). With regard to Ukraine, the approach is twofold: It is expected to abandon Kyiv’s constitutionally enshrined aspiration for NATO membership and to commit itself constitutionally never to join the Atlantic alliance. At the same time, the NATO statutes are to be amended to include a provision prohibiting Ukraine's admission (7). EU membership, however, is permitted (11). The deployment of NATO troops in Ukraine is ruled out (8). According to point 4, a security policy dialogue "between Russia and NATO" will be initiated, "mediated" by Washington (as if the US weren't a central part of NATO!). Additionally, a US-Russian working group is to be established to implement the agreement (15). Ukraine's status as a non-nuclear-weapon state, in accordance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, is to be reconfirmed (18).
- **Territorial issues:** The US no longer intends to recognize Crimea "de jure" (as in the Witkoff paper from April), but "only" "de facto" as Russian territory. In addition to the Luhansk region, the plan now places the entire Donetsk region, including the part controlled by Ukraine, under the "de facto" sovereignty of Russia, even though it should be granted the status of a "neutral demilitarized buffer zone." In return, Russia is to return not only occupied parts of the Kharkiv region, but also other occupied territories to be "jointly determined." This "territory swap," as Washington euphemistically calls it, is a sham: The territories to be released by Moscow are of no strategic importance, whereas the evacuation of the northwestern part of the Donetsk region, still held by Ukraine, would create a huge breach in the fortified belt built around Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, opening the floodgates for a Russian invasion of the Ukrainian heartland. The front line in the south (in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson), on the other hand, is to be frozen along the "de facto" recognized contact line (point 21).
- **Interference in domestic politics and restriction of Ukraine's sovereignty:** In addition to curtailing Ukraine's freedom of association and imposing a constitutional amendment

¹⁰ For a comparison with Moscow's position, the latest comprehensive Russian draft of a framework agreement is used here. The Russian side presented this draft at the last round of negotiations with a Ukrainian delegation on June 1, 2025, in Istanbul. [Proposals of the Russian Federation (Memorandum) on the Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis. <https://solidaritet.dk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Ukrainian-and-Russian-memorandum-about-peace-proces-02.0625.pdf>]

to exclude NATO membership (see above)¹¹, the 28-point plan calls for limiting the number of Ukrainian troops to 600,000 (point 6), and adopts Russian demands for mandatory "denazification" and the protection of Russian-speaking minorities (point 20), and stipulates that new elections be held "within 100 days".

- **Economy and reconstruction:** While Ukraine is promised only a vague amount of aid for reconstruction, primarily without concrete funding commitments (point 12), there are a number of concrete promises to Russia, in particular its reintegration into the global economy through the lifting of sanctions, long-term economic cooperation with the USA, and its inclusion in the group of industrialized nations, which would re-transform the G7 to a Group of 8. Furthermore, 50% of the electricity generated by the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant is to be delivered to Russia. The plant is to be placed under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (19). The most damaging provision for Ukraine concerns the frozen Russian assets, the majority of which are to be transferred to a US-Russian investment fund. Only \$100 billion would remain for reconstruction and investment in Ukraine, of which the US claims 50% of the profits for itself.

In summary, with this document, Trump made the most concessions to Putin so far

- on the territorial issue (abandoning the entire Donetsk region, including the part held by Ukrainian forces),
- access to frozen Russian assets, which would be withdrawn for the purpose of direct compensation to Ukraine,
- by imposing a two-fold NATO ban on Ukraine (amending NATO statutes and the Ukrainian constitution),
- by establishing a Russian American "condominium" over Ukraine to monitor the ceasefire,
- by halting future NATO enlargement – which carries geopolitical implications far beyond Ukraine,
- by distancing the US from the Atlantic Alliance through its willingness to assume a mediating role between "NATO and Russia," as if the US were not part of NATO.

Concluding, Trump's desire for a swift end to the war is evident, a peace project Washington intends to promote by opportunistically yielding to Russian demands. In contrast, the security interests of Ukraine and Europe play no discernible role in US calculations. Over the course of the year, the US position, without any necessity, increasingly aligns itself with Putin's maximalist demands. The substantial US concessions in the 28-point plan were prompted by *additional* Russian demands, which Moscow had announced in March 2025. These new demands have been initially voiced in a reaction to Trump's concessions and in the expectation of extracting even more concessions from the new US President. It was only through, or rather since, Trump that Putin's stance has significantly hardened, as he has good reason to believe he can pocket quick additional profit from the Trump administration.

For the Europeans, the outcome of 2025 is sobering. Only through massive personal commitment and a high level of political capital, the formation of a "coalition of the willing," the

¹¹ Ukraine's renunciation of its aspiration for NATO membership, as enshrined in the Ukrainian Constitution (preamble), would require a constitutional amendment, which the Rada may not enact under martial law (Art. 157). Changes to Ukraine's territory require the consent of the population through a nationwide referendum (Art. 73).

preparation of security guarantees, repeated blitz trips to Washington, and the hosting of the Berlin-Ukraine Summit on December 14-15, 2025, and the Paris meeting on January 6, 2026, were they able to remove most of the toxic elements from the 28 points.

Besides Trump's well-known push for a quick "deal" with Russia to secure the Nobel Peace Prize and reap economic gains, are there deeper ideological or strategic reasons for the US's compliance with Moscow? A comparison of the recently published US National Security Strategy (November 2025) with Russian strategy papers demonstrates the strong affinity in the strategic thinking of Moscow and Washington.

3. The Shared Dream of a New Greater Order: Trump's "Western Hemisphere" and Putin's "Russian World"

Conversation on X

Elon Musk: *The EU should be abolished and sovereignty returned to individual countries so that governments can better represent their people.*

Dimitry Medvedev: *Exactly.*¹²

Russia and the US under Trump agree on fundamental geopolitical issues. Both consider themselves great powers with their own hemispheres (Russia: the post-Soviet space, the US: the American continents/Monroe Doctrine), for which they claim exclusive rights of domination. Both are opponents of the European liberal model. Both are looking down on Europe and the European Union as an allegedly decadent region, distorted beyond recognition by in the US security strategy of November 2025 migration flows and marked by "civilizational erosion." It is therefore only logical that Russia, in the US security strategy of November 2025, no longer appears as an aggressor and strategic threat. This stands in stark contrast to the joint security analysis of the transatlantic alliance, NATO's Strategic Concept (2022), according to which NATO states identified "Russia as the most significant and direct threat to the security of the alliance partners and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area." Washington has now officially distanced itself from this position.¹³

Since 2023, **Russia** has officially defined itself as an "independent state civilization" (*samobytnoe gosudarstvo-tsvilizatsiya*), a "powerful Eurasian and Euro-Pacific superpower" that unites "the Russian people and other peoples who constitute the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian World (*russsky mir*)."¹⁴ In the Russian political discourse, the term *gosudarstvo-tsvilizatsiya* serves as a code for an imperial superpower exercising political sovereignty over a separate hemisphere that transcends its own national borders, in which this

¹² Both on „X“, 6.12. 2025

¹³ NATO 2022, Strategic Concept, Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022, 4. <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>

¹⁴ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023, Chapter I,4. Website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/>.

superpower enjoys sole authority.¹⁵ The term also carries a strong anti-Western connotation.¹⁶ Russia thus defines itself not as a nation-state within its borders but describes its identity as a hegemonic power with a claim to power over states with "limited sovereignty" within its own sphere of influence. Putin elaborates on this in his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*¹⁷, denying Russia's southwestern neighbour a distinct historical and cultural identity and reducing Ukraine to a mere function of Russia.

The **US Security Strategy** proclaims the "restoration" of American primacy in the "Western Hemisphere" with the aim of protecting the homeland and its "access to the most important geographic areas in the region." This includes preventing non-hemispheric competitors from deploying any "threat capabilities" or gaining control over strategic resources.¹⁸ Even though the NSS treats "Europe" (Chapter 3C)¹⁹ in a separate section from the "Western Hemisphere" (Chapter 3A)²⁰, the strategy explicitly asserts the US's right to determine and participate in fundamental internal and external affairs of the old continent. This is justified paternalistically with concerns about a Europe allegedly plagued by severe crises, economic decline, "civilizational erasure", cultural alienation due to unchecked immigration, the erosion of nation-state sovereignty and freedom by "transnational organizations" (referring to the EU), and the loss of national identity. The US wants "Europe to remain European," to regain its "civilizational self-confidence," and to abandon its "and to abandon its failed focus on regulatory suffocation." The Strategy advocates for "genuine democracy, freedom of expression, and unapologetic celebrations of European nations' individual character and history."

Regarding the war against Ukraine, the strategy accuses the representatives of Europe's "unstable minority governments" of having "unrealistic expectations." These expectations, it claims, contradict the desire for peace held by a "broad majority in Europe," a desire that these governments are allegedly suppressing because they trample on fundamental democratic principles. Against this backdrop, the strategy argues, it is crucial to mobilize resistance against Europe's current political course, primarily through support for "patriotic" European parties.

With this, the Trump administration is openly calling for interference in Europe's internal affairs and proclaiming, barely disguised, the goal of regime change. The vision is a Europe of authoritarian-ruled, pro-Russian (and, of course, pro-Trump) sovereign nation-states that reverse their supranational integration in the framework of the EU.

Among the stated goals are the restoration of "strategic stability with Russia" and an end to NATO's perpetual expansion ("ending the perception, and preventing the reality, of NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance"). At this point, the US security strategy becomes an open

¹⁵ See, for example, Alexei Drobinin, 'The Vision of a Multipolar World: The Civilizational Factor and Russia's Place in the Emerging World Order.' In: 'Russia in Global Affairs,' 20.2. 2023.

<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-vision-of-a-multipolar-world/>

¹⁶ Konstantin Kosachev, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Federation Council, said in a speech at the XXXI General Assembly of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy on May 22, 2023: "The choice has already been made – in favour of a 'civilizational state.' But under the current conditions, this choice automatically means a decision for the 'anti-West.'" <https://svop.ru/projects/assambleya-svop/2023-posle-svo/47076/>

¹⁷ Статья Владимира Путина «Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев», published 12.07. 2021. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/articles/66181>

¹⁸ NSS, 15.

¹⁹ Ibid., 25-27. All of the citations from the NSS quoted below come from this section of text.

²⁰ The 'Western Hemisphere' is referred to as 'The Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine' and thus suggests a limitation to the American continent, which, however, is not adhered to in the discussions about Europe.

declaration of distrust in Europe and the European Union. By vilifying Europe and the EU, Trump echoes Putin, who claimed in July 2024:

The danger to Europe does not come from Russia. ... Europe is increasingly being pushed to the margins of global economic development, plunged into the chaos of migration and other acute problems, and deprived of international subjectivity and cultural identity.²¹

Putin also accused European governments of being unwilling to make peace — with a dig at the Biden administration that Trump is likely to appreciate:

Everyone believed they would destroy and smash Russia in a short time. And Europe's little pigs immediately joined the machinations of the previous American administration, hoping to profit from the collapse of our country.²²

Moscow's vilification of Europe, which replaced the demonization of the US after Trump's inauguration in January 2025, was recently taken to a new level by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who accused Europe of maliciously sabotaging US negotiations with Russia. The cause lies in a resurgence of “Nazism” in Brussels, Berlin, London, Paris, and the Baltic states:

Blatant Nazi-like approaches, blatant ignoring of what the Nazi regime is committing in Ukraine, which is a copy of Adolf Hitler's actions and those of Napoleon before him. ... At present, Europe—and Biden's administration until recently—is trying to do exactly the same—to bring together all European countries, pump Ukraine with money and weapons, and give it a Nazi flag.²³

It is no surprise that Lavrov explicitly praises the US Security Strategy for reining in Europe and warning it against imposing its liberal way of life on other states.²⁴ Putin lauds the strategy for no longer designating Russia as an adversary, while mockingly pointing out that, in contrast, the NATO Secretary General is still “preparing for war with us.”²⁵ Washington's Security Strategy, according to Putin, largely reflects Russia's perspective and gives cause for hope that cooperation with Washington in the “search for a peaceful solution for Ukraine” will continue. In contrast, Europe currently allegedly was showing no willingness to engage in dialogue with Russia. This would likely require a “change in the political elites in Europe.”²⁶

Against this backdrop, the largely identical “peace plans” of the US-Russian alliance, with their shared thrust against Europe, appear as a vehicle for curbing the EU as a geopolitical actor,

²¹ Speech by the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin on the occasion of the meeting with the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Moscow, July 14, 2024.

https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1957107/?lang=ru

²² W.W. Putin, Annual Press Conference “Results of the Year 2025”, December 19, 2025.

<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/78815>. The passage verbatim: “Everyone thought that they would destroy and dismantle Russia in a short period of time. And the European ‘piglets’ immediately joined in this work of the previous American administration, hoping to profit from the dismantling of our country.”

²³ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting media corporation, Moscow, December 14, 2025. <https://en.interaffairs.ru/article/foreign-minister-sergey-lavrovs-interview-with-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-broadcasting-media-corp/>

²⁴ S. Lawrow, a.a.O.: “A lot has been said of late about the new US National Security Strategy. One of its major purposes is to make Europe know its place and to prevent it from imposing its liberal ways that it has been proud of and cooperated with the US democratic administrations in promoting them for decades for decades; ...”

²⁵ W. Putin, *ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

economic competitor, and regulatory power in Europe. Driven by different motives but based on similar conservative socio-political concepts, the Trump administration and Moscow have a shared interest in strengthening right-wing populist movements and weakening liberal democracies in Europe. With regard to Russia's territorial expansion at the expense of Ukraine, a new logic of great powers is replacing international law, disregarding key principles such as the protection of territorial integrity or the prohibition of the use of force, and accepts policies of expansion and annexation as long as these unfold within its own "own" hemisphere and do not affect the interests of other major powers.

4. Trump's "Hemisphere Doctrine" and the National Defense Strategy

On January 23, the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) was published in Washington. It breaks down the National Security Strategy into the US arms and defense posture. For the EU and Ukraine, the conclusions regarding the US relationship with its European allies are particularly important. Right at the beginning, in the foreword signed by "Secretary of War" Hegseth, it is made unequivocally clear: Unlike previous administrations, the Trump administration prioritizes Americans and their interests, rather than clinging to "cloud-castle abstractions like the rules-based international order".²⁷

Therefore, it is only logical that the NDS, unlike its predecessor document from the first Trump administration in 2018, no longer formulates global or universal defence commitments, but instead takes a selective approach. While the Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, and the Western Hemisphere were explicitly designated as equally worthy of protection under the US defence umbrella as recently as 2018, the current strategy paper focuses exclusively on the US and the Indo-Pacific and announces a reduction of the US presence in other regions of the world. Europe is relegated to third priority, ranking behind the US homeland, the Western Hemisphere, and the Indo-Pacific region. Europeans are expected to take the lead in defending against threats that pose a greater danger to themselves than to the US. Furthermore, they are to assume primary responsibility for "conventional defence" in general – with "critical but more limited support" from Washington. The paper fails to define the term "critical."²⁸ Even such reduced support is only promised on the condition that Europeans reach the level of defence spending agreed upon at the NATO summit in June 2025, amounting to a total of 5% of GDP. With this, the NDS reverses course from its previous unconditional partnership to a conditional *quid pro quo*.²⁹

Russia is classified — unlike in the National Security Strategy — as a "persistent but manageable threat," though primarily not for the US, but rather for NATO's eastern members. Russia is implicitly granted a hegemonic prerogative in the post-Soviet space, for which the use of the Russian phrase "near abroad" as a designation for the post-Soviet space is a telltale indication. This term signifies Russia's political and military dominance: "Russia has also shown that it has the national resolve required to sustain a protracted war in its near abroad."³⁰ Europe is clearly

²⁷ Secretary of War, NDS-2026. National Defense Strategy. Restoring Peace through Strength. For a New Golden Age of America. Washington 23.1. 2026, Begleitschreiben VM P. Hegseth, erste Seite.

<https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>

²⁸ NDS, 19.

²⁹ "... a first-order shift from assured partnership to conditional transaction ...". In: Simon J. Evenett, The Unstated Gamble: An Analysis of the 2026 US National Defense Strategy, 25. January 2026.

³⁰ NDS, 10.

distinguished from this: Moscow is not in a position to claim "European hegemony" because the European part of NATO is economically, demographically, and "therefore" also "latently" superior to Russia in military strength. At the same time, it is noted that Europe's global economic power is declining, leading to the conclusion that the US must focus on its own defence and deterring China.³¹

In short, this means:

- In international relations, might makes right.
- International law rules such as the protection of territorial integrity are imaginary constructs.
- International law is replaced by the mutual demarcation of spheres of influence, within which the respective dominant hegemonic power enjoys free rein.
- Furthermore, only economically powerful and emerging regions in which Washington has a strong economic interest deserve priority military support from the US. Only those who benefit Washington are protected.
- Europe, as a "continent in economic decline," does not fall into this category. Ukraine is considered (for Moscow) "near abroad" and thus assigned to Russia's sphere of influence.

5. The Value of US Security Guarantees and Options for Action for Europe

Against this sobering backdrop, the question arises: How much are US security guarantees for securing a future ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine actually worth?

The Ukrainians and their European supporters must not allow themselves to be fobbed off with vague promises. They must demand decisive, irreversible action, in particular the integration of US military personnel into the planned "Multinational Force for Ukraine,"³² to be deployed on Ukrainian soil. This requires a binding commitment from the US (similar to Article 5 of the Washington Treaty) to punish Russian ceasefire violations, if necessary, with US military force.³³ Finally, it requires a commitment to provide Ukraine with the necessary weapons for effective defence and intelligence on a sustainable and long-term basis. To gain credibility and a lasting deterrent effect, this package must be ratified by the Senate as part of an international treaty, pursuant to Article II, Section 2 of the US Constitution, with the required two-thirds majority (at least 67 votes).

What can Europe itself do?

Europe faces a profound dilemma. The US is no longer prepared to unconditionally defend the old continent and uphold fundamental principles of international law. In the talks with Moscow's

³¹ Ibid.

³² Paris Declaration – 'Robust Security Guarantees for a Solid and Lasting Peace in Ukraine', issued by France, 6.1. 2026, para 3. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/01/06/robust-security-guarantees-for-a-solid-and-lasting-peace-in-ukraine-statement-of-the-coalition-of-the-willing-issued-by-france/>

³³ The *Paris Declaration* by the *Coalition of the Willing, Ukraine and the United States* announces "binding commitments" to restore peace in the event of an armed attack by Russia, which are also to include the use of "military capabilities" (point 4).

seasoned negotiators, they prove to be unreliable partners, even openly distancing themselves from the interests of Ukraine and Europe. On the other hand, realistically, only Washington possesses the military power to rein in Russia. Despite substantial increases in their defense spending, European NATO states will remain militarily dependent on the US for a long time to come. Support with American artillery and missile defense systems, satellites (Starlink), and intelligence remain highly relevant for Ukraine.

For Europe, there is therefore no alternative to the current course of keeping the US on board militarily and in terms of alliances. At the same time, however, Europeans have considerable options for action.

The EU, even as a subgroup of like-minded member states (*coalition of the willing*), must intensify the economic isolation of Russia and its backers, for example, by introducing secondary sanctions, thereby largely preventing sanctions circumvention by third countries, independent of the US. Europe already bears the brunt of military and economic support. It is crucial to make this support more sustainable and to benefit more symbiotically from the cooperation between the arms industry and Ukraine, for example, with drones, as a turbocharger for the European arms industry.

Within the framework of enhanced cooperation under Article 20 TEU, like-minded EU member states should establish the nucleus of a *European Defence Community* as quickly as possible, ideally with the involvement of the UK and Canada. In negotiations with Moscow, Europe must forcefully demand a permanent seat. Ukraine's EU accession process must be vigorously promoted, even if, as Zelenskyy has demanded, setting a deadline of 2027 for accession as "part of the security guarantees" seems to be unrealistic.

With a peace agreement in Ukraine, nothing less than the European security order is at stake. It will depend on Europe whether we will see a demarcation of spheres of influence with a neutralized buffer zone in Central and Eastern Europe, or the revival of a European security order based on international law and self-determination.