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Special Edition

# Munich Security Conference 2026



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## Munich Security Conference

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[Credit: privat]

### Dear participants of the Munich Security Conference,

This special edition of our magazine *European Security and Defence* is intended to contribute to the discussions at MSC2026. I hope that you will find something of interest in our selection of topics.

The year 2026 got off to an exciting start. The breathtaking developments this year have presented us with problems, but I hope we have solved them. Nevertheless, it is possible that new events occurred after our editorial deadline that would have changed some of what our authors wrote. We ask for your understanding if we were unable to include some of these developments. The year began dramatically: the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Maduro sparked heated debate, and not only in South America. Do we still have a rules-based international order? What has become of the Helsinki Final Act that the OSCE participating states – including the former Soviet Union and the United States – agreed upon in Helsinki in 1975? It is to be hoped that a similar declaration of principles will be possible again in the not too distant future, but this time with the additional involvement of China. At that time, a phase of *détente* began cautiously, then later with more vigour. The Cold War was cautiously contained in a spirit of cooperation. What an achievement that was at the time!

Today, we are discussing how to ensure Greenland's security without breaking up the Western alliance. To this end, NATO partners are making efforts to remove the option of a US occupation of the island from the debate. This is followed by

economic threats from Washington against its allies – will they take effect or will they bring about a new unity among Europeans?

Greenland has become so strategically important because the eternal ice in the Arctic is melting, creating new sea routes and making mineral resources appear accessible. Those who still deny climate change are being proven wrong here – and want to profit from it.

But it is not only in the area of external security that we are living in turbulent times. Autocratic and nationalist movements are gaining ground in many countries. This is significant for the countries concerned, but also has consequences for international organisations. If too many divergent political concepts clash within NATO and the EU, it will no longer be possible to determine their course clearly. What conclusions do we draw from this finding? In view of the threat situation in Europe, especially Russia's war against Ukraine, simply continuing as before is no longer acceptable. What impact does this have on defence cooperation when countries with different concepts agree to jointly develop and produce weapon systems? Politically significant is the fact that this development can change after every national election.

Security policy issues have become more fundamental. I hope that your discussions in Munich will lead to good solutions.

#### Rolf Clement

Editor-in-Chief for the MSC-Special Edition

# The role of the MSC as a transatlantic platform is now more important than ever

Interview with Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger,  
Chairman Munich Security Conference



▲ **Interviewed: Wolfgang Ischinger, Chairman MSC**  
[Credit: MSC]

**ESD:** Mr Ischinger, the motto of one of the last Munich Security Conferences was “Westlessness”. Did you think the current developments were possible back then?

**Ischinger:** This was the theme of the 2020 Munich Security Conference. While I won't claim that we predicted the current situation back then, several precursors were already visible. We already saw significant tensions in the transatlantic alliance under the first Trump administration. We had tough discussions about burden-sharing. And we knew that Russia posed a threat to international security. In fact, Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference was a very early indicator. What we are seeing now is an exacerbation of these trends.

**ESD:** What would have been necessary to prevent the breakdown of security in Europe?

**Ischinger:** It is always easy to say what should have been done with the benefit of hindsight. That said, I think we should have read the signs. It has been almost 12 years since Russia first attacked Ukraine. It has been almost nine years since Donald Trump first came to power and urged Europeans to take responsibility for their own security. We were too naïve when it comes

to Russia's intentions. And if we had used the past decade to strengthen our military capabilities and fill long-standing gaps, we would be in a much stronger position today.

**ESD:** The world is rapidly moving away from the old bipolarity. Do you see new, stable and resilient centres of power in international politics?

**Ischinger:** The answer very much depends on the metrics you use. In many respects, the US remains an unrivaled superpower: its defence spending is more than twice that of the world's number two, China, and the US Dollar remains the global reserve currency. At the same time, China's GDP surpassed the US's last year when corrected by purchasing-power parity (PPP) and China's shipbuilding capacity is 230 times larger than that of the US. For others, the picture is more mixed. Take Russia: it boasts the world's largest nuclear arsenal but has a nominal GDP lower than Italy's. You can find similar statistics displaying either the strengths or weaknesses of Europe, India, Brazil, and other want poles in a multipolarising order. Which of these old and new power centers will emerge as stable poles remains to be seen.

**ESD:** Back when this conference was still called the ‘Defence Conference’, it was a high point for the German-American alliance. Will the US continue to be as prominently represented in future as it has been up to now?

**Ischinger:** The role of the MSC as a transatlantic platform is now more important than ever. We need to engage with our American partners and discuss both common interests and points of friction in a constructive and open manner. At the last MSC, we welcomed 55 US lawmakers from both sides of the political spectrum to Munich. I hope that we will be able to welcome a similarly large and prominent congressional delegation as well as senior Administration representatives.

**ESD:** Is US President Trump, who repeatedly sees himself as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia, positioning himself above or outside the Atlantic Alliance? Is the US still a reliable partner?

**Ischinger:** The US National Security Strategy appears to suggest that the US seeks to position itself as a mediator between NATO and Russia. At the same time, the US remains at the heart of the Alliance, which has clearly designated Russia as a long-term threat. The current Administration effectively strengthened NATO by urging European Allies to spend significantly more on defence. We should focus on strengthening European defence and resilience. This means sustaining higher defence spending, doubling down on support for Ukraine, and bolstering our defence industries.

**ESD:** What does this mean for Europeans? Is the EU in a position to fill this vacuum?

**Ischinger:** There are areas where Europe remains dependent on the US. But Europeans also have a lot of resources they can bring to bear. The EU has a population of 450 million, more than the US (344 million) and Russia (145 million). Its GDP of EUR 18 trillion is the world's second largest and the EU accounts for 14% of world trade in goods. It has a highly educated and skilled workforce. These numbers even become more impressive if you add the UK, Norway, and Ukraine. But if Europeans don't bundle these resources, their voice will be eclipsed.

**ESD:** In Europe, too, there are forces driving us apart. Can institutions such as NATO and the EU still develop and offer viable solutions? Or have these institutions become obsolete?

**Ischinger:** We are currently seeing a rise of flexible coalitions of the willing. This is a symptom of these centrifugal forces but also of the need for speed. At the same time, the EU and NATO remain crucial for effective and lasting European cooperation. While NATO is crucial for capability planning and military standards, the EU is a key enabler for cooperation and integration through its regulatory power and financial incentives from the common budget.

**ESD:** How should countries with liberal constitutions deal with those that have departed from this consensus?

**Ischinger:** With self-confidence and willingness to engage where necessary, but without illusions. Concretely, this means engaging with illiberal governments where it is in our vital interests to do so while remaining clear-eyed about their intentions. Furthermore, it is important to keep channels open to civil society and dissident forces in such countries and support democratic initiatives wherever politically feasible.

**ESD:** How should Europeans deal with 'Putin's KGB Russia'?

**Ischinger:** Russia remains a security threat to Europe. Europe has to be able to deter further Russian aggression and to support Ukraine in resisting Russia's war. At the same time, we should keep the door open for Russia. If Moscow is willing to accept a just and durable peace in Ukraine that does not equal a de facto Ukrainian surrender, confrontation could be brought to an end. However, we are far from that today.

**ESD:** What will European-Russian relations look like after the war in Ukraine?

**Ischinger:** Difficult to imagine that we could return to a non-confrontational relationship. Russia has shifted to war-economy-mode since 2022 and intelligence services warn that it might reconstitute its forces for renewed aggression on its neighbours after a ceasefire with Ukraine.

**ESD:** How important do you consider China, India and the Indo-Pacific region to be for us?

**Ischinger:** Few European countries would consider China as a military threat to their own security. Indeed, most European countries only have a minor security footprint in the Indo-Pacific.

Economically, the situation is quite different. There are critical dependencies with several countries in the Indo-Pacific region, for example regarding rare earth minerals and microchips. This was very visible when China recently announced it would tighten its export restrictions. At the same time, India is gaining importance as a strategic and economic partner for Europe. Its growing market and strong technology sector make it an attractive partner for diversification of supply chains and cooperation in areas such as renewable energy, digital innovation, and maritime security.

**ESD:** What consequences must Europeans and NATO draw from the abduction of the President of Venezuela by the United States?



▲ Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference was a very early indicator that Russia posed a threat to international security [Credit: MSC]

**Ischinger:** From a European perspective, there are several implications. First, a certain disregard for international law by the US, complicating the transatlantic relationship. Second, the US administration is serious about "restoring American pre-eminence" in the Western Hemisphere. European leaders need to engage with Washington. Europeans should also clarify that "taking" Greenland might have serious economic consequences. At the same time, legitimate security concerns in the Arctic need to be addressed, preferably within the NATO framework. The fact that the Alliance is now looking into strengthening its posture in the Arctic is positive. Finally, and that goes beyond the Arctic, Europe needs to invest in its own defense capabilities. Statements of concern will not take us very far in a world shaped by power politics. Third, the events in Venezuela highlight the limits of Russia's power. As with Armenia, Syria, and Iran before, Russia was unable to help an ally. Even when the US Coast Guard boarded a Russian shadow-fleet tanker that had evaded the US naval blockade of Venezuela, there was no meaningful Russian response. This should encourage Europe to take stronger action against the many false-flagged vessels in the Russian shadow fleet – within the limits of international marit.

Questions asked by Rolf Clement.



◀ EU is a key enabler for cooperation and integration through its regulatory power and financial incentives from the common budget [Credit: EP]



# South America – a pawn of the superpowers?

Oscar Armanelli

**The kidnapping of Venezuelan President Maduro and the political context surrounding this act highlight the forces vying for influence and power in South America: immediately prior to the kidnapping, Maduro had been hosting a Chinese delegation with whom he was negotiating the supply of oil to China and raw materials to Venezuela.**



▲ **Sailors, assigned to Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron 70, perform maintenance on an MH-60R Sea Hawk helicopter on the flight deck of USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78), in the Caribbean Sea, Dec. 20, 2025. [Credit: US Navy]**

## AUTHOR

**Oscar Armanelli** is a retired brigadier general of the Argentine Armed Forces. In his last position before retiring in January 2025, he was commander of the Argentine Army General Staff Academy (Escuela Superior de Guerra) and dean of the Army Faculty (Decano de la Facultad del Ejército).

The air defence systems designed to protect Venezuela had been supplied by Russia. And the US intervened militarily to remove the regime in Caracas and brutally kidnap the president. The US and China in particular are seeking to exert influence in the region, while Russia is currently less active, probably because its forces are tied up in Ukraine. All of this has an impact on the strategic stability of South America. The continent is at a strategic turning point, caught between external and internal tensions.

## The US and the Venezuela crisis

US foreign policy towards Latin America has historically been characterised by a dual perception of the region: a zone of ‘obsession’ and guaranteed dominance in Central America and the Caribbean and a zone of ‘relative neglect’ in South America, where political intervention has been sporadic. Donald Trump’s presidency marked a ‘rediscovery’ consisting of open hostility (towards Mexico and Central America) and the resurgence of Cold War-era obsession (towards the ‘triangle of tyrannies’: Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua). This approach was characterised by the abandonment of hegemonic strategies that were implemented with ‘soft power’. Instead, coercion, verbal threats and economic blackmail are now being used to assert one’s own interests. In Venezuela, military power has also been used and continues to be threatened.

Currently, the other power centres are concerned about their respective spheres of influence: Russia in the war with Ukraine and China in the Indo-Pacific.

Although the US is taking immense liberties in the Venezuela crisis, a solution is being delayed. The reason for this is the start of the large-scale naval operation ‘Southern Spear’, which ostensibly serves to combat drug trafficking and began in August 2025. The White House justifies these measures by citing the Maduro regime’s links to drug trafficking via the ‘Cartel of the Suns,’ which has not been officially designated as a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) by the US State Department. However, the US government used the terms ‘narco-terrorism’ and ‘transnational criminal organisation’ (TCO) to justify legal and military action against its leaders.

The US Department of Justice classifies the cartel’s activities as narco-terrorism. Legally, this implies that the proceeds from drug trafficking are used to finance activities aimed at destabilising or influencing the government in Venezuela, and allows for the application of counter-terrorism laws and sanctions.

It is important to note that the charge of ‘narco-terrorism’ (a criminal activity) and the formal designation as a ‘foreign terrorist organisation (FTO)’ (a specific political and legal

designation with far-reaching consequences) are two different legal measures; the 'Cartel of the Suns' was subject to the former, but not the latter.

Given the importance of Central America and the Caribbean to the US, and in order to prevent Honduras from being added to the 'triangle of tyrannies' (Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua) (hence the importance Trump attached to the presidential election there on 29 November 2025), he decided on the January operation in Venezuela.

Will this turn out to be a mistake in the long run? US political scientist Jervis argues that wars are often the result of systematic errors in perception by leaders. These miscalculations stem from one of the following: underestimating the will of the opponent, misjudging the costs, or bias on the part of the leader, such as ignoring warning signs or the actual capabilities of the opponent.

Before the US intervention in Venezuela, the following steps were discussed:

- First, Maduro's departure under safe conditions, together with Generals Diosdado Cabello, Jorge Rodríguez and Delcy Rodríguez, while General Padrino López retains command of the military;
- Second, CIA operations through an internal conspiracy to instigate a coup;
- Third, a long-range attack from the sea on moving targets (e.g., the regime's leadership); and
- Finally, military intervention on the ground, but with the risk of a stalemate and a de-escalation to a low-intensity conflict.

Authors such as Stephen Walt (1987) argue that excessive pressure from the US was not and is not an attempt to liberate Venezuela, but rather a hegemonic attempt to impose its own will, which naturally prompted Venezuela to seek counterbalances (a balance of power) with rival powers such as China and Russia. The mistake was to ignore the dynamics of the regional balance of power.

This situation evokes different perceptions in Latin American countries.



▲ A map of the targets hit in Venezuela. [Image: Wikimedia Commons]

On 3 January 2026, Operation Absolute Resolution was carried out, in which Maduro and his wife were abducted from Caracas and taken to New York to stand trial in a US court for drug trafficking and terrorism. At the same time, Trump announced that he would lead Venezuela to a safe transition of power and that Venezuelan oil would once again be produced by American companies. In Venezuela, Maduro's Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez took over the interim presidency on the orders of the Supreme Court. This decision delayed the assumption of power by María Corina Machado or Edmundo González, who had won last year's presidential elections but did not take office. The priority of the intervention was to ensure a smooth transition and prevent unrest by the regime's armed militias (Colectivos), which posed the greatest threat to peace in the short term.

The Venezuelan court interpreted Maduro's absence as 'temporary' and allowed Vice President Delcy Rodríguez to take over the duties of the office for up to 90 days, with the possibility of a three-month extension by the National Assembly. In the event of Maduro's permanent removal from office, Venezuelan law requires presidential elections to be held within 30 days. The new National Assembly, which was illegitimately elected in May, took office on Monday, 5 January 2026.

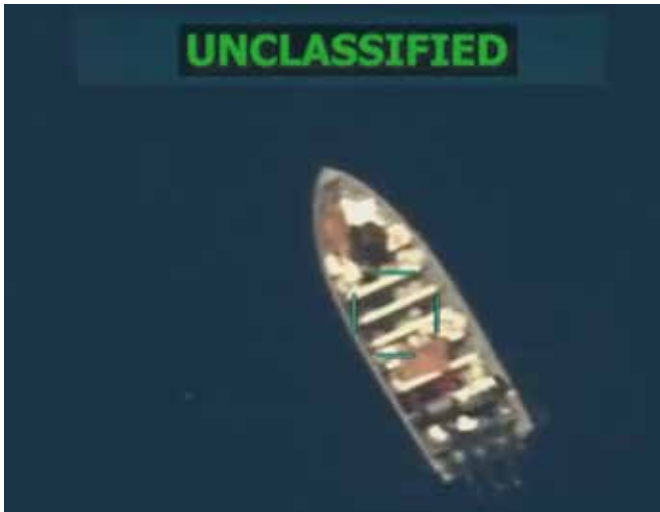
Venezuela is now the scene of a conflict between an autocracy that adheres to internal legality (Supreme Court, Delcy Rodríguez) and a power that enforces political realism with violence.

The execution of Operation Absolute Resolve represents the manifestation of the US National Security Strategy (NSS) 2025. The abduction of Nicolás Maduro confirmed the credibility of US deterrence through a show of force that overrode traditional positive law as enshrined in the United Nations Charter. According to the logic of Carl Schmitt's theory (2009), the US executive acted as a sovereign state that declared a state of emergency and intervened in a scenario where international norms did not provide effective responses to drug terrorism and the regional crisis.

## Chinese influence in Latin America

China's growing economic and technological influence in Latin America, which offers the US alternative financing options, is changing Washington's strategic calculations and forcing countries in the region to redefine their defence doctrines.

Chinese foreign policy is embedded in the 'three-stage development strategy' of Deng Xiaoping, the great Chinese political leader of the 1980s and 1990s. The current goal, driven by Xi Jinping, is to make China a globally influential and leading power by 2050. To achieve this, China has become a 'rule maker' in global power structures and has taken an active role in the G20 (especially at the 2025 summit in Johannesburg) and BRICS+, as well as creating its



▲ **The Pentagon said end October it carried out the deadliest day of strikes on suspected drug smuggling boats in the Pacific Ocean, destroying four vessels and killing 14 people.**  
 [Source: SecWar/X]

own institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

The most important geo-economic strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to strengthen China's leadership role through the massive expansion of infrastructure connecting Asia, Europe, Oceania and Africa. China is attempting to extend this strategy to Latin America. The Silk Road Initiative (BRI) aims to intensify cooperation with China in five key areas: politics, roads and motorways, trade, exchange rates and interpersonal relations.

China's rise has prompted a swift response from the United States, which has shifted its focus to 'great power competition,' as outlined in its 2017 National Security Strategy. The US emphasises its supremacy, urges countries in the region to choose between the United States and China, and warns of the supposed 'pitfalls' of Chinese cooperation.

China views the cosmopolitan vision of Latin American leaders positively, as they are actively seeking to diversify their relations beyond the North Atlantic in order to achieve a multipolar world order. To this end, it promotes global economic governance and advocates for greater representation of developing countries in decision-making mechanisms through a partnership based on mutual respect.

China's interests in Latin America can be summarised in five key points:

- Creating a favourable strategic environment for its rise in the Asia-Pacific region.
- Excluding Taiwan from international recognition. (Paraguay is the only country that has recognised Taiwan.)
- Securing access to large quantities of raw materials.
- Opening up new markets for its higher value-added products.
- Investing in strategic areas such as physical and, in particular, digital infrastructure (5G) to set international standards. This could have implications for data sovereignty, military command and control capabilities (C4ISR) and strategic decision-making in Latin American countries.

The most worrying aspects of closer relations with China, given its rise and consolidation of its position as a leading world power,

remain the increasing dominance of Chinese corporations in their economies and the inability to counter this phenomenon regionally. This concerns, for example, the establishment of regional value chains and the development of common positions against China's ambitions in the region.

China's greatest strength lies in offering Latin American countries a kind of 'autonomy option' that allows them to diversify their debt and investments outside the sphere of influence of Western financial institutions. Examples of this are the port in Chancay, Peru, and the takeover of the largest public energy supply company there. In Brazil, China is seeking to develop the country into a 'bridgehead' in Latin America. In Chile, China has acquired an energy distribution company, and in Argentina, a lithium plant and agreements to manufacture electric vehicles. Venezuela is – or was – the main recipient of Chinese financing (receiving almost half of all loans since 2005).

### **Defence policy in Latin America. Differences from the EU.**

Both Chinese influence and the crisis in Venezuela are having different effects on Latin American countries, which are characterised by a highly fragmented position. There is no uniform 'Latin American position', but rather a strategy of 'pragmatic autonomy' or, in some cases, regional dependence.

For Brazil, the goal is to prevent armed anarchy. Traditionally, the country has avoided military intervention and focused on pragmatic diplomacy and containing the humanitarian and security crisis on its borders. The main concern is that armed anarchy in Venezuela could trigger a massive migration crisis and the spread of transnational criminal groups in the Amazon region (a particularly vulnerable area).

For Colombia, the goal is to prevent interference (or at least military intervention). Historically, Colombia has been the closest partner of the US and the most affected by the Venezuelan conflict (migration, FARC dissidents).

Chile is pursuing a specific course in migration policy (a humanitarian and internal security-oriented approach), but this position will change when José Antonio Kast takes office as president in March 2026 and turns to the United States.

Argentina is focusing less on geopolitics and more on dealing with the internal consequences of the crisis (massive Venezuelan immigration); its defence policy is geared towards democratic stability and border control and rejects military intervention. Under the current liberal-conservative government, Argentina has clearly aligned itself with the policy of the United States, which seeks regime change and the restoration of democracy in Venezuela.

Venezuela has evolved from a static hotbed of conflict to an epicentre of the restoration of US hegemony in the American continent.

The population of South America is estimated at around 452 million (53 per cent Spanish-speaking and 47 per cent Portuguese-speaking). Despite linguistic homogeneity, the region does not pursue a unified foreign and defence policy, as demonstrated by the differing positions of individual countries on the Venezuela crisis and Chinese influence in the region.

In contrast to the EU, where these policies are being harmonised, a fragmented scenario is emerging in Latin America, in which each country's defence policy gives priority to the concept of strategic autonomy for the development of military operations over the concept of cooperation or any kind of security architecture.

## The 2026 scenario in the Western Hemisphere

In 2026, five nations will reshape their future. These include Costa Rica, with presidential elections on 1 February; Colombia, with presidential elections on 31 May (incumbent Petro cannot be re-elected); Peru, with presidential elections on 2 April, in which Rafael López Aliaga, a self-professed admirer of Trump, is running; Haiti in August; and finally Brazil on 4 October, where Lula is running for his fourth term, while Jair Bolsonaro has been convicted, his son Flavio Bolsonaro represents the right wing, and Trump is threatening tariffs.

The possible scenario for Latin America in 2026 points to a consolidation of the 'Trump axis,' but with critical points of political instability that could redefine existing alliances. With the rise of José Antonio Kast in Chile and the strategic orientation of Javier Milei in Argentina, the Southern Cone is developing into a block of unwavering support for US hegemony and facilitation. However, the presidential elections taking place in other countries in the region this year represent an adjustment variable: should social democratic or left-wing populist leaders prevail in key states, the polarisation lamented by countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Colombia will deepen, giving rise to a scenario of 'defensive fragmentation'. In this context, the situation in Venezuela under the transitional government of Delcy Rodríguez and the control of oil resources by US companies will serve as a barometer for the region: If the Venezuelan economy is successfully stabilised, the electorate could turn to the 'security and market' model, while continued resistance by the popular militias could strengthen the narrative of sovereignty and rejection of intervention currently espoused by governments opposed to the United States.

## Conclusions

The convergence of China's geo-economic influence and Venezuela's political crisis has rendered traditional defence doctrines in Latin America obsolete and led the region into a scenario of 'hybrid challenge' in which threats are multidimensional and the response is inevitably fragmented.

This is because there is no security consensus in South America.

The region has not responded to the crisis with a non-existent security architecture (as in the EU), which does not exist there, but with a mosaic of pragmatic national strategies:

- a) Neorealist survival (Venezuela): prioritising state survival in the face of external pressure, even at the cost of internal instability.
- b) Containment (Brazil/Colombia): Prioritising the containment of instability and hybrid threats (migration, organised crime) at the borders, avoiding direct US military intervention.
- c) Strategic alliance (Argentina): Other states opt for an ideological alliance with the US to secure economic and political advantages, although their involvement in the Venezuelan crisis is primarily rhetorical and diplomatic in nature.

## The convergence of the hybrid challenge

The 'hybrid challenge' manifests itself in the convergence of two types of threats that are redefining Latin America's defence:

- a. Technological/economic threat (China): Control of digital infrastructure (5G) and value chains (lithium, ports) poses a threat to data sovereignty and economic autonomy.
- b. Asymmetric/coercive threat (Venezuela-US): The US's use of the concept of 'narco-terrorism' (which combines organised crime and hostile governments) to justify military interventions and sanctions is forcing the region to focus on multidimensional security (crime, migration, human rights) rather than traditional territorial defence.

Ultimately, the reorientation of 'Latin American defence' was not a conscious and coordinated process, but rather an adaptive and fragmented response to a new scenario in which US hegemony faces a systemic rival that uses the fragile states of Central America and the Caribbean as a geopolitical testing ground.

The supposed 'autonomy' of Latin American countries is merely a euphemism for 'selective dependence': they are financially dependent on China and security-wise on the US (or vice versa, depending on the case), but do not achieve autonomy in terms of their capabilities (e.g. developing their own weapons or technologies).

The elections in five countries in the Western Hemisphere in 2026 give rise to two scenarios: one short-term and one long-term:

### a. Short-term scenario: Operational fragmentation

In the short term, the region will face significant 'defensive fragmentation' in light of the implementation of the US National Security Strategy 2025 (NSS) and the Trump administration's tariff pressure. The lack of consensus on the Venezuela crisis will divide the region, with the Southern Cone bloc (Ecuador, Chile and Argentina) prioritising economic and security rapprochement with Washington in order to secure trade advantages. At the same time, the 2026 election cycle in major powers such as Colombia and Brazil will paralyse regional integration and force each country to negotiate bilaterally with the US to protect its exports. This will thwart any attempt to speak with one voice against the hegemony of the North.

### b. Long-term scenario: autonomy vs. strategic dependence

In the long term, Latin America's future will oscillate between the consolidation of the 'Trump axis' and the pursuit of increasingly costly strategic autonomy. If the 2026 election results in Peru, Brazil and Colombia consolidate a leadership close to the radical right, the region runs the risk of becoming a direct implementation field for the US's New Security Strategy 2025 and losing its room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis extra-regional powers. If, on the other hand, resistance from countries that prioritise autonomy prevails, the region will be divided into two irreconcilable blocs: one economically integrated into US security policy and a second that seeks to ensure its political survival through fragmentation in an international system that no longer tolerates neutrality



# Syria

## On the road to uncertainty

**Kristin Helberg**

**Syria:** At the beginning of 2026, the country is in transition. The first steps have been taken, but it is unclear where the journey will lead. Much of what has happened since the end of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 can be viewed as both positive and negative. The National Dialogue Conference in February 2025, the constitutional declaration in early March, the appointment of a transitional government in late March, the parliamentary elections in October? All of these are either first steps in the right direction or mere window dressing. Opinions are also divided on the question of who is responsible for the massacres of Alawites and Druze. Does interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa not yet have enough control over the new security forces, or is he building his power on radical Islamists? And is the level of violence in the country – murders, kidnappings, attacks and armed clashes – surprisingly low or alarmingly high?

Depending on who you talk to, you will hear different assessments: For some, Syria is developing into a jihadist dictatorship that oppresses minorities; for others, it is becoming a democracy that recognises social majorities and restores justice. Some are afraid, others feel free.

The only thing that is certain is that overcoming 54 years of mafia-style totalitarianism is a lengthy and painful process. The unexpected collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime within just 11 days was preceded by almost 14 years of extremely brutal power struggles. And both dictatorship and war have left their mark on Syria – visible in the form of destroyed infrastructure and neglected statehood, and invisible in the psyche of the people and the constitution of society.

The country and its people face fundamental challenges. How can the state and its governance be structured in such a way that everyone can identify with it or at least come to terms with it? How can social differences be civilised and one-sided narratives overcome? How must reconstruction be organised so that it reduces social inequality, and what role can the Syrian diaspora play in this?

The answers to these questions will determine whether the transition succeeds. Whether Syria will become a united country in which all people feel safe, free and recognised in their cultural differences. This still seems far from certain. For while Ahmad al-Sharaa has been able to gain the trust of the international community over the past year, he has lost support at home. The initial

scepticism towards the new rulers has turned into open rejection among many Syrian Kurds, Alawites, Druze, Christians and secular activists.

### Al-Sharaa's vision: control and competence

How democratic Syria evolves depends above all on al-Sharaa himself, because he has concentrated power in the person of the president. Whether he is prepared to relinquish it will become clear at the end of the transition process. During this time, he must prove that he is serious about participation, institutional reform and freedom of expression. If democratic elections are to take place in three to four years, Syrians must be able to organise themselves politically, demonstrate without fear and inform themselves freely.



▲ [Ahmed al-Sharaa at the National Dialogue Conference in February 2025 \[Screenshot: youtube presidential office\]](#)

So far, al-Sharaa and his confidants have relied on control and competence. Capable individuals are involved, not organisations or parties. Anyone who wants to get involved must put their experience and knowledge at the service of the 'new Syria'. Non-governmental organisations, media and associations are expected to be loyal to this 'project'; criticism is allowed, but not fundamental questioning. On the one hand, this is understandable – the security situation is tense, various actors want to bring about the failure of the transitional government and are working to undermine society. On the other hand, al-Sharaa must generate trust, and this requires at least transparency – in the enactment of laws, the awarding of contracts, the appointment of officials and the investigation of crimes.

So is al-Sharaa's penchant for authoritarianism a temporary tool, a practised reflex or his vision of rule? Much has been written about the 43-year-old, about his metamorphosis from militia leader to father of the nation, from wanted terrorist to smart head of state. To understand his understanding of power, it is worth taking a look at his entire biography.

Raised in the Sunni educated middle class of Damascus as the son of an economist and a geography teacher, al-Sharaa came into contact with pan-Arabism at an early age. In the early 2000s, he studied communication and turned to Islamism under the influence of the Second Intifada in Palestine, 11 September 2001 and the US attack on Iraq in 2003. He joined Al-Qaeda in Iraq, spent five years in US captivity and returned to his homeland in 2012 after the outbreak of the revolution. From then on, he concentrated on the fight against the Assad regime. He broke with international jihadism, consolidated his military power in Idlib and gained political experience there by setting up administrative structures.

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Ideologically, al-Sharaa was influenced by his father's pan-Arabism, Al-Qaeda's Islamism and the nationalism of the uprising against Assad – in other words, by the three ideologies that have shaped Syria's predominantly Arab Sunni society for decades. However, it is precisely this ideological mix that makes it difficult to unite the country, because in order to convince Kurds, Druze and Alawites of a 'new Syria for all', a decentralised and democratically pluralistic order is needed – not an authoritarian and Arab Sunni-dominated central state.

### **Kurdish demands: unification instead of dissolution**

These differing visions are most clearly evident in the negotiations between Ahmad al-Sharaa and Mazlum Abdi, the commander-in-chief of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). They are the United States' most important allies in the fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS) and, alongside the armed forces of the transitional government, the most professional military alliance in the country. In the resource-rich north-east of Syria, the SDF is defending a Kurdish-dominated autonomy project, whose integration into the new Syria was agreed upon in a basic agreement on 10 March 2025, but has since failed to be implemented. Instead, there has been repeated fighting between units of the transitional government and Kurdish forces, especially in the Kurdish neighbourhoods of Aleppo.

The main points of contention are the integration of the SDF into the national army and the organisation of the administration. Damascus, partly under the influence of Türkiye, is seeking the self-dissolution of Kurdish structures and their integration into the Syrian state. The SDF, on the other hand, is willing to place itself under a central command, but wants to retain its brigades in the north-east; and the Autonomous Administration is counting on a merger of the two systems in order to preserve its own achievements, such as its Kurdish-language schools.

Syria's Kurds have been under increasing pressure since US President Donald Trump also began to regard al-Sharaa as a partner. The US is pushing for a quick agreement between the transitional government and the SDF in order to jointly fight IS, stabilise the country and reduce its own involvement. However, they are still needed on two fronts. On the one hand, the US could persuade other countries to take back their IS members. More than 8,000 foreign women, children and men are still in camps and prisons in the north-east, including around 40 German men. On the other hand, only Trump can prevent the Israeli government from further military action in Syria.

### **Israel's interests and Druze fears**

Since December 2024, Israel's armed forces have attacked Syria more than a thousand times. They have advanced into the UN buffer zone on the Golan Heights, occupied more land in southern Syria, established nine military posts, and confiscated and destroyed houses in the process. More than two dozen Syrians have been killed in the attacks. With the mediation of the US, the neighbours, who have been enemies since 1948, agreed in January to coordinate on security issues. Damascus is demanding that Israel return to the status quo before Assad's fall and comply with the 1974 ceasefire agreement, while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is pushing for a demilitarised zone in the south of the country.

Officially, Israel also justifies its military action on the grounds of protecting the Druze. Since the fighting and massacres of hundreds of Druze civilians in July 2025, the Druze have felt under serious threat and have established a de facto autonomous area in parts of the province of Sweida. Thirty-five militias have formed a 'national guard' there under the leadership of Druze cleric Hikmat al-Hijri, who, according to research by the Washington Post, has been receiving financial and military aid from Israel since the end of 2024. However, this support is now controversial in Israel, and following Trump's intervention, al-Sharaa is increasingly seen there as a potential negotiating partner.



▲ **In November 2025, US President Donald Trump hosted Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa in the Oval Office, marking the first-ever White House visit from a Syrian head of state. Ahead of the meeting, the Trump administration lifted US sanctions and a terrorist designation on the Syrian president. [Credit: Truth real Donald Trump]**

In general, decentralisation of power in Syria appears to make sense. Not only because of legitimate demands for more say on the part of the Kurds in the north-east and the Druze in the south, but also because many regions in Syria have had experience with local self-government since the 2011 uprising – in the suburbs of Damascus, in Daraa, Idlib and parts of the provinces of Aleppo, Hama and Homs. Millions of people have managed their affairs independently of Damascus for years and now do not want to fall back into authoritarian centralism. Instead of paternalism from Damascus, they want cooperation on an equal footing.

However, many Syrians assume that only a strong central state can hold the country together. The opposite is true: those who are given responsibility at the local level must help solve problems and will identify with the 'new Syria' instead of fighting it. As a first step, the transitional government should therefore give the 14 provinces more say, make use of existing structures and integrate locally recognised figures.

### **The role of the Alawites and the invention of the 'Assadists'**

The integration of the Alawite community, to which the former ruling Assad family belongs, is particularly difficult and at the same time urgent. Al-Sharaa's initial attempts to approach Alawite sheikhs failed at the latest after the massacres in March 2025. According to the government, 1,426 civilians were killed at that time, the vast majority of them Alawites; almost 300 suspects were arrested, but not all of them were prosecuted in a transparent man-

ner. Human rights organisations emphasise that this is not a matter of individual extremist fighters, but a structural problem within the security forces.

The Alawites, who initially celebrated the end of Assad's rule, feel like the losers of the change of power and no longer have any confidence in the new leadership. Many have lost their jobs in the civil service or security apparatus and have returned to their home towns on the coast for fear of revenge and sectarian hatred. This makes young men in particular susceptible to members of the Assad regime who have gone underground, are operating clandestinely, recruiting discontented individuals and repeatedly attacking the security forces of the transitional government.

To combat these networks, the new rulers should recruit Alawites from the region into the new armed forces. It is very much in the interest of the Alawites to track down former commanders, intelligence officers and Shabiha militiamen of the Assad regime and bring them to justice. After all, they are often held collectively responsible for the crimes of the Assad regime, even though by no means all of them were involved or personally profited from them.

To avoid attributing blame on the basis of religion and ethnicity, civil society groups have introduced the term 'Assadists' for all those who supported the old regime. At the same time, the Alawites must face up to their past. Since they were disproportionately represented in Assad's secret services and army, many Syrians believe that they also bear responsibility as a community, regardless of the role of individuals. One thing is clear: Assad abused them by reducing their identity to support for his regime. Many Alawite families lost their sons in the fight to keep Assad in power. Nevertheless, it would help to be aware of the crimes committed in the process and to ask the victims for forgiveness beyond any personal guilt.



▲ **January 2026, Families evacuate Aleppo, Syria, amid escalating hostilities [Credit: UNOCHA/Ali Haj Suleiman]**

## A society of victims

The dilemma of the Alawites shows what Syrian society fundamentally lacks: a sincere interest in the experiences of other Syrians and a willingness to acknowledge their suffering. How did the people in the Damascus suburbs, in eastern Aleppo and in the sealed-off parts of Homs survive barrel bombs, chlorine gas and Russian missiles? What was it like in Raqqa under Islamic State and in Idlib under al-Sharaa's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)? Why is Deir al-Zor so destroyed, what was allowed in Tartous, what in Sweida, and why are there Kurdish schools in Qamishlo?

Phrases like 'I had no idea' or 'we thought the army would protect us' now sound hollow. Torture prisons have been opened, and

mass graves are still being discovered. The ruins of bombed-out residential areas and villages can be seen as you drive by. Millions of internally displaced persons stand in mine-infested terrain in front of the ruins of their former lives. And yet people remain silent, retreating into their own victimhood. Yet greater knowledge about the realities elsewhere in the country would also help to combat the prejudices, propaganda and fake news that threaten to tear Syrian society apart.

Without coming to terms with the past, there can be no future; without justice, there can be no social reconciliation. For years, Syrian NGOs have been documenting crimes, collecting evidence, talking to witnesses, evaluating documents and preparing indictments, cooperating with international organisations and UN bodies. A commission for transitional justice and one for the issue of the disappeared have been set up, and Syrians in exile are organising training courses for lawyers and therapists. However, it is difficult to coordinate all these skills and efforts effectively.

## Without legal certainty and transparency, there can be no reconstruction

When it comes to reconstruction, too, hope lies with the Syrians themselves, because given the state of the world, there will be no major donor conferences – despite the fact that between USD 200–400 billion are needed. The Syrian diaspora includes entrepreneurs and businesspeople, committed NGO workers, young academics and well-educated professionals. This potential must be harnessed for reconstruction.

The need remains enormous. As many as 16.7 million of the 24 million inhabitants are dependent on humanitarian aid, almost half of six to 15-year-olds do not attend school, and two-thirds of residential units and health facilities have been destroyed or severely damaged. Since more than half of the Syrian population has been displaced since 2011, the issue of property rights must always be taken into account in the reconstruction process.

Important prerequisites have been met: sanctions have been lifted (including secondary sanctions by the US), Syria is reconnected to the international SWIFT system, new banknotes facilitate everyday payments, electricity supply has increased by 50%, and civil servants' salaries have been raised.

Investors from the Gulf states and Türkiye have pledged USD billion, but are waiting for reforms, especially in the financial sector. Syria's banks must overcome decades of mismanagement and regain the trust of both the population and foreign countries. To do so, they must comply with international rules on combating bribery, corruption, tax evasion, money laundering and terrorist financing.

The transitional government must guarantee legal certainty and transparency, manage resources effectively and create institutions that serve citizens rather than controlling or patronising them.

The challenges are therefore overwhelming. Added to this are forces of inertia – mechanisms and behaviour internalised over decades that continue to have an impact and make a new start difficult, both politically and economically. The State could therefore remain autocratic and centralised, giving rise to a corrupt system of favouritism – the opposite of what the people once demonstrated for. Will Syria succeed? If so, it will only be through the joint efforts of all Syrians.





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# The Abraham Accords

## The U.S. Perspective

Iulia Joja

The Abraham Accords have represented a remarkable shift in U.S. Middle East policy. They reframed Arab-Israeli normalization as a result of shared interests – within the Middle East and directly with the US, rather than as a byproduct of Israeli-Palestinian peace. Signed in September 2020, on the last leg of the first Trump administration, the Accords brokered by Washington normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, followed by framework agreements with Morocco and Sudan. From the American perspective, the Accords were intended to break decades of diplomatic stagnation in the Middle East in order to establish a regional framework aligned with American strategic objectives.

The Abraham Accords were the first Trump administration's most significant diplomatic achievement. They tackled at once several strategic objectives. They represented a means to consolidate a US-friendly regional bloc in the most anti-American region, a mechanism to counter Iranian influence, and a way to strengthen cooperation among US partners across domains, including in tech and defense. The change of paradigm sought to move the center of gravity away from the Palestinian issue.

The Biden administration worked to both deepen and expand the Accords. Washington deepened the framework by institutionalizing cooperation, most notably through the integration of Israel into US Central Command (CENTCOM) and through sustained intelligence sharing with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

### State of Play

The Abraham Accords have enjoyed bipartisan US support. The framework has endured through major shocks, including the October 7 attacks by Hamas on Israel. The Accords have delivered tangible gains for Washington: greater burden-sharing, improved coordination among partners within a US-aligned security architecture and expanded regional economic and technological cooperation. At the same time, October 7 highlighted the Accords' limitations, particularly in respect to their capacity to foster broader regional peace and stability. To Hamas and other Iranian proxies, the Accords signified a de facto military alliance against Iran and its Axis of Resistance. In that sense, according to some senior US analysts, the Accords didn't only prevent war, they caused it. We've witnessed the twelve day war between Israel and Iran, difficulties in disarming Hezbollah, and the emergence of conflict between the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

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The second Trump administration has been focused on an expansion of the Accords. Kazakhstan is one new participant. Astana's accession stretches the framework beyond the Middle East and signals US and Israeli inroads into Central Asia, a region of growing competition over energy and critical minerals traditionally shaped by Russia and China.



▲ **The Abraham Accords are a set of agreements that established diplomatic normalization between Israel and several Arab states, beginning with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Signed in Washington, D.C. on September 15, 2020, the Accords were mediated by the United States under President Donald Trump. [Credit: White House]**

Absent a formal alliance, the Accords' most concrete security benefit has been incremental burden-sharing. Normalization lowered political barriers among U.S. partners, enabling deeper intelligence sharing, joint exercises, maritime coordination, and defense planning under the US CENTCOM. If the Accords provoked the October 7 attack, they proved themselves very successful in giving Israel the political and military support to defeat Iran and its proxies Hamas and Hezbollah. They facilitated, what's more, US, the United Kingdom, France, and Jordan to openly back Israel against Iran and even for Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain to offer more indirect support. For Washington, this has reduced coordination costs and increased partner interoperability, allowing regional actors to take on greater responsibility for countering Iranian missile and drone threats, maritime insecurity, and non-state actors. This model preserves US influence while enabling a more flexible military posture, including the selective drawdown of key capabilities.

Economic integration and commercial opportunity have been major benefits. Trade between Israel and the UAE has surged since 2020 from almost nonexistent to \$3.2 billion in 2024. The 2023 Israel-UAE free trade agreement accelerated exchanges, with trade projected to exceed \$10 billion annually within five years. US firms have benefited from a lower-risk environment

and expanded trilateral ventures, which has led to major US tech investments in the Gulf, alongside large-scale Gulf capital flows into the US economy. The most illustrative example has been the UAE, with Microsoft and Nvidia each committing to billions in investments into the country and the UAE promising an investment of \$1.4 trillion into the US tech, military, and energy sectors.

In defense, too, cooperation has been expanded. The Accords enabled increased US military capability sales to Gulf allies and partners. Most importantly, the Accords have broken the taboo of Arab-Israeli defense cooperation, allowing for incipient, yet previously unthinkable cooperation. Israel's defense company Elbit is enabling technology transfer and sales of long-range maritime unmanned surveillance to UAE in 2025. These contracts are contributing to interoperability, regional security and burden-sharing among US allies and partners across the Middle East.

The framework remains durable yet flawed. By prioritizing speed over depth, the Accords have normalized ties with states not in active conflict with Israel; the sidelining of the Palestinian issue has a price in the way of weakened public legitimacy across the Arab world. Elite-driven cooperation in defense, trade, and technology has not yet translated into societal buy-in, leaving many underlying grievances unresolved.

For several Arab states, recent conflicts have raised the domestic political cost of normalization beyond what the Abraham Accords' incentives can offset. Saudi Arabia—the most notable absentee and the most influential Arab and Sunni Muslim state—illustrates this unfavorable cost-benefit calculation. Riyadh's participation would be the framework's "crown jewel," a point President Donald Trump has emphasized: It's my fervent hope, wish and even my dream that Saudi Arabia ... will soon be joining the Abraham Accords ... I think when Saudi Arabia goes in, everybody goes in.

Up until now, Riyadh has tied normalization with Israel to a clear path towards a two-state solution. Importantly, though, Saudi reluctance on the Accords has not blocked enhanced US-Saudi ties. President Trump chose Riyadh for his first trip abroad in his second term; Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was recently received in Washington. Saudi Arabia pledged up to \$1 trillion in investments in the US economy. In November 2025, Riyadh was designated by the US as a major non-NATO ally.

But will Saudi Arabia normalize ties with Israel? Near-term prospects look difficult. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu wants Saudi Arabia's participation in the Abraham Accords, but is highly unlikely to cede to Riyadh's demands for a two-state solution. Nor does this align at present with the US administration's vision. That is a snapshot, however. It may well be that Saudi Arabia is playing a somewhat longer game and will remain patient for a change in Israeli politics and a post-Netanyahu regime. Additionally, one might add, it's unclear what American politics look like a year from now, after mid-term elections and as President Trump moves into his last two years in office as a lame duck.

## Transatlantic Opportunities

The Abraham Accords offer the US a durable instrument for advancing strategic interests while sharing the burden of



### ▲ Signatory nations of the September 15, 2020, agreements Bahrain, Israel and the United Arab Emirates [Credit: mawibo media]

regional security and stability. There is significant opportunity in further institutionalizing security cooperation in areas such as integrated air and missile defense, maritime security, intelligence fusion, and joint planning under the umbrella of CENTCOM. These measures directly reduce US operational burdens while enhancing deterrence against Iran some of its proxies, a crucial interest for Washington.

By lowering coordination costs among already aligned partners, the Accords enable Washington to boost its regional power and crisis-response capacity with a more flexible military footprint. There is no doubt that the Middle East has become more dependent on the US. There is also opportunity here for Europe, in a win-win-win format: The Union and its member states can expand their contribution to regional security in the southern neighborhood by burden sharing with the US. More alignment on select naval missions, such as in the Red Sea, investing in early-warning and maritime domain awareness in the Mediterranean and beyond, and amping support for partner capacity-building represent immediate opportunities.

In the economic sphere, the Accords are likely to further embed the US in the region through commercial and technological ties. Expanded multilateral projects in energy, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, critical minerals, and infrastructure will allow the US to secure its interests and counter Chinese and Russian influence. Here, too, Europe can increase its contribution to the Abraham Accords by carving out multilateral projects in energy security, to name one example.

Finally, the Accords present an underutilized opportunity to contribute to peace and stability by reconnecting normalization to progress on the Palestinian issue. The Accords are no substitute for a peace process. Building into the Accords a dimension and corresponding initiatives to support confidence-building measures and economic reconstruction can create a sustainable bridge to a peace process and progress toward a two-state solution. This is only possible with European advocacy and American leadership. There's a chance the Abraham Accords can evolve from an unprecedented strategic and commercial realignment program to one that also brings fuller peace and stability to the Middle East.



# US-Israel relations

## Natan Sachs

The United States is Israel's closest ally, and its support is a central pillar of Israel's national security. The US provides Israel access to purchase advanced weapon systems, ammunition and weapon emergency supplies in times of war, intelligence sharing, opportunities for cooperation in defense technology, and crucial diplomatic cover at the UN Security Council and elsewhere. It also provides Israel with regular security aid, to be spent in the United States, currently at an annual rate of \$3.8bn (under an MOU that expires in 2028). Since October 2023, the US also offered active military support, in a break from the historical norm. It contributed substantially to Israel's defense against Iranian ballistic missiles, in conjunction with Arab regional partners, and bombed nuclear sites in Iran in support of Israel's campaign in the "12 Day War" of June 2025.

These technological, intelligence, and security cooperations have benefited the US, especially in recent years, and Israel has supported broader American aims in the region. Equally important a motivation for US support for Israel, however, is widespread sympathy for the country among the American population and its political elite.

Three factors now put this longstanding foundation of the relationship in uncertain territory: 1. significant erosion of support for Israel against the backdrop of the war in Gaza and the devastation in the Gaza Strip, with generational and partisan correlates; 2. accompanying changes in political calculus among many Democratic politicians and among some in the Republican political elite; and 3. the unprecedented nature of Donald Trump's foreign policy, marked by unpredictability, fast pace, and liberal use of pressure on partners.

Taken together, these factors point to change as well as to growing unpredictability in the US-Israel relations in the short, medium, and long terms.

## A shift in public opinion

Israel's global standing declined precipitously during the war in Gaza. Israel remains more popular in the US than in almost any other country in the world, but there too the decline in support is striking, marking a break from recent decades. Polling by the Pew Research Center in March 2025, during some of the worst days of the war in Gaza, found that 53% of Americans reported holding an unfavorable view of Israel, up from 42% in March 2022. In a similar timeframe, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reported that Israel received a rating of 50 on a 0-100 "feeling thermometer", the lowest since the survey began in 1978.

Americans still sympathized more with Israel than with the Palestinians, but at far lower margins than in the past. In February 2025,

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▲ **The United States is Israel's closest ally, and its support is a central pillar of Israel's national security. [Credit: White House]**

Gallup found that 46% of Americans sympathized more with Israel, a record low, while 33% sympathized more with Palestinians, a record high since measurement began.

Three features stand out:

First, while there was a decline across the partisan spectrum in the US, partisan gaps persist. Among Democrats the rise in unfavorable views reached notable highs (from 53% in 2022 to 69% in March 2025 in the Pew data), but even among Republicans, where Israel remains popular, the rise in unfavorability was pronounced (27% to 37%), a pattern common to other polls. Second, younger Americans hold more negative views of Israel than their older compatriots. But third, whereas younger Democrats already held negative views of Israel before October 7, 2023 (62% negative in 2022 to 71% in 2025 in the Pew data), younger Republicans now followed suit (35% in 2022 to 50% negative in 2025.)

Among Jewish Americans, who comprise only about 2.4% of the population, October 7, the ensuing war, rising criticism of Israel, and rising antisemitism have all been highly salient. Even among this group, with a strong baseline of sympathy for Israel, some became very critical of Israeli conduct. In October 2025, the Washington Post reported that a majority of Jewish Americans believed Israel had committed war crimes in Gaza, and over a third called it genocide. Among Jewish Americans as in the general population, generational and partisan divides are highly visible, with younger and more liberal Jews far more critical of Israel than others. American Jewry is not monolithic, politically: In 2020, about 71% identified as or leaned toward Democratic, and some 26% Republican.

The war in Gaza has become a formative political experience for many young Americans, especially those on the left. While attitudes tend to revert to the mean over time, a formative event may have effects that are far more lasting than others.

Moreover, support for Israel benefited for years from being the default option for many American politicians. Those who did not have a strong opinion on Israel or Israeli-related affairs found the path of least resistance in its support. This has already changed among

Democratic politicians in their public posturing on Israel. The election of Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York signifies at least tolerance for, if not a public embrace of, positions on Israel that in the past would have been disqualifying in Democratic primaries. In the more moderate camp of the party too, the Overton Window has shifted significantly to the left.

Even among the MAGA right, figures like Tucker Carlson, Steve Bannon, and Marjorie Taylor Greene now openly argue against America's and the Republican party's traditional support for Israel and involvement in its defense, a sign of the changing times across the board.

## Caveats

This picture requires several caveats. First, Americans tend to distinguish between Israel's government, its prime minister, and its policies, which all receive far more criticism than in the past, and sympathy for the Israeli people. This distinction is more apparent in the United States than in many other countries.

Whereas 59% reported unfavorable views toward the Israeli government in a Pew poll from September 2025, 56% still held favorable views of its people. (The same poll found 52% with favorable views of Palestinians, but 84% with unfavorable views of Hamas and 68% unfavorable view of the Palestinian Authority.) Similarly negative views of Benjamin Netanyahu were found in other polls as well. This suggests that a future change in Israeli leadership and Israeli policy may have mitigating effects on the trends presented here.

Moreover, the data above come from a time of extreme focus on the worst aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with images of misery in Gaza emerging daily. If the Gaza ceasefire takes real hold and attention shifts elsewhere, these trends may weaken.

Attitudes that seem dominant in liberal urban centers like New York or on social media are also poor gauges of true broader public opinion. Liberal cities are very important in American politics, but they tend to be significantly to the left of the American population as a whole. Similarly, only a slice of the population is represented on social media, and these can be severely skewed due to the ease of manipulation of perceived attitudes on these platforms by interested parties.

- ▼ **If Trump's successor in the Republican Party is someone like Vice President J.D. Vance, who falls more squarely into the "America First" attitude toward Israel, policy could change further even under a Republican administration.** [Credit: MSC/Conzelmann]



- ▲ **Americans still sympathized more with Israel than with the Palestinians, but at far lower margins than in the past. In February 2025, Gallup found that 46% of Americans sympathized more with Israelis, a record low.** [Credit: Anna Steffes]

Finally, already during the war and as important as it was to many Americans, the issue remained a low priority in voting patterns, along with the rest of foreign policy. Like in most countries, Americans vote first and foremost on domestic issues, and this effect may lower the salience of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict further, as attention shifts.

## Policy

The changes are nonetheless evident already in policy terms. Public support for military aid to Israel has declined along with other views of Israel. In 2025, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reported a plurality of the general public (37%) saying that the US provides too much military aid and Pew found 49% of Democrats expressing a similar view.

Given the Trump administration's reluctance to provide foreign aid in general, negotiations for a new MOU for US military aid to Israel to begin in 2028 seem far more complicated than in the past. Already Netanyahu has signaled a conciliatory tone saying he would aim to end military assistance within the next decade. Notably, staunch Israel supporter Senator Lindsay Graham responded in agreement saying he would aim for a shorter time frame.

## The Trump administration

These shifts in public opinion coincided with a break in US foreign policy under President Trump. Even now, US policy toward Israel is changing. Trump has coupled his strong support for Israel with remarkable pressure compared to his predecessors. He forced Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to issue a scripted apology to Qatar for the Israeli strike in Doha in September 2025. Warning that he would not tolerate Israeli annexation of the West Bank, he explained that he had given his word to Arab partners, saying that "It won't happen... Israel would lose all of its support from the United States if that happened," a warning none of his recent predecessors would have issued.

During negotiations over a ceasefire that promised but did not guarantee removing Hamas as the governing force in Gaza, Netanyahu's main goal, Trump made what his envoy, Steve Witkof, described as "[a] very blunt and straightforward statement to Bibi... that he has no tolerance for anything other than this." This was tied to Israel's altered standing: Trump told him: "Bibi, you can't fight the world... [T]he world's against you. And Israel is a very small place compared to the world."



This pressure was effective in part because of Trump's strong public standing in Israel. During Trump's first term, he made several moves in support of Israeli policy, most notably recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and brokering the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Bahrain. These made him very popular in Israel, and especially among Netanyahu's right flank, which holds the key to the governing coalition. Trump's active support for Israel during the 12 Day War in his second term enhanced his popularity further in many quarters of Israeli society. From this position, his pressure on Netanyahu to accept the ceasefire in Gaza was protected from the right, politically. Having successfully negotiated the release of nearly all remaining Israeli hostages in Gaza, and an end to the war, he now enjoys considerable popularity even in the Israeli left.

### Future questions


While changing attitudes in the US toward Israel have not yet translated into most policy areas, the effects are already there and may grow in the future. It is far from clear what US-Israel relations will look like under the next few administrations, but this uncertainty, in and of itself, is a dramatic shift from recent decades.

If the next president comes from the left flank of the Democratic party, the changes in public opinion may come to the fore early, at least during campaigns but likely also during an administration's term. There is now a heated debate among Democrats on the party's position on Israel. The debate will not end by the next election and may depend on the identity of the candidate who wins the

Democratic primary. But these primaries will take place under different terms than in the past, where the issue of support for Israel becomes highly contested and where opposition to support for Israel is no longer a disqualification.

If Trump's successor in the Republican party is someone like Vice President J.D. Vance, who falls more squarely into the "America First" attitude toward Israel, policy could change further even under a Republican administration, albeit in a more muted way than under a Democratic one.

The relationship will also reflect changes in Israeli leadership. With a great deal of US public criticism focused on Netanyahu personally, a future leader of Israel, even one from the right, may have more of a grace period with the American public and political leaders. Netanyahu's close association with Trump (exemplified by Trump's active advocacy for a pardon for Netanyahu in his ongoing criminal cases) similarly suggests that a different leader may have more leeway with those Americans who disapprove of their president.

Many of the interest-based foundations of the US-Israel relationship remain strong or have even strengthened during the recent war. Technological, intelligence, and operational cooperation have all deepened. Israel's remarkable demonstration of its capacities in all these realms, its colossal intelligence failure on October 7 notwithstanding, have raised its attractiveness as a partner for the US and other countries. In terms of public opinion, however, Israel's standing has taken a historic plunge, globally but also among many Americans. In this regard, the war in Gaza may turn out to be a watershed moment for the relationship. 

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**MITTLER**  
**REPORT**

# Looking For A New Security Architecture In Europe

Detlef Puhl

Four years into the war launched by Russia against Ukraine, the security architecture of Europe not only is and remains broken. What was left of it, after NATO succeeded in uniting to assist the attacked partner to resist the attacker, has now definitely been torn to pieces by a new US-administration which has decided to ignore essential parts of the NATO Strategic Concept, adopted by the heads of state and government of the alliance, including the US, on June 29, 2022, after Russia's attack: "The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area," the strategic Concept says. "It seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation. It uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means against us and our partners". It goes on: "We will continue to respond to Russian threats and hostile actions in a united and responsible way... In light of its hostile policies and actions, we cannot consider the Russian Federation to be our partner. However, we remain willing to keep open channels of communication with Moscow to manage and mitigate risks, prevent escalation and increase transparency... Any change in our relationship depends on the Russian Federation halting its aggressive behaviour and fully complying with international law".

In stark contrast to this agreed language of 2022, the National Security Strategy of the US of November 2025 states, on page 25 of 29, that "many Europeans regard Russia as an existential threat. Managing European relations with Russia will require significant US diplomatic engagement. Both to reestablish conditions of strategic stability across the Eurasian landmass, and to mitigate the risk of conflict between Russia and European states." This means basically, that the US administration under Donald Trump doesn't share any longer the threat perception as laid out in the Strategic Concept and shared by the services of NATO and all of its allies. It declares the conflict with Russia to be a European affair, a conflict it claims to manage, not being a part of it. And NATO no longer is the point of reference for US security policy. In its chapter (3) on "Promoting European Greatness" NATO is mentioned once, on page 27 of 29: policy priority for the US concerning Europe is "ending the perception and preventing the reality, of NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance". That's it!

Nothing about "building on the enduring transatlantic bond between our nations and the strength of our shared democratic values," as stated in the preface of the Strategic Concept. Nothing on an outlook for transatlantic and European security after this war will have come to an end. Only this: "Europe remains strategically and culturally vital to the United States. Transatlantic trade remains one of the pillars of

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▲ [The November 2025 National Security Strategy of the United States of America marks a decisive shift in Washington's strategic outlook. \[Credit: Department of Homeland Security\]](#)

the global economy and of American prosperity... Not only can we not afford to write Europe off – doing so would be self-defeating for what this strategy aims to achieve." Europe, says the Trump administration, is strategically vital to the US because of transatlantic trade! Not because of security!

So, the US has not only changed the rules of the game; Washington has changed the game altogether. The reconstruction of a viable European security structure will have to take into account that a strong transatlantic alliance can no longer be taken for granted, that it remains an option only. An option which Europeans will have to work hard to keep open. For it is in the European interest that this alliance continues to exist. It has always been more than just a military alliance to protect territory from military aggression. It's been an alliance based on common democratic values of the people of our nations, which would need to be defended against any attack from outside.

NATO was founded in 1949 according to its first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down". Keeping the Germans down is no longer an issue. Keeping the Russians out was and continues to be a success. No member of NATO has ever been subject to military coercion. That's the reason why so many nations of Central and Eastern Europe, which could leave the Russian-dominated bloc after 1990, have chosen to join the alliance as soon as this was possible. Most recently, even Finland and Sweden, neutral nations for a long time, followed, in order to get protection. Keeping the Americans in now turns out to be the major problem for the alliance. While NATO continues to support Ukraine against an aggressive Russia, official language in Washington indicates that the US doesn't consider itself anymore to be on the NATO-side of the equation, but claims to stand outside, ready to moderate between Russians and Europeans.

What does this mean for the cohesion of the alliance? For its credibility? For the security of Europe? The effectiveness of a military defence alliance depends not only on its military capabilities. Here the

engagement of the US in Europe continues to be substantial. There are still important military installations, manned by up to almost 100,000 troops, 65,000 on a permanent basis, and 35,000 on rotation. Germany is the most important host country for US troops in Europe, with about 35,000 personnel. The most important of these installations serve mostly US national purposes, as they are critical for the global outreach of the Great Power, the Air Base in Ramstein or the Regional Headquarters for USEUCOM and USAFRICOM in Stuttgart. They provide capabilities for command and control, transportation hubs, centers for intelligence and communication, installations for training. Their value to the US is obvious, as well as to Europeans, if and when the US chooses to share them. They continue to be an asset for US security interests.

Also, NATO's integrated military structure continues to function, including its sophisticated NATO Defense Planning Process (NDPP) and Allied exercises, as they continue to take place. Planning is at the heart of military headquarters, when they are not running current operations. Therefore, NATO's planning capacities are critical to the credibility of the alliance. Generations of military leaders in all NATO countries have spent parts of their careers with and in these integrated structures, are familiar with their Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). If Europeans want to maintain this well established strategic culture and network, of which they are part and which has taken root in the different national military education and career systems, they need to increase their share in these structures in terms of hardware and personnel to make up for the reduction of US engagement in such activities, as announced by the Pentagon. Only then can they maintain their strong links across the Atlantic, also towards Canada, Greenland and Iceland.

Congress has passed legislation to hold US military engagement in Europe to a minimum of 76,000 troops. But at the same time, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth set a deadline of 2027 for Europeans to take over the majority of the conventional defence efforts on the continent, threatening to withdraw from some "defence coordination mechanisms" in the alliance. It remains to be seen what exactly the "Secretary of War", as he calls himself, means. But should he mean that the US should withdraw from the NDPP, even from parts of it, this would be the end of the alliance. Plans of the Pentagon to degrade strategic headquarters like USEUCOM, whose commander always assumes the role of SACEUR, "Supreme Allied Commander Europe", equally would put into question the well established structure of the alliance, which is the result of agreements between all allies.

Whatever the language, whatever the declarations of the present US administration are, Europeans have every interest in keeping the Alliance working in support of its core function: Defence of its member states against any military aggression. And to this end, Europeans have to increase their share, both in terms of capabilities and of personnel. They will have to assume roles which they had happily left to the "benign hegemon." Such roles will have to include very costly and sensitive matters, like intelligence gathering and sharing, satellite communication, long range weapons and, yes, also nuclear deterrence. They will have to consider running NATO by themselves - leaving a "guest room" for the Americans which would show they still have their place.

So, looking for a new security architecture in and for Europe, Europeans have to finally start organizing themselves better. It is obvious that in spite of numerous efforts over past decades, the EU, as it is, is not fit for this role. It is true, the EU has created some elements of a military structure. And it has developed ways and means to coop-

erate with NATO on important security-related issues. The Lisbon Treaty also has its "Article 5"; it's Article 42,7 which stipulates the obligation to assist each other with all means in case of an armed attack. But the EU has not been able, it has not even wanted to develop its own geostrategic footprint, alongside NATO and the US, but serving European interests in the first place.

At this turning point of history (Zeitenwende) however, as the international order seems to roll back to the patterns of the 19th century with Great Powers, ruled by strong men, dominating their spheres of influence (China, Russia, now US as well), Europe's voice needs to be heard, Europe's interests need to be taken seriously, in particular as they represent an important part of what once was "the West". At this point in time, they are not, unless Europeans decide to create their own capacity to act, following their own security strategy which has yet to be defined.

But unlike the US, the EU is not a state; the EU is a union of 27 nations. And defence matters, the use of military force have always been and will always be a matter of national responsibility, in particular with democratic nation-states where parliaments oversee, in one way or another, the activities of armed forces. Therefore, the EU-Treaty of Lisbon rules explicitly that "the Common Foreign- and Security Policy (CSFP) follows particular rules and procedures" (Art. 24,1) which exclude legal action by the Council, as well as parliamentary or judicial oversight by the European Parliament or the European Court of Justice. CSFP is a matter for the member states, assisted by the High Representative, who chairs their meetings and prepares them. Nothing more. Talking about creating a "European Army" is way out of bounds, unless European leaders are ready to write up a new treaty, a Treaty of a "European Security and Defence Union" for example, which would probably not find support in all of the 27 EU-nations but should seek support from non-EU countries like the UK or Norway.

But in these turbulent times of uncertainty, of doubts about the seriousness of a firm and lasting engagement by the US for Europe's security, there is no time to waste. European leaders have been pressed, not least by the Americans, to develop formats in which they can combine their efforts to define common European interests and act. As they did in the case of supporting Ukraine against an attacking Russia.

But if Europeans want to avoid a situation in which the US manages their relationship to Russia for them, as the Trump administration claims in its security strategy, the "E 3" or "E 5" or "E whatever", always including the UK outside of the EU, will need to give their formats a consistent and coherent frame for cooperation, create a small permanent and mixed staff, establish certain rules and procedures and thus contribute to giving their leaders a solid ground for common action and common language, to speak with one voice. This might, one day, turn into a security union and give Europeans a strong voice. In the meantime, they could try out and prove their ability to act in solidarity, based on their common democratic "Western" values not just in dealing with the present crisis.

This may be a smaller security architecture for Europe, but an efficient one, provided it leaves the door open to democratic allies to join. And it will be essential and critical to save one of the greatest historic achievements ever - the wisdom of Europeans to integrate into a sphere of shared sovereignty which provides a solid framework for permanent cooperation among nations and lasting reconciliation among former foes.



# Trump's foreign policy

Markus Pindur

Donald Trump's foreign policy year began as it ended: with a bang. He challenged the international community with military action against Venezuelan President Maduro and his abduction to the United States. He had begun his term in office by threatening that the United States wanted to take over Greenland and did not rule out the use of force. Was Venezuela the first chapter of the book 'I'll get what I want'? Is Greenland the second chapter?

On 21 December 2025, he appointed the Republican governor of the US State of Louisiana, Jeff Landry, as Special Envoy for Greenland. The large island in the North Atlantic is semi-autonomous, formally relies on Denmark for its foreign and security policy. Denmark then summoned the US ambassador in Copenhagen to the Danish Foreign Ministry. A representative from Greenland was also present.



◀ **On 21 December 2025, Trump appointed Jeff Landry, the Republican governor of the US state of Louisiana, as Special Envoy for Greenland; although the island in the North Atlantic is semi-autonomous, formally relies on Denmark for its foreign and security policy.**  
[Credit: Gov Louisiana]

Greenland's Prime Minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen wrote on *Facebook*: 'Greenland is our country. Our decisions are made here.' He said he was 'sad' that Trump still wanted Greenland. 'Such words reduce our country to a question of security and power.' Nielsen emphasised that he was also grateful for the support of other heads of state and government. This promptly came from the Europeans. Greenland 'belongs to its people,' French President Emmanuel Macron wrote on the social media platform X. Like other Europeans, he expressed his 'full solidarity,' Macron wrote. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and almost all European governments expressed similar sentiments. They issued a declaration of solidarity with Denmark.

The world's largest island is strategically located in the North Atlantic and Arctic Ocean between North America and Europe. The island is also directly in the path of a possible missile trajectory between Russia and the United States. The largely ice-covered and uninhabited Greenland has valuable raw materials in its soil that have hardly been exploited to date. New sea routes opened up as a result of climate change have recently led to a significant

increase in geostrategic interest in the Arctic on the part of the US, China and Russia. However, the US has already concluded various agreements with Denmark on the military use of the island. There is therefore no reason to confront an ally such as Denmark in this way. Unless, that is, the unlawful appropriation of Greenland is part of the MAGA movement's strategy to retreat to the Western Hemisphere. This is also suggested by the provoked conflict with Nicolás Maduro's Venezuelan regime.

Trump had already expressed his interest in taking over Greenland during his first term in office. If the US were to actually take over the island by force, it would spell the end of NATO.

However, Denmark is not the only democratic European state to be put under massive pressure by the Trump administration. Right at the beginning of his term in office, in February last year, Trump and his Vice-President J.D. Vance staged a scandal with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. At first, the meeting between Trump and Zelensky seemed harmonious. But then Vice-President Vance intervened in the conversation and caused the meeting to derail. The way to end the war was through diplomacy, a thinly veiled accusation against Zelensky. Zelensky responded by pointing out that Ukraine had been seeking a diplomatic solution to the conflict for years. In 2019, a ceasefire agreement had even been concluded with Russia in the presence of German Chancellor Merkel and French President Macron. However, Putin had never complied with this agreement. Vance then accused him of disrespect and ingratitude, saying that Zelensky had no right to express his views in the White House in front of the American media.

From then on, the situation continued to escalate. Trump also began to make accusations against Zelensky, repeating the accusation that Zelensky was ungrateful for US engagement. The meeting between Trump and Zelensky was supposed to result in the signing of an agreement on raw materials – in Trump's view, a *quid pro quo* for US military aid. But the situation took a dramatic turn when the US president declared that he was interested in a deal, not security guarantees for Ukraine, which Zelensky had demanded.

Zelensky then declared that a ceasefire would not be possible without American security guarantees, prompting Trump to resort to the strongest possible accusations. The Ukrainian president was putting the lives of millions of people at risk, Trump said, and Zelensky was risking a Third World War. The talks were finally broken off abruptly, and a press conference planned for later was cancelled at short notice.

An ominous start to the already strained relations between Trump and Zelensky. The relationship between the US and Ukraine has been characterised by constant ups and downs – with the downward trend tending to prevail. Although Trump has sometimes shown his annoyance with Putin and his unwillingness to compromise on his maximalist demands, he has never taken any effective action. Political pressure is always only exerted on Ukraine.

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## Tariffs on almost every country in the world

These are two constants in Trump's foreign policy. For example, Ukraine was hit with a 10% tariff, while Russia got off scot-free. Sanctions against buyers of Russian oil were discussed but never implemented.

Trump has imposed tariffs on almost every country in the world. The average tariff level for goods imported into the US rose from 2% to 17% this year. The aim is to make American products more competitive domestically, create more jobs in the US and thus strengthen domestic industry.

This is the highest tariff level since the Smoot-Hawley tariffs of 1930, which economists consistently cite as a historical negative example and which are blamed for exacerbating the global economic crisis at that time. Trump presents his tariff policy as a punishment and remedy for unfair trade practices. In reality, however, tariffs are a tax that is largely paid by American consumers. This leads to rising living costs in the US, a development that is now making Republican party strategists nervous. After all, the mid-term elections in the US are coming up in November 2026. Many voters elected Trump because they hoped he would use his strong hand to reduce the cost of living. However, this has not happened; quite the contrary. This could backfire on the Republicans in the mid-term elections.

Europeans are economically on a par with the US. Punitive measures by the EU in response to the tariff war unleashed by Trump would have hit the US economy hard. But both sides refrained from further escalation. The Europeans did not want to avoid economic damage, but feared – rightly so – that Trump would otherwise break the US's promise of protection within NATO. If Trump does indeed reach for Greenland, this promise of protection would also be null and void. Europe must prepare for this. What Europe has achieved in terms of sovereignty in economic policy must now be achieved in security and foreign policy. This – and not trivialities such as the next stage of regulation for supply chains – must be the next step for Europeans if they want to successfully deter Putin. The Allies can no longer rely on the US under Trump.

Elsewhere, China has not been intimidated by Trump and went on a collision course. The result – a comparatively moderate tariff rate of 10% was agreed upon for the time being. However, it is impossible to predict how long the conflict with China will be postponed. The large-scale Chinese military manoeuvres around Taiwan at the turn of the year do not bode well. Trump's erratic actions have also made the world more uncertain in Asia.

Trump's attitude towards Putin culminated in the summit meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, when Trump rolled out the red carpet for the Russian president in August. The long handshake alone was Putin's first success. The images of the handshake went around the world, but there were no other tangible results. Putin could be satisfied. He received a kind of rehabilitation on the world stage for which he did not have to deliver anything.

Trump himself had raised expectations for the summit, even talking about a possible ceasefire, or even a peace agreement in Ukraine, that would make a ceasefire superfluous. The impression remained that Trump had fallen into Putin's trap. Putin had indicated a willingness to negotiate, but then made no concessions. The self-proclaimed great 'deal maker' had been outmanoeuvred by a former KGB agent.

The Europeans were alarmed and travelled to Washington D.C. in an unprecedentedly large delegation. The signal: the broadest possible support for Ukraine. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte were among those present. Their task: to support Zelensky without snubbing Trump or cornering him. A diplomatic balancing act that initially seemed to be successful.

Chancellor Merz had already courted Trump during his inaugural visit to Washington D.C. and visibly impressed the moody US president. Since then, the CDU leader has been careful in his choice of words. Trump has a reputation for repeating the arguments of the last person he spoke to.

This became clear with the publication in mid-December of the latest US National Security Strategy

It is not without reason that the new US National Security Strategy has met with a positive response from the Russian government of all places. For decades, it has been a dream of Soviet and then Russian foreign policymakers to push the US out of Europe so that they can then put pressure on European governments individually. Thanks to Donald Trump, Putin seems to be getting closer to this dream of Russia as the dominant power in Europe.

## Russia is not the declared strategic adversary

In the 2017 National Security Strategy, during Trump's first term in office, Russia was still described as a threat. In the current edition, Russia is not characterised as a threat, but is cited as a potential stabilising factor, which seems highly disconcerting to the US's European allies in view of Russia's brutal war of aggression. According to the latest Strategy, it is not Russia that is the declared strategic adversary of the US, but liberal democracy on the European continent.

The Trump administration does not want to support this, but rather its declared opponents, from Orbán to the AfD, whose criticism of the democratic constitutional state Trump has made his own.

◀ **Meeting at the White House in spring 2025: In 2019, a ceasefire agreement was concluded between Ukraine and Russia in the presence of Chancellor Merkel and French President Macron. However, Putin never complied with this agreement. Vance accused Zelensky of disrespect, saying he had no right to express his views in front of the American media at the White House. [Credit: White House]**



Allegedly, what he calls 'patriotic parties' – meaning right-wing populists and right-wing extremists – are being persecuted and restricted in their freedom of expression. The security strategy states that these parties should be supported. The fact that NATO's biggest ally, the US, wants to actively interfere in European politics, and is openly in favour of ultra-right-wing parties friendly to the Kremlin, poses a real threat to Europeans. The US under Trump is no longer a reliable ally, according to *The Economist*, which is otherwise reliably transatlantic in its stance. The most pessimistic interpretation of the US policy paper, according to the British news magazine's commentator, suggests that Europe will be considered part of Russia's sphere of influence.



▲ **In a speech in Berlin on 11 December 2025, NATO Secretary General Rutte accused some NATO partners of failing to recognise the urgency of the threat posed by Russia.**  
**[Credit: Federal Government/Steffen Kugler]**

Chancellor Merz did not speak out until just under a week after the publication of the US security strategy. Apparently, they did not want to make too much of a fuss. And for good reason: Europeans are in no position to bang their fists on the table and put Trump in his place. They simply cannot afford to bring about a rapid break with the US – simply because they need the US. From weapons for Ukraine to the nuclear umbrella, Europeans are so dependent on the US that it is not advisable to part ways with the US any faster than the US seems to be doing with the Europeans.

Nevertheless, Wolfgang Ischinger, an experienced diplomat and current chairman of the Munich Security Conference, advises more composure. It is not at all clear to what extent the contradictory and largely domestically motivated paper will be consistently implemented. However, the attack on Venezuela follows the narrative of this paper: foreign policy considerations are based exclusively on the economic interests of the US. On the other hand, Trump's volatility and his dependence on the situation are well known. So are the fault lines within the US government. But hope is not a strategy. The direction is clear: American foreign policy, which has been closely linked to Europe for 80 years as a guarantor of security, is distancing itself from its European allies.

Foreign and security policy expert Nico Lange from the Munich Security Conference advises Europeans not to panic. Europe must learn that in the current geopolitical world situation, strength and power are crucial if it wants to assert its own interests. In this respect, it is advisable to take note of the new national security strategy. However, it is crucial that Europe has its own security strategy with which it can then approach the world with strength and help shape it.

Just a few days after its publication, European allies saw for the first time that the American security strategy paper was not just empty rhetoric. In an interview with the online media outlet *Politico* in early December, Trump openly expressed his contempt for European allies and reiterated his assessment that Europe was in decline and being destroyed by its own governments. To many observers, this sounded like an ideological break with Europe. Eighty years of successful alliance policy between America and Europe had apparently been terminated.

## Time for Europe

Now is the time for Europe to strengthen itself. Friedrich Merz, who has been unfairly defamed by his critics as the 'foreign chancellor', has obviously recognised this. In a speech in Berlin in December, NATO Secretary General Rutte accused some NATO partners of failing to recognise the urgency of the threat posed by Russia. They must rapidly increase defence spending and arms production, Rutte demanded at an event at the Munich Security Conference. At the same event, German Foreign Minister Wadepuhl urgently called on European partners to provide more support for Ukraine. It is in Ukraine that it will be decided whether Putin can continue his attack on the European order, not in a European culture war against Trump. Europeans have a gross national product eleven times higher than Russia's. They can defend themselves. But they must also want to do so.

It is questionable however, Trump will consistently implement the new US National Security Strategy. Many doubt that he has even read the document. The notoriously transactional president often changes his mind when it suits him. But US allies in Europe would do well to prepare for the worst-case scenario: that American foreign policy will ultimately abandon the Europeans.

In asserting themselves against Russian aggression, Europeans would no longer have the US fully at their side for the first time in 80 years, CDU foreign policy expert Norbert Röttgen notes in an interview with the weekly newspaper *Das Parlament*. And if the war is worthwhile for Putin, 'then he will come to us too'. Röttgen warns of a threat to NATO territory if Ukraine is no longer able to defend itself. This is exactly how the majority of Baltic and Eastern European states see it.

The summit meeting between Trump and Zelensky in Washington at the end of December did not produce any substantial results. Zelensky claimed that Trump was prepared to give Ukraine a temporary security guarantee if a ceasefire were to be reached, but this seems illusory. President Putin immediately announced that he did not want a ceasefire, but insisted on the complete fulfillment of his war aims.

Trump would therefore have to exert massive pressure on Putin force him to back down. But Trump has never once effectively confronted Putin. He clearly admires Putin's power and his status as a strong man and dictator. According to many observers, Trump has changed sides. NATO's promise of assistance under Article 5 of the Alliance Treaty is no longer certain. Putin knows this too. And the Europeans would do well to prepare and arm themselves for this eventuality.



# The US security strategy and its consequences for Europe

Rolf Clement

Political scientist Claudia Major spoke of a divorce document, while CDU foreign policy expert Norbert Röttgen referred to a second turning point. Both were commenting on the new US National Security Strategy. Both note that the document now presented is repositioning the US.

And since 3 January 2026, the invasion of Venezuela, we know what that will look like.

It always causes a stir when the US publishes a new National Security Strategy. The excitement this time is mainly due to the wording used by the Trump administration to emphasise the US-centric orientation of this paper in a very polemical manner. After all, most of the content can no longer shock Europeans. It is what the US President has been saying repeatedly for a year. Admittedly, these theses have a different binding force in an official document than in the President's speeches, the contents of which often have no lasting effect.

## Only interested in economics

First of all, rarely has the US so clearly and uncompromisingly aligned its foreign and security policy exclusively with its own economic interests in a document. There is no room for other considerations. It is unusual in its clarity, but then again not surprising that a country openly justifies its own security interests in such economic terms. If we are honest, German security policy – and that of other countries in Europe – also follows this premise. However, Germany embeds this formulation of interests in a commitment to alliances and cooperation with partner countries.

This is precisely what the US Strategy rejects in its diction. It repeatedly refers to partners in Asia and Europe. However, partners can only be those who shape their foreign policy in such a way that it obeys the interests of the US. What Claudia Major means is that the US Strategy rejects the international organisations of which the US is a member. This hits the EU particularly hard, as the US is not currently a member and cannot become one. In the view of the US, international organisations jeopardise the independent development of sovereign states, which thereby lose their identity. On the other hand, this US strategy deliberately ignores the fact that alliances pool interests where individual states cannot assert themselves alone and preserve their identity together with others. However, these alliances only work if these organisations make clear decisions. Perhaps this is also at the heart of US discontent – it cannot find equal partners who can decide on and implement binding positions.

Washington's policy of wanting to be the world's policeman has, on the one hand, come to an end. This has been heard repeatedly



[Credit: KAS]

from Washington, even before Trump. Especially with regard to Africa, the Strategy ends US efforts to promote democratic forms of government. On the other hand, the Trump administration is intervening in the internal politics of many countries, not so much militarily, but politically. In Venezuela, this has now happened in a particularly spectacular way. By putting former president Maduro on trial in New York, i.e. in the US, the US is also setting itself up as the world's judge.

## US support for nationalists

In many regions, the US expressly supports those parties that claim to advocate for the identity and independence of their respective countries with exaggerated arguments. This means that nationalist parties are supported in many countries. In doing so, the US fails to recognise that Europe has come to realise that cooperation and joint representation of interests are significantly more effective and indispensable for a continent with many states in a global world. Unlike on the North American continent, where the US government rules the entire country from Washington, cooperation in Europe must first be organised.

Here, too, we must be honest: Previous administrations have also placed US interests at the centre of their foreign and security policy. The trend towards isolationist policy has been noticeable for some time, albeit not so clearly. Remember Barack Obama's reorientation of foreign policy with his focus on Asia. At that time, tensions in Europe had not yet come to the surface, so strong US intervention was not necessary.

This continent could be left to its own devices. When the crisis in Ukraine began in the mid-2010s, the US quickly returned to Europe.

## A new security order

Nevertheless, we must recognise that 35 years after the end of the bloc confrontation, a new security order is emerging. This goes further than what is currently being discussed in political circles. The times when we thought in terms of East and West no longer reflect political reality. Now three major blocs are wrestling with each other: the US, China and Russia. Other groups are involved, but more on the sidelines.

In addition, other dividing lines are currently emerging, for example in Europe. There are the so-called liberal democracies, which includes Germany. This group also comprises the United Kingdom and France, for example. Then there are the so-called autocratic states. These include Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia, and until recently also the Netherlands. And then there is Russia and Belarus. The first two groups are members of NATO and – almost all of them – of the EU. However, in recent months and years, we have seen that it has been almost impossible to reach clear, unambiguous decisions in both international organisations because the necessary unanimity or even a qualified majority could no longer be achieved. These alliances have reached their limits. Anything that the US strategy rejects because it does not serve US interests first and foremost is also called into question due to its low effectiveness.

Now, in practice, the problem arises that the two groups, 'liberal democracies' and 'autocratic democracies,' are not permanently stable blocs. Until the elections there in October 2025, the Netherlands belonged to the autocrats, but can now be counted among the liberals again. Whether France will still belong to this group after the next presidential elections in May 2027 remains to be seen. Elections are due to be held in Hungary in spring 2026. The polls clearly predict a victory for the opposition against the autocrat Orbán. But that was also the case four years ago. Will elections in Hungary be conducted according to the rules of a free democracy? Three examples, three possibilities.

These volatile developments in Europe, even in the EU, force us to think about new forms of cooperation. Hopefully, this is happening in the planning departments of governments. This would also be an important task for the new National Security Council in Germany, which the federal government has set up.

## Are the EU and NATO formats still appropriate?

It must be clear that NATO and the EU, in their current formats, with their rules and the breadth of positions represented within them, will no longer be able to take truly binding and ground-breaking decisions on security policy that can then be implemented. Where purely economic or, for example, environmental policy is concerned, there are still areas of overlap and competences at EU level that can lead to a common policy. In defence and security policy, the forces that are drifting apart are clearly visible.

This has concrete implications. What is the value of an integrated military structure if different countries in NATO bodies even hold opposing positions on certain conflicts and parties to conflicts? Is it realistic to assume that the mutual assistance clause in the NATO and EU treaties, which requires unanimity, can still be applied at all?

Or is the defence alliance founded in Washington on 3 April 1949 now obsolete?

This becomes even clearer when one imagines the US intervening militarily in Greenland. Greenland belongs to Denmark in terms of foreign and security policy. If the US were to intervene there, the mutual defence clause would have to be activated in favour of Denmark. However, this is not possible in formal terms because the US would prevent unanimity in determining the Alliance case, quite apart from the fact that the US would not provide assistance against itself. That leaves the EU's mutual assistance clause. Would everyone participate if the opponent were the US?

New forms of cooperation are also necessary because many armament projects have been and are being launched jointly by several countries. Here, too, the question arises as to whether a weapons system can be developed jointly with a country with which, in the worst case, one might even find oneself on opposite sides in a conflict. Remember: in the Iraq War in the first decade of this century, French Mirage fighter jets could not be used against Iraq because France had sold this type of aircraft to the regime in Baghdad years earlier. The friend-or-foe identification system on US fighter jets would not have been able to distinguish between Iraqi and French jets.



### ▲ Is the defence alliance founded in Washington on 3 April 1949 now obsolete? [Credit: Bundeswehr/Sebastian Wilke]

This means that the procedures of NATO and the EU are no longer practicable. A new, similarly structured alliance can no longer be constructed because the previous agreement on fundamental objectives can no longer be guaranteed and because the principles in European states are interchangeable depending on the election.

A flexible approach to European security will therefore be necessary. The model of the 'Coalition on the Willing' provides a framework for this. A core group can work more closely together, but must always expect that some members of this core group will break away.

De facto, this means a renationalisation of security policy. This is a requirement of US security strategy. But this strategy calls for such steps in order to restore the identity of the nation states. However, this analysis shows that the opposite is true: European states want to continue working together, but cannot find a common strategy. But this also leads to renationalisation, which they do not actually want, because they can only be strong together.



# The System of Total Defence

## Interview with the Swedish Minister of Defence

### Dr. Pål Jonson

**ESD:** What is your assessment of the threats your country and Europe are exposed to?

**Jonson:** The rules-based world order is being challenged by authoritarian states, and a geopolitical power struggle is intensifying. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine shows that conflicts for territory using military means are yet again a reality. China's growing geopolitical ambitions and authoritarian governance challenge the rules-based international order. Its military build-up and use of economic and technological influence pose indirect but significant risks to European and global security.

An armed attack on Sweden or our allies cannot be excluded, nor can it be excluded that military instruments or threats could be used against us. All in all, the threats to Sweden have increased in range and complexity, also comprising, amongst others, malign information operations, cyber-attacks, intelligence operations, terrorism, and sabotage.

**ESD:** What do you expect from NATO, being a new member of the Alliance?

**Jonson:** NATO has, during its whole existence, shown that it can adapt to different security threats and remain the world's strongest provider of peace and security. Sweden has been a member of NATO for almost two years, a decision that entailed a profound change in Sweden's foreign, security and defence policy by ending 200 years of military non-alignment. By joining the Alliance, Sweden exercised our right to freely choose our own security arrangements which is at the core of the European security order.

Our long history of close partnership with NATO, as well as intense national preparations for NATO membership, has significantly contributed to our integration. In light of the seri-

ous global security situation, Sweden's NATO membership strengthens security and stability, raises the threshold for an armed conflict in our neighbourhood and enhances our resilience. We joined NATO to gain security, but also to provide security, and Sweden is proud of what we bring to the table. Sweden is safer in NATO, and NATO is a stronger alliance with Sweden in it.

**ESD:** What is Sweden's contribution to NATO?

**Jonson:** Sweden brings its full set of forces to the Alliance. As an ally, we will contribute with forces in all domains to make SACEUR's plans executable. The geographical location of Sweden also means that Sweden plays a vital role for the reinforcement and sustainment of allied operations in both Joint Area Northwest and Center, crucial for the defence of the Alliance. Sweden is also an active contributor to the DDA-activities. This includes Air Policing, Standing Naval Forces, contributions to FLF Latvia and not least by acting as Framework Nation for FLF Finland. Sweden can also make a substantial contribution to the Alliance when it comes to defence industrial strength and innovation.

**ESD:** Sweden talks about "Total Defence", what exactly does this mean?

**Jonson:** Total Defence is defined as everything needed to prepare Sweden for war. It consists of Military Defence (The Swed-



[Credit: Kristian Pohl/Government Offices of Sweden]



[Credit: Astrid Amtén Skage/Swedish Armed Forces]

ish Armed Forces) and Civil Defence. The overall objective is to have the capability to defend Sweden and its population against armed attacks, assert our country's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and contribute to the defence of Allies.

**ESD:** What does it mean for a Swedish citizen to prepare for the defence of his/her country?

**Jonson:** All Swedish citizens, as well as those resident in Sweden from the age of 16 until 70, can (by law) be summoned to assist in various ways in the event of threat of war or in war. This legal duty is gender-neutral and the duty to contribute to Sweden's total defence has three forms and; one of them is the conscription system, which is applicable for all Swedish citizens.



▲ **Steadfast Defender 24 ran from mid-January to June and was the largest Nato exercise series in decades. It was conducted to clearly demonstrate the Alliance's ability to deter adversaries and showcase Nato's capability to reinforce Europe. The exercise involved practicing the movement of troops across the Atlantic from North America to Europe. All member countries, including Sweden, participated in the exercise series, with a total of 90,000 soldiers involved. [Credit: David Carr]**

There are three types of total defence service:

- The military service, which means that the 18-year-olds who are selected are obligated to serve and to enroll in basic military training. After completing military service, the conscripts are transferred to the reserves of the Swedish Armed Forces, which includes mandatory rehearsal training if called upon.
- The civilian service, which is a non-military service. The civilian service was suspended in 2010 but is now being reactivated.
- The third is the so-called general compulsory national service, which only applies in the event of a heightened state of alert or war. In short, it makes it mandatory to keep working in your ordinary job in case of heightened state of alert or war if you are not assigned by the government to any other posting.

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency MSB brochure, "If Crisis or War Comes", is a comprehensive guide sent to every household across Sweden. It provides clear, practical advice on how to prepare for and act during both civilian crises and wartime scenarios. The brochure covers essential topics such as assembling emergency kits, understanding communication channels, and safeguarding basic needs like food, water, and

shelter. It also reflects the evolving security landscape—highlighting increased geopolitical tensions, extreme weather events, cyber threats, disinformation, and Sweden's NATO membership.

**ESD:** Are defence efforts in Sweden subject to important public debates?

**Jonson:** Yes, defence efforts in Sweden are clearly the subject of important public debate, and these debates have intensified significantly in recent years. A central issue in the current discussion is the plan to increase defence spending to 3.5% of GDP, which represents a historically high level of ambition and add a full stop/period

The debate mainly focuses on:

- The security situation and NATO: Sweden's NATO membership and a deteriorating security environment have increased demands for stronger military and civil defence.
- Defence spending and priorities: The 3.5% of GDP target has sparked discussions about financing, borrowing, and trade-offs with welfare and other societal needs.
- Conscription and personnel: How the expanded defence effort will be staffed and what consequences this may have for individuals and the labour market.
- Total defence: Greater emphasis on civil preparedness, supply security, and society's resilience in the event of crisis or war.
- Military presence and exercises: Local impact, environmental concerns, and civilian safety are recurring topics.

In summary, defence issues – and especially the 3.5% of GDP target – are no longer a narrow expert domain, but a central part of public and political debate in Sweden.

**ESD:** Sweden had suspended the military draft in 2011, but re-established it after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. How did you explain this change of mind to your citizens?

**Jonson:** The new security situation after 2014 made it necessary to reactivate conscription to make it possible to quickly increase the size of the armed forces. Conscription is historically well implemented in Sweden and therefore socially accepted. The re-activation was well received. We believe the conscription system itself plays an important role in maintaining will to defend one's country.

However, there needs to be a dialogue and relationship with the public about conscription and it needs to start early. Therefore, total defence knowledge has been incorporated in secondary schools this year and an ongoing inquiry is looking into the possibility to teach it in Elementary school as well. The Swedish armed forces visit public and private schools to provide information about total defence, the Armed Forces and conscription itself. Approximately 85,000 contacts are

made during a year in upper secondary schools (15-18 years). Another example is the brochure "If crisis or war comes", which is sent to all Swedish households. The entire year group of 18-year-olds, some 110,000 people last year, received the leaflet Mustering & Conscription by post. The leaflet informs about the duty of conscription, and all the steps in the process from filling out the mustering questionnaire to basic military training itself. Conscription has a high level of acceptance in Swedish society and particularly in higher socio-economic groups. Of the approximately 8,000 who are selected for military training, many are highly motivated, which is partly explained by the fact that they see personal benefits later in life from the military training experience.

**ESD:** What does your draft system consist of?

**Jonson:** Total defence duty applies to all citizens living in Sweden or abroad between the ages of 16 and 70 years. Total defence duty also applies to foreign nationals residing in Sweden. The duty is divided into military service (ages 18-47), civil defence service and general national service. Only Swedish citizens are obliged to perform military and civil defence service, but general service applies to everyone who resides in Sweden. In a heightened state of alert when the government has ordered a full mobilisation, all conscripts need to proceed to their designated wartime posting. If the government activates general national service, you are obliged under law to remain at your present work or carry out other tasks in support of Sweden's total defence system.

In case of war and highest state of alert, all civilian employees in the Swedish Armed Forces transition to military personnel within their area of expertise. The civilian personnel within the Armed Forces must have completed at least three to five days of combatant training.

The military training is between 9-15 months long. The basic military training is three months and is followed by a trade specific training of up to 12 months. The conscript system is compulsory and gender neutral. Once trained, conscripts are legally obliged under criminal liability, to serve until a maximum age of 47 years. To uphold a war time placing, the conscript must have undergone refresher training at least once in the last ten years.

Military service encompasses basic training, refresher training, readiness service if the Government decides that it is necessary for Sweden's defence readiness and military service in the

event of heightened state of alert, including during war, if it's deemed necessary for the defence of Sweden.

**ESD:** Are the needs of your armed forces met by people serving on a voluntary basis or do you have to draft people?

**Jonson:** Sweden has a mixed system of personnel supply that combines both conscription and voluntary recruitment. That system enables both quality and quantity within the armed forces. Conscription fills and sustains the Armed Forces with personnel at the scale required at the present threat level. Conscription, however, is also the basis for the recruitment of employed personnel. Despite being suspended for eight years, the conscription system is well regarded and 82 percent of conscripts state that they would recommend a friend or acquaintance to complete or apply for basic military training. As many as 77% feel that they are prepared in their job role for war or a war-like situation after completing military service. Over a third (2025: 36%) of the conscripts choose to stay on as employed within the Armed Forces after their military training. This is the highest proportion since conscription was activated in 2017.

**ESD:** Which are the criteria for drafting people for service in the military?

**Jonson:** The base of recruitment consists of the entire age group Hyphen 18-year-olds. Each year, approximately 110,000 18-year-old men and women are obliged to fill out a mustering questionnaire. This means that the number of conscripts selected for enrolment and basic military training permits an increased intake pending on the security situation. About 20 percent of those who start their basic military training through conscription are women. In comparison, during the all-volunteer system the percentage was 12-13%.

There is also a possibility for individuals older than 18 years to sign up voluntarily for basic military training. If mustered and enrolled, the volunteers too are considered conscripts, with an obligation to do military service under criminal liability.

Out of the entire year group, some 30,000 individuals will be called to muster and approximately 8,500 will be enlisted for basic military training. The individuals picked are those whose mustering results are regarded as being best suited for certain war time positions. By 2032, the number of conscripts enlisted for basic military training will be 12,000.

**Questions by Rolf Clement and Detlef Puhl**



▼ **Sweden intends to build two brigades for subarctic warfare by 2028. [Credit: Jesper Sundström/ Swedish Armed Forces]**



# Can security expectations in France and Germany be aligned?

Jean-Francois Bureau

More than 63 years after the signing of the 1963 Elysee Treaty, which was described as a testament to Franco-German reconciliation, both nations still have a lot to do to ensure the alignment of their views, interests and achievements in this post cold-war world, which has changed so much.

Despite the *aggiornamento* of the Aix la Chapelle treaty in 2019, and many efforts to establish a common agenda, the latest in Toulon in August 2025 (25th French-German Council of Ministers), it seems that both nations still have different priorities and do not read the changing world in the same way. To be fair, it should be recalled that this situation is quite enduring if we remember that the Bundestag added a preamble to the law ratifying the Elysee Treaty by which the German Parliament firmly stated the continuing priority to the US-German relationship and NATO. This didn't mean that Chancellor Adenauer's confidence in France was weak, but it has to be recognised that this statement was only anticipating the Gaullist decision to distance itself from NATO as confirmed in 1966 by France's withdrawal from the Alliance's integrated command structure.

In the meantime, the world has changed significantly, and Russia's war against Ukraine has created a sense of urgency and called for more realism. Now both countries are under strong pressure to identify a new path to promote a European integration which will ensure that European Western democracies will be able to safeguard their interests and security. While in the past, French expectations that Germany support the rationale and the magnitude of its proposals for strategic partnership have been a constant source of misunderstandings, France should now reassess its proposals and take stock of the German strategic culture, interests and defence efforts.

Three main issues provide evidence that such changes are needed.

## Should European "strategic autonomy" become a "strategic responsibility" ?

Since the end of the Cold War, France has developed the idea that the Europeans should develop an autonomous defence within the framework of the EU. Germany has always understood this proposal as a way to promote an alternative

security structure which could undermine NATO and an enduring US commitment. But even if France demonstrated its readiness for a more balanced relationship between EU and NATO in terms of strategic commitments, the return of France to the integrated allied military structure in 2008 did not lead to a more unified Franco-German policy to update the NATO strategy, and build a reinforced European pillar in NATO.



▲ German Federal Chancellor Adenauer and President de Gaulle of France sign the Elysée Treaty on 22 January 1963. [Credit: Federal Government/Schwahn]

## However, the terms of the discussion have now changed

It is only after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 and the election of the new coalition in Germany in 2025, that the notion of European strategic autonomy seems less disruptive to Germans. Now Germans discuss that it could be wise for the Europeans to develop a strategic understanding and a common view about how to ensure the security of the continent. France should recognise that Germany has demonstrated an important move in this regard.

As it is today, the notion of "strategic autonomy" should be less understood as a French plan for European security. Instead "European strategic responsibility" should be promoted to identify the magnitude of responsibilities the Europeans would be ready to take in NATO in order to develop a true "European pillar" in the Alliance, beyond the budget commitments they have agreed upon at the Hague Summit in 2025. Should France and Germany decide to present common proposals, they could offer, together with the UK and nations such as Poland, Italy, the Nordics and the Balts, to define the "European pillar" of NATO. This would significantly change the terms of the discussion regarding the relationship between the EU and NATO. Berlin and Paris have not been able to come to this point yet.

### AUTHOR

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If both nations agree that the Russian threat and Moscow's preference for war will only increase before the end of the decade, and that this outlook must be addressed whatever the US position regarding NATO will be, there is an urgent need for Paris and Berlin to develop a discussion in order to shape a bilateral set of proposals. This could demonstrate the enduring importance of the Alliance and forge the ability of the Europeans to be in a position to take decisions when it comes to the defence of their interests. The Coalition of the Willing prevented the Europeans from being totally excluded from negotiations for a ceasefire in Ukraine. Such a format could also be meaningful, based upon proposals which both capitals could have set up in order to adapt NATO to the new essential threats the Europeans are now facing. The notion of "strategic autonomy" may now need to be adjusted to a true European responsibility.

Reconciling the reform of NATO and the European strategic capacity to act as a responsible power, could become a key common task for the Franco-German ambition. It would entail both capitals moving forward and recognising that the relationship between NATO and the EU has changed: NATO will only survive both challenges, one stemming from the Russian threat the other from the US "pivot", if the Europeans demonstrate, their will (with structured proposals) and capacity (with budgets) to be in the driving seat alongside with the US, if they decide to attend. If Berlin wants NATO to survive, it needs to engage in change, and if Paris wants the Europeans to assume their security responsibility, it is the place to be as well.

### **Nuclear protection must take stock of the Russian nuclear assertiveness:**

In the past, France has repeatedly suggested that a discussion about nuclear deterrence should take place among concerned Europeans, and that France was ready for it. According to the comments it publicly received, Warsaw, London and Berlin have now expressed their readiness to start such a process.

The German refusal to discuss the nuclear issue until recently has deep roots, and Paris knows about them. During the Cold War, French land-based short-range nuclear systems could have impacted German territory. Today, Germany is concerned about the validity of the nuclear commitment by the US to protect European allies. The German decision to purchase F-35s was related to this commitment. And instead of Paris



▲ **The 25<sup>th</sup> Franco-German Council of Ministers took place in Toulon, France. Federal Chancellor Merz was accompanied by numerous members of the Federal Cabinet.** [Credit: Federal Government/Steffen Kugler]



▲ **KNDS is the result of the association of Krauss-Maffei Wegmann and Nexter, two of the leading European manufacturers of military land systems based in Germany and France.** [Credit: Gerhard Heiming]

suspecting German disloyalty vis-à-vis France when Berlin decided to buy F 35s, Paris should have suggested that the nuclear discussion it was offering should be an extension of the Ottawa Declaration of 1974, which reaffirms commitment of all nuclear powers in NATO for the security of the Alliance.

France cannot and will not claim that it could substitute for a US decision to reconsider its nuclear engagement in Europe, but there is a need to deliver an unambiguous signal of commitment should a Russian aggression threaten the Allies. The issue could be described as such: France has already declared that its security ("vital interests") is absolutely related to the security of Europe. The question is: What are the practical steps that could support this statement? Instead of navigating around the US ambiguities, this discussion should take place in relation to the current strategic situation. The reassurance France could provide, alongside the UK, can then also influence the US equation, and restore an allied deterrence posture in Europe which could be firm enough to protect Europe's security. If NATO has to transform in order to organise a credible European pillar, the nuclear issue could not be set aside. Two key issues should then be addressed by both nations:

- The new Russian nuclear posture: The war in Ukraine and the developments of the Russian nuclear doctrine have confirmed that Moscow will extensively use the threat of the use of nuclear weapons to achieve its military and political objectives. But, instead of focussing on deterrence, it will threaten to use nuclear weapons in a coercive way. Germany should recognise that Russia could make use of this coercive power, and that only an equivalent deterrent capacity can prevent further aggression.
- This new strategic posture will only be meaningful if Russia faces an existential risk which could prevent it from translating nuclear capabilities into a coercive policy. The equalising power of nuclear capabilities should be raised in order to determine a European attitude towards deterrence. As a consequence, Europeans, who do not intend to wage a "nuclear battle" as Russians seem to be preparing for, could endorse a defence policy which would include their ability to threaten the use of nuclear weapons.

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**The defence effort is a multidimensional issue to be addressed:**

With the expansion of defence budgets in Europe and the technological dimension of the armaments programmes, defence industries are less inclined to support political directives from the top. Instead of stimulating cooperation in order to support national needs which could be harmonised, competition among the manufacturers is sharply increasing, and consolidation schemes will probably shape the future of the European defence industry more than programme-led decisions. The painful discussions about Franco-German cooperation projects, including FCAS and MGCS, have confirmed that the top-down approach based upon mostly political impulse needs time to deliver and can even worsen the bilateral relationship.

With a public debt of 117% of its GNP, France will face huge challenges to commit in its annual budgets the money planned by the multi-year programming law 2024-2030. This situation could undermine German confidence in the French modernisation plan, which may not work as expected. This, in turn, will raise fears in France that German industry will benefit from such weakness. With a German defence budget of €86 billion in 2025 to be compared to €53 billion in France the same year, this gap already weighs upon potential discussions both partners could like to have in order to strengthen both defence industries. Rather than a (political) top-down approach, a bottom-up approach, based on concrete industrial interests between partners, looks more attractive. Start-up companies like Helsing and Exploration Company, both of them very much grounded in a Franco-German dimension, seem to pave the way of future defense related

activities. Even Dassault and OHB seem to contemplate potential future cooperations for Vortex.

One of its most resilient industry segments, like chemistry in Germany, the French defence industry has relied on a successful exports policy which, increased orders significantly to the main suppliers. This priority for exports is a critical issue for French industry as well as for the government in order to lessen the financial constraints the defence policy is facing. As a consequence, the French side will not support the proposal of the European Commission to have a say on weapons exports of the member states, even inside the EU: armaments exports cannot be subject to rules of an EU unified market.

France and Germany will be able to reset their defence and security relationship if they decide to address the key issues they have to face in common as Europeans: face the enduring Russian aggression (military and hybrid), contribute to a credible nuclear deterrence which they will support together as well, and take stock of industrial common plans to create opportunities of armaments cooperation.

France and Germany also need to grasp the changing strategic landscape together, banning taboos and totems: as Ukraine and Venezuela already demonstrate, the XXIst century will be disruptive. They already have a lot on their plate if they wish to deliver, whatever the key next political steps are – which include upcoming elections in both France and Germany, regional elections in Germany in 2026 and national elections in France in 2027, perhaps earlier. If extreme anti-EU forces (far right and far left) can claim success, the Franco-German agenda will undergo radical change.



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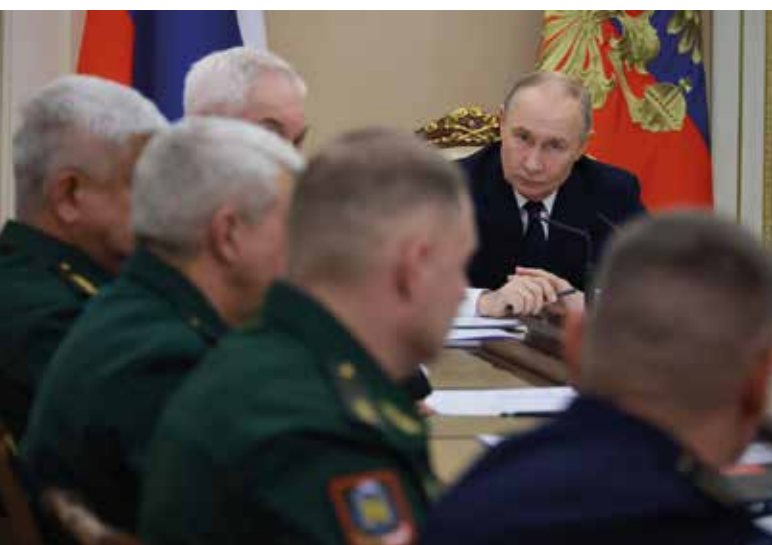


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# “Russia and its Ambitions”

Graeme P. Herd

**On the fourth anniversary of Russia’s full-scale, multi-axis invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin and senior Russian officials continue to articulate unchanged strategic objectives: military victory; the “demilitarization” and “denazification” of Ukraine (understood in practice as regime change); and the annexation of Ukraine’s entire Donbas.**



▲ [The Russian Supreme Commander-in-Chief Vladimir Putin chaired a meeting on the developments in the special military operation zone on 9 December 2025.](#)  
[Credit: Kremlin]

Control over Donbas is framed not merely as a war aim in itself, but as a strategic and operational prerequisite for extending Russian authority over the remainder of Ukrainian territory. Putin’s conception of Ukraine has displayed remarkable ideological continuity, from his 2001 assertion to President George W. Bush that Ukraine was an artificial state, to his June 2025 declaration that “Ukraine is ours”. Within this conceptual framework, a peace agreement is not envisaged as a negotiated compromise between sovereign actors, but as the formalisation of Ukrainian capitulation and the settlement of Ukraine’s status on Russian terms. In this view, negotiation outcomes are ultimately determined by battlefield dynamics and each party’s capacity to sustain hostilities.

## AUTHOR

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## Russian–U.S. Negotiations

Putin currently employs three principal channels to address general peace parameters and summit preparation: (1) the foreign-ministerial channel between Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio; (2) engagement between Russian and US special envoys — Kirill Dmitriev on the Russian side and Steven Witkoff and Jared Kushner on the US side; and the presidential administration channel via Putin’s foreign policy adviser, and former Russian Ambassador to the US Yuri Ushakov. A bilateral presidential summit with President Trump is reserved exclusively for endgame negotiations and the formal signing of an agreement. Such high-level, in-person engagement is intended to reinforce Moscow’s insistence on US–Russian parity, equality, and reciprocal recognition of great-power status.

Russia deliberately shifts between negotiation formats to complicate US policymaking, maintain the appearance of an ongoing peace process, and incrementally introduce additional demands as conditions for participation in a summit. By contrast, Putin views a meeting with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as status-degrading. Moscow asserts that Zelenskyy is not Ukraine’s constitutional head of state but merely the *de facto* leader of its executive authorities, an argument designed to reinforce the broader Russian narrative that Ukraine is a territory rather than a sovereign political subject. Consistent with this framing, Russia portrays negotiations with Ukraine as a continuation of the Istanbul process initiated in March 2022, rather than as talks mediated by the United States.

The protracted tempo of US–Russian negotiations serves Russian interests. First, Putin assesses that incremental Russian front-line advances create leverage for additional demands. Second, participation in a peace process enables Moscow to shape US deliberations toward concessions on territorial status, enforced neutrality, and a sharply reduced Ukrainian military establishment incapable of effective self-defence or future deterrence. Third, Russia seeks to balance a tactical demonstration of willingness to negotiate with Washington against a persistent narrative that European states (“the party of war”) and the “Nazi junta” in Kyiv are responsible for obstructing a settlement.

Russian diplomatic signaling has been reinforced less by decisive battlefield success than by nuclear escalation rhetoric and information operations emphasising alleged technological breakthroughs. In this context, the deputy chairman of the State Duma’s Defence Committee publicly raised the possibility of deploying Oreshnik or Kalibr missile systems to Venezuela. On 21 October 2025, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov announced a successful test of the nuclear-powered Burevestnik cruise missile. Putin subsequently claimed the system possessed unlimited range, had flown 14,000 km, and represented a qualitatively unique capability—a “wunderwaffe”.

Throughout 2025, Russia's principal diplomatic inflection points included the highly contentious Trump–Zelenskyy encounter in the Oval Office on 28 February and the 15 August Putin–Trump summit in Alaska. The latter effectively shifted responsibility onto Ukraine to accept a ceasefire, while allowing President Trump to avoid enforcing his 2 September ultimatum deadline to Putin. On 20 November, President Zelenskyy received US peace proposals delivered by Secretary of the Army Dan Driscoll. These proposals—developed via the Witkoff–Dmitriev channel—placed Ukraine in a strategically untenable position by *de facto* rehabilitating Russia, legitimizing its aggression, and removing restrictions imposed on the aggressor.

full-scale, multi-axis invasion with a peacetime force composed primarily of contract soldiers and volunteers under the rubric of a “Special Military Operation (SMO)”, rather than conducting full mobilisation prior to invasion. Putin traded anticipated shock and surprise—based on erroneous assumptions regarding Ukrainian political collapse—for operational depth, force density, and a campaign design capable of overwhelming Ukraine.

Although partial mobilisation was ordered in September 2022 and concluded in spring 2023, persistent manpower constraints re-emerged by 2025, despite Russia's fourfold demographic



▲ **Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin on December 19th, 2025 in the Kremlin, Moscow. [Credit: Kremlin]**

Under these terms, Ukraine would have been required to cede the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, while a demilitarised zone would be established in areas Russia had failed to occupy over four years of combat—an arrangement effectively nullified by Ushakov's clarification that Rosgvardiya and police forces, rather than regular army units, would assume control. Additional provisions included limits on the size of Ukraine's armed forces, unresolved status of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, and the absence of credible security guarantees. President Zelenskyy characterised these proposals as among the most difficult moments in Ukraine's history, forcing a choice between preserving national dignity and retaining its most consequential strategic partner.

### Structural Constraints on Russia's War Effort

Time is not neutral. Developments in 2025 increasingly exposed structural and systemic weaknesses in Russia's war effort. Russia's foundational error was the decision to launch a

advantage over Ukraine. New legislation authorised partial mobilisation of reserve elements nominally assigned to air defense of critical infrastructure. These forces are likely to be deployed to Ukraine, signaling the onset of *de facto* covert mobilisation.

Over the course of 2025, Ukraine refined a theory of victory centred on deep operational strikes against Russian command-and-control nodes, logistics hubs, fuel and ammunition depots, and force concentrations at distances of up to 300 km from the line of contact. The objective is to render the war operationally unsustainable, thereby achieving Russia's strategic neutralisation. Russia has largely lost the ability to conduct large-scale armored manoeuvre, rapid operational exploitation, or sustained territorial expansion. Instead, it relies on small-unit infantry assaults, while incurring manpower losses broadly equivalent to its annual recruitment capacity.

Approximately 500 Russian air defence systems have been confirmed destroyed over four years of war—roughly 50% of

available inventory—with Ukraine demonstrating an ability to degrade these systems faster than Russia can replace them. While Russia retains effective air defence coverage over Moscow, St. Petersburg, and select defence-industrial nodes, protection elsewhere remains uneven and insufficient against Ukrainian drone operations.

## Economic and Informational Dimensions

Strategic neutralisation also depends on constraining the revenue streams sustaining Russia's war effort. Russian government sources indicate that Ukrainian airstrikes have reduced refinery output by approximately 25%. On 21 November, new US sanctions targeting Rosneft and Lukoil entered into force, disrupting crude exports to India, Brazil, and China. President Trump threatened escalation to an economic war should negotiations stall. Enhanced sanctions enforcement, combined with intensified Ukrainian strikes, accelerated declines in Russian oil exports, forcing Moscow to discount prices to retain buyers. By the end of 2025, Russian oil exports had fallen to their lowest level since 2022.

In September 2025, the EU adopted its 19th sanctions package, confirming the termination of LNG imports from Russia by 1 January 2027—a market Russia cannot rapidly replace. Additional measures targeted Russia's shadow fleet and firms supporting its defence-industrial base.

Russian information operations have similarly degraded over time as the disparity between declared red lines and actual responses has widened, eroding credibility. A central claim seeks to persuade Western policymakers that Russia possesses substantial undeployed reserves capable of escalating the conflict horizontally against NATO. The counterargument is straightforward: if such reserves exist and are combat-effective, their absence from the Ukrainian theatre remains unexplained. The proposition that Russia would risk general war with NATO in 2026, despite failing to secure Donetsk after four years, lacks internal coherence.

Military intimidation—including drone incidents involving Poland, airspace violations affecting Estonia, and disruptive drone activity at Oslo and Copenhagen airports—is intended to deter European support for Ukraine and undermine confidence in NATO decision-making. Lavrov has consistently argued since early 2022 that Russia is effectively at war with NATO in Ukraine, a narrative designed to rationalise Russian underperformance and sustain second-front rhetoric.

## Domestic Legitimacy and the SMO Narrative

A further core narrative advances a revised social contract between the Kremlin and Russian society. The SMO is portrayed as a limited conflict fought exclusively by well-remunerated contract soldiers and volunteers, rather than by conscripts, the reserve, or through general mobilisation. The war is framed as insulated from everyday life within Russia, with steady military progress abroad and internal security guaranteed by the Federal Security Service (FSB) and Rosgvardiya.

This narrative has increasingly come under strain. The car bomb assassination in Moscow of Lt. Gen. Savarov, head of training at the Russian General Staff, directly contradicted official assur-

ances of domestic security. More broadly, Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory erode public confidence. Since the invasion began, at least 19 Russian generals have been killed, while total Russian casualties (killed and wounded) may approach 1.15 million—approximately 1% of Russia's pre-war male population.

## Venezuela and the collapse of Russia's deterrence narrative

On 3 January 2026, US special forces conducted a surprise military operation targeting Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Setting aside questions of legality and legitimacy, the operation had a profound psychological and strategic impact on Russia's political elite, military leadership, and broader society, which were reportedly shocked by the speed, precision, and decisiveness of US action. The episode constituted a significant strategic setback for Russia. US forces struck Venezuela's most critical air force bases and air defence systems—supplied, maintained, and in some cases operated with Russian assistance—captured the president, and effected regime removal without US casualties.

The operation underscored, by contrast, Russia's failure to achieve a comparable outcome against President Zelenskyy on 24 February 2022, whose survival precipitated four years of high-cost attritional warfare. In October 2025, the Russian State Duma had ratified a strategic partnership agreement with Venezuela, signed by Putin and Maduro in Moscow earlier that year. The US operation demonstrated that formal strategic partnership with Russia neither conferred inviolability nor constituted a meaningful deterrent or red line for Washington, instead highlighting Russia's inability to protect its partners. Subsequently, US naval and air forces pursued a Russian-flagged oil tanker (*Marinera*) departing the Caribbean. Despite



- ▲ **On 3 January 2026, US special forces conducted a surprise military operation targeting Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. The operation had a profound psychological and strategic impact on Russia's political elite, military leadership, and broader society, which were reportedly shocked by the speed, precision, and decisiveness of US action. [Credit: DVIDS]**



▲ **Russia strikes with Oreshnik against Ukraine, intended to restore escalation dominance and demonstrate Russian military effectiveness [Graphic: United24]**

Russia dispatching naval assets to escort the vessel in the North Atlantic, a US special operations unit, operating in coordination with British and Norwegian forces, ultimately seized the tanker. Rosneft reportedly lost approximately USD 17 billion in sunk investments in Venezuela. President Trump announced that, with Venezuela's energy infrastructure and revenue streams under US control, the United States could sell Venezuelan energy supplies to Russia and China.


### European Consolidation and Strategic Consequences

The 3 January debacle was compounded by the Summit of the Coalition of the Willing in Paris on 6 January 2026. A trilateral declaration by Ukraine, France, and the United Kingdom announced the establishment of a joint coordination group as a first step toward deploying Western troops in Ukraine following the end of the war, alongside a broader joint declaration by Coalition members. The Coalition expressed agreed principles and readiness to provide Ukraine with conventional land, sea, and air security guarantees after a peace agreement.

As a result, Russia faces the prospect that European support for Ukraine becomes the organising logic of a Trump-administration-supported, European-led conventional deterrence and defense architecture. Ukraine would remain politically outside NATO, yet become militarily integrated into a NATO-aligned Coalition of the Willing—circumventing

the constraints of formal Alliance enlargement, including potential Hungarian vetoes. A post-agreement monitoring and verification mechanism under US leadership is planned, likely requiring some US military presence in Ukraine. Arms deliveries and other forms of military assistance to the Ukrainian armed forces would continue. Planned Ukrainian force levels could reach up to 800,000 personnel, a development that would compel Russia to maintain permanently large troop concentrations in occupied territories and along Ukraine's borders.

### Conclusions

A growing sense of strategic powerlessness permeates Russia's response. Oreshnik strikes against Ukraine, intended to restore escalation dominance and demonstrate Russian military effectiveness, no longer function as credible propaganda tools. Russia's strategy of operating across multiple diplomatic formats—signaling willingness to negotiate while delaying substantive compromise in anticipation of battlefield breakthroughs—is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Russia's military and diplomatic room for manoeuvre have narrowed significantly. To avoid additional sanctions, Moscow must continue engagement with US representatives, yet the timing increasingly signals supplication rather than parity. Russia cannot explicitly reject U.S. proposals without incurring further costs, but risks becoming an unwilling spectator to a process it no longer fully controls. 

# It takes two to Tango

## Settlement perspectives of the war in Ukraine following the Paris Declaration

**András Rácz**

In the closing months of 2025 and in January 2026, there has been plenty of optimism arising about finding a sustainable, compromise solution for ending the war in Ukraine. European, US and Ukrainian leaders have conducted countless negotiations and background talks, high-level and technical ones alike, working hard on forging such a compromise that could serve as a basis of getting Russia agree to a ceasefire. The Paris Declaration of 6 January 2026 constituted the most important achievement of these concerted efforts so far.

However, this article argues that while Ukraine and its Western partners are hoping to achieve a negotiated ceasefire, what Moscow keeps seeking is not a compromise solution, but a victory over Ukraine. Hence, any sustainable settlement is possible only if Ukraine and its Western allies can convince the Kremlin that achieving any victory is and will be out of reach for Russia in the future.

### The road to Paris:

#### Different priorities about ending the war

The Paris Declaration stipulates that once a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine is achieved, members of the Coalition of the Willing will provide politically and legally binding guarantees for Ukraine, in addition to various bilateral security agreements. The former includes sustained military-technological support to Ukraine, a US-led ceasefire monitoring and verification mechanism, as well as a European-led multinational reassurance force to be deployed to Ukraine following the ceasefire.

Achieving this agreement between Kyiv, the Europeans and the United States has already not been easy, because the sides had distinctively different priorities. Initially, in the first half of 2025 the administration of US President Donald Trump clearly optimised for the speed of the settlement. Washington intended to bring fighting to an end as quickly as possible, motivated both by economic consideration as well as the will to concentrate attention and resources to the Pacific region. Hence, hard pressure was applied to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyi to accept serious territorial and political concessions. This pressure resulted in the humiliation of the Ukrainian president in the White House in February and the temporary suspension of intelligence sharing with Kyiv in March. Signing the so-called "Minerals Deal" between



- ▲ **European, US and Ukrainian leaders have conducted countless negotiations and background talks, high-level and technical ones alike, working hard on forging a compromise that could serve as a basis for getting Russia agree to a ceasefire. The Paris Declaration of 6 January 2026 constituted the most important achievement of these concerted efforts so far. [Source: President Ukraine]**

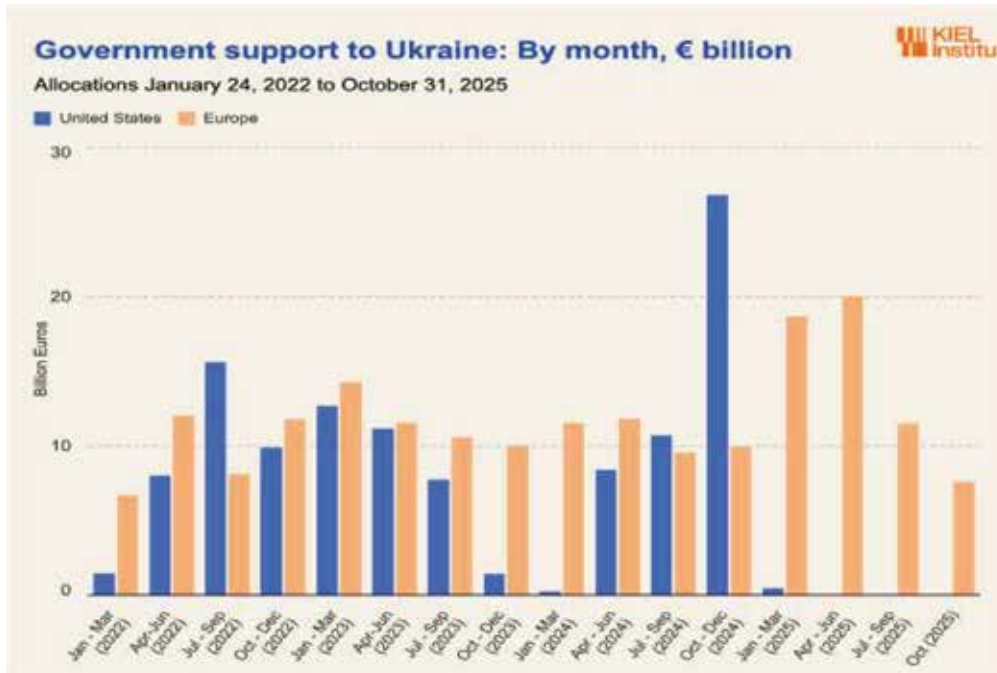
Washington and Kyiv eased the tensions only temporarily. As of December 2025, the Trump Administration still prioritises a swift ceasefire, even if getting Russia's consent would require Ukraine to withdraw from the rest of the Donbas.

Contrary to the initial US priorities, Ukraine has persistently favoured the quality of the settlement, namely, to achieve such a sustainable ceasefire, which provides meaningful guarantees that Russia would not attack again. As demonstrated above, Ukrainian forces have been largely able to hold the frontline and prevented any major Russian breakthrough, thus Kyiv has not been under any unbearable time pressure related to the military situation. By taking into account the military situation, since late spring 2025 Ukraine has not been pushing for the restoration of the 1991 borders. Instead, since approximately June 2025 Ukrainian negotiation delegations are ready to accept the current frontline as a future line of contact, if strong security guarantees are provided. Hence, Ukrainian diplomacy has worked tirelessly to convince the United States that quality of the future ceasefire matters more than the speed of achieving it.

The priorities of Ukraine's European allies have been largely similar to the ones of Kyiv, namely the need to achieve a sustainable settlement. However, in case of the "Coalition of the Willing" an additional complicating factor has been the constantly growing financial burden of keeping Ukraine in the fight. Following the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2025, the US practically stopped contributing to the financing of Ukraine, concerning both financial and military aid. As demonstrated by the data of the Ukraine Support Tracker project of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, the nominal value US support has dropped to near zero in 2025, which was a sharp contrast to the years of the Biden

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[Source: Ukraine Support Tracker of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy]

Administration. Hence, Europe needs to bridge this financial gap. In other words, Europe needs a ceasefire that is not only sustainable in the security sense, but is also financially manageable.

While the recently agreed €90 billion loan to Kyiv, to be provided for the years 2026 and 2027, offers a temporary relief, beyond this timeframe a more sustainable solution is needed. This constitutes an important difference especially when compared to the US approach, as Washington unilaterally decided to quit financing Ukraine following Trump's 2025 inauguration.

Another financing channel is the NATO-led Prioritized Ukraine Requirement List (PURL) initiative, which allows NATO members and partners to contribute to financing the purchase of critically important military equipment and ammunition for Ukraine. As of December 2025, the countries contributing to the PURL have gathered more than USD 4 billion for Ukraine. Similarly to the "Coalition of the Willing", the voluntary nature of the PURL allows less willing countries to stay out and also prevents veto efforts, which could possibly pose a major problem, should full consensus be required. Experiences of the PURL have also shaped the Paris Declaration framework.

All in all, the Paris Declaration is a result of almost a full year of intense negotiations in various frameworks. During this period, the initially different settlement priorities have gradually converged, leading to the strongest commitment that Ukraine could get for achieving a sustainable settlement so far.

### Russia seeks not a compromise, but a victory

While Europe, Ukraine and the US have been in constant negotiations about elaborating a common position on the conflict settlement, Russia has not been pushing for a negotiated solution, but for victory. Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin himself, indicated many times that Moscow is not ready to step back from its initial, maximalist objectives.

Russia consistently demands that Ukraine should withdraw from the entire Donbas, pledge neutrality and abandon NATO-member-

ship aspirations, and limit the size of her armed forces. In addition, from time-to-time Russia also voices other requests, such as a full amnesty for every crime and atrocity committed during the conflict in Ukraine and the lifting of Western sanctions. Sometimes, but not in all cases, Moscow also demands that rights of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine should be re-instated and Russian should be given the status of an official language in Ukraine. Sometimes Russia also insists that Ukraine should not possess certain types of long-range weapons. However, these latter demands are not voiced in all cases, only in some. The Russian agenda differs considerably depending on which actor is presenting it, be it the

president, the foreign ministry or businessman and close Putin aide Kirill Dmitriev. The latter's *de jure* position of Special Presidential Envoy on Foreign Investment and Economic Cooperation *de facto* means that his main task is to negotiate with the US and to forge a grand bargain between Moscow and Washington over Ukraine – and possibly also over Europe.

Moscow is certainly aware of the fact that the Ukrainian leadership would never agree to giving up the rest of the Donbas. Besides constitutional limitations, there are also political ones: even if Zelenskyi would agree, the armed forces are extremely unlikely to accept the withdrawal. Besides, giving up the strongest layer of fortifications consisting of the fortress cities of Slaviansk, Kramatorsk and Kostyantynivka would make Ukraine extremely vulnerable to any future Russian attack, which constitutes another reason, why Kyiv cannot accept it. Still, Moscow keeps demanding.

This seemingly incoherent and unconstructive approach is, however, not a weakness of Russian diplomacy, but a key feature of their current approach to the conflict settlement. In other words, they are not unable to negotiate any better, but are purposefully opting for negotiating in such a way.

The contrast is stark, if one compares this approach to past cases, when Moscow truly intended to achieve an agreement. A spectacular example was the extension of the New START treaty in February 2011. Starting from April 2009, following the London meeting of then presidents Barack Obama and Dmitri Medvedev, the US and Russia started elaborating the details of replacing the old START-I agreement. Back then Russia used all the power and might of its diplomatic service to achieve the new deal: Russian diplomats were constructive, always delivered coherent and accurate messages, often ahead of actual deadlines, etc. Similarly active and constructive Russian diplomacy was visible during the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. All in all, Russia indeed knows how to negotiate efficiently. If Moscow does the opposite, it is not a mistake, but a conscious choice.

There are also other indicators showing Moscow's unwillingness to decrease the hostilities and find a negotiated solution. Russia's



◀ **Ternopil after Russian attack in the morning of 19 November 2025. [Credit: State Emergency Service of Ukraine]**


despite the fact that in 2025 it managed to achieve only minimal territorial gains. Between January and December 2025, Russia conquered some 4,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Ukrainian territory, but not a single major city. Meanwhile, Russian forces have lost approximately 350,000 soldiers killed, wounded, captured and missing combined. Nevertheless, both the policy and military actions of Moscow are pointing in the same direction: the Kremlin keeps pursuing a decisive victory, not a negotiated, compromise settlement.

planned budget for 2026 and 2027 and the consistently high military expenditures clearly show that the Kremlin is preparing for a still long, protracted war. So does the presidential decree signed by Putin on 30 December 2025 authorising the mobilisation of reservists to guard critical and military infrastructure. The decision indicates not only Russia's growing difficulty to recruit enough new soldiers at home to replenish battlefield losses, but also Moscow's calculus about the prolonged need to protect infrastructure against enemy attacks – meaning that fighting is likely to continue. Transforming the Russian conscription system to function year-round, thus increasing its efficiency, points to the same direction: the Kremlin apparently thinks that it will need a wide and reliable recruitment base for a longer time. If a ceasefire agreement was near, Moscow probably would not work so hard to intensify her recruitment efforts.

Russia is apparently still convinced that it can achieve its maximalist objectives by military means. The Kremlin keeps thinking so

**Conclusion: for a ceasefire the West needs to alter Russia's calculus**

The Paris Declaration manifests a concerted Ukrainian and Western effort to sustain and guarantee the ceasefire, once it is achieved. However, a key precondition is still missing, namely Russia's willingness to agree to a ceasefire. Moscow, in fact, uses a combination of intentionally incoherent demands and clearly unacceptable requests to block any progress in the settlement process, while it maintains – and tries to intensify – military pressure. Russia's actions indicate that Moscow keeps thinking that time is on its side, thus sooner or later it will be able to break Ukraine's resistance.

The Paris Declaration will be a highly valuable tool after a ceasefire is achieved. However, until then consistent pressure needs to be applied on Moscow to alter the Kremlin's calculus and make Russia ready for a ceasefire. 

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# Russian Defence Industry

Maxim Starchak

Since 2022, the Russian defence industry has increased the production of weapons. This has been facilitated by the increase in industry financing and the selection of technologically proven weapons suitable for mass production.

Nevertheless, the Russian military-industrial complex faces limitations that will prevent this industry from continuing its multiple growth.

## General features of the defence industry

The productivity of the defence industry has grown due to retained mobilization capacity, 24/7 work, 12-hour shifts, and management solutions to consolidate production. However, after the sanctions in 2022, challenges have arisen: loss of access to imported equipment, components, and technologies. The low level of innovative activity of enterprises and worn-out equipment have forced the defence industry to produce Russian analogues, but Russia has not been able to replicate all technologies, and those it can produce do not always meet military requirements.

Another problem hindering the development of the technological defence industry is the shortage of highly specialized, highly qualified personnel. The growth of state defence orders has forced enterprises to hire people without necessary training and retirees. The average age of workers in the defence industry has increased to 60 years or more. In some cases, this has led to increased defects, missed deadlines and redesigns of equipment that had already been produced.

In response, starting in 2023 the industry shifted to producing simpler and cheaper weapons. This increased the speed and scale of production while reducing costs. At the same time, it pushed the production of high-tech weapons further into the future.

This was largely possible thanks to significant financial injections from the budget. The share of military spending in Russia reached

record post-Soviet levels and continued to grow. According to the Ministry of Finance, defence spending in the Russian budget increased by 3.85 times during the war in Ukraine. Russia's defence budget expenditures for 2025 under the "National Defence" category amounted to 13.5 trillion rubles, equivalent to 6.3% of Russia's GDP and 32% of all budgetary spending.

However, production growth is limited. It will be difficult to increase production without new industrial facilities and attracting new employees. In addition, the Russian defence industry cannot function without government support. Government money comes with delays; enterprises get loans; contractors have not received payments for months. As a result, hidden cuts and freezes in investment have already begun at several factories, despite formal record military orders.



▲ [Russian President Putin visiting a tank factory \[Credit: Kremlin.ru\]](https://www.kremlin.ru)

## Modernization of nuclear forces

The Strategic Missile Forces are equipped with 90% of the latest weapons, as stated by the commander Colonel-General Sergei Karakaev in December 2025. This year, Votkinsk Plant has supplied the last silo-based RS-24 Yars missiles to the Strategic Missile Force. Despite the prepared infrastructure near Krasnoyarsk and announced mass production, RS-28 Sarmat intercontinental missiles have not yet been transferred to the Ministry of Defence. According to defence industry sources, the missile is suffering from substandard engines. In 2013, R-36M2 Voevoda ICBM was launched for the last time in order to extend their service life by five years. Successful launch of Sarmat missile occurred only once, while several others failed, meaning that Russia has not had a technologically advanced heavy ICBM for seven years.

After the use of the Oreshnik medium-range hypersonic missile against Ukraine, attention should be paid to the possibility of mass production and deployment. The active expansion of the

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Votkinsk plant, including the construction of five new buildings, modernization of twenty facilities and search for 1,200 workers, indicates preparations for production of Oreshnik. Production will be limited by the high cost of hypersonic technologies, as well as limited access to necessary materials. It seems that Russia will be able to easily produce about 40-50 missiles per year at the first stages. Pilot production in 2025 could amount to about 25 missiles, but, if necessary, production could grow to 150 missiles. However, that is not possible yet because the workshops are not yet ready and the same plant also produces Iskander missiles which are currently more in demand during the war in Ukraine.

Plans for the transfer of four Tu-160M strategic bombers in 2025 have not been fulfilled. The Kazan Aircraft Factory transferred only two aircraft due to problems with NK-32-02 engines. Attempts to replace foreign components with Russian analogues of insufficient quality have led to technical problems with the engine and delays in its delivery. The latest PAK-DA stealth missile carrier also experiences a lack of technological expertise from the manufacturer, and all original deadlines (first prototype by 2022, testing from April 2023) have been disrupted. Now, the rollout of the prototype is expected in 2026.

In July 2025, Sevmash plant handed over the strategic submarine of the *Borey-A* class, *Prince Pozharsky*, which was to be commissioned at the end of 2024. For the third year in a row, Russia has not started construction of two more submarines of this class planned, probably due to plans for the creation of an improved modification of Borei-AM, which requires additional time for preparation.

As President Putin announced, Russia is also conducting successful tests of the *Poseidon* unmanned underwater vehicle and the *Burevestnik* unlimited-range cruise missile. Due to complex technological solutions, there will be few of these weapons and their transfer to the Navy will not take place in the next couple of years.

## Aviation production

In 2022, the United Aircraft Corporation transferred more than 101 military aircraft to the Ministry of Defence. Including IL-76MD-90A, Su-35S, Su-34 and one Su-30SM2, as well as training aircraft. According to the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, the total number of Su-34 was 194, and there were 149 Su-35S.

Like other weapons, Su-35S and Su-34 have become the most readily available aircraft for mass production. However, according to expert Dmitry Smirnov, the Su-34 suffers from inefficiencies in its aerial bomb glide range extension kit. It also has significant

defects, such as failures in radar, navigation systems, and software, leading to frequent maintenance downtimes and disruptions in training.

By 2025, Russia had produced 52 Su-57, including experimental models. New assembly lines were deployed, but production used the old AL-41F1 engine (Product 117). Flight with the new engine, "Product 177", took place only in December 2025. According to expert Mikhail Jerdev, programmes for two-seat Su-57D and Su-75 light fighters are also being developed. Russia produces about 150 hypersonic daggers and 500 X-101 cruise missiles per year, but these are expensive and in short supply, says Dmitry Smirnov. Therefore, mass production of cheap high-explosive aerial bombs, up to 45,000 per year was launched in 2024. However, their use is hindered by the lack of carrier aircraft.

## UAV production

Russia has significantly increased production of drones. In 2025, at least 889 companies associated with this industry. Of these, 70 % are small and medium-sized. Two years ago, there were almost twice as many companies. It was thanks to small private companies, as well as due to the transition to mass production by large manufacturers of drones, which were previously produced in trial batches, that drone production could be scaled, says expert Denis Fedutinov. First and foremost, production of strike Geranium-type has increased, while the pace of production of Lancets and first person view drones remains high. A similar trend is seen in the segment of small reconnaissance UAVs, such as the Zala and Supercam S350. Annual production has grown to 1.5 million drones.

However, funding for UAV production is declining. In 2026, the industry received only 26 billion rubles, or 40.5% less than planned. The budget for 2026-2028 is only 2,3 billion rubles. This situation is exacerbated by China's restrictions on exporting drones and spare parts from 4 kg, introduced in 2023.

Localization of components remains a problem. 40% of them are partially localized and 20% cannot be localized due to technological difficulties. Evgeny Dudorov, the executive director of Android Technology, says this. Analogues of some components, such as cameras, video transmitters, speed controllers, control receivers, virtual reality helmets, and remote controls, are not commercially available or not ready for use in Russia. The import dependence on rare-earth magnet raw materials also remains, as well as an acute shortage of internal combustion engine parts. To compete with Chinese prices, one needs an order of 100-120 thousand units per year, which no Russian enterprise can currently provide.

## Air Defence Production

In 2025, Almaz-Antey Concern of East Kazakhstan Region produced 12 brigade and divisional sets of S-350 Vityaz and S-400 Triumph air defence systems. However, according to Russian sources, Russia lacks air defence systems, even to the point of wanting to buy the S-400 back from Türkiye. In addition, two years ago, Russia

◀ In 2025, Almaz-Antey Concern of East Kazakhstan Region produced 12 brigade and divisional sets of S-350 Vityaz and S-400 Triumph air defence systems. Photo shows the S-350 Vityaz [Credit: MoD Ru]





▲ A BMD-4M infantry fighting vehicle and an improved BTR-MDM Rakushka-M multipurpose armoured personnel carrier produced at Kurganmashzavod manufacturing company [Credit: picture alliance/dpa/Alpatkin Alexander]

requested the Ra'ad air defence system from Iran (a clone of the Buk-M2E). All this time, there has been study of technology and personnel training, but no supplies have been received yet.

Air defence needs are determined not only by war but also by infrastructure protection. According to an independent Russian publication, *Important Stories*, between 2013 and 2044, Russian energy companies alone held almost 300 tenders to purchase air defence systems valued at least a billion rubles.

Almaz-Antey has always been loaded, including with exports, which stopped with the outbreak of war. There were not enough volumes due to the complexity of systems and lack of Western materials. Transition to Russian analogues required additional research and development, delaying deadlines. For example, the technology of ceramic materials was not developed in Russia.

Massive supply of air defence equipment to the front did not stimulate technology development. The corporation failed to supply the Ministry of Defence with automated aviation and air defence control systems, so the Ministry went to court. Also, although the modernization of the corporation's workshops by 30 billion rubles was carried out, it was not possible to update the machines.

## Production of land weapons

By the end of 2025, production of new artillery shells in Russia had increased from 1.1 million to 3 million per year, due to an increase in personnel at factories, said Pavel Luzin, senior fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis. This volume does not, however, cover consumption in the war in Ukraine, which explains the dependence on millions of shells supplied from North Korea and Iran.

According to expert Dmitry Smirnov, up to 80% of shells used by the Russian armed forces were from North Korean or Iranian production in 2019. Luzin believes stocks of chemical components can increase production of projectiles, missiles and mines, but shortage of personnel and rare components limit growth.

In 2022-23, troops received mostly Soviet equipment from storage. Manufacturers found it easier to provide shells for older guns first, and ammunition for newer guns became a secondary concern due to high requirements for components. Smirnov noted that the production of Iskander ballistic missiles grew from 50 per year in 2021 to approximately 800 in 2025. Deliveries of modern wheeled howitzers, such as the 2C43-Malva and 2S44-Hyacinth-K, began only in the second half of 2024. Their quality did not meet requirements: weak base materials and communications reduced accuracy, causing complaints from military officials. Only at the end of December 2024, single-barrelled versions of 2S35 Koalitsiya-SV were supplied to troops, as double-barrelled models required more advanced technology and possibly new factories. There was also a risk that industry would not be able to quickly produce the required number of shells.

## Tank production

By the end of 2025, tank production in Russia increased by 7.5 times to 1,400-1,600 units per year since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, meaning the assembly of new vehicles and deep modernization of old Soviet tanks which make up 75-85% of equipment arriving at the front. The main new model is T-90M, the successor of T-72, with backward compatibility of components and an easier turret. Production of T-80 also been launched since 2024. The problem with imported fire-control-systems is being gradually solved by Russian analogues. Uralvagonzavod

produces around 240-280 T-90Ms per year with a plan of 428 by 2030. Uralvagonzavod hopes for an increase in the production of Russian components.

T-14 Armata production is no more than 10-15 per year due to its complexity, high scrappage rate and low reliability, costing the Ministry of Defence 2-3 times more than the T-90M.

By the end of 2025, the tank reserve at storage bases will be almost exhausted, and its influx into the Army will cease in 2026. To increase capacity, new factories and production lines will need to be created, says military expert Dmitry Smirnov. The industry lacks components, including imported components, electronics, thermal imagers, transmission elements and even special lubricants. Uralvagonzavod and related companies have long switched to manual assembly from what they have, and import substitution exists only on paper for many items. Real analogues either don't meet quality standards or aren't produced in sufficient quantities, says a Rostec executive on condition of anonymity.

## Military shipbuilding

President Putin announced the replenishment of the Navy with three submarines and 19 surface ships. However, according to expert Kirill Ryabov, only two *Borey-A* and *Yasen-M* submarines and two Lada-class diesel submarines are of real combat value. Over the past five years, the fleet has received 49 ships.

As part of the state armament program, financing for the rearmament of the Navy was reduced from 4.7 trillion rubles to 2.6 trillion, which shifted the focus to submarines and small ships, postponing purchases of large units such as cruisers and destroyers. Serial construction of largest ships is unlikely to begin before 2031, partly due to the lack of shipyards capable of building ships with a displacement of 100,000 tons.

The industry suffers from technological lag. There is no full-fledged 3D design. Block-modular assembly is used to a limited extent. Localization of critical components is low. Russia has lost Ukrainian and German engines. Chinese engines are criticized. Alexander Simakov, the former head of the Surface Ship Operations Department at the 1st Central Research Institute of the Ministry of Defence, calls the purchase of engines from abroad a dead end. He is pessimistic about the future of diesel production in Russia. For success he believes it is necessary to rebuild the whole production process, starting with rolling metal. To abandon Chinese components which do not have the required technical specifications for military use would end the history of frigate series classes 21631 *Buyan-M* and 22800 *Karakurt*.

Creating Russian analogues of components is a complex, long and expensive process. This leads to disruption of delivery dates or reducing the performance, such as the corvette of 20386 class and the frigate 11356P. The tactical and technical characteristics of ships often do not meet the requirements of the military, leading, for example, to the cancellation of six ships from the 22160 class due to poor seaworthiness and air defence capabilities.

Sergey Buyanov, CEO of JSC Central Research Institute of the Marine Fleet, noted that increasing production volumes is impossible due to the existing shipyards being fully utilized. In addition, the equipment wear at the shipyards exceeds 60-70 percent, hindering the introduction of new technologies. Construction of new shipyards had been discussed for years but had not begun, and it would take 10-15 years to create them. As a result, construction times for ships remained excessively long.

## The prospects

On 26 December, 2025, Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting on the formation of the state armament programme for 2027-2036. Putin stressed that in the coming years, the main focus will be on strengthening the Ground Forces, as they play a key



▲ To abandon Chinese components which do not have the required technical specifications for military use would end the history of frigate series classes 21631 *Buyan-M* (Photo) and 22800 *Karakurt*. [Credit: MoD Ru]

role in modern warfare. Thus, it is expected that the production of artillery, tanks and missiles of various classes will continue at an accelerated pace.

Nuclear forces remain a priority of the state armament programme. Russia is completing their modernization. The next generation of nuclear weapons is likely to be developed.

For the first time, a separate section on artificial intelligence (AI) will be provided in the new state armament programme. Russia wants to introduce AI technologies into combat. Automated systems will be implemented. However, according to IT experts, Russia is lagging behind in these technologies and the quality of such systems will be low.

Russia will develop the latest technologies, but experts interviewed are confident that there will be areas where their quality and efficiency will be hopelessly inferior to the world's leading developments.



# “German Security and Defence Industry as the core of our national resilience and deterrence!”

**Armin Papperger**

It was the German Chief of Defence, General Carsten Breuer, who in November 2025 said: “At the moment we are in a dim in-between situation between not yet war, but no longer peace”. What he was referring to were the ongoing violations of NATO airspace by Russian aircraft and drones, but also the permanent attacks on civilian structures which Western intelligence services commonly attribute to Russian or Russian-friendly sources. General Breuer’s conclusion was that we need to effectively deter any kind of potential aggression as soon as possible, but latest by 2029. Such deterrence includes not only fully equipped armed forces across the whole of Europe, starting with our Bundeswehr, but also complete resilience in our civil societies. Therefore, the last three years have been used by German governmental authorities to address the respective challenges and needs through a holistic approach. Strategies like the “Gesamtverteidigungsrichtlinie” (“Comprehensive Defence Guidelines”) and “Operationsplan Deutschland” (“Operational Plan for Germany”) involve numerous actors from across German society, from the Bundeswehr, police authorities, state governments to private support entities, such as the Red Cross, Malteser, Johanniter and other service organizations.

All these organisations have one thing in common: They can only work if the people in charge are committed and available in sufficient numbers and skills, and if all these people are properly outfitted with sufficient state-of-the-art equipment in respective volumes. This is why the industry must be seen as a strategic asset to our national security and peace-keeping capability. In some countries the security and defence industry is seen as a complementary dimension equivalent to land, sea, air and cyber-forces. In Germany it took quite a while to understand that security and defence industrial capabilities are essential to our national sovereignty, even if we find ourselves in a geopolitical environment, which calls for more European cohesion and cooperation with regards to rearmament. Finally, it is up to Europe’s ministries of defence to keep their promises, as given to NATO, regarding our ability as Europeans to defend ourselves. In the case of Germany, these pledges are translating into a huge effort in the upcoming

national defence budgets until 2029. While EU countries pledged to spend 5% of GDP on defence by 2035 during the NATO 2025 Hague Summit, Germany is targeting the 3.5% for defence plus 1.5 % for defence-related infrastructure already by 2029! This highlights a special sense of urgency, which also sends a clear signal to the industry. If we look at the planned figures for the growing German defence budgets from year 2025 to year 2029, we can see some EUR 200 billion to be spent only on armaments. After years of administering budgetary austerity – in spite of 2022’s extra EUR 100 billion – this finally sends the industry a signal of predictability and long-term contractual reliability. All this is framed by important legislative initiatives on EU, as well as national levels for removing or lowering bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles, not only for the benefit of the industry, but also for the armament procurement offices. In Germany, the Bundeswehr procurement authority BAAINBw has done a lot since 2022 in order to streamline their own processes and to procure faster and with a focus on market-available products.

When it comes to industry, many of our association’s more than 470 member companies have already built up their capacities substantially and on their own risk over the last four years. For my own company Rheinmetall, I am presenting only one out of several examples: Before the Ukraine war we used to produce 70,000 rounds of 155 mm artillery ammunition per year; now our production capacity lies above one million rounds per year. Nobody can accuse our industry of not doing our part to scale up capacities. Nonetheless, further and even more challenging efforts still need to be made. Depending on the programmes and products in question, output figures need to be scaled up by factors of three, five or even ten until 2029. Besides the contractual pressure being put on those Original Equipment Manufacturers, which are direct contractors of the armed forces, the pressure is cascading down our entire supply chains. Our industry comprises numerous very capable SMEs, which need to organise their upscaling rapidly. This is why BDSV as their representative association is successfully building up support, not only for the detecting and qualifying of suitable further supply resources, but also for the mobilisation of respective financing tools and partners (for more detailed information on these instruments I refer to the contribution of Dr. Hans C. Atzpodien in this publication).

In summary, overall I feel optimistic about our industry’s approach and our capability to achieve what we are currently tasked with: aiding with the development of our societal and military resilience and deterrence. But we have to further sharpen our societal mindset, as former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg put it at MSC 2023: “Spending more on defence means less money for other important tasks. But nothing is more important than our security, to preserve peace!”

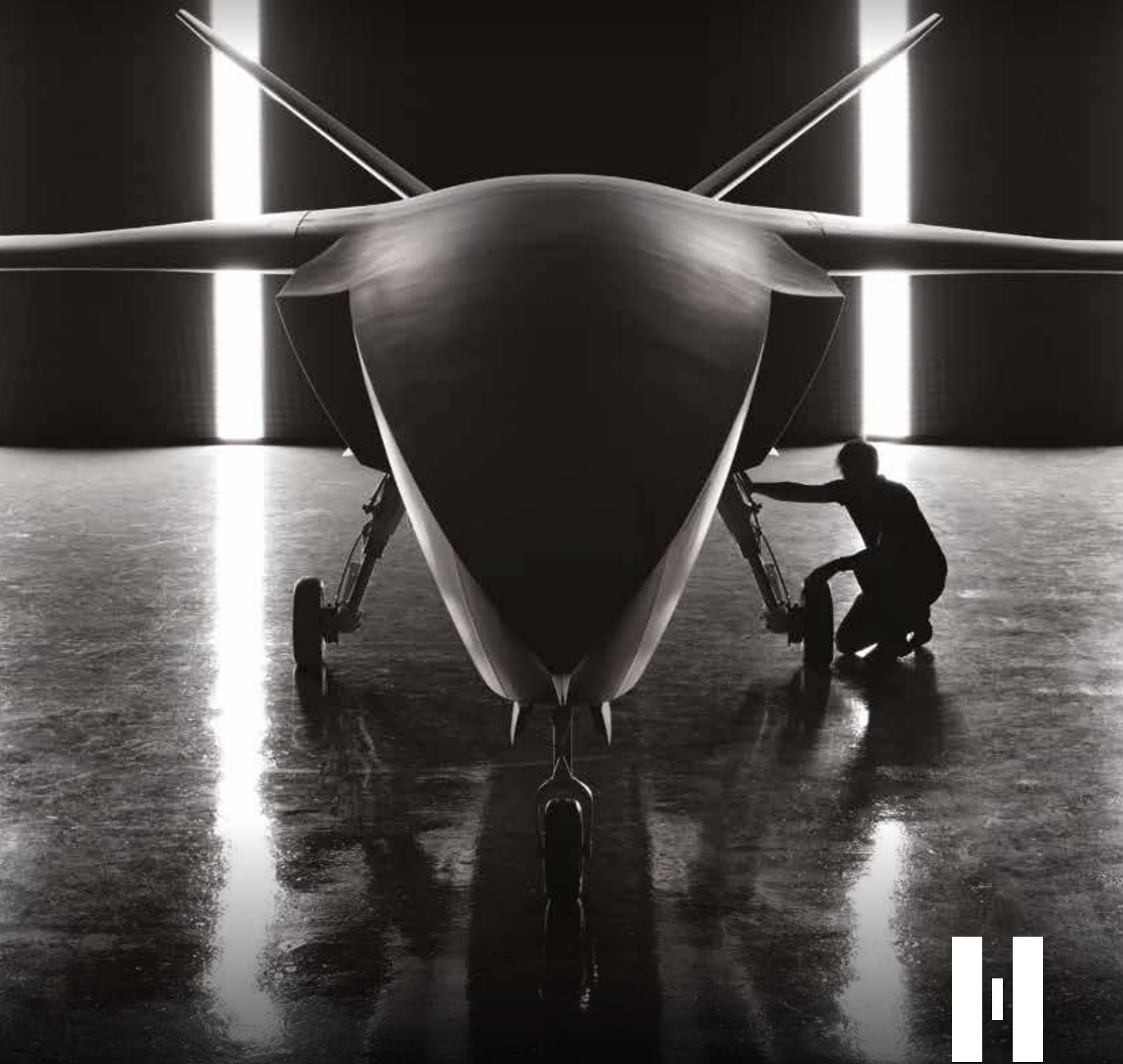


[Credit: Rheinmetall]

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# EUROPEAN DEFENCE



Helsing

# How the upscaling of German security and defence industrial capacities is moving ahead

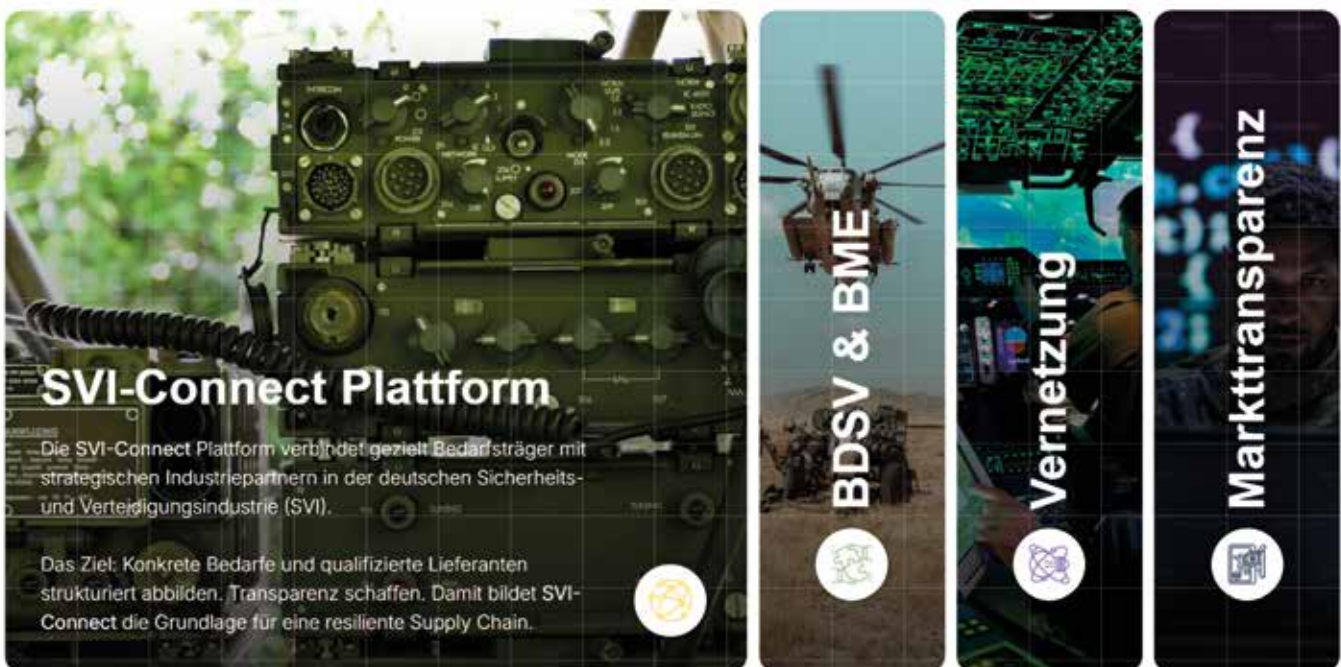
Hans Christoph Atzpodien and Elias Sedlmayr

2029 is the year on which we are focusing most, if we listen to what our Chief of Defence is giving us as a warning. By then – at the very latest – Germany's armed forces must be fully equipped. To be more precise: Germany must by then be capable of defending itself and our NATO allies in the event of an attack on NATO territory. To prepare for and deter against this threat, we will increase our defence spending to 3.5% of our GDP by 2029. If we include the further 1.5% to be spent on military-relevant infrastructure, these 5% or roughly €250 billion per year will affect all areas of our society and our economy. The challenges arising from this undertaking are demanding, but the German security and defence industries are ready to meet them. In the short term, success in this endeavour, requires a massive increase in output, mainly for already existing products across our supply chains. Many measures have already been taken to achieve this.

For example, the number of rounds of artillery munition produced by Rheinmetall has already been increased from 70,000 before 2022 to more than one million in 2025. The same can be seen

across a wide range of other urgently needed military equipment. Now, further orders with long-term impact on our industry's capacities are flowing in, such as the Boxer armoured fighting vehicles, Leopard 2A8 tanks, certain types of missiles and drones etc. Naturally, these upscaling measures have led or are currently leading to certain constraints in existing supply chains. Early detection of these constraints is necessary, so that complementary and/or alternative resources and redundancies can be acquired, ensuring that the supply chains are not pushed beyond their limits. This is relatively easy when companies with an existing footprint in defence extend their respective capacities, as such players already know what it means to work for the armed forces. Nevertheless, it might well be that extending established facilities will not be sufficient.

In this respect, it is good news that we are witnessing a strong momentum in other areas of our economy to participate in this effort. This particularly applies to many companies with – so far – no involvement in the defence sector. Many companies from the



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- ▲ The SVI-Connect platform connects specific consumers with strategic industry partners in the German security and defence industry (SVI). The goal: to map specific needs and qualified suppliers in a structured manner. To create transparency. In this way, SVI-Connect forms the basis for a resilient supply chain.  
[Credit: SVI]

also struggling automotive sector, or its suppliers, and from the steel or steel processing industries are wondering: what's potentially in it for me in the growing defence market? This is not only a money-driven attitude, but signifies a mindset change that is spreading across the German population and economy, which are showing a strong willingness to contribute to securing peace and freedom, knowing that it is society as a whole, not just one particular sector, that is being called upon. Therefore, our challenge was to provide a basis for these new resources to be integrated into the existing, but eventually strained, defence supply chains.

Our proposed solution for this is our new matchmaking platform "SVI-Connect" (to be found here: <https://www.svi-connect.com/>), which BDSV launched together with the Federal Association for Materials Management, Purchasing, and Logistics (BME), which will be administering the platform, with the support of the German Ministry of Economy and Energy and starting at the end of 2025/beginning of 2026. The platform will support, first and foremost, small and medium-sized companies in aligning their skills and know-how with the increased demand from companies in defence supply chains – to the benefit of both sides. It provides a secure, GDPR- and NIS2-compliant digital space for structured matchmaking, integrating features such as profile management, intelligent search and filter mechanisms, and the ability to store qualifications and certifications. This internet-based platform has created a central hub that facilitates the identification and access of relevant suppliers. It further promotes collaboration between established industry partners, new players, SMEs, and start-ups. "SVI Connect" is on its way to becoming an important building block in sustainably supporting Germany's defence readiness through improved transparency and networking of relevant production resources.

At the same time, it cannot and should not replace the individual efforts of companies seeking access to the supply chains of the security and defence industry by themselves. Ultimately, additional

qualifications and applications through the supplier portals of major defence original equipment manufacturers will continue to play a major role for every company aiming to become a supplier. Equally encouraging have been developments outside Germany, particularly in the field of cross-border cooperation. The European Defence Agency (EDA) maintains via its homepage various platforms for industry, such as a B2B-platform (Link: <https://b2bplatform.eda.europa.eu/verify-account/>) or an overview on industrial capability development meetings (Link: <https://www.eda.europa.eu/what-we-do/industry-engagement/industry-engagement-roadmap>). A further European matchmaking venue is EUDIS (Link: <https://eudis-matchmaking.eu/>), connecting "Defence Innovators, Investors, Corporates, and End-Users across Europe through structured, high-value networking". Finally "ASD Connect" needs to be mentioned (Link: <https://asd-connect.org/>) which has been designated as trusted aerospace and defence marketplace with verified suppliers, in order to track live funding opportunities and find qualified partners.

Finally, some thoughts about the prospects for more and better European armaments cooperation, which are in the midst of the recently adopted European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP). From a mid- and long-term perspective, more cooperation on the European level seems to be of paramount importance for creating higher frequencies and more efficiency. But this will only work if the respective EU member states are committed to foster such cooperation. EU incentives and tools alone will not do the job. From a short-term perspective, with outputs required by 2029 at the latest, there will likely be insufficient time to establish entirely new cooperative structures among European countries. Let there be no doubt: Germany and Europe are in the midst of a historic test. However, despite ongoing challenges, we are confident that Germany and Europe will ultimately prevail. The security and defence industry is willing to do everything within its power to contribute to achieving this goal. And we are confident that we will succeed. 



- ▲ EDA: The B2B Platform launched in 2019 is a tool to facilitate creation of cross-border partnerships. The B2B Platform aims to respond to the increased need for networking due to the new initiatives at EU level with benefit to defence-related Industry. [Credit: EDA]

# Drones of the 21st Century

Heinrich Fischer

**On 24 February 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine in violation of international law with the aim of overthrowing the Zelenskiy government, destroying the Ukrainian armed forces and eliminating Ukraine as an independent nation. The war has now been raging for four costly years without these objectives being achieved.**

From the mid-2010s onwards, terrorist organisations also recognised the possibilities of using drones. Both the Islamic State and the Taliban used mini-drones loaded with explosives. Iran, the Houthis and Hezbollah followed suit. Warfare using drones has now found its way into every crisis and conflict zone. Their use is no longer reserved for states alone; non-state actors are also making use of them.



▲ **A Russian tank, destroyed by a Ukrainian drone [Credit: MoD Ukr]**

The massive use of unmanned systems is shaping the combat situation in this war. This has sparked a debate as to whether this drone warfare represents a “revolution in military affairs” or merely a “revolution in military affairs”.

## History

The term ‘drone’ covers a wide range of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). It ranges from commercially available drones to military drones the size of aeroplanes. Drones are classified into classes one, two and three according to weight, performance, range, size and type. So-called ‘loitering munitions’ are also often referred to as drones. These systems circle above the target for a period and then attack it in a top attack. This is why they are also called kamikaze drones. The war in Ukraine is by no means the beginning of the military use of drones. For more than 20 years, the military use of drones for reconnaissance and combat has been developing steadily, and with it their influence on warfare. Since the beginning of this century, the USA and Israel in particular have been using drones in the fight against terrorists, militias and irregular forces.

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## Drone use in the Ukraine war

With the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces in February 2022, drone use reached a new dimension. A veritable drone war was unleashed. Drones, in all their diversity, are leaving their mark on the war in Ukraine. Both sides in the conflict are using class one to three drones for a wide range of tasks. These include reconnaissance and combat, ranging from the tactical to the operational and strategic levels. Ukraine already had a powerful arsenal of drones at its disposal when the war began. Examples of this are the Quantix Recon and Vector

reconnaissance drones and the Turkish Bayraktar TB 2 combat drone. The Bayraktar can be armed with laser-guided mini-bombs or four missiles with tandem shaped charge warheads and has a flight duration of 24 hours. In addition, the Ukrainian armed forces have Warmate, Switchblade and Phoenix Ghost loitering munitions at their disposal. The bulk of Ukraine’s drone portfolio consists of FPV (first-person view) drones produced in-house. These are low-cost small drones modified for military use. They are used for reconnaissance, target location and combat.

The Russian armed forces also have drones of all classes at their disposal. These include the Forpost, Orlan 10 and Orion 10 reconnaissance drones and the Zala Kub-BLA kamikaze drones; Lancet and Shahed-136, known in Russia as Geran 2. By digitally integrating their reconnaissance drones (Vector and Orlan 10) into a reconnaissance network, both sides have significantly improved the responsiveness and target engagement capabilities of their artillery.

The use of drones as reconnaissance and combat assets has steadily increased in importance on both sides since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This process is characterised by rapidly accelerating innovation, development and procurement cycles and resembles a game of cat and mouse in terms of its technological and tactical development trends. With the concept of the ‘drone wall’, the Ukrainian armed forces are pursuing a novel approach to meet these challenges.



▲ **The Russians in Ukraine have used the Geran 2 kamikaze drone for some time now. [Screenshot: Latvian MoD]**

The drone wall is the deployment concept for drones at the tactical command level. It is a corridor with a depth of ten to 15 km in front of the own defensive positions.

Attackers are detected at long range, either during the staging phase or, at the latest, during the deployment phase, through continuous day and night surveillance by drones. Possible approaches are blocked by remote mining, thus channelling enemy movements. Once enemy forces have been sufficiently located, they are attacked and destroyed using various types of drones. If necessary, the combat operation with drones is supplemented by mortar and/or artillery fire. In order to implement this operational concept effectively, suitable units with mission-specific drone equipment and personnel qualified for the task are required. Consequently, independent drone units were established and combined in a cross-functional organisation, similar to a branch of the armed forces, called 'Unmanned System Forces'. By mid-2023, 60 drone companies had already been established and around 10,000 drone operators had been trained. Only through the effectiveness of the drone wall and the mass deployment of FPV drones in particular are the Ukrainian armed forces able to compensate for their infantry and artillery inferiority and largely hold the front line. Another remarkably successful drone operation took place as part of the Ukrainian 'Spider Web' operation. The targets were Russian long-range bombers (Tu-22, Tu-95 and Tu-160) at their bases of operation throughout Russia. Drone components and explosives were transported from Kazakhstan to the Urals, where they were assembled and hidden in tiny house-like wooden containers. These were OSA quadcopters with a 3.2-kg explosive charge at a unit price of approximately USD \$ 800. The containers with the drones were loaded onto

trucks and transported by unsuspecting Russian truck drivers to locations near the air bases. On 1 June 2025, Spider Web was launched. The roofs of the wooden containers opened remotely and 117 drones took off. Each drone was assigned a pilot in Ukraine. Control was based on the Russian GSM network and target detection was AI-assisted. The trucks were then remotely detonated. Ukraine suffered no losses, while the Russian Air Force lost 41 aircraft. Ukraine thus succeeded in delivering an unexpected, asymmetrical blow deep into Russian territory. Innovative thinking, detailed planning and the precise use of modern drone technology by professional agents and special forces formed the basis for this success.

Another field of application for drones is the so-called 'strike campaigns' conducted by both warring parties. The concept of the 'strike campaign' involves combating and wearing down the enemy's potential through indirect fire deep in enemy territory. While Ukraine mainly attacks military targets in Russia with homemade long-range kamikaze drones from the UJ family, Russia uses Gerbera and Geran drones from its own licensed production mainly against civilian infrastructure. The Gerbera acts as a decoy to saturate the enemy's air defences, thus creating attack corridors for the Geran-2 long-range disposable drones. Russia has made qualitative changes that both increase the lethality of the long-range drones and make them more difficult to intercept. The Geran-2 drone has been upgraded with a terminal phase homing system, more resistant electronics and a 90-kg warhead.

A new threat is emerging in the form of the Geran-3 drone. It has a jet engine, reaches a peak altitude of 9.1 km and a speed of 600 km/h, making it difficult to combat.

Ukraine maintains its technological lead, particularly in the field of FPV drones, and is therefore focusing on tactical FPV drones, while Russia is concentrating on strategic long-range drones. Both parties had the goal of producing approximately four million drones by 2025.

The Ukrainian process of developing, producing, procuring, introducing and using drone technology is worth mentioning. It is carried out in cooperation between civilian companies, primarily start-ups, and the armed forces.

◀ **A typical RF controlled Ukrainian FPV drone, shown during take-off. [Credit: Armyinform]**



## Drone defence

The course of the war in Ukraine not only reveals rapid developments in drone technology. Concepts and tactics for consistent drone defence are also becoming increasingly prominent. Effective drone defence includes both kinetic and non-kinetic defence capabilities. Effective drone defence consists of several layers with different effective systems, i.e. tube weapons, missiles, interceptor/fighter drones and electronic warfare systems. This drone defence is supplemented by an integrated self-defence capability of each tactical sub-unit against drones in the immediate vicinity. Electronic warfare measures make a decisive contribution to drone defence. They jam and spoof GPS signals and use radio direction finding to locate the drone pilot, who can then be eliminated by other means. Electronic warfare in the Ukraine war is very



▲ **The Ukrainian forces use the German drone AX-2**  
[Credit: Helsing]

heterogeneous. While in some sections of the front, electronic warfare prevents any drone flights; in other sections, it has less lasting effect. With its traditional emphasis on electronic warfare, the Russian side was able to reduce the effectiveness of Ukrainian drone operations. In addition to modern tube and missile weapons, Ukrainian interceptor/fighter drones are a new and effective means of defending against small, low-flying reconnaissance drones with only a low radar signature. The Ukrainian defence rate against Russian drones is approximately 90%.

### Revolution or evolution?

A prominent feature of the war in Ukraine is the massive use of drones. The types range from simple commercial drones to highly specialised military systems. The spectrum of missions includes reconnaissance, directing artillery fire and engaging various target categories deep within enemy territory. Drone operations are an integral part of modern warfare. The massive use of drones has fundamentally changed the nature of modern combat. With the increased transparency of the battlefield, attention to movements is growing. The coordinated deployment of armoured units has become more difficult. The threat from low-altitude airspace has grown, and the terrain in front of one's own troops is dominated by an airborne reconnaissance and combat network. At the tactical level, reconnaissance and combat ranges have increased while response times have shortened. Effective drone deployment requires a clear command and decision-making structure, clear rules for cooperation and coordination with one's own electronic warfare and air defence measures. Drones represent a significant expansion of the capability profile for reconnaissance and engagement. However, due to their technical limitations, they cannot replace



▲ **According to the manufacturer, the Skyranger 30 offers the ideal balance between mobility, protection, flexibility and precision, thus meeting the increasing demands of challenging threat scenarios at short and very short ranges. The system's airburst ammunition, whose detonation point is programmable, is particularly effective against drones. [Credit: Rheinmetall]**

traditional capabilities, but only complement them. While drones can only be used to a limited extent in special weather conditions such as strong winds, heavy rainfall or thick fog, as well as in a severely disrupted electromagnetic spectrum, artillery is capable of conducting firefights 24/7 and achieving a disproportionately higher effect in a shorter time.

Similarly, drones cannot replace either infantry or armoured combat troops, as only these classic branches of the armed forces are capable of capturing and holding territory. There is no doubt that drones bring a remarkable increase in capability for modern armed forces in almost all dimensions. However, this increase in capability does not meet all the criteria for a 'revolution in military affairs', but is rather an 'evolution in military affairs'. Valid operational-tactical principles are confirmed, but must be consistently adapted to modern drone technology. This insight must be given due consideration in armed forces planning for all dimensions with regard to doctrines, structures, equipment, training and logistics. The manned/unmanned teaming system of the Army Aviation Corps is a good example of this.

### Conclusion

The use of drones in crisis and war zones in recent years shows that unmanned weapon systems play an essential role in modern warfare and that drones have a high performance capacity. Drones are a cost-effective and efficient means of achieving strategic impact when used correctly. The short technical innovation cycles and high production rates of low-cost systems are remarkable. This also makes them attractive to non-state actors. With the war in Ukraine, drones have gained further importance and have become an indispensable element of current and future warfare. Through the innovative and massive use of drones, the Ukrainian armed forces have so far managed to prevail against a quantitatively superior enemy in a war of attrition. In this respect, drones have changed the economics of war.

Drones achieve high efficiency at relatively low cost, with less risk to the people who operate them and a higher degree of automation. When assessing all the advantages of drone use in Ukraine, the specific conditions of the Ukrainian theatre of war, the technical performance limitations and the evolving drone defence must be taken into account in an objective, holistic evaluation of the potential of drones. Therefore, the use of drone technology is less of a 'revolution' and more of an 'evolution in military affairs'.



# The Transatlantic Nuclear Debate

Michael Rühle

Nuclear weapons are reserved for extreme circumstances. Perhaps this explains why debates about these weapons tend to be so polarised. The current transatlantic debate on how to provide effective nuclear deterrence for Europe in times of upheaval is a perfect example of this: it is characterised by nervousness that confuses rather than enlightens. Fearing that Europe could be caught between an aggressive Russia and an unpredictable United States, some analysts have suggested alternative arrangements to provide nuclear deterrence if the

## European allies are “freeloaders”

The origins of the new nuclear debate are easy to trace. During the 2016 US presidential election, candidate Donald Trump’s disparaging comments about NATO raised European concerns about the viability of US extended deterrence. Trump’s characterisation of European allies as “freeloaders” who were taking advantage of the American taxpayer fuelled European concerns about an eventual US disengagement from



▲ French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel signed the new friendship treaty in the German city of Aachen in 2019. [Credit: Bundesregierung/Bergmann]

United States were to withdraw its “nuclear umbrella” from Europe. While such proposals testify to the undiminished intellectual agility of the transatlantic security debate, most of these ideas do not translate into feasible policies.

Europe. Consequently, European analysts started to consider alternative deterrence options, with some even suggesting that major European nations should contemplate acquiring their own nuclear weapons.

#### AUTHOR

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This debate remained a fringe issue, however. Once in office, President Trump did not question the “nuclear umbrella”, and the discussion quickly subsided. However, it resurfaced during the 2024 election campaign, when candidate Trump once again criticised US allies and questioned the viability of transatlantic security ties even more vocally than before. The prospect of Donald Trump returning to the White House

concentrated the minds. Believing that the end of US security assurances was now imminent, many European analysts once more offered proposals on how Europe could substitute for a vanishing US extended deterrence commitment.

Predictably, most ideas focused on “Europeanising” French and British nuclear forces, for example by establishing EU - or Europe-wide nuclear consultation mechanisms or setting up new “nuclear sharing” arrangements akin to those of NATO. Some analysts argued that certain bilateral treaties, such as the Franco-German Treaty of Aachen, could be extended to also cover the thorny issue of nuclear protection. Others suggested convincing Paris to extend its nuclear umbrella to other European states by offering to help finance the French nuclear arsenal. Still others proposed rotating the “red button” among major EU nations, thereby turning the Union into some sort of a nuclear power. Some pundits even contemplated new national nuclear programmes, culminating in an eerie proposal by a German academic that Berlin should simply purchase 1,000 nuclear warheads from the US to become a nuclear power virtually overnight.

Although the second Trump administration took an even more hostile approach to Europe, none of these proposals received much support from European governments. Several reasons accounted for this.

Firstly, most proposals lacked realism. The “Europeanisation” option remains implausible because the nuclear arsenals of the UK and France were designed only to protect their respective national territories. They are traditional “sanctuary weapons” that were neither intended nor built for a pan-European

extended deterrence for the rest of Europe. To make matters worse, the EU contains two staunchly anti-nuclear members, Austria and Ireland, and remains too politically divided to become a true political union, which is the prerequisite for becoming a nuclear-armed entity.

New national nuclear options remain an even more distant prospect. A small number of analysts in Germany made the case for a German bomb, but this idea gained little traction. In attempting to circumvent the numerous political, technical, and legal obstacles to a German nuclear option, these analysts revealed an alarmingly simplistic understanding of international relations. Moreover, successive German governments have categorically ruled out a national nuclear option, and no major political party is supporting it. While the idea of a national nuclear programme may gain some traction in Japan or South Korea, Europe never went beyond mere “proliferation chatter”, as a German analyst aptly put it. The tensions that would be caused if several European states were to start national nuclear weapons programmes makes such a scenario too abhorrent to be contemplated seriously.

A second reason why the nuclear debate appears to have subsided for now is the less alarmist view of the nuclear threat posed by Russia. In the initial phase of Russia’s assault on Ukraine, Moscow’s overt nuclear threats came as a shock to the Western strategic community and populations alike. However, as the war has continued, the impact of Russia’s nuclear rhetoric has diminished, as it was clearly intended to deter the West from increasing its support for Ukraine and prevent NATO from directly intervening in the conflict. Russia’s repeated attempts to define “red lines” have failed



▲ **The nuclear arsenals of the UK and France are designed only to protect their respective national territories.**  
[Credit: Force de frappe]

extended deterrence mission. While the UK has earmarked its nuclear weapons to NATO, France has consistently emphasised its national sovereignty on nuclear matters, even refusing to join NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group. Furthermore, the UK is no longer an EU member and its nuclear arsenal relies heavily on cooperation with the US. Although France and the UK have moved closer together on nuclear matters, neither country is likely to endorse an unequivocal commitment to provide

because the use of nuclear weapons does not appear plausible in circumstances that are less than existential. While it is not impossible that the West could inadvertently cross real Russian “red lines” over the course of the conflict, the war’s actual trajectory suggests otherwise: a Russian defeat now looks improbable, which will further diminish the likelihood of Moscow making good on its nuclear threats. Fears by some observers that Russia might even attack NATO usually re-

volve around scenarios of a limited land grab in the Baltics or the High North, which would not have an immediate nuclear dimension.

A third reason why alternatives to traditional extended deterrence are not gaining traction is the fear of accelerating the alienation between transatlantic security partners. While European governments are concerned about US policies, they also realise that any kind of nuclear self-assertion could result in a self-fulfilling prophecy that might convince Washington that the time for a transatlantic divorce has finally arrived. Consequently, European governments have sought to distinguish between aspects in flux, such as the future size of US forces in Europe, and aspects that remain unchanged, such as the US nuclear commitment. As long as Washington will not openly raise doubts about the “nuclear umbrella”, neither will European governments. Long-standing French clarion calls about European “strategic autonomy” may sound more fitting today than only a few years ago, but they only apply to the conventional realm. On nuclear matters, France would prefer to keep things as they are, including a continued US nuclear presence in NATO-Europe.

This leads to the fourth reason why there has not yet been a sustained debate about alternatives to the US “nuclear umbrella”: the Trump Administration has not yet challenged the US commitment to extended deterrence in Europe. Washington’s silence on nuclear matters contrasts sharply with the administration’s aggressive stance on conventional defence. However, there is a compelling reason why the United States is treating the conventional and nuclear dossiers differently. While Washington has used stark language to cajole European allies – successfully – into increasing their defence budgets and conventional military strength, it makes little sense to use the same approach in the nuclear field. Much as the Trump Administration may wish to abandon what it perceives as outdated American foreign policy dogmas, preventing nuclear proliferation has remained a constant priority for all US administrations since the dawn of the nuclear age. Given that the US “nuclear umbrella” has been fairly effective in preventing allies from developing their own nuclear arsenals, the US would gain little but lose much by folding it.

## European nations attach to extended nuclear deterrence

Real-life developments support this interpretation. In recent years, NATO’s nuclear dimension has been significantly bolstered by the US investing in the modernisation of the B-61 gravity bomb, as well as by several allies purchasing dual-capable F-35 aircraft and conducting more complex nuclear exercises. More allies are likely to join NATO’s “nuclear sharing” arrangements, for example by participating in conventional support missions for nuclear operations. The UK’s decision to deploy dual-capable F-35s on its soil is another strong indication of the value European nations attach to extended nuclear deterrence. Within the US nuclear community, there is now strong support for a standoff weapon to replace the B-61 gravity bomb at a later stage, which would further increase the effectiveness of NATO’s nuclear arsenal. NATO has also become more vocal about the importance of nuclear deterrence in safeguarding the security of its allies – a policy that is reinforced by the more positive views of European publics vis-à-vis nuclear weapons.

Finally, despite the Trump Administration’s political eccentricity, the US nuclear community remains fairly confident that their extended deterrence mission will continue. None of these developments should be taken as a sign that the US “nuclear umbrella” will remain in place indefinitely. The Trump Administration’s tendency to make “deals”, in particular with Moscow regarding lasting security arrangements for Ukraine, still could lead to upheavals that would damage the transatlantic relationship in many ways. Although the Administration’s public strategy documents emphasise the importance of Europe to the US, further disputes could convince President Trump to sever even the nuclear ties with Europe. Congress and the US defence establishment would almost certainly resist such a step; however, President Trump’s record thus far demonstrates that he can get his own way.



▲ **Although France and the UK have moved closer together on nuclear matters, neither country is likely to endorse an unequivocal commitment to provide extended deterrence for the rest of Europe. [Credit: Crown Photo]**

However, if such a worst-case scenario were to occur, Europeans could not hope for a quick fix. They could establish a European Nuclear Planning Group, similar to the one in NATO, and participate more regularly in French and British nuclear exercises. They would also likely try to strengthen existing consultation and cooperation agreements, such as the 2024 Trinity House Agreement between the UK and Germany. French dual-capable aircraft could regularly visit air bases in other European countries, and major EU foreign policy documents could contain more language on nuclear issues. Taken together, such steps could serve to project at least a semblance of European nuclear solidarity. However, they would not come close to the current status quo of extended deterrence “made in USA”. This is not just because the US’ nuclear arsenal far exceeds those of the UK and France. The “nuclear umbrella” also connects Europe to the superior conventional power of the United States. Hence, rather than declaring the transatlantic nuclear arrangements moribund, Europe should try its utmost to maintain them.

The transatlantic marriage may be rocky, but it is still preferable to a Europe left to its own devices. As Samuel Johnson said over 200 years ago, “marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures”.



# Hope or chaos for the near east?

## After 16 months of war people long for peace and a solution

H.M. Lawrence

For centuries, war has shaped the Orient, mostly limited in time and place. But since October 7, 2023, when HAMAS attacked Israel, there are no limits for the conduct of military conflicts any more – the use of new weapons systems makes this possible. While in former times, two or few adversaries fought for land or power, today a great number of different groups, internal and external, with their respective individual interests make rapid solutions of conflicts impossible. Global players, regional powers, individual states, dynasties, religious groups or international groups of terrorists, they all fight about



### ▲ Hezbollah fighters in the Lebanon [Credit: Israel Defense Forces]

an area which, for its oil wealth and for the fact that it's the cradle of the three „religions of the book“, is of high importance for the whole world. While armies used to fight battles and decide the outcome of a war in the past, today media coverage and the endurance of the population determine the course of events. There is only one thing that stays the same: It's the local population who pays the price. The past year and a half have shaken up an already volatile region and disturbed the distribution of power. The situation today is more complex than ever before and could even escalate further (by an outright war between Israel and Iran, for example). On the

other hand, it also holds opportunities to find solid solutions for an end to decades of conflict and for a better future for the people.

### Political Tension Leads To Military Conflict!

During the past decades, a sort of Cold Peace (between Israel on one side and Egypt and Jordan on the other), political tensions, saber-rattling, and temporary limited wars characterized the region, which today is close to an explosion. For more than a year, Israel fights a war in the Gaza Strip to destroy HAMAS militarily – with also two million Palastinians suffering.

In particular Iran-sponsored proxy-militias in the Arab world showed solidarity with the Palastinian terrorist organization. For months, Israel was struck by missiles coming from Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Hizbollah, Shiite militias in Iraq and Houthi in Yemen disposed of missiles of all kinds and used them against the ten million inhabitants of the Jewish state.

On October 1, 2024 the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) started their offensive on the ground in the north against the Hizbollah in Lebanon and hit them very hard. Attacks by the air force, targeted killing of Hizbollah leaders and unconventional measures like the explosion of pagers in possession of Hizbollah-fighters were successful – but also hit inhabitants of Beirut and Southern Lebanon.

The next surprise comes at the beginning of december 2024. An alliance of different islamist militias in Syria („Hai'at Tahrir asch-Scham“ – HTS = Committee for the Liberation of the Levant) succeeded, within a few days, to move into Aleppo and Idlib first, then into Damascus. The Syrian army and the whole regime of Baschir al-Assad collapsed – an event, which recalled the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021. But a peaceful transfer of power is not certain. Israel took advantage of the situation and destroyed important military facilities in Syria. In the north, Kurdish militias fight for their autonomous region, and also Alavites, a group who had been in power for the past 50 years, at first opposed the new rulers before declaring their support for the new leadership, waiting for the next steps.

At the end of december 2024, the Israeli Air Force also intensified its attacks on positions and installations of the Houthi in Yemen, in 2000 km distance. In support for HAMAS, Houthi had attacked Western ships in the Red Sea. As if the seventh-poorest country of the world, Yemen, would not suffer enough, the conflict between HAMAS and Israel has now extended to the Street of Bab al Mandab.

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H. M. Lawrence is the pseudonym of a freelance Middle East expert. The name is known to the editorial team

## Could The Escalation Of Today Be Expected?

The Near East is up in flames. The real conflict with Iran, the Shiite regional power, has not broken out yet. While different countries of the region try to sort out their conflicts by war and violence, regional and global powers play their games from behind. The oil-rich region is too important for Washington to leave the field to Beijing or Moscow, in spite of its strategic re-orientation towards Asia („pivot to Asia“). Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the European Union also try to secure or even extend their positions. These international actors seem to make a solution for the problems of the region even more complicated, and not contribute to reduce tensions. The self-interests of each player seem to be more important than the desire for lasting and just peace. In spite of the hopes that appeared at the beginning of the decade.

In September 2020, the Foreign Ministers of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed agreements of “normalization” with Israel, brokered by the US. Only a few months later, Morocco and Sudan joined the so-called “Abraham Accords“. A normalization in the relations between the Jewish State of Israel, founded in 1948, and an accepted place for it in the Arab world seemed to have been launched. Mutual relations improved, most of all in the economic and diplomatic domains, in particular with the UAE. But the key problems of the region, the “Palestinian Question“ and the conflict with Shiite Iran had not been addressed by the “Abraham Accords“. Israel continued to promote Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, and Iran continued to build up its system of proxy-militias in the region. All this did not contribute to calming the tensions in the region. In spite of this, US diplomats continued to work on solutions. An agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the guardian of the holy sites of Islam and representative of the sunnite world, was just about to be concluded. With important concessions regarding security guarantees for the royal House of Saud and the development of nuclear energy, the US had prepared the way for a normalization with Israel. Like Donald Trump before him, Joe Biden tried to lay the foundation for a peaceful and respectful coexistence of the states in the Near East.

## The HAMAS attack takes Palestinians back to the headlines

But the world did not take into account the hatred of people in the region who are influenced by ideology. In the early hours of October 7, 2023, Palestinian HAMAS terrorists, supported by Tehran, launched a well planned attack on Israel, coming from the Gaza Strip. The Sunni fighters attacked Israeli towns and kibbutzim close to the border to the Gaza Strip, killed 1200 people and took more than 240 people hostage to the Gaza Strip. Israel’s response was met with worldwide understanding and accepted as being morally justified. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) attacked the Gaza Strip with its two million inhabitants on a very small piece of land. During their “Operation Iron Swords“ they discovered the tunnel system of HAMAS, destroyed their command posts and killed their leaders. But

their military victory also meant an almost complete destruction of civil infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, including schools and hospitals, and suffering of the population. World opinion began to change. Demonstrators in many countries, who protested against extremely hard and disproportionate operations by the Israeli Air Force, demanded an end to the fighting and a stop of delivery of weapons to Israel. But nothing changed. IDF continues to fight HAMAS, to discover more tunnels, but also to destroy more infrastructure. At the same time, HAMAS continues to refuse to let go the remaining hostages (during a short cease-fire at the end of 2023, roughly 100 hostages were freed in exchange for Palestinian prisoners in Israel). The UN deplores the humanitarian situation for two million people in this densely populated land. In December of 2024, a report by the UN-Human Rights Commission warns that the health services in Gaza may collapse. The International Court of Justice has decided that Israel and HAMAS must stop the fighting. And the International Criminal Court has indicted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as three HAMAS leaders, who have been killed in the meantime, for war crimes.



- ▲ In a well prepared and perfectly planned operation, IDF succeeded in eliminating most of the Hezbollah leadership in Lebanon. IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi speaks with officers and soldiers during a drill simulating a ground offensive against Hezbollah in Lebanon, in northern Israel. [Credit: Israel Defense Forces]

Israel’s southern neighbour, Egypt, looks at the fighting with suspicion. It fears thousands of Palestinian refugees crossing the border at Rafah, and has imposed strict controls. It also criticizes the occupation by Israeli forces of the “Philadelphi-Corridor“, a road between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, 14 km long and 100 m wide, to allow for patrolling of the border, which was de-militarized in 1979 and taken over by Egypt when Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005. But smuggling of weapons, equipment, and HAMAS fighters into the tunnel system in Gaza could not be prevented by the Egyptians. President al-Sisi now calls the occupation of the corridor by Israel a violation of Egyptian sovereignty.

While hopes for a cease-fire and a liberation of the hostages, brokered by the US and Qatar, fade away, a second front opened.

## Israel Hits Hezbollah Very Hard

In a well prepared and perfectly planned operation, IDF succeeded in eliminating most of the Hezbollah leadership in Lebanon. The killing of Hassan Nasrallah, the charismatic leader of Hezbollah in September 2024, and the explosion of hundreds of paggers of Hezbollah fighters demonstrated to the world the resolve of Israel. In October, it started a limited offensive on the ground into Lebanon. After 1978, 1982, and 2006, Israeli ground forces again crossed the „blue line“, observed by UN blue helmets, and attacked Hizbollah fighters in Lebanon. Accompanied by air attacks, this offensive caused destruction in Beirut and a movement of refugees within Lebanon. On November 27, 2024, both parties agreed to a cease-fire, again brokered by the US. Israel promised to stop fighting, and Hizbollah agreed to completely withdraw weapons and fighters behind the Litani River (30 km north of the „blue line“). This cease-fire holds, more or less. Hizbollah's weakness today –especially after the fall of the Assad Regime in Syria— also opened new possibilities to come to a solution of the political crisis in Lebanon, where political parties (and Hizbollah has important representation in the Lebanese Parliament) have not been able for two years to elect a new president (according to the Constitution this has to be a Christian). Now, in January, the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, General Joseph Aoun, was elected. This is an important step towards saving the former „Switzerland of the Near East“ from falling apart.



▲ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a joint press conference with President Donald Trump during a visit to the United States December 2025. [Credit: White House]

## Opposition Topples Assad-Regime In Syria

In December 2024, Hezbollah received another fatal blow. To the surprise of many experts and Russian diplomats, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in power since 2000, fled to Moscow. In a well prepared offensive the HTS-militia, supported by Turkey, took control of the important cities of Aleppo and Idlib in the north of the country. But the Syrian army and its Russian ally failed to react, as they did in the past. Without support from Moscow or Iran, the Syrian army fell apart and

the troops of the so-called opposition entered Damascus. But the victorious HTS-militia and its leader al-Dschaulani (who now is called again by his real name al-Sharaa) are known to be an Islamist terror organization. He himself had created the „al-Nusra Front“, the Syrian branch of AL-Qaida. But the new „strong man“ in Damascus now takes a moderate position, in order to not present an obstacle to diplomatic efforts by neighboring countries, or the EU, the US, or Russia. It remains to be seen if he and his group will turn out to be the right individuals not only to stabilize the country, but also to appease the situation among the many groups in the country who often times fight each other. As a first step, al-Sharaa has put into place a provisional government headed by Mohammed al-Bashir (former head of government in Idlib). He promised a peaceful transfer of power and protection of minorities as well as elections, probably not before four years.

The fall of the Assad regime means hope for the Syrian people to see an end to the civil war which has raged for 13 years. But it also carries dangers. As a strategic link between Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran, who has created it, Syria was responsible for the delivery of arms to the Shiite militia and, at the same time, presented a threat to Israel. While the Assad clan had suppressed internal quarrels for 50 years, these may now reappear. The Kurdish minority in the northeast, supported by the US in their fight against ISIS (Islamic State) enjoys autonomy. Fighting for oilfields between the new masters and the Kurdish „Syrian Democratic Forces“ broke out in December 2024. But the new leadership has announced that all militias will be dissolved and replaced by a national army which has still to be formed. If and when this will be done, is an open question. Also, Assad's „home base“, the Alavites, a religious group close to the Shiites who make up roughly 10% of the Syrian population, fear for their future under the new government. Here as well, talks between the groups have started.

## Prospects Of The Second Trump Administration For The Near East

Beside all these regional issues the election of the new US president also plays an important role. On January 20, 2025, Donald Trump, for the second time, took over the White House and will, for four years, have a great impact on developments in the Near East. His son-in-law Jared Kushner had prepared the „Abraham Accords“ in 2020, his special envoy Amos Hochstein had arranged for a settlement of the sea border between Lebanon and Israel in 2022. They both had an important share in positive developments in the region. Today, expectations are equally high. The somewhat unorthodox policy of the 47th president as a dealmaker may yet surprise. The Israeli government under Benjamin Netanyahu, after military success „on all fronts“, finds itself in an upswing position. The situation in the Near East is complex, and wars, during the past 100 years, have never led to lasting peace. In the end, only a comprehensive agreement among all parties to the conflict can bring permanent peace. For this to happen, strategic interests of the US and of China, but also regional ambitions of Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have to be taken into consideration as well. And a solution for the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples has to be found. Only then, the cultural, religious, and economic wealth of the Orient can offer its people the future they deserve. 

# US Army Transformation Initiative

## Goals and Status

Sidney E. Dean

On 30 April 2025, US Secretary of Defense/War Peter Hegseth presented a directive to Army leadership mandating a Transformation and Acquisition Reform process, which has since become known as the Army Transformation Initiative (ATI). The stated aim is to make the Army more agile, lethal, and responsive to both conventional and emerging threats.

The day after Secretary Hegseth's memo, Army Secretary Dan Driscoll and Chief of Staff General Randy George presented the outline of the Army Transformation Initiative. The goals focus on streamlining force organization, modernizing acquisition, eliminating outdated systems, and ensuring rapid adoption of advanced technologies. This is to be achieved by restructuring commands, divesting outdated systems, converting brigade formations, and activating new units aligned with ATI's modernization goals. According to Gen. George, the ATI reforms build upon the Transformation in Contact initiative which has been prototyping organizational changes and integrating emerging technology into formations since at least 2024.

### Streamlined Chain of Command

A streamlined force organization is to be achieved through reduction of superfluous headquarters layers and consolidation of major commands. By eliminating redundancies and excessive 'stovepiping' the Army intends to sharpen the focus on combat capabilities. To this end, the number of generals is to be reduced to streamline the chain of command. The US Army headquarters staff is being reduced by 1,000 positions, with military personnel reassigned to combat units. Staff consolidation at other headquarters echelons is expected.

By the end of 2025, the Army had already formalized two top-echelon mergers.

The newly created Transformation and Training Command (T2COM) was activated on 2 October, 2025, merging Army Futures Command (AFC) and Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). T2COM is now the largest single command in the US Army. It synchronizes and integrates all major elements of force development, force generation, and force design under one headquarters. Modernization efforts and military training

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▲ Lightweight Infantry Squad Vehicles will enhance mobility of light formations as Infantry Brigade Combat Teams convert to Mobile Brigade Combat Teams. [Credit: US Army/Patrick Hunter]

(from basic training to leader development, as well as doctrine development) are to be harmonized, and rapidly adapt to meet changing technological or operational environments.

On 8 December 2025, the Army activated the Western Hemisphere Command (WHC) which is focussed on homeland defence and on partnerships with other nations in the Americas. WHC consolidates the former Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) and FORSCOM's two major subordinate components, Army North and Army South. The latter two entities had been responsible, respectively, for supporting the joint US Northern Command in defence of the continental United States and for supporting the US Southern Command which conducts military operations and provides assistance to friendly nations in the Caribbean/Latin America region. The merger comes as the line between the two commands has become blurred, with increased focus on securing the southern border of the United States, and combatting migrant flows and drug trafficking in the region. As part of the reorganization, WHC headquarters is expected to achieve IOC in February and full initial operational capability in the summer of 2026.

Another aspect of this reorganization is the realignment of major command echelons and units to more directly support the individual regional warfighting commands. I and III Corps, which were previously subordinate to FORSCOM, will now be directly aligned with the US Army Pacific and the US Army Europe-Africa, respectively, while the XVIII Airborne Corps remains under WHC. This realignment is expected to improve the efficiency and quality of training and equipment of personnel and combat units, providing better prepared forces to theatre commanders.

## Acquisition Reform

Acquisition reform efforts include replacement of the old system of 12 Program Executive Offices (PEOs) with six Portfolio Acquisition Executives (PAEs), each overseeing critical domains such as Fires, Manoeuvre, Command & Control, Sustainment, and Protection. Development and acquisition of new systems is to be accelerated by reducing what is perceived as excessive regulation and by accepting greater risk in the development cycle.

Furthermore, the Pentagon seeks to “consolidate budget lines and shift from program-centric funding to capability-based funding across critical portfolios [such as UAV, Counter-UAV, and EW] to ensure rapid technology adaptation.” The service seeks to expand the use of Other Transaction Authority agreements to speed prototyping and fielding of critical technologies. Furthermore, performance-based contracting and expanded use of multi-year procurement agreements should be pursued to reduce cost and enhance efficiency.

Current inventories as well as ongoing acquisition programmes involving equipment and systems deemed ineffective, redundant, or not attuned to current operational doctrine are to be eliminated or cut. Freed up resources are to be used for acquiring mobile, modern combat gear and advanced battlefield technologies.

The Secretary’s 30 April directive was quite clear regarding some programmes setting ambitious deadlines between 2026 and 2028 for fielding: long-range missiles capable of striking moving land and maritime targets; counter-UAV capabilities at company and below level; field unmanned systems and effects at division level; and enable AI-driven command and control at field level and theatre echelon headquarters.

While a premium is placed on mobility as well as on maximizing use of artificial intelligence and unmanned systems to enhance the speed of development as well as operational tempo, traditional combat arms such as artillery, air and missile defence and armour retain a vital role. The M1E3 Abrams tank, long-range fires programs and the new MV-75 combat helicopter remain priority programs, reflecting the focus on enhancing combat power for full-spectrum conflicts across large theatres of operations.

## Enhancing Manoeuvre Force Mobility and Offensive Capability

To enhance mobility and adapt to recent tactical developments, some combat formations are being reorganized. These efforts are considered core aspects of ATI.




All 34 active duty and Army National Guard (ARNG) Infantry Brigade Combat Teams (IBCT) are being converted to Mobile Brigade Combat Teams (MBCT). The IBCTs (including airborne and airmobile units) had been configured and equipped for counterinsurgency operations and were considered ill-suited for high-intensity, peer-involved conflict. MBCTs are expected to have improved speed, mobility, lethality and rapid deployment capability, preparing them for future multi-domain operations (MDO). To this end they will be equipped with highly manoeuvrable Infantry Squad Vehicles (ISV), hundreds of UAVs per brigade (reconnaissance, fire direction, and loitering munitions), electronic warfare tools, as well as a new organic multifunctional reconnaissance company and a multipurpose company to coordinate fires and strike operations. In exercises, MBCTs demonstrated 300% higher lethality than legacy IBCTs. Conversion of the first five units began in 2025, with 25 brigades to complete conversion within two years.

Aviation restructuring has begun with the goal of reducing one Aerial Cavalry Squadron from each of the 11 Combat Aviation Brigades (CAB) in the active duty Army component (this amounts to half of the brigade’s attack helicopter strength). The removed elements will be replaced with drone-swarm capability integrated into the brigade. Additionally, medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) airlift units are being resized for efficiency.

Finally, expansion of Multi-Domain Task Forces (MDTF) is intensifying, with all five planned MDTFs to be operational by 2028. The special capabilities inherent in the MDTF formations include long-range precision missiles (including long-range hypersonic missiles) suitable for neutralizing high-value targets, as well as integrated cyber, space and electronic warfare effects.

The units are being operationally aligned under theatre-level Army component commands. Under ATI, new Multi-Domain Command (MDC) subordinate headquarters are being established at these Army component commands. The two-star level MDCs will control the MDTFs and synchronize the MDTF’s delivery of precision effects and precision fires against adversary A2/AD networks. Three of the Task Force units (1st, 3rd and 4th MDTF) will be dedicated to or focussed toward the Indo-Pacific theatre, while the 2nd MDTF is configured and trained for operations in the European theatre. The 5th MDTF will be available for global response as needed.

## Implications for US Strategy and Alliance Support

Many aspects of ATI reflect the current administration’s determination to focus primarily on western hemisphere and Indo-Pacific challenges. Nonetheless, the realignment of III Corps to EUCOM-AFRICOM and the continued expansion of the 2nd MDTF demonstrate that US armed forces will remain operationally capable of responding to threats to NATO. Functionally, the reforms and modernization drive being pursued under ATI aim to enhance the US Army’s capacity to counter current and future challenges and to relocate quickly to emerging conflict zones globally, and not only in the Indo-Pacific region. 

- ◀ **The 3rd Battalion, 12 Field Artillery Rgt, was formally activated on 17 Oct. 2025. The unit serves as the long-range fires battalion of the 2nd Multi-Domain Task Force, dedicated to operations in the European and African theatres of operation. [Credit: US Army/Sgt. Keith Matthews]**

# Involvement in over 150 port projects

## China is a global port power

**Katrin Büchenbacher**

Over the past two decades, China has built up a global network of port investments. Chinese companies now have stakes in more than 150 ports across every continent except Antarctica. This has far-reaching geopolitical consequences. Ports are not only hubs of global trade, but also instruments of power.

In times of peace, China's port investments secure access to raw materials, sales markets and trade routes. In times of crisis or conflict, they can be used as leverage – even to the point of blocking supply chains. China's, the People's Liberation Army Navy already practising such scenarios. The economic and military benefits of this infrastructure are intertwined.

China is now the world's largest maritime power. Around 95% of China's trade volume is handled by sea. Ports are therefore central to the country's strategic interests. Chinese companies operate or control dozens of terminals worldwide; according to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace think tank, they own property rights in over 90 of them. Chinese actors hold majority stakes in 17 ports, as analysis by the Council on Foreign Relations shows.

The Chinese state plays a direct role in most of these investments. The large shipping and logistics companies – including China Harbour, Cosco and China Merchants – are state-owned. This gives the Communist Party influence over decisions concerning the operation and use of the ports. Chinese companies often do not operate entire ports, but rather individual terminals or have long-term rights of use. However, even this limited presence can be strategically crucial.

### Africa: Economic presence, military options

This strategy is particularly advanced in Africa. The continent is rich in raw materials, is considered a growth market of the future and has insufficiently developed port infrastructure in many places. 'Ports are expensive to build and maintain, especially because of the harsh marine environment. Many governments do not have the resources to maintain this critical infrastructure,' says security expert Raelene Lockhorst of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. 'So when someone offers help, it quickly becomes tempting. This is especially true for poorer countries.'

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▲ **China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) has commenced construction on a new container terminal near the Côte d'Ivoire city of Abidjan [Credit: Port of Abidjan]**

According to the Merics research institute, Chinese companies operate at least 27 ports in Africa. Other think tanks, such as the Africa Center for Strategic Studies in Washington, assume significantly higher figures and speak of up to 80 port projects with Chinese participation – more than in any other region of the world.

Commercial interests are often the primary focus at first. China imports oil, rare earths, industrial metals and gold from Africa. At the same time, Beijing wants to secure market share early on: by 2050, 2.5 billion people will be living on the continent. Growing trade relations also help China to protect itself against possible Western sanctions and diversify its supply chains.

One example is Nigeria. There, China built a new deep-sea port, secured a majority stake and signed a 16-year lease agreement. A large oil refinery, financed by a Nigerian entrepreneur, was built in the immediate vicinity. A Chinese state bank also financed a new connecting road between the port, the refinery and the hinterland. Since it went into operation in early 2023, thousands of jobs have been created, and factories and companies have settled in the free trade zone and the adjacent industrial corridor.

These investments are also paying off politically. Many African countries in which China is heavily involved support Beijing in international bodies such as the UN General Assembly and the

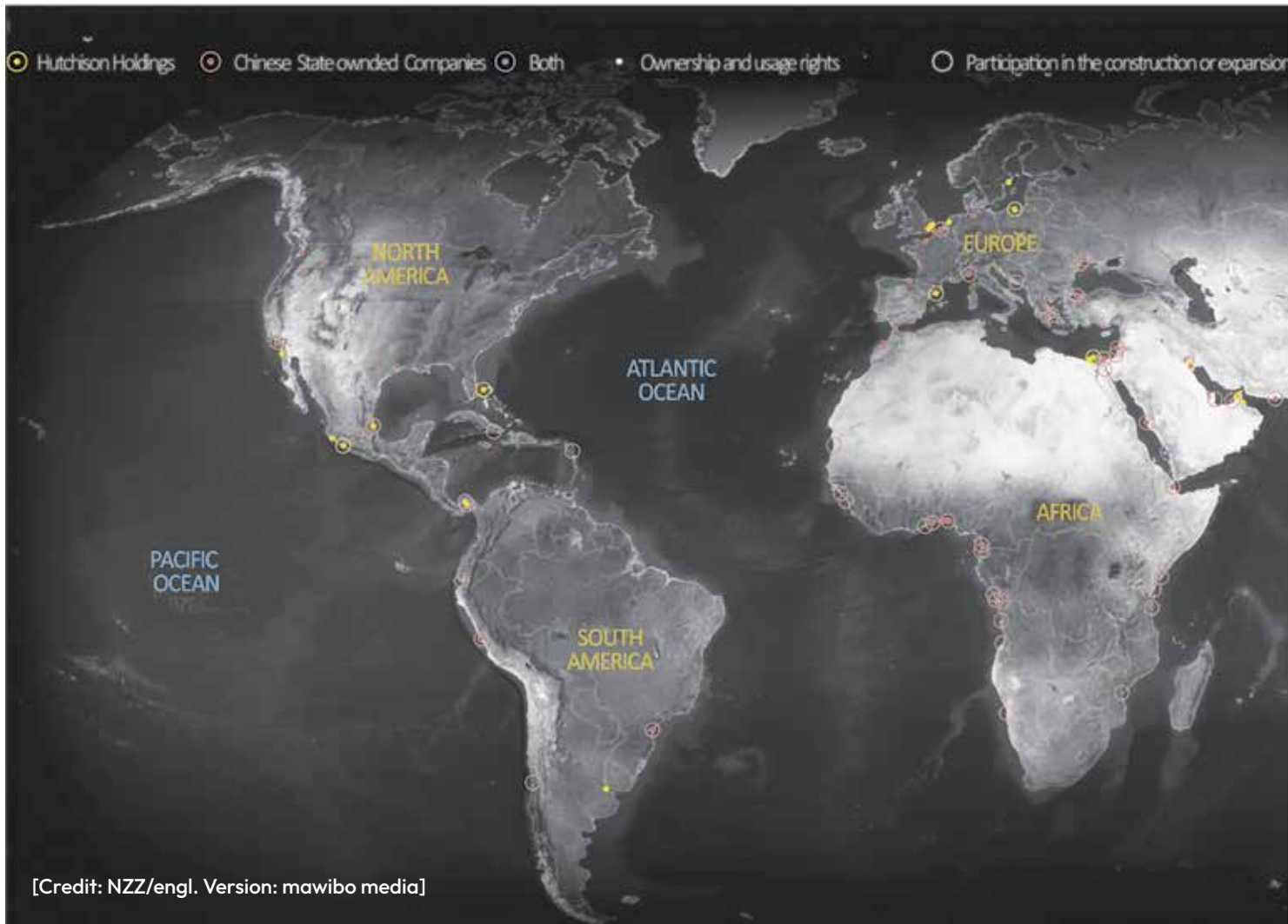
World Trade Organization. In the UN Human Rights Council, African states regularly praise the achievements of the Chinese government and rarely voice criticism.

This political capital also opens up military opportunities for China. The example of Djibouti illustrates this. China first built a port there – and then, a few weeks later in 2017, opened its first military base outside its own territory. Officially, it serves as a logistics base for naval operations to protect Chinese trade interests. In fact, the facility has capacity for large warships, space for around 2,000 soldiers, and shooting ranges, warehouses, radar and communication systems.

China denies that it wants to establish further military bases in Africa. But the potential is there. Seven of the ten African ports operated solely by China are deep-sea ports – deep enough for destroyers or supply ships of the Chinese navy. Such ports can be used for military purposes with little effort. According to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, the Chinese navy has been deployed 19 times for exercises in African ports since 2000.



▲ Panama Ports Company (PPC), a subsidiary of Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison, in which CK Hutchison holds a 90% stake, has invested \$1.7 billion in two ports near the Panama Canal, the company announced in April 2025 [Credit: CK Hutchinson]



[Credit: NZZ/engl. Version: mawibo media]

## Europe: Chinese companies exploit weaknesses

Europe also plays a central role in China's maritime strategy. In recent years, Chinese companies have made targeted investments in important European seaports. China is already involved in at least 22 ports, holding majority stakes in five of them.

Beijing emphasises that it is not about control, but about partnerships. Chinese investments are intended to modernise ports, connect Europe more closely with Asia and make supply chains more efficient. The focus is on economic and cultural exchange.

However, awareness of the risks is growing in Europe. Ports are considered critical infrastructure. When the Chinese state-owned company Cosco sought a 35% stake in a terminal at the Port of Hamburg, resistance arose. The German ministries of economics and foreign affairs warned of China's 'disproportionate' influence. After lengthy negotiations, the stake was limited to a maximum of 25% – to prevent China from blocking strategic decisions.

At the same time, Chinese state-owned companies are deliberately exploiting economic weaknesses. They offer financial assistance when modernisation is needed that local operators cannot afford. The port of Zeebrugge in Belgium struggled with stagnating transshipment figures, while Spain's Noatum Ports grappled with the aftermath of the financial crisis. This dynamic was particularly evident in Greece. During the debt

crisis that began in 2009, the country was forced to privatise. China entered the port of Piraeus via Cosco, which is now wholly Chinese-owned. Piraeus has developed into the largest container port in the Mediterranean.

## Panama: a geopolitical bottleneck

The Panama Canal is a particularly sensitive case. The Hong Kong investment firm CK Hutchison Holdings has been operating two central container terminals at both ends of the canal since the 1990s. In 2017, Panama broke off diplomatic relations with Taiwan and turned to Beijing. Since then, China has been one of the country's most important trading partners.

This poses a security risk for the United States. The Panama Canal is central to American trade with Asia and is considered part of the United States' strategic sphere of influence – similar to how China views the South China Sea or Russia views the former Soviet states. President Donald Trump's security strategy makes this claim clear: the Western Hemisphere should remain under American control.

In March last year, it was announced that CK Hutchison wanted to sell 43 ports – including the two terminals on the Panama Canal – to a consortium led by the American investment firm Blackrock. But the deal has stalled. Beijing sharply criticised the sale and demanded that the state-owned Cosco group be involved. China clearly does not want to relinquish control over these strategically important ports.

## Australia: vulnerable due to its geography

Australia shows how serious the security policy consequences can be. The country is particularly dependent on maritime supply chains. Raelene Lockhorst warns that in the event of a conflict – for example over Taiwan or in the South China Sea – China could block fuel deliveries to Australia. 'We would probably last a week, then our supplies would be exhausted,' she says. Ships would have to take detours and expose themselves to piracy. The economic damage would be enormous.

## Economy and military as one

'China's economic and military strategies go hand in hand,' says Isaac Kardon, professor at Johns Hopkins University and researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace think tank. In his research, he found that China makes about a one third of the terminals it owns available to the People's Liberation Army.

In an emergency, however, hardly any country would allow China to openly use a port as a troop or naval base. Moreover, it would be difficult for the Chinese army to protect such facilities against attack. The real function of this infrastructure therefore lies elsewhere: in protecting trade routes, providing logistical support for naval operations and gathering operational experience.

These often small, temporary military facilities usually go unnoticed. They enable the refuelling of warships, the supply of materials and the exchange of information. This is precisely where their strength lies. China's leadership avoids building numerous formal military bases – they would be expensive and politically sensitive. Instead, it relies on a global port network that combines economic efficiency with strategic impact.



# Post-Consensus Attitudes To Defence and Security in NATO

David Saw

Although many would seek to deny it, Europe is going through a period of profound political change, with the old political certainties constantly being swept away. Both between countries and within countries, what were considered to be fixed political and social structures are now being questioned. This uncertainty inevitably impacts on national and international perceptions of defence and security. If traditional political and government structures are being challenged, how can they convince their people that increased funding for defence is justified and how can they find the required number of people to make the necessary sacrifices to populate their defence and security apparatus?

It is a long time since the formation of NATO in 1949, when Lord Ismay, the first NATO Secretary General, described the purpose of the organisation as to “keep the Americans in, keep the Russians out and keep the Germans down.” Of course it has to be remembered that this was some four years after the end of a ruinous war that has virtually destroyed Europe, when the battle lines of the Cold War were being drawn, dividing the West from the Soviet Bloc forming across the other side of the Iron Curtain.

NATO was only one of a series of defensive alliances formed during this period. There was the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) established in 1955 and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), that had been established in 1954. Of these collective security organisations only NATO has survived to this day – indeed its membership has grown, but the political changes across the NATO nations are contributing to a sense of doubt over the long term future of the Alliance, at least in its current form. The reasoning behind this view is that many of the member nations of NATO are suffering from increasing internal political turmoil and that this could potentially weaken the sense of purpose of the member nations in joint decision-making and subsequent joint action impossible. There are more than internal factors at play here, at a national level, concerning fissures are appearing within NATO – a truly unwelcome development.

## Challenges

That is not to say that there have not been problems between NATO members before. Cast your mind back to 1956 between October and November, when Britain and France, along with Israel, had invaded Egypt in an effort to topple the Nasser regime after the Suez Canal was nationalised. US political and economic pressure forced Britain and France to withdraw, effectively exposing

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▲ **August 2008 saw the Russian invasion of Georgia, the first sign of a resurgent Russia, but the Western response was anaemic at best. [Credit: Atlantic Council]**

the fact that they could not have an independent foreign policy in the face of US opposition. At exactly the same time, the Hungarian Revolution had broken out, with the reaction of the US and other NATO members insipid at best. Although the Soviet suppression of Hungary provided a graphic example of the real meaning of Soviet power.

Then we come to 1966 and Charles De Gaulle’s decision to remove France from the military structure of NATO and to demand the withdrawal of NATO forces from French territory. The Gaullist belief was that French national interests outweighed alliance interests, especially considering that the NATO Alliance was dominated by US security and economic interests. Paris wanted to control its own foreign and defence policy (France would eventually rejoin the NATO military structure in April 2009).

The Gaullist strategy of 1966 was highly significant – it marked the first time that a NATO member nation would reassert national sovereignty/national interests over alliance interests. It eventually led to the development of a new view of European security interests – on the one side there was the realist “Atlanticist” view, which accepted that the US was first amongst equals in NATO, but as they were bearing a larger defence burden, had significant military forces and were effectively central to Europe’s defensive shield, that US pre-eminence in the Alliance was a valid price to pay. What the Gaullist move of 1966 did was to act as the starting point for a more nuanced European view of Europe’s defence and security strategy, what we shall call a ‘Eurocentric’ view. As the European Union (EU) grew post-Cold War, the Eurocentric view started to gain considerable traction.

The next complicating factor in the NATO came when Türkiye invaded Cyprus in July 1974. Two members of the Alliance fighting both covertly via surrogates and overtly. Centuries of *animus*

between these two nations and competing territorial claims in the Aegean have created a situation where the potential for conflict still exists. Tension between Ankara and Athens remains a factor for instability in the Eastern Mediterranean.

## An End and a Beginning

Despite everything, NATO survived, primarily due to the fact that although there might be internal disagreements within the Alliance, it was obvious that the main threat was Soviet armies across the Inner German Border (IGB) and the only sure way to deal with that threat was a strong NATO. That NATO was a success could not be doubted – after all in April 1989 the Alliance celebrated its 50th anniversary having achieved its primary mission of collective defence for its member states. Later that year, the Berlin Wall fell and the dissolution of the Soviet Bloc commenced.

Into the 1990s, the prevailing strategic picture had changed both within Europe and globally; it seemed to many that the end of the Cold War had proven to be the triumph of Western liberal democracy over competing collectivist ideologies. The 1992 book that was the primary text of that point of view was “The End of History and the Last Man” by Francis Fukuyama and with its contention that no plausible challenge could emerge to confront Western liberal democracy – this was what he meant by “the end of history.”

The 1990s saw the US as the undisputed dominant power globally – it also saw the expansion of NATO, a process that continued into the 2000s, with former Warsaw Pact, the Baltic states and states that had emerged from the former Yugoslavia later joining the Alliance. There was also expansion of the EU to the east. Europe’s security situation was less clear cut though as there were wider conflicts, as there were certainly conflicts caused by the dissolution of Yugoslavia from 1991 through to 1999. There was also clear evidence that NATO members were following their own foreign/strategic policy objectives rather than aligning themselves with a united front of NATO or EU policies.

Expansion of both NATO and the EU would see competing Atlanticist and Eurocentric views of what was needed for the European strategic space to grow. It would also see ongoing differences of opinion between member states. Liberal democratic values still held primacy, but there were challenges emerging to this political orthodoxy often driven by national governmental priorities and by the past historical experience of the new member states and how that coloured their strategic and foreign policy priorities. Even so, despite these emerging differences, the fundamentals were positive for business as usual for Europe and for NATO in a defence context. The 1990s were, in many ways, the start of a “Holiday from History” for Europe. There were no major threats and defence spending that could be reduced in consequence – the situation was positive and the overall feeling was “what could go wrong?”

## The Descent

The 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks on the US homeland changed the comfortable security assumptions that had taken hold in the 1990s. This resulted in the “Global War on Terror” and the regime change wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, all of which monopolised US attention and cost a vast amount of blood and treasure. Then came a global recession in 2007, leading to a significant economic crisis in the US during 2008, all of which sapped US strength. August of 2008 saw the Russian invasion of Georgia, the first sign of a resurgent Russia, but the Western response was anaemic at best.

The arrival of the Obama administration was greeted favourably by Europeans – this was a centre left administration that was palatable to European politicians and would be in office from 2009 to 2017. Unfortunately, the Obama foreign policy misread the situation in Iran and the broader Middle East, failed to recognise the threat of the Islamic State, and failed to recognise that the appeasement of Russia was a mistake. The latter charge being proven by the lack of real reaction to the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014 and the war in the Donbas.

The Obama administration made a critical change in US strategic policy, one which still resonates to this day and that was the “Pacific Pivot.” All of a sudden, the Asia-Pacific region was a priority in US strategic planning and China had emerged as the primary strategic competitor to the US. In economic and industrial terms, China had arrived to tackle US superiority in these areas and in defence capabilities and technologies China was also fast closing the gap on the US. The importance of Europe in US strategic planning was severely weakened by the Pacific Pivot.

## Political Change

From 2015 onwards, a series of events both within Europe and externally would call into question conventional politics in Europe. The first of these events was the migrant crisis – by the end of 2015 it was reported that one million migrants had entered the EU via the Mediterranean route alone. Immigration was already becoming a political issue in Europe and the 2015 crisis added fuel to the fire, acting as a catalyst for right of centre political groups. This was the point where national populism started to emerge across Europe as an increasing challenge to existing political and cultural elites in Europe and the globalist progressivism that they had embraced. Then in November 2015 came six separate Islamic State inspired terrorist attacks in Paris, the worst terrorist outrages in Europe since 2004. Global terrorism was now a significant factor in the European strategic space. Again this added to the narrative of national populism.

The next series of events that challenged the European political consensus came in 2016. The first seismic event was the Brexit Referendum in the UK in June that year, the then government offered a referendum on EU membership based on the assumption that the remain vote would prevail and that the anti-EU sentiment in the UK would disappear for at least a generation. They miscalculated with the leave vote winning 51.89 percent of the ballots cast.

- ✦ **There is no common European strategy towards dealing with Russia, with, for example, Hungary having a totally different view of foreign policy realities compared to the view from Brussels. [Credit: White House]**



Later that year in November, the US Presidential election saw Donald Trump emerge victorious – again this was a manifestation of national populism. Trump was brash, he was not a career politician, he certainly was not a diplomat in the classic sense, he was a businessman and a negotiator used to driving a hard bargain. He was certainly not the US leader that European political elites wanted and needed. Perhaps the greatest concern was that Trump was not a believer in the conventional wisdom regarding NATO and the importance of Europe to the US. Fortunately for European politicians and security planners, Trump was not elected for a second term in the 2020 election – instead the arrival of Joe Biden signaled a return to a more comfortable relationship between the US and Europe.



▲ **According to reports out of the US, the belief is that Greenland contains Rare Earth Elements resources that are equivalent to those of China. Vivian Motzfeldt, Greenlandic Minister of Independence and Foreign Affairs and Denmark's MoD Trols Lund Poulsen. [Credit: MoD Denmark]**

The end of Trump after his first term did not mark a return to conventional politics in Europe. Indeed the *Gilets Jaunes* (Yellow Vests) protests in France (2018-2020) exposed a significant degree of dissatisfaction with traditional government policies – this was a populist movement and was yet another manifestation of the growth of national populism. Arguably the most significant event during this era was the COVID-19 pandemic which occurred from 2020 onwards and caused nearly 1.8 million deaths in Europe alone. The deaths, the massive economic damage caused by the pandemic and how the crisis was handled, led to a massive loss of confidence in establishment politics in both Europe and the US. This added further fuel to the growth of national populism and also to radical left political groupings. The classical establishment elites might still be hanging on to power, increasingly though they were losing the battle to retain political legitimacy.

## Realities

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the fact that this war has continued into 2026 has ended the European “Holiday from History” that had lasted since the 1990s – the threat to European security was back and it was very real! Yet for all the talk of responding to the Russian threat and finally bringing defence spending and military capabilities back to respectable levels, it would seem that talk is cheap and in far too many cases action is rare. You cannot cure years of neglect overnight; where are the qualified people and can national defence industries respond rapidly enough to demands for rearmament.

It is also clear that not everybody in Europe sees the threat calculus in the same way – there is no common European strategy towards dealing with Russia, with, for example, Hungary having a totally different view of foreign policy realities compared to the view coming from Brussels. Hungarian elections are expected in April 2026 – this might see the end to the Orbán era, which would be of some relief to Brussels. But then Viktor Orbán has long demonstrated an ability to surprise critics.

Another potentially disruptive force in the European strategic space is Türkiye – the Erdoğan government has its own national strategic direction and its increasing involvement in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean could be a cause for concern. Turkish strategic and economic interests cannot be ignored, further complicating European security planning.

Another source of discomfort to European political elites is the second Trump administration that took power at the start of 2025. Unlike the first Trump administration, Trump II is a much more formidable proposition as it is much more able to wield the power of government effectively. The key point with Trump II is that it is not afraid to put US national/strategic interests ahead of everything and everyone else! If the US can seduce Russia away from its close relationship with China that is a positive benefit for US interests, no matter the cost to other concerned states.

The question of Greenland? The reason that the US is prepared to disrupt relations with a NATO ally is twofold: first, Greenland holds a key strategic location as the Arctic becomes an area of competition with both Russia and China having ambitions in the area. Second, there is the question of Rare Earth Elements (REE), which are strategically critical minerals for a host of advanced applications. China has vast REE resources, the US does not! According to reports out of the US, the belief is that Greenland contains REE resources that are equivalent to those of China, an immense strategic prize! There are certainly better, less controversial, ways of gaining access to the REE in Greenland, but remember, Trump II is always aggressive in its pursuit of US national interests.

The domestic political question that continues to cause discomfort to European political elites, is the rise of national populism and, to a lesser extent, a newly energised radical left. In France, the Rassemblement National (RN) continues to grow in popularity, especially as the current Macron administration is incredibly unpopular. In Germany, there is the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), another right wing group making significant progress. Then in the UK you have Reform, currently leading opinion polls, though not as far right as the parties in France and Germany. If Reform achieved power, it would convulse the British political system.

For the first time in many years Europe faces a strategic threat. With conventional politics losing ground to disruptive political forces on both the right and the left, there appears to be no consensus on how to confront the threats that Europe is facing. With the US less engaged in Europe than ever before, there is a need for Europe to show leadership in building enhanced defensive capabilities and, just as important, convincing the European population that it is a real threat and that sacrifices need to be made to confront that threat. Sadly the required leadership skills seem to be lacking in Europe at this point. 

# The Death of Democracy

Peter R. Neumann and Richard C. Schneider

Liberal democracy does not die suddenly. It is slowly being eroded – by mistrust, exhaustion and the feeling that the future is more of a threat than a promise. In many Western societies, there is a growing impression that politics no longer solves problems but merely manages them, that institutions no longer protect but fail, and that those who govern have lost touch with large sections of the population. It is precisely in this climate that right-wing populist movements thrive.

Their rise is therefore not an accident of democracy, nor is it merely a protest phenomenon. It is a symptom of a deeper crisis in Western societies – and a dangerous political response to it. Anyone who underestimates right-wing populists as mere mouthpieces for discontent or as a temporary radicalisation fails to recognise their true significance: they are setting out to fundamentally change the political system.



▲ French far-right leader and Member of Parliament Marine Le Pen, President of the French far-right National Rally (Rassemblement National - RN) party parliamentary group [Credit: picture alliance/REUTERS/Ana Beltran]

For a long time, such a development seemed inconceivable. After the Second World War, Western democracies were almost universally on the upswing. With each generation, prosperity, security and individual freedoms grew. By the end of the Cold War at the latest, there was a prevailing sense that the West had finally triumphed. Democracy, market economy and human rights were considered not only superior, but also without alternative. For many, Francis Fukuyama's famous 'end of history' was less theory than lived reality.

This self-image has since been lost. Since the global financial crisis, at the latest, there has been a growing sense that

something has fundamentally gone out of balance – economically, politically and socially. This is precisely where the success of right-wing populists comes in.

## The Western malaise

For about 15 years, experiences of crisis have been intensifying throughout the West, which many people perceive as a permanent malaise. This is not just about individual shocks such as pandemics, war or inflation, but about longer-term developments that undermine trust in politics and institutions.

A key issue is the loss of trust in the state. For decades, it was seen as a guarantor of stability and social equality. Today, many see it as overwhelmed, inefficient or absent. Despite growing bureaucracy, less and less seems to be working: infrastructure is falling into disrepair, schools and administrations are reaching their limits, security agencies appear overburdened, and even pension provision seems uncertain. Whether these perceptions always correspond to reality is secondary. What is crucial is that they have become entrenched – and that social media provides apparent evidence for every complaint. In the end, the explanation is often the same: the 'elites' are to blame.

Added to this is a deep sense of uncertainty about demographic changes. Western societies are ageing, while migration is increasing and younger generations are becoming increasingly diverse. Many wonder whether the society they are leaving to their children will still resemble the one in which they themselves grew up. Will they eventually become strangers in their own country? What will happen to culture, lifestyle and political influence? Even those who accept change in principle find the pace unsettling. This is precisely where conspiracy myths such as the 'great



▲ If Donald Trump succeeds in replacing the separation of powers with a system focused solely on himself, the entire democratic system could be permanently damaged. [Credit: White house gov]

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replacement' come in – not because they are true, but because they translate diffuse fears into a seemingly coherent world view.

Finally, the international order is also changing. For decades, the West was seen as a model that others wanted to follow. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, at the latest, have shown how limited this appeal actually is. The rise of China and Russia's aggressive revisionism make it clear that there are alternative models of power and society that not only challenge the West, but actively push it back. Even those who do not immediately feel these shifts perceive a sense of historical decline – years of self-confidence are followed by a kind of collective hangover.

### The promise: 'Back to the future'

Right-wing populists have a simple and seductive answer to all this: 'Back to the future.' Their central promise is that we can turn back the clock to a time when the state functioned, society was manageable, migration was not an issue, and our country was admired internationally. Slogans such as 'Germany. But normal' or 'Make America Great Again' thrive on precisely this longing.



▲ In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has systematically disempowered the courts, media and civil society over many years [Credit: EU]

In this narrative, it is also clear who is to blame: the 'liberal elites' who have destroyed the state and society out of self-interest or ideological zeal. The solution, they say, is to remove them from power and restore the 'true will of the people'. Right-wing populists see themselves as the only legitimate representatives of this will. The fact that they rarely achieve absolute majorities in elections hardly disturbs this logic. They claim that the people suffer from a 'false consciousness' that will change as soon as they themselves are in power.

Where right-wing populists govern, they usually follow the same pattern. They talk about direct democracy and closeness to the people, but their main aim is to strengthen the executive and weaken or neutralise liberal institutions – courts, parliaments, the media, the administration, and in some cases also science and civil society. Ostensibly, this is to liberate the will of the people. In reality, it dismantles the control mechanisms that are supposed to prevent the abuse of power.



▲ The Meloni government is not yet authoritarian in the classic sense, but it is continuously testing the limits of liberal institutions [Credit: EU]

The end result is either a 'people's president' who presents himself as a saviour and claims to speak for the 'forgotten' or an authoritarian ruler who combines democratic rhetoric with virtually unlimited power. Which variant occurs often only becomes apparent when it is almost impossible to reverse.

### The real danger

The greatest danger therefore lies not in the fact that right-wing populists are already fascists, but in the fact that they can become fascists. Once institutions have been weakened and counterbalances removed, it ultimately depends on individual actors how far they go in the direction of kleptocracy or authoritarianism. The United States probably provides the most important example of this: if Donald Trump succeeds in replacing the separation of powers with a system focused solely on himself, the entire democratic system could be permanently damaged.

Similar developments can also be observed in Europe. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has systematically disempowered the courts, media and civil society over many years and created a political system that is still formally democratic but in practice allows for little fair change of power. Elections take place, but the rules of the game are so distorted that genuine competition is only possible to a limited extent. Italy is moving in a similar direction, albeit to a much lesser extent. The Meloni government is not yet authoritarian in the classic sense, but it is continuously testing the limits of liberal institutions, attacking the media and relativising the standards of the rule of law. The crucial point is that the transition from democratic rhetoric to illiberal practice is gradual – and often so slow that it is only noticed when it is almost impossible to reverse.

Last but not least, even in countries where right-wing populists are not (yet) in power, they are changing the political culture. In France and Germany, they are shifting debates, normalising authoritarian positions and putting pressure on established parties to adapt their language and priorities. Even without government responsibility, they are thus contributing to further undermining trust in democratic institutions. The danger therefore lies not only in the seizure of power itself, but in the long-term erosion of democratic norms. Where the separation of powers, the protection of

minorities and pluralistic debate are no longer considered indispensable, but rather obstacles, the ground is already prepared for authoritarian solutions.

## What can be done?

There is no simple solution to the problem of right-wing populism, but there is a kind of counter-strategy.

First, liberal democratic parties must defuse real conflicts instead of ignoring them. Populism is an illiberal response to actual fault lines. The issue of migration in particular combines loss of control, questions of identity and conflicts over distribution. However, the majority of voters for right-wing populist parties do not have a unified nationalist worldview. Many accept migration in principle, but expect order and control. Democratic politics must do just that – without adopting the extreme rhetoric of the populists. Countries such as Denmark show that this can win back support.

middle-income earners; foreign policy positions that weaken national sovereignty; unrealistic migration plans. Above all, however, the myth of the ‘true will of the people’ must be refuted when four-fifths of voters support other parties.

Fourth, there needs to be an offensive in political education. Fundamental principles – pluralism, separation of powers, protection of minorities – are surprisingly poorly established. Many take democracy for granted without understanding how fragile it is. The fact that populists can so easily challenge these foundations is an alarm signal for society as a whole.

And finally, liberal democrats must fight against themselves – offensively and visibly. Protests such as those at the beginning of 2024 show that there is a will of the people other than that of the populists. But that is not enough. We need positive narratives about the future that are more appealing than the backward-looking nostalgia of right-wing populists. And we need to




▲ **The rise of China and Russia's aggressive revisionism make it clear that there are alternative models of power and society that not only challenge the West, but actively push it back. [Credit: Kremlin]**

Second, clear firewalls are needed. Since right-wing populists rarely achieve majorities, they are dependent on coalitions. The idea that cooperation is harmless or tactically astute has historically proven fatal. Conservative parties do not benefit from it in the long term – they often lose their independence or become marginalised. Those who want to protect democracy must not become stooges, even if this means uncomfortable coalitions.

Third, right-wing populists must be consistently challenged. For too long, they have either been ignored or morally reviled – both of which have tended to work in their favour. Their programmes often remain unexplained: economic policies that harm low and

be willing to leave our filter bubbles – in everyday life as well as on social media. When a large part of the younger generation perceives politics almost exclusively online, it is a sad reflection on the state of affairs that democratic parties are often barely present there.

The death of democracy is not a law of nature. Right-wing populists are acting according to a plan – for the path to power and for its use. It is not too late to stop them. But those who want to save liberal democracy must not harbour any illusions: there are no shortcuts. What is needed is perseverance, clarity – and a plan of their own. 

# Talking with Emre Akin

Chief Operating Officer, Europe. Nurol Makina Sanayi (NMS)

**ESD:** Russia’s war against Ukraine has boosted procurement activity worldwide. This is leading to new orders and capacity expansion. What are your expectations for the international arms trade in the post-Ukraine era?

**Akin:** The Russo-Ukrainian war has altered the logic of defence procurement significantly. The emphasis has shifted away from buying impressive specifications and towards building real readiness. That means speed of delivery, assured sustainment and industrial resilience that can survive disruption. In practical terms, I expect demand to stay strong, particularly in protected mobility. Land forces are modernising, rebuilding stocks and learning hard lessons about survivability. But buyers are also becoming more demanding. “Value” is no longer just acquisition price or brochure performance; it is delivery discipline, reliable service, and the ability to adapt platforms to evolving operational needs.

In this new environment, track record matters. NMS has already proven itself through on-time deliveries to tens of users across different regions — including NATO and EU customers — where delivery performance and dependable support are critical requirements rather than contractual formalities.

The post-Ukraine market will reward companies that can deliver, support and upgrade at pace — consistently.



[Photos: NMS]

governments are not only increasing defence expenditure, they are also looking at the industrial foundations behind readiness: production capacity, supply security, and sovereign sustainment.

In short, US decisions matter, which today lead the international arms trade to become more diversified and more multi-polar — and Europe will increasingly set its own priorities, particularly for land capability.

**ESD:** How do you intend to respond to potential demands from the US government to cease supplying certain countries or regions?

**Akin:** Defence industry operates within strict regulatory frameworks. That is not new. What is new is how fast the environment can change.

For NMS, compliance is not a talking point — it is a legacy. We adhere to international regulations, export controls and sanctions regimes, and we approach every programme with a long-term view of responsibility and credibility.

▼ **Distributed manufacturing across multiple production sites strengthens industrial resilience and continuity of supply.**



▲ **Combat-proven 4x4 protected mobility platforms, fielded internationally and backed by proven on-time delivery and responsive support.**

**ESD:** How much does the development of the arms trade depend on decisions made by the US government?

**Akin:** It is obvious that the United States will play even more of an influential role in the global defence market. Through technology, export controls and security policy, it shapes the environment for many programmes worldwide. However, Europe is clearly moving into a phase of greater responsibility — both militarily and industrially. European



The defence sector runs on trust. If you want to be a reliable partner for end-users, you have to be predictable and disciplined in how you operate internationally.

**ESD:** What are your thoughts on the idea of developing a global business model and thus moving away from contracting by nation-states?

**Akin:** Defence will always remain rooted in nation-states. Requirements, funding and operational concepts are sovereign by nature.

That said, the way capability is delivered is increasingly shaped by alliances and multinational cooperation — particularly within Europe and NATO. So the key question is how do we support sovereignty in practical terms?


In our business line, industry must offer more than vehicles. It must offer continuity of supply, spares and repair capacity, upgrades and trained people. Above all, it must offer resilience. This is exactly why our distributed industrial model matters. Through our international production sites in the UK, in Hungary as well as Türkiye, we are not simply assembling platforms. We are bringing know-how to our users for the long term. We can manufacture sovereign systems that the users fully control — particularly in supply chain including upgrades and upkeeps — throughout the service life of the vehicles.

**ESD:** How should Europe position itself in terms of arms policy?

**Akin:** Europe should focus on three priorities: speed, resilience and availability in service.

Speed matters because the threat environment does not allow long acquisition cycles for essential capabilities. Resilience matters because supply chains can be disrupted and demand can surge. And availability matters because equipment only counts when it is operational — year after year.

NMS's perspective is shaped by operational experience. Our vehicles are in service in more than 20 countries. We have proven our ability not only to deliver but also to sustain fleets, implement upgrades, and keep platforms ready across the full lifecycle. We are also accustomed to changing user requirements even during project execution — and we respond quickly. In a rapid procurement environment, that adaptability acts as a real differentiator for NMS.

Equally, after-sales support is not an afterthought for us; it is part of how we judge performance. With NATO and EU end-users such as Hungary and Estonia, our responsiveness has built a strong reputation with users. In addition, because most of our major subsystems already rely on European-based supply chains, we are well positioned to expand local sourcing further — for European solutions. 



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# The Operational Plan for Germany after two years building a national defence capability

**André Johannes Bodemann**

Peace, once taken for granted by many, is becoming increasingly unstable in Europe and worldwide. We are experiencing a sustained erosion of the security order – and Germany is also no longer being spared from the effects. In the past years, the European and global security architecture has experienced a significant deterioration, ranging from geopolitical conflicts to new forms of hybrid threats. For Germany, this marks an end to the era of the peace dividend.

In plain terms: Despite all peace efforts, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has raged in Eastern Europe for four years, and the situation in the Western Balkans, the Middle East and in parts of Africa remains challenging. In Germany, hybrid threats are clearly affecting our sense of security. Acts of sabotage against railway lines and submarine cables in the Baltic Sea, spying activities with drones, disinformation campaigns, attacks against critical infrastructure – all of this is becoming increasingly visible and unsettling.

The immediate consequences of these changes: The European Union is seeking a common armaments policy, NATO is again emphasising the key principle of collective defence, and Germany is realigning its security and defence policy. Chancellor Friedrich Merz wants to turn the Bundeswehr into the strongest conventional army in Europe, and the Federal Government has committed to increased efforts in the area of defence and to appropriate funding. By refocusing on national and collective defence, the Bundeswehr has also been implementing the 'Zeitenwende'.

As a consequence of this changed security situation, the Operational Plan for Germany (military abbreviation: OPLAN DEU) was developed in 2023. The plan combines the key military components of national and collective defence in Germany with the required civilian support services to form a feasible plan. Germany's military role today and in situations of crisis, tension and war is described and translated into required action.

The Bundeswehr Joint Force Command is now responsible for this plan, and it is continuously being adapted and developed to

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Lieutenant General André Johannes Bodemann has been Deputy Commander of the Bundeswehr Operational Command and Commander of Territorial Tasks since April 2025. He is the author of OPLAN DEU.



▲ Since the end of 2023, the Bundeswehr Joint Force Command and the regional territorial commands have been coordinating with all parties involved and providing regular information about the OPLAN DEU at the federal-state level. [Credit: German Armed Forces]

meet the current challenges. The classified document contains the essential statement that defence is a whole-of-government and whole-of-society task.

## Germany as a hub

Due to its geostrategic position in the heart of Europe, Germany would have a special role as a hub in the event of a conflict on NATO's eastern flank. According to NATO's defence plans, an initial deployment would involve up to 800,000 troops, including vehicles and materiel, being deployed from allied countries through Germany towards the eastern flank to provide deterrence and to defend there, if necessary. A considerable effort would then be needed to supply these troops. At the same time, it is to be expected that materiel and personnel will also be moving in the opposite direction. It should be openly said that this would also include refugees, prisoners of war, as well as casualties and fatalities. A variety of scenarios must therefore be developed and prepared so that we are equipped for a genuine emergency. To provide a reliable basis for action, these scenarios need to be trained and exercised – immediately, continuously and across all government departments. The OPLAN DEU serves as a deterrent and provides reassurance to all NATO member countries that Germany is a well-prepared ally.

Its geographical location does not only make Germany a central hub for military movements and logistic support. As the largest economy in Europe, Germany has two responsibilities: It must ensure the protection of its territory and population and also

contribute to deterrence as a reliable partner within NATO. Europe, and therefore also Germany, is still heavily dependent on raw materials and energy from third countries. In the event of a crisis, these dependencies on oil, gas or rare earths can be exploited in the sense of hybrid attacks. The expansion of own capacities, the diversification of supply sources, the protection of value chains, and a greater focus on resilience are therefore basic necessities in terms of security policy.

## OPLAN DEU in detail

First of all, the task of whole-of-government defence is spread out across several shoulders. This is clearly governed by the Basic Law: The Federation is exclusively responsible for legislation on defence, including the protection of the civilian population. Planning and carrying out the military tasks of overall defence is in the hands of the Federal Ministry of Defence. The Federal Ministry of the Interior has direct responsibility for the tasks of civil defence. The fourth pillar of the Civil Defence Concept explicitly provides for the support of the armed forces.

With OPLAN DEU, the Bundeswehr covers a core part of overall defence and establishes an effective interface with civil defence planning. Its main task is to ensure the military defence of Germany and, in an Alliance context, to enable the planned deployment and supply of allied forces via the aforementioned German logistics hub. The resulting requirements for the Bundeswehr and other state and civilian entities are specified in OPLAN DEU. Before a state of tension or defence is declared, the majority of tasks are performed within the competence of the federal states. In this respect, it should again be emphasised that OPLAN DEU, as well as NATO's defence plans are primarily intended as a deterrent and to prevent a state of tension or defence.

The requirements to be fulfilled by the civilian side in this context are governed by contracts during peacetime, unless action is being taken on the basis of emergency preparedness and control legislation. There are already standing contracts with Deutsche Bahn and other logistics companies as well as agreements with the relevant organisations in charge of the road network, including the federally owned motorway company (Autobahn GmbH des Bundes) and the Federal Logistics and Mobility Office. In addition, companies have been contracted to set up and operate convoy support centres as military rest and assembly areas. This means a civilian contractor provides


logistic support with the deployment of forces, both during peacetime operations and in a state of defence or an Alliance contingency. It is important to consider that airports, railway hubs, roads and waterways with bridges or tunnels must remain operational even in times of crisis. Logistics companies, energy suppliers or construction companies can therefore be integrated into security-related processes.

## Civil-military network and infrastructure

The decisive progress over the past three years has been that the plan is now backed up with operational arrangements. Its feasibility is continuously being improved and refined. A comprehensive network of civilian and military actors has been established with a view to operating Germany as a hub and protecting supply routes and infrastructures. The functioning of this network is being tested and improved in various civil-military exercises.

Seaports and airports have been inspected to determine exactly what is required in terms of parking areas, transport capabilities and handling capacities for loading and unloading ships and aircraft. These requirements serve as the basis for current and planned contracts with civilian operators. Of course, we also talked to our neighbouring countries about aspects of the OPLAN DEU. It is important that we harmonise our procedures at border crossing points, for instance. We also analysed which facilities crucially need protection in the event of a crisis, such as scientific outposts or certain data connections, and examined which strategic bottlenecks exist and which logistic challenges need to be overcome.

Since the end of 2023, the Bundeswehr Joint Force Command and the regional territorial commands have been coordinating with all parties involved and providing regular information about the OPLAN DEU at the federal-state level. Updates are continuously given on the threat analysis, and all stakeholders are being sensitised to see defence as a networked and whole-of-government task.

The changed threat situation makes it clear that, within the scope of overall defence, the OPLAN DEU is also a catalyst for civil defence. The aim now is to harmonise both areas and continuously train our cooperation with the civilian side – in the sense of a genuine and functioning overall defence, in the sense of resilience and, above all, in the sense of a preparation effort that is ultimately intended to deter and prevent war. 

- ▼ **The German Armed Forces secure and guard infrastructure that is important for defence, while operators and civil security authorities are responsible for the protection of critical infrastructure in general, such as power plants. [Credit: German Armed Forces/Tom Twardy]**



# The Sun Also Rises

## Political action in the 21st century must be based on reality

**Norbert Froitzheim**

"The Sun Also Rises" is the title of an Ernest Hemingway novel, which was published in 1926, and known in German-speaking world as "Fiesta". The novel deals with the trauma of a 'lost generation' in the aftermath of the First World War. It opens with a passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament: 'One generation passes away and another generation comes, but the earth remains forever (...) What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun' (Ecclesiastes, chapter 1, verses 4 to 10). What this means is that everything earthly is transient, cyclical and ultimately beyond human control. The First World War, 'The Great War', the cataclysmic event of the early 20th century, whose effects are still felt today, marked the beginning of an era of radical upheaval and the widespread destruction of old certainties.

Since the end of the Cold War, a generally accepted self-image developed in the United States and most European countries in the 1990s, linking their political goals and an explicit value base that saw the definitive end of history. The idea derived from this was simple and compelling: liberal systems were not only superior in domestic politics, but they also promoted peace in foreign policy because they were based on globally valid values, and history would inevitably move in that direction.

After the terrible attacks of September 2001, the proclaimed fight against global terrorism merged with the conviction that unstable or authoritarian states were breeding grounds for terrorist violence and extremist movements that had to be combated. The intervention in Afghanistan following 9/11 was therefore seen not only as self-defence by Western democracies led by the US on the basis of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1368, after the Taliban refused to take action against Al Qaeda, but also as an attempt to establish a new political system that would create long-term security. This took place under the name 'Operation Enduring Freedom'.

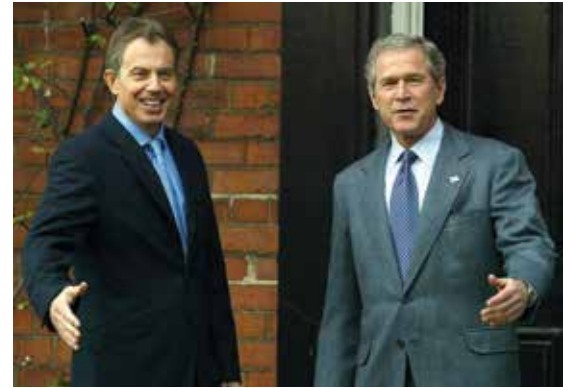
The second Iraq War of the so-called 'coalition of the willing' in 2003, which was part of the 'War on Terror', intensified this approach, partly because it was based on deliberately false assumptions and was seen as a necessary preventive war to prevent an allegedly imminent attack by Iraq on the US with weapons of mass destruction. The US and the UK interpreted Security Council Resolution 1441 as a mandate for military intervention.

During these years, a veritable culture of intervention emerged. In Afghanistan, at the latest, it became clear how difficult it is in reality to create functioning and, above all, permanently sustain-

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▶ Tony Blair and George Bush led the coalition of the willing against Iraq 2003. [Credit: picture alliance/empics Owen Humphreys]



able institutions when established social traditions and power constellations stand in the way. In Iraq, the fall of the regime led to a dynamic that unleashed new major conflicts instead of resolving existing ones. Confidence in the effectiveness of exported democracy began to wane as the political costs rose.

Added to this is considerable damage to the credibility of the West, especially the United States. Those who aggressively promote universal values such as the rule of law, human rights and the binding of state action to international law expose themselves to particularly strict standards. For many states and societies, especially in the Global South, this did not seem like a tragic exception, but rather evidence of double standards.

Over time, several key insights emerged. First of all, democracy is not a technical product that can be designed on the drawing board and exported like a tradable commodity. Rather, it is clear that it is the result of historical, social and cultural processes that can only be influenced to a limited extent, if at all, from outside.

In short, the starting point for any 'National Security Strategy' is the assumption that American policy must be strictly oriented towards clearly defined national interests and that strategy always means the realistic combination of goals and available resources. The central goal is to preserve the United States as a sovereign, independent republic. The protection of territory, population, borders, economy and way of life has absolute priority. At the same time, and this is a fundamental change, a basic reluctance towards military intervention is emphasised, which is only justified in cases of clear danger to central interests.

For Europe and Germany, however, this becomes highly relevant when it comes to the reorientation of foreign policy. In terms of foreign policy, the world is explicitly understood as a system of sovereign nation states. Multilateral institutions are to be accepted only insofar as they do not undermine national sovereignty, which explicitly refers to the United Nations, the European Union, the World Health Organisation, the World Trade Organisation and the International Criminal Court. Ultimately, the United States refuses to act as a permanent global guardian of order, which is to be understood as a clear departure from its previous political line and will lead to global ripples.

Europe and Germany find it particularly difficult to accept that the National Security Strategy represents a conscious and consistent departure from global moralism, which until recently manifested itself in Germany in a non-negotiable 'values-based (feminist) foreign policy,' and as a return to a strictly power-political, sober and nationally oriented security strategy that seeks to secure order not through former universal value promises, but through unambiguous strength, full sovereignty and clear priorities. The wake-up call is linked to the ultimate realisation that investment must be made in one's own defence capabilities, which must inevitably lead to greater autonomy and sovereignty.

Europe is no longer seen by the US as a liberal peace project that automatically generates stability through integration and institutions, but as a collection of sovereign states of different speeds and political orientations that must restore their own defence capabilities, economic substance and cultural coherence.

This shift is hitting Germany particularly hard. This is because the German political model of recent decades was based on several tacit assumptions. These included the delegation of political decisions to the European Union, permanent American security guarantees, steadily growing global markets, rule-based world trade, cheap energy from Russia, the pursuit of demographic stability through migration, and political conflict resolution through legalisation.

It now seems clear that Germany and Europe must become militarily independent in the face of real threats. In addition, the German export model, which is based on open markets without power-political safeguards and has thus become substantially dependent on countries such as China, is losing its strategic clout and its role as a guarantor of prosperity. The economy is once again being seen as an instrument of security policy rather than a neutral space for exchange.

This is putting the European model of exercising power under considerable pressure. The National Security Strategy makes it clear to all decision-makers that supranational regulation, bureaucratisation and ideologically charged policy areas are not a source of strength, but rather a source of paralysis, dependence and internal erosion. For Germany, this means questioning the European Union as a unique liberal peace project and reassessing the previous focus on redistribution and equality in favour of state and economic performance, industrial substance and overall social resilience towards a European Union that must consistently see itself as an 'enabler' that generates added value for all.

- ▼ **The German export model, which is based on open markets without power-political safeguards and has thus become substantially dependent on countries such as China, is losing its strategic clout and its role as a guarantor of prosperity [Credit: HHM]**

Against the backdrop of this fundamental change, the question that arises is whether the instruments of political culture that shaped the second half of the 20th century are suitable for meeting the challenges of the early 21st century. This question points to a core conflict in modern democracies in terms of their ability to take results-oriented action in the medium and long term. The political framework that emerged after 1945 was created under conditions that differ fundamentally from those of the present. Stability, social integration and the avoidance of new systemic ruptures took precedence over rapid decision-making or sustainable results in the sense of 'checks and balances'. Political processes were less focused on measurable output or efficiency in problem-solving than on the process itself. Politics was seen as a moderating process between interests rather than as the optimisation of operational measures. Consensus was considered a value in itself because it promised stability, legitimacy and social peace. This orientation meant that decisions were often made slowly, incrementally and with maximum security, flanked by media approval and opinion polls. This is still true today, but it is part of the current problem.

We live in a dynamic and, in some respects, hostile external world in which political capacity to act arises not from good intentions but from sober orientation.

The basis of any responsible decision is a sober analysis of the current situation. This also includes an honest assessment of one's own position, the available resources and existing dependencies. Only on this basis can a realistic target image be defined that describes not wishful thinking but an achievable order. The deviation between the actual and the target situation marks the need for political action. This results in short-, medium- and long-term measures that must be coordinated and whose effects remain verifiable.

Political processes rarely have an immediate effect. Institutions, social loyalties, economic structures and security policy arrangements develop over long periods of time. An effective understanding of politics must therefore view time as a separate category, take long-term systemic effects into account and regard time as a strategic factor. Long-term thinking means evaluating political decisions not only according to their immediate effect, but also according to their consequences over years or decades. Political structures must be designed in such a way that they enable stability, learning ability and adaptation over time, instead of constantly switching to crisis mode and orienting themselves towards polls and the next elections. This requires a cross-party consensus.

Global politics does not take place in a normative uniform space. States and societies are shaped by different historical, cultural and social factors. Political stability, legitimacy and order therefore do not emerge everywhere according to the same patterns. A realistic understanding of politics requires not rushing to judge other systems of order, but first seeking to understand them. Meeting on equal terms means not setting one's own standards as absolute and not reflexively interpreting foreign behaviour as deficient. Those who view international relations exclusively from their own perspective create misunderstandings, escalations and strategic misjudgements. Understanding does not replace interest-based politics, but it is a prerequisite for representing interests effectively and with minimal conflict.



# Africa

## On its way to the world stage?

Christoph Kohlmeyer

In terms of security policy, Africa is a key region on the world stage. However, Africa itself does not have a significant influence on it. No other continent is currently experiencing more armed conflicts. Nowhere else do armed combatants kill more people. Nowhere else do more people die from hunger and disease – in addition to the already lamentable victims of the consequences of climate change.

Africa also plays an important economic role on the world stage. 30% of all natural resources, from rare earth elements to diamonds and gold, and many precious metals, including uranium deposits, are located in Africa. Since the end of the slave trade, Africa has also been an important breadbasket for Europe and the Middle East supplying the world

with significant quantities of agricultural commodities such as grains, meat, sugar, cotton, oilseeds, coffee, cocoa, and timber.

As far as the flow of goods and capital is concerned, this structural pattern largely remains unchanged today. The African Development Bank's latest African Economic Outlook 2025 (AEO25) shows that Africa regularly still transfers almost three times the amount of capital to the rest of the world as it receives back into the continent in the form of remittances, investment income, and development aid.

Africa thus supports economic development and prosperity in the rest of the globe with an annual sum equivalent to approximately 20% of its gross domestic product.



▲ Currently the third-largest gold producing continent in the world, Africa has gold mining activities underway in over 21 countries. [Credit: NATO]

#### AUTHOR

**Prof. Dr. Christoph Kohlmeyer** is a retired Agricultural Economist/Rural Sociologist and Conflict Mediator. He has taught at the universities of Bonn, Kumasi and Dortmund. He also served as policy advisor to various African states. Presently, he has been elected as the Chair of the Management Board of the African Legal Support Facility (ALSF).

But these are only the statistically recorded figures. In reality, numerous bilateral commodity deals with partner countries, primarily in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, are also involved. In these deals, natural resources are supplied in exchange for arms deliveries and infrastructure construction, and/or used to pay mercenary groups. It is also important to mention externally organized and internationally unsanctioned military attacks, such as those currently taking place in eastern Congo, the Sahel, and Sudan.

Even though official economic statistics show that Africa accounts for only 2% of total world trade, the commodity flows outlined above are significant for global trade and the world economy. The measured and relatively small share of world trade can be explained by the fact that raw materials exported from Africa are often not valued at global market prices. Because they are usually traded in the form of barter, and the exchange proceeds as well as the value added generated by the raw materials are then recorded in the recipient countries.

## Imbalances and market distortions prevail

Another dimension is the prevailing imbalances and market distortions in global markets. For example, about two-thirds of the world's traded cocoa is produced in West Africa. The trade and key stages of cocoa processing are characterised worldwide by a concentration in essentially the hands of about six corporations. According to economic models, this results in these corporations achieving an oligopoly rent of approximately 40-60% of the final retail price in Western supermarkets. Specifically, this means that only the remaining 60-40% can be distributed along the entire value chain. And specifically, this means also that only 6% of the price one has to pay in the supermarket can be recorded as the relative share of the global cocoa trade in, for example, Ghana, the country where the cocoa was produced. This amount must then be distributed among the local landowners, local traders and processors, farmworkers, and their children who help to do the harvest.

Similar distribution formulas apply in many other value chains for raw materials and agricultural products. Another example is the African cotton sector, which was similarly devastated. In this case, however, it was American export subsidies that drove world market prices below the level of production costs in Africa and Brazil.

The low cotton prices, to the detriment of African producers, then fuelled textile production, particularly in Türkiye and China, which in turn flooded world markets with cheap textiles.

Africa is thus already a significant player on the world stage. However, the continent has yet to fully capitalise on this.

The legacy of the exploitative conditions of the colonial era continues to disadvantage Africa economically, perpetuating inequality and underdevelopment. This history of exploitation has left lasting marks on Africa's socio-economic and political structures and laid the foundation for many of the challenges the continent faces today.

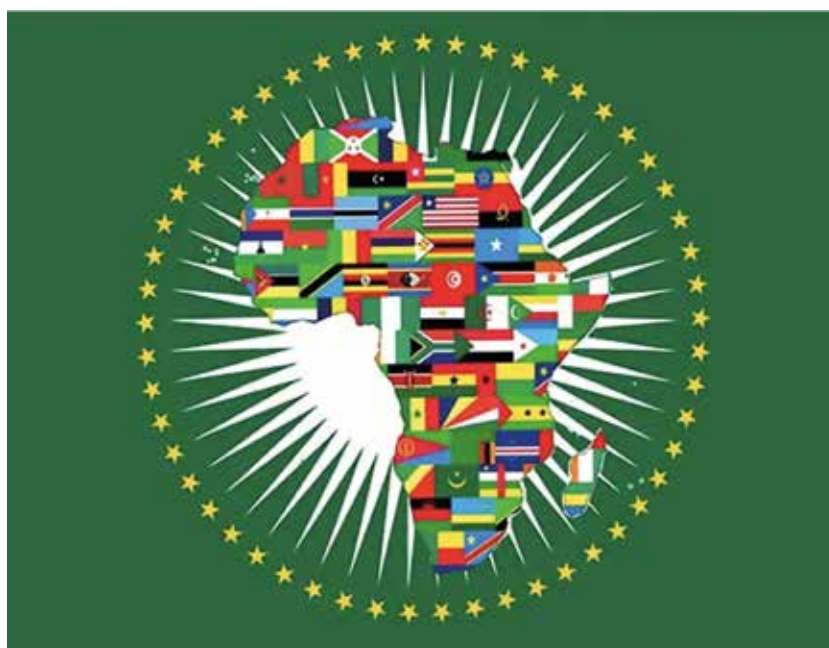
## Africa makes its voice heard

Nevertheless, Africa is increasingly becoming a member of the global and international community. It can make its voice heard, for example, in the United Nations, in the bodies of the Bretton Woods organisations (IMF and World Bank), in the WTO, in the WHO, in UN

organisations such as the FAO and the UNCCD, at the International Criminal Court, and to some extent also within the G20.

Africa played a significant role in shaping the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the World Trade Organization (WTO) also serves as an example of how an African country can formally win a panel against the US (for example, regarding cotton), but the sanctions subsequently permitted (punitive tariffs on US imports) are ineffective. This is because, as a supplier of raw materials, African countries rely on imports of manufactured goods and machinery from industrialised nations. By imposing these tariffs, they penalise themselves and merely fuel domestic inflation.

Alternative avenues for African states to gain a stronger voice on the global stage include membership in other global alliances such as BRICS++. However, this can also lead to political



- ▲ **In August 2025, South African political leader Julius Malema reignited a bold idea: the unification of Africa under a single president, currency, military, and parliament. [Graphic: ORF]**

and strategic conflicts, as some members of these groups, and especially Russia and the United Arab Emirates, pursue aggressive neo-colonial strategies. Such alliances may offer protection against injustices perpetrated by the EU and the US, but not against war and exploitation.

Against this backdrop, political approaches are once again being discussed in Africa, which build upon the political initiatives of Pan-Africanism from the 1960s, based on the principles of solidarity, cultural identity, and economic cooperation. The African Union is a prime example. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and, since 2002, the African Union (AU), along with its various bodies, represent the implementation of the fundamental Pan-African ideas of solidarity and cooperation. In addition to the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, which makes political decisions, the Executive Council, and the Commission, which implements these decisions, the AU Peace and Security Council and the African Court of Human Rights are important bodies through which African states assume responsibility for peace, security, and the protection of human rights on their continent.

## The vision of Africa 2063

The vision of a united Africa was also defined in the Africa 2063 strategy, which refers to the basic idea of Pan-Africanism: “We rededicate ourselves to the enduring Pan African vision of ‘an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena.’” And the vision of Africa “as a strong, united, resilient, and influential global player and partner” is explicitly formulated.

Many ideas do indeed exist on how to elevate Africa to the global stage as an equal partner, along with important political approaches to achieve this.

AU to uphold human rights standards and fundamental sustainability standards as part of a sovereign pan-African legal framework. In addition to defining a common customs and tax policy, the foundations for a common monetary policy must also be established, one that can guarantee greater independence from fluctuations in global financial markets. Given the extreme distortions in international credit ratings, the project of a pan-African rating agency should also be pursued further. In times of rapidly growing influence from so-called “artificial intelligence”, the reliable legal protection of patent rights and intellectual property rights is becoming an increasing challenge for economic actors and for state sovereignty. Action is needed here as well. However, the prerequisite for this additional responsibility of the AU is that the establishment of the



### ▲ African Union Summit 2025 [Credit: AU]

However, they all suffer from a fundamental problem: weak sovereignty at the continental and regional levels, the lack of legislative power at these levels, no parliamentary oversight, and no clear definition of who assumes executive roles and who is accountable for them.

This can only be achieved if the necessary sovereignty is attained and an economic policy is developed that allows the added value from the continent’s wealth of resources to benefit the people of Africa. At the heart of this is the further development of the Pan-African Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) under the political leadership of the African Union.

The economic policy recommendations of the AEO25 outline a number of key policy approaches that can enable Africa to lay the foundations for participating on an equal footing on the world stage within the coming decade. These include, above all, recommendations aimed at aligning economic policy with good governance. Key areas requiring reform include the harmonisation and increased efficiency of tax systems, the harmonisation of property rights, a joint approach to combating corruption, legal definitions of accountability and transparency standards at the national level, and their standardisation at the regional (RECs) and continental (AfCFTA) levels.

Above all, the AU must be endowed with legislative rights and responsibilities. This includes, for example, the introduction of pan-African antitrust law, as well as legislation enacted by the

Pan-African Parliament is expedited to ensure the necessary democratic legitimacy and control.

## The African Legal Support Facility

Finally, the work of the African Legal Support Facility (ALSF) should be highlighted. Founded in 2008 by the African members of the AfDB, the ALSF has developed into a central advisory organisation for all African states over the past decade. It advises member states on contract negotiations with international economic partners, focusing primarily on natural resources, energy, public infrastructure, and public finance. Simultaneously, it advises African states on relevant legislative reforms in these areas and organises the necessary training for responsible personnel in these countries. The ALSF now possesses a wealth of experience and sufficient resources to sustainably advise in shaping regional and pan-African legislation in the core areas of human rights, resource extraction, public debt and sovereign capital, energy policy, and fair public-private partnerships. As a pan-African organisation, with 15 years of experience it has since offered legal and technical advice, as well as capacity-building services to almost all countries on the continent.

Africa is preparing. And humanity on the world stage can look forward to experiencing solidarity, humanity, and fair exchange from a sovereign Africa.





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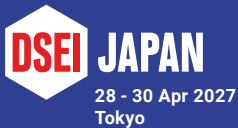


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