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Photo: Ukrinform

The eastern flank of NATO is widely regarded as the Achilles' heel of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Since the outset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the problem of reinforcing this frontier has acquired particular salience. The prospect of a potential attack and/or hybrid aggression has been securitized by the Baltic states and Poland – actors for whom, given their geographical location, the level of risk is critical. At the same time, the Ukrainian information space has recently been saturated with warnings and indications of a possible opening of a northern, Belarusian front – a scenario highlighted not only by experts, but also by government officials. The evolution of events over the past several months merely confirms that there is a lacuna within the European security space, the closure of which should not be seen as a long-term challenge, but rather as an urgent imperative. Beyond the strictly military-security dimension, Europe also faces ideational threats. Such episodes as Hungary's and Slovakia's blocking of an EU loan package for Ukraine¹, the lack of unity concerning Ukraine's accession to the EU², and the growing popularity of "alternative" political forces in a number of European states³ all testify to a normative crisis within the European community

¹ TSN. (2026, March 28). Угорщина заблокувала допомогу Україні: лідери ЄС не переконали Орбана скасувати вето. <https://tsn.ua/politika/uhorshchyna-zablokuvala-dopomohu-ukrayini-lidery-yes-ne-perekonaly-orbana-skasuvaty-veto-3044738.html>

² Європейська правда. (2026, May 25). Що замість "асоційованого членства"? Пояснюємо, як має змінитися пропозиція ЄС для України. <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2026/05/25/7238258/>

³ ZN.ua. (2026, May 11). Чи зупиниться хвиля зростання правопопулістських сил у Європі? – The Economist. <https://zn.ua/ukr/europe/chi-zupinitsja-khvilja-zrostannja-pravopopulistskikh-sil-u-jevropi-the-economist.html>

which, under conditions of strategic uncertainty, generates additional challenges and problems. Compounding this is the increasingly unpredictable foreign policy of the United States, whose doctrinal principles and practical steps undermine the cohesion of the transatlantic community in the broad sense. This inevitably raises the question of whether Europe, in the event of a global systemic crisis, will be able to act as a unified front and, crucially, what role it will ultimately be assigned.

In recent months – specifically in April and May 2026 – both international and Ukrainian media have more frequently raised the prospect of Russian aggression against the Baltic states⁴ and/or the opening of a “Belarusian” front against Ukraine⁵. While the outbreak of war or major military operations is invariably accompanied by uncertainty in the form of potentially excessive risks and unpredictable consequences, and while the Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka publicly denies any plans to attack Ukraine or the Baltics, it is necessary to take into account the high degree of the Republic of Belarus’s dependence on the Russian Federation. Consequently, *despite Minsk’s reluctance to embark on such a course of action and its desire to postpone related decisions as long as possible, Belarus cannot, in the full sense of the term, be regarded as an autonomous subject of international relations*. Against this background, both the EU and NATO face a persistent hybrid threat along their eastern flank, a threat with the potential to escalate into open armed confrontation. This is borne out in practice, particularly in the cases of Lithuania⁶, Latvia⁷, and Estonia⁸. First and foremost, the intelligence services of all three states consistently identify Russia – and, typically, Belarus as a pro-Russian proxy actor – as the primary threat to their national security.

The predominant modality of these challenges is hybrid in nature: sabotage and subversion via the recruitment of local (primarily Russian-speaking) citizens, disinformation and propaganda, instrumentalization of migration routes (with the associated risk of infiltration by Russian and Belarusian intelligence operatives), and cyberattacks. Between 2025 and 2026, the states in question began to actively implement projects under the “**Baltic Defence Line**” initiative – a roadmap for the construction of fortifications and other protective infrastructure, as well as for the introduction of preventive measures intended to avert or at least contain a potential attack by Russia and/or Belarus. As an integral component of NATO’s broader regional defence posture, this initiative is complemented by Poland’s “**Eastern Shield**” programme⁹ and by Finland’s defensive infrastructure¹⁰ along its eastern border. A defining feature of this strategy is its focus on buying time: its core logic is to halt an offensive and preserve state integrity until assistance from other Allies arrives¹¹. Accordingly, the effectiveness of the Baltic Defence Line – and thus the security of NATO’s entire eastern flank – is directly contingent on the willingness of other Allies not only to take rapid decisions on deploying their combat contingents, but also to ensure coordinated Alliance-wide action. It is telling, however, that other European actors, despite appeals from the Baltic states and Poland in the summer of 2025¹² for EU assistance in

⁴ Українська правда. (2026, April 20). Лукашенко розповів, як буде разом з РФ захищатись від вигаданої агресії проти Білорусі. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2026/04/20/8030885/>

⁵ Focus. (2026, April 3). Наступ з Білорусі? Лукашенко спростував заяви про наступ РФ.

<https://focus.ua/uk/voennye-novosti/755190-nastup-z-bilorusi-lukashenko-sprostuvav-zayavi-pro-nastup-rf-video>

⁶ Ministry of National Defence of Lithuania. (2026, March 6). *The government passed draft National Security Strategy*. <https://kam.lt/en/the-government-passed-draft-national-security-strategy/>

⁷ State Security Service of Latvia (VDD). (2026). *Annual report 2025*. <https://vdd.gov.lv/en/useful/annual-report-2025>

⁸ Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service. (2026). *International Security and Estonia 2026*.

<https://www.valisluureamet.ee/doc/raport/2026-en.pdf>

⁹ Мілітарний. (2024, November 7). Польща почала зводити фортифікації «Східний щит» на кордоні з Калінінградською областю.

<https://military.com/uk/news/polshha-pochala-zvodity-fortyfikatsiyi-shidnyj-shhyt-na-kordoni-z-kaliningradsko-yu-oblastyu/>

¹⁰ Мілітарний. (2025, February 12). Мажіно чи Маннергейм? Аналіз Балтійської лінії оборони.

<https://military.com/uk/articles/mazhyno-chy-mannergejm-analiz-baltiyskoyi-liniyi-oborony/>

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Європейська правда. (2025, June 20). Країни Балтії запропонували створити «Балтійську лінію» оборони від РФ. <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2025/06/20/7214232/>

strengthening Europe's defence capabilities under this project, have thus far not committed investment. Moreover, *among states that are members of both the EU and NATO, there is an ongoing debate over which institutional framework should lead Europe's rearmament effort: whether to continue large-scale procurement of American weaponry under NATO auspices, or to prioritize the development of indigenous arsenals within the EU's broader pursuit of strategic autonomy*¹³.

The adoption of timely and constructive decisions on bolstering NATO's eastern flank – particularly in the Baltic region – has not been facilitated by the series of hybrid operations conducted by Russia in 2025–2026. Such provocations intensified in the last several months. In April–May 2026, incursions into Baltic airspace by unmanned aerial vehicles and unidentified flying objects originating from Russian and Belarusian territory became more frequent. For example, between 9 and 10 April, smuggling balloons¹⁴ were launched from Belarus into Lithuania, resulting in the suspension of operations at Vilnius airport for more than seven hours. A similar incident occurred on the night of 13 May¹⁵. On 19 May, Lithuania declared an air-raid alert and scrambled NATO fighter jets after a UAV entering the Baltic states' airspace from Belarus was detected; the drone was shot down later that day, but already over Estonian territory¹⁶. In Latvia¹⁷, during the night of 7–8 May, two drones crashed, one of which damaged empty fuel storage tanks in the city of Rēzekne. A joint Ukrainian-Latvian investigation established that these were Ukrainian UAVs whose flight path had been deliberately diverted by Russian electronic warfare systems¹⁸. On 17 May, air-raid sirens sounded in five Latvian regions due to the presence of UAVs of unknown origin in the country's airspace¹⁹.

In parallel, Ukrainian media have increasingly referenced *the elevated risk of a potential offensive launched against Ukraine from Belarusian territory*^{20 21}. According to military experts, a sudden large-scale attack is currently unlikely, given the size and disposition of Russian garrisons stationed in Belarus and the manpower and readiness levels of the Belarusian armed forces themselves, while any substantial transfer of additional Russian forces into Belarus would be difficult to conceal^{22 23}. Nevertheless, in all scenarios Europe's response to these challenges remains relatively weak, and consensus is absent on most key issues. In terms of defence and security measures, the European region is characterised by a clear geographical stratification: those states that share a border with Russia and/or Belarus, or that are adjacent to countries which do so (such as the Baltic and Nordic states), tend to adopt more robust and

¹³ LB.ua. (2026, April 16). ЄС і НАТО сперечаються через озброєння Європи: хто контролюватиме трильйонні витрати. https://lb.ua/news/2026/04/16/732970_ies_nato_sperechayutsya_cherez.html

¹⁴ Ukrinform. (2026, May 16). Литва висловила протест Білорусі через новий інцидент із повітряними кулями та мігрантами. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-world/4111273-litva-vislovila-protest-bilorusi-cerez-novij-incident-iz-povitranimi-kulami-ta-migrantiv.html>

¹⁵ LB.ua. (2026, May 15). Литва викликала представника Білорусі через повітряні кулі й мігрантів. https://lb.ua/world/2026/05/15/738370_litva_viklikala_predstavnika.html

¹⁶ РБК-Україна. (2026, May 15). У Литві оголосили повітряну тривогу та підняли винищувачі через запуск куль із Білорусі. <https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/litvi-ogolosili-povitryanu-trivogu-ta-pidnyali-vynishchuvachi-cherez-zapusk-kul-iz-bilorusi>

¹⁷ 24 Канал. (2026, May 14). Дрони над Латвією: чиї БПЛА залетіли на територію країни – деталі. https://24tv.ua/droni-nad-latviyeyu-chiyi-bpla-zaletili-teritoriyu-krayini-detali_n3064630

¹⁸ Deutsche Welle. (2026, May 15). Сибіра: українські дрони потрапили в Латвію через російські системи РЕБ. <https://www.dw.com/uk/sibiga-ukrainski-droni-potrapili-v-latviu-cerez-rosijski-sistemi-reb/a-77113702>

¹⁹ Факти ICTV. (2026, May 17). У Латвії оголошували тривогу та піднімали винищувачі НАТО через проліт дрона. <https://fakty.com.ua/ua/svit/20260517-u-latviji-ogoloshuvaly-tryvogu-ta-pidnimaly-vynyshchuvachi-nato-cherez-prolit-drona/>

²⁰ Час Дій. (2026, May 10). «Щось насувається»: Лукашенко переводить армію Білорусі у режим воєнного стану. <https://chasdiy.org/society/schos-nasuvayetsya-lukashenko-perevodyt-armiyu-bilorusi-u-rezhym-voennogo-stanu-76047>

²¹ UNN. (2026, May 12). РФ готує нові операції з території Білорусі: Силам оборони доручено підготувати план реагування – Зеленський. <https://unn.ua/news/uf-hotuie-novi-operatsii-z-terytorii-bilorusi-sylam-oborony-dorucheno-pidhotuvaty-plan-reahuvannia-zeleneskyi>

²² Ukrinform. (2026, May 18). Наступ з Білорусі: реальна загроза чи гібридна ілюзія. <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/4115790-nastup-z-bilorusi-realna-zagroza-ci-gibridna-iluziya.html>

²³ УНІАН. (2026, May 19). Загроза з Білорусі: військовий експерт оцінив шанси нападу та наступ на Україну. <https://www.unian.ua/war/zagroza-z-bilorusi-viyskoviy-ekspert-ociniv-shansi-napadu-ta-nastup-na-ukrajinu-13385589.html>

proactive measures. By contrast, the states of so-called “Old Europe” – including France²⁴, Germany²⁵, Italy²⁶, and the Benelux group²⁷ – which do not face an immediate risk of invasion, are less inclined to take rapid operational decisions, preferring long-term measures and often encountering bureaucratic and political obstacles. As a result, **from a defence and security perspective, in the event of a potential attack by Russia and/or Belarus on an EU and/or NATO member state, Europe would almost certainly find itself in a crisis situation, lacking the capacity to act as a unified bloc and to swiftly mobilise the resources required for effective deterrence and defence.**

In the scenario of a potential war waged by Russia and/or Belarus against Europe, *the question of the role and position of the United States becomes particularly salient*. Under the current doctrinal framework – specifically, the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy of the United States – Europe’s status has undergone fundamental change compared to the European vector pursued under the administration of Joseph Biden. Above all, Washington’s foreign-policy priorities have been reoriented: the primary focus is now on the Western Hemisphere as the core sphere of direct influence, while America’s treaty obligations in Europe as a security guarantor have been recalibrated. Analysts at the Munich Security Conference explicitly speak of “the end of the era of the American security umbrella” in Europe: the second Trump administration clearly signals that primary responsibility for European security must rest with the European NATO members themselves²⁸. In February 2025, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth stated that ensuring Europe’s security should become a priority for the Europeans, whereas the United States would play more the role of arbiter than of guarantor, reducing the degree of automatic involvement in a crisis²⁹. At the same time, according to Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s remarks at the 2026 Munich Security Conference³⁰, a complete American withdrawal from the region is not envisaged. The new strategic documents nevertheless criticise the EU as an ally failing to meet its commitments. Instead, they stipulate that European states must assume “primary responsibility” for their own defence, thereby de facto calling into question the traditional model of comprehensive U.S. protection of Europe.

Analytical reports associated with the Munich Security Conference note that, despite a 41-percent increase in European defence spending, these efforts are still deemed insufficient, while *the United States increasingly encourages not the creation of a unified defence system within the EU, but the preservation of Europe’s dependence on American weapon systems* (such as the F-35 and Patriot). This strengthens Washington’s position as a key supplier, but not as an unconditional “shield” for NATO. However, the case of the war with Iran demonstrates that, in a crisis, Washington can re-prioritise its deliveries, which renders a high level of dependence on U.S. arms imports a sub-optimal option for Europe. In this context, and against the backdrop of

²⁴ TSN. (2026, April 3). Ще одна країна Європи екстрено готується до війни: запаси ракет збільшать у п’ятеро. <https://tsn.ua/svit/shche-odna-krayina-yevropy-ekstreno-hotuyetsia-do-viyny-zapasy-raket-zbilshat-vpiatero-3055541.html>

²⁵ Deutsche Welle. (2026, April 4). Як нова військова стратегія Німеччини змінює Бундесвер. <https://www.dw.com/uk/ak-nova-vijskova-strategia-nimeccini-zminue-bundesver/a-76902736>

²⁶ Defense Express. (2024, February 23). Італія оголосила плани на переозброєння: у переліку HIMARS, Leopard 2A8 та нова БМП замість Dardo. https://defence-ua.com/weapon_and_tech/italija_ogolosila_plani_na_pereozbrojennja_u_pereliku_himars_leopard_2a8_ta_nova_bmp_zamist_dardo-13206.html

²⁷ Європейська правда. (2026, March 17). Група країн НАТО розробляє новий механізм спільних закупівель озброєнь. <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2026/03/17/7233390/>

²⁸ УНІАН. (2026, February 9). РФ може готувати нову війну проти країн Балтії або сусідів: що відомо. <https://www.unian.ua/world/rf-mozhe-gotuvati-novu-viynu-proti-krain-baltii-abo-susidiv-shcho-vidomo-13281483.html>

²⁹ Час.Новини. (2026, February 9). РФ, імовірно, готує війну проти країн Балтії або одного із сусідів – звіт Мюнхенської конференції. <https://chas.news/news/rf-imovirno-gotue-viynu-proti-krain-baltii-abo-odnogo-iz-susidiv-zvit-myunhenskoi-konferentsii>

³⁰ U.S. Department of State. (2026, February). Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference. <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/02/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-at-the-munich-security-conference>

the ongoing European debate over the preferred model of modernisation and rearmament (either primarily through NATO and U.S. procurement, or autonomously within the EU), **Ukraine emerges as a potential partner capable of contributing to Europe's defence and security autonomy**. At the end of April 2026, Kyiv announced that it had agreed on a mechanism for exporting domestically produced arms and was preparing to launch special agreements with partners³¹. These include **the Drone Deals initiative** – *bespoke intergovernmental agreements covering the production and supply of drones, missiles, ammunition, and military equipment*. Nevertheless, as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has noted in the context of exports of Ukrainian *Flamingo missiles*, the entry of Ukraine's defence industry into global markets is disadvantageous not only for Russia, implicitly pointing to the high degree of competition with Western defence manufacturers³².

Moreover, while remaining the principal and, in effect, the only security guarantor for the Euro-Atlantic community, the United States is taking decisions – drawing on its normative and material authority – that increasingly destabilise the region and deepen intra-Western divisions. For instance, the Trump administration has excluded the prospect of Ukrainian membership in NATO on the grounds that Russia objects to the Alliance's previous pledge. This effectively signals that Washington does not rule out sacrificing key elements of European security in order to advance its own national interests. A further, and highly topical, example is the de facto legitimisation of the Lukashenka regime, a policy Washington began to pursue in early 2025³³. A series of meetings between Belarusian officials and a U.S. special envoy, along with partial sanctions relief (in the potash, financial, and aviation sectors) in exchange for the release of political prisoners, is intended both to reduce Belarus's dependence on Russia and to re-establish "constructive" relations with Europe. From a narrow defence-security standpoint, such an outcome could be favourable for Europe, since the removal or mitigation of the threat of an offensive from Belarusian territory is clearly desirable for the Euro-Atlantic community as a whole. However, it once again demonstrates that the Trump administration is prepared to disregard the position of its European partners, thereby undermining the EU's already fragile status as a subject of international relations. Despite the current lack of consensus³⁴ among European states on re-engaging with Minsk, the very fact of a recent telephone conversation between Emmanuel Macron and Alyaksandr Lukashenka³⁵ underscores the effectiveness of the American campaign to restore the international legitimacy of Belarus's autocratic regime.

Taken together, *an analysis of the current defence, security, and strategic situation in Europe reveals a lack of unity on a range of vital issues, a pronounced geographical stratification among regional actors, and a persistent strategic ambiguity regarding U.S. security guarantees and the capacity of NATO and the broader West to ensure regional stability in the event of a potential offensive by Russia and/or Belarus*. **Lacking sufficient aggregate power, Europe is presently unable to act as an autonomous regional security guarantor – a role that the United States is, in fact, urging it to assume. At the same time, Washington is erecting additional obstacles to the attainment of a meaningful level of European strategic autonomy and is further weakening the EU's already precarious position.** In light of this, European states are likely to confront a series of systemic problems once the need to defend themselves and resist an adversary becomes immediate. This challenge is most acute for the

³¹ АрміяInform. (2026, April 28). Експорт зброї буде реальним: Україна запускає нову модель співпраці з партнерами. <https://armyinform.com.ua/2026/04/28/eksport-zbroyi-bude-realnym-ukrayina-zapuskaye-novu-model-spivpraczi-z-partnerami/>

³² Радіо Свобода. (2026, May 5). «Дзюдо-стиль» Зеленського: що Україна може отримати від Drone Deals. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/zelenskyv-dron-dil-drony-bezpilotnyky-zbroya-eksport-ssha-rakety/33750645.html>

³³ Європейська правда. (2025, February 19). Як адміністрація Трампа може допомогти режиму Лукашенка і навіщо. <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2025/02/19/7205398/>

³⁴ 24 Канал. (2026, April 6). Чому Трамп знімає санкції з режиму Лукашенка, але Європа не поспішає. https://24tv.ua/geopolitics/sanktsiyi-ssha-yes-proti-bilorusi-chomu-tramp-znimaye-navishho_n3044109

³⁵ Korrespondent.net. (2026, May 23). Макрон зателефонував Лукашенку вперше з 2022 року. <https://ua.korrespondent.net/world/4881091-makron-zatelefonuvav-lukashenku-vpershe-z-2022-roku>

states of NATO's eastern flank – above all Poland and the Baltic republics – as well as for Ukraine. Accordingly, against the backdrop of repeated warnings about the heightened risk of a Russian and/or Belarusian attack on Europe, EU and NATO member states must demonstrate political will and a high degree of allied cohesion in order to take urgent decisions and implement prompt and substantive measures.

Foreign and Defense Policy of Ukraine

■ **THEME ANALYSIS:** *Will the United States and China succeed in rebuilding a bipolar US–China system of international relations on Chinese terms? The role of Russia in shaping a US–China security system. The contours of tripolarity and its uncertain future*



Photo: CFR

The two-day state visit of the US president to Beijing, held from 13 to 15 May 2026³⁶, was a genuine sensation in light of several factors: the systemic nature of the confrontation between these two actors, their belonging to mutually exclusive security architectures (the Indo-Pacific under the US security umbrella versus the Asia-Pacific under China’s aegis), as well as the trade wars that have become a defining trend in their bilateral relations since Donald Trump’s return to the presidency in early 2025. This event is also emblematic because of the reorientations that have taken place in US foreign-policy doctrines and strategies, such as the renewed focus on the Western Hemisphere as a “natural” sphere of influence, the revision of US engagement in sustaining the security architecture of the transatlantic community, and **the change in the “status” assigned to the PRC** in previous editions of the National Security Strategy (NSS)³⁷ and the National Defense Strategy (NDS)³⁸ of the United States. In the 2025

³⁶ Радіо Свобода. (2026, May 24). Візит Трампа до Китаю: чого досягли США і Сі Цзіньпін – підсумки та аналіз. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/vizyt-tramp-kytay-si-tzinpin-pidsumky-analiz/33757597.html>

³⁷ The White House. (2025). *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

³⁸ U.S. Department of War. (2026). *2026 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*. <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>

NSS and the 2026 NDS, China is framed in a markedly less critical tone: Beijing is no longer depicted as the “top-tier threat,” but rather as a “rival” or “competitor.” Moreover, *although the course of containing the PRC (including in the Indo-Pacific) remains relevant for the Trump administration, the emphasis in US–China relations has shifted to the protection of US interests in high technologies and supply chains*³⁹. Against this backdrop, the personal meeting of the leaders of the two most powerful states – taking into account the above factors – has put back on the agenda a theme long associated with the US–China dyad, namely the **RECONFIGURATION OF WORLD ORDER THROUGH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A BIPOLAR SYSTEM**. In the theory of international relations, particularly in the works of Kenneth Waltz, it is precisely the bipolar model that is considered the most stable. This is explained by the fact that the entire “burden” of maintaining systemic stability and defining the “rules of the game” falls on only two players, which in turn automatically increases the scope of their responsibility and the consequences of systemic crises⁴⁰. As the case of the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)⁴¹ demonstrated, this type of power equilibrium shows the highest degree of “stress resistance” and is characterised by a set of systemic safeguards against a Great War. However, in this context it should be emphasised that any transformation of global order is possible either as a result of the decline or weakening of the hegemon, or through the emergence among the multitude of actors of two strong players whose capabilities, even if not identical, do not significantly outweigh one another. Regardless of which interpretation is taken as primary – the relative decline of the US or the rise of the PRC – a key question remains: *how will the redistribution of roles within the existing global order occur, through escalation or through a diplomatic delineation of spheres of influence?*

As noted above, the United States and the PRC have been engaged in a trade war since 2025; however, their bilateral economic relations are characterised by a certain degree of **interdependence**⁴². The trade restrictions imposed by the Trump administration on Beijing have had a negative impact on bilateral export–import flows: within a year from the onset of tariff escalation, the value of Chinese exports fell by roughly 30%, while imports declined by more than 25%⁴³. Yet despite an overall contraction of bilateral trade by 18.9% compared to 2024, the United States remained China’s largest trading partner at the end of 2025⁴⁴. The asymmetry in trade specialisation and export–import commodity structures that dominate US–China trade partly explains the relatively smooth reorientation towards other markets⁴⁵. At the same time, several factors underpin the above-mentioned economic interdependence: rare earths and foodstuffs on the one hand, and advanced technologies and components on the other⁴⁶. It was precisely these goods that became the focus of the 2025 negotiating round, which culminated in an agreement in October–November 2025 on a partial easing of trade restrictions between the US and the PRC⁴⁷. Beijing agreed to suspend broad export-control measures on rare earths and

³⁹ Разумков центр. (2025). *Зовнішня політика України та безпека в Європі у 2024–2025 роках* (Національна безпека і оборона, №201–202). https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2026/04/20/NSD201-202_2025_ukr.pdf

⁴⁰ Stability of a bipolar world. (n.d.). In *Kenneth Waltz – Selected readings* [PDF]. University of Washington. https://faculty.washington.edu/caporaso/courses/203/readings/waltz_Stability_of_a_Bipol.pdf

⁴¹ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. (n.d.). *Cuban Missile Crisis*. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/cuban-missile-crisis>

⁴² Едельман, Д. С. (2023). Геополітичне суперництво США та Китаю в Азійсько-Тихоокеанському регіоні. *Економіка та суспільство*, 51. <https://economyandsociety.in.ua/index.php/journal/article/view/6542>

⁴³ BBC News Україна. (2024, October 10). Як Китай став суперником США і чи можлива нова «холодна війна». <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cy41npy12y9o>

⁴⁴ А Бізнес. (2024, January 15). США залишаються найбільшим торговим партнером Китаю попри падіння торгівлі. <https://abiznes.com.ua/ssha-zalyshaiutsia-naybilshym-torhovym-partnerom-kytaiu-popry-padinnia-torhivli-8990/>

⁴⁵ iPress.ua. (2024, January 25). Експорт США та Китаю досяг рекордних показників – FT. https://ipress.ua/news/eksport_sshi_ta_kytayu_dosyag_rekordnyh_pokaznykiv_ft_383922.html

⁴⁶ Главком. (2025, December 29). Конгресмени у США прогнозують різке погіршення відносин із Китаєм у 2026 році. <https://glavcom.ua/world/world-politics/konhresmeni-u-ssha-prohnozujuut-riшке-pohirshennja-vidnosin-iz-kitajem-u-2026-rotsi-1095351.html>

⁴⁷ The White House. (2025, November). *Fact sheet: President Donald J. Trump strikes deal on economic and trade relations with China*.

critical minerals, to roll back a number of retaliatory tariffs, and to commit to purchasing large quantities of American soybeans and other agricultural products. In turn, the United States agreed to reduce by 10 percentage points the aggregate tariffs previously introduced “to curb fentanyl flows,” to extend certain tariff exemptions until the end of 2026 (including for high-tech goods), and to temporarily suspend the tightening of export controls on end-users and sanctions related to shipbuilding. The trade “truce” thus established revealed, first, the mutual economic dependence of the two states, and second, the advantage of dialogue over a logic of confrontation.

However, the outcome of the Xi–Trump meeting in Beijing (13–15 May 2026) highlights yet another trend in US–China dialogue at this stage: *an awareness on both sides that this interdependence can be instrumentalised as a tool of pressure – even a “weapon” – against each other*⁴⁸. This is evidenced by the fact that, despite loud statements from the White House in October–November 2025 about an upcoming “grand deal,” **no new significant arrangements on lifting tariff barriers were concluded**⁴⁹. Moreover, the talks exposed fundamental differences in US and Chinese approaches to and visions of priorities in trade normalisation: while Donald Trump focused on achieving rapid, tangible outcomes, Xi Jinping stressed the need for long-term stabilisation of relations⁵⁰. Consequently, it may be inferred that this high-profile summit, from the standpoint of economics and trade, was largely symbolic and once again underlined that, although neither side is interested in open confrontation, the logic governing the US–China dialogue remains one of systemic rivalry, in which reaching consensus is not only costly but, in many cases, not even deemed expedient.

In ideological and geostrategic terms, the United States and the PRC are likewise locked in systemic confrontation, as their visions of world order and their respective places and roles within it differ fundamentally. China’s current model of global governance and development is, for now, predominantly declarative and programmatic in nature, with a pronounced claim to leadership. This is evidenced by the principles and ideas underpinning the activities of the BRICS+ grouping. Devoid of concrete action plans, these provisions call for the reconfiguration of the existing international order into a more “just” one and highlight the regional distinctiveness of Global South states. In practice, cooperation among participants is largely confined to the implementation of inter-regional projects and initiatives that fall into the domain of so-called “low politics” – that is, international issues and challenges that affect the majority of states and for which consensus-building is not an overly costly option for their governments⁵¹. By contrast, the most ambitious objectives – such as dedollarisation and the dismantling of US dominance in the economic and financial realm – remain unrealised, and their scale (for example, the case of the New Development Bank) is not commensurate with the parameters of the current normative architecture of world order⁵².

In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative – an inter-regional framework that has evolved into Beijing’s “grand strategy” – China’s vision of global governance is not uniformly perceived by regional actors (in Southeast, South and East Asia) as an acceptable project⁵³. In 2025, the nature of Belt and Road projects underwent revision, driven in no small part by the need to restore prestige undermined by “debt diplomacy.”⁵⁴ This demonstrates that China’s quest

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/11/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-strikes-deal-on-economic-and-trade-relations-with-china/>

⁴⁸ РБК-Україна. (2025, August 30). Торгова війна на паузі: чи дійшли згоди Трамп і Сі.

<https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/torgova-viyvna-pauzi-chi-diyshli-zgodi-tramp-1761849995.html>

⁴⁹ РБК-Україна. (2026, May 10). Трамп «залишає» Китай: ЗМІ підбили підсумки нової торгової угоди.

<https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/tramp-zalishae-kitay-zmi-pidbili-pidsumki-1778851738.html>

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ New Development Bank. (n.d.). *Projects*. <https://www.ndb.int/projects/>

⁵² TASS. (2024, January 5). Russia’s trade with BRICS countries exceeds \$230 bln in 2023. <https://tass.com/economy/1713599>

⁵³ Ujvari, B. (2019). *The Belt and Road Initiative — the ASEAN Perspective*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21387>

⁵⁴ Atlas Institute for International Affairs. (2023). *China’s strategic shift to “small and beautiful” (xiao er mei) projects*.

<https://atlasinstitute.org/chinas-strategic-shift-to-small-and-beautiful-xiao-er-mei-projects/>

for leadership is marked by a reliance on multilateral cooperation while deliberately avoiding the creation of a dense alliance network. Accordingly, the Chinese model is primarily economic and declarative.

By contrast, the idea of *Pax Americana* rests on the United States' aspiration, willingness and capacity to assume responsibility for defending its interests virtually anywhere on the globe and to provide security guarantees to an extensive network of allies (notably in Europe and East Asia). Despite debates about the decline and structural crisis of the transatlantic security architecture and of the "West" as a political community – debates that have intensified with the advent of the Trump administration – there is still no analogue in world politics to this type of security-ideological cluster of states, in which shared values are embedded so deeply that key concepts and ideas are ingrained in the political cultures of the relevant actors.

It should nevertheless be noted that Trump's pressure on NATO and Europe to assume a significantly greater share of the security and defence burden (including demands that Allies raise defence spending to 5% of GDP)⁵⁵ is likely to destabilise alliance cohesion. Member states are thus compelled to act reactively in response to constant shifts in the systemic balance of power and to operate under conditions of "strategic uncertainty." Similar concerns are pertinent to the security architecture of East Asia, particularly regarding guarantees to Taiwan. During his meeting with Xi Jinping, the US president made vague and ambivalent statements about Washington's commitment to its obligations vis-à-vis Taipei. He signalled that the United States is not presently interested in being drawn into a new conflict that would result from "someone declaring independence." Indeed, according to the latest public-opinion surveys in Taiwan, over 50% of respondents favour a formal declaration of independence⁵⁶. Trump's statement can, however, be interpreted differently, even though both the president and Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasise that US policy towards Taiwan has not been revised⁵⁷. The very fact that the implementation of security commitments is accompanied by caveats, and that delays in arms deliveries to Taiwan are played as a political bargaining chip, may be construed in Beijing as a form of "backing down" by Washington or indirectly influence future foreign-policy decisions regarding potential military escalation⁵⁸.

Overall, when one compares the projection of US power – above all in terms of the number of overseas military bases⁵⁹ and defence expenditures⁶⁰ – with the corresponding indicators of the PRC, Washington's primacy on the international stage remains indisputable. Even against the backdrop of a broader trend in US foreign policy towards reducing formal commitments, the cases of Venezuela and Iran illustrate (a) the United States' capacity to defend its interests in regions it regards as its spheres of influence, and (b) the absence of any actor capable of mounting a meaningful counter-challenge to such initiatives. In both Venezuela and Iran, the international community – including the PRC – confined itself to declaratory criticism. The US–Israeli war against Iran is particularly revealing, as disruptions to the infrastructure of the Strait of Hormuz directly harm China's economic interests, yet Beijing has been unable to take decisive steps to "flip the game" in its favour, let alone resort to symmetric counter-measures⁶¹.

⁵⁵ Understanding NATO's burden-sharing debate. (2025, May 6). *Small Wars Journal*. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/05/06/understanding-natos-burden-sharing-debate/>

⁵⁶ Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation. (2025, February 14). *Taiwanese preferences on political future* (Special report). <https://www.tpof.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/20250214-TPOF-Special-Report-Taiwanese-Preferences-on-Political-Future.pdf>

⁵⁷ Українська правда. (2026, May 15). Трамп застеріг Тайвань від проголошення незалежності: хоче, щоб Китай заспокоївся. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2026/05/15/8034903/>

⁵⁸ TSN. (2026, May 22). Після зустрічі із Сі Трамп несподівано висловився про незалежність Тайваню. <https://tsn.ua/politika/pislia-zustrichi-iz-si-tramp-nespodivano-vyslovyvsia-pro-nezaleznist-tayvaniu-3084827.html>

⁵⁹ Visual Capitalist. (2023). *Mapped: Every known U.S. military base overseas*. <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-every-known-u-s-military-base-overseas/>

⁶⁰ Statista. (2025). *Countries with the highest military spending worldwide*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262742/countries-with-the-highest-military-spending/>

⁶¹ The Diplomat. (2025, June). War in Iran: China's short- and long-term strategic calculations.

Within the US–China dyad, attention must also be paid to Russia, whose strategic thinking since the 2000s⁶² has been characterised by a self-perception as one of the key poles of power⁶³ and, at the very least, as a hegemon in the Eurasian space. According to assessments by SWP⁶⁴ and Geopolitical Monitor⁶⁵, Russian elites hold a persistent belief in Russia as an “inherently great power” that must be recognised on par with the US and the PRC, regardless of its actual economic performance. Yet, if one looks at recent trends in Russian foreign-policy practice, several factors emerge that preclude Russia’s transition into the category of systemic poles of power.

First, there is the military dimension. Despite its sizeable authorised strength (Putin’s decree of 4 March 2026 increasing the established strength of the Russian Armed Forces to 2,391,770 personnel⁶⁶), Russia’s army has been suffering significant losses in Ukraine without achieving substantial territorial gains⁶⁷. Moreover, increasingly frequent and effective strikes on strategic – including industrial – targets on Russian territory have far-reaching destabilising consequences, both economic and societal: the Kremlin’s inability to protect its own population undermines the long-standing social contract under which citizens refrained from political engagement in exchange for stability. This is particularly evident in the context of this year’s Victory Day parade, which took place under unprecedented security measures (including the decision not to display heavy military equipment) owing to the threat of Ukrainian UAV attacks⁶⁸.

Second, as the 2026 Victory Day events have also shown, Russia’s diplomatic isolation has deepened. The case of China is particularly telling, since bilateral relations between Moscow and Beijing are often portrayed in the media as de facto alliance-like. Yet, instead of a high-level government delegation as in the previous year, only representatives of the Chinese embassy in Moscow attended the parade. In addition, according to *Financial Times*, Xi Jinping reportedly told Donald Trump during their talks that Vladimir Putin might ultimately regret launching the war against Ukraine – though this report relies on anonymous accounts of summit participants⁶⁹. Taken together, these elements suggest that Beijing’s level of support for the Kremlin is contingent on external circumstances rather than rooted in binding commitments.

At the same time, a “comprehensive strategic partnership” has been institutionalised between the two states, and cooperation under this framework continues to develop, as underscored by the latest Xi–Putin summit⁷⁰. Although more than forty cooperation agreements were signed across various sectors, Russian–Chinese dialogue is most pronounced in the diplomatic/political and military-technological realms⁷¹. Economic relations, by contrast, are characterised by relatively modest volumes, strong dependence on hydrocarbon prices and the

<https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/war-in-iran-chinas-short-and-long-term-strategic-calculations/>

⁶² Putin, V. (2007, February 10). *Speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy*. Munich Security Conference.

<https://securityconference.org/en/publications/books/selected-key-speeches-volume-i/2000-2009/speech-vladimir-putin-2007/>

⁶³ Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации. (2023, March 31). Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/1860586/

⁶⁴ Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. (2023). *Multipolarities: The world order visions of “others”*.

<https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/multipolarities-the-world-order-visions-of-others>

⁶⁵ Geopolitical Monitor. (2023). The brave old world of Russia’s foreign policy concept.

<https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-brave-old-world-of-russias-foreign-policy-concept/>

⁶⁶ Суспільне Новини. (2024, August 5). Путін збільшив штатну чисельність армії РФ.

<https://suspilne.media/1255408-putin-zbilsiv-statnu-ciselnist-armii-rf/>

⁶⁷ РБК-Україна. (2026). ЗСУ перейшли в контратаки та досягли найбільших успіхів із початку року.

<https://www.rbc.ua/rus/news/zsu-pereyshli-kontrataki-ta-dosyagli-naybilshih-1779353092.html>

⁶⁸ 24 Канал. (2026, May 10). Москва, парад 9 травня: WSJ пояснили, чому Захід показав успіх.

https://24tv.ua/geopolitics/moskva-parad-9-travnya-wsj-poyasnili-chomu-zahid-pokazav-uspih_n3065392

⁶⁹ Європейська правда. (2026, May 19). FT: Сі сказав Трампу, що Путін може пошкодувати про вторгнення в Україну.

<https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2026/05/19/7237835/>

⁷⁰ Новинарна. (2026, May 20). Результати візиту Путіна до Китаю: 40 документів, просування багатополарності. А як щодо війни проти України?

<https://novynarnia.com/2026/05/20/rezultaty-vizytu-putina-do-kytayu-40-dokumentiv-prosuvannya-bagatopolarnosti-a-yak-shho-vo-vijny-proty-ukravyny/>

⁷¹ PRISM UA. (2026). Вісь “Росія–Білорусь–Китай”: стан відносин і перспективи розвитку. <http://prismua.org/234562-2/>

tightening of sanctions against Russia, and a pronounced asymmetry: Russian exports to the PRC consist mainly of oil, gas, coal and metals, whereas Chinese exports to Russia are dominated by automobiles, industrial equipment, electronics and consumer goods⁷². Thus, the specific nature of Russia–China cooperation is largely situational and diplomatic, albeit underpinned by a relatively high degree of military cooperation. There is, however, no basis for speaking of a distinct “pole of power” in the form of a Russia–China tandem or alliance.

Third, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has demonstrated to CSTO member states and the wider post-Soviet space that Russia is not a reliable ally and that its security guarantees are predominantly declaratory, with their implementation contingent on the Kremlin’s domestic and external circumstances⁷³. As a result, Azerbaijan effectively achieved victory in this conflict, while responsibility for formalising the end of hostilities and for managing Armenian–Azerbaijani normalisation was assumed by the Trump administration⁷⁴. Other indicators could also be adduced to show Russia’s inability to function as a separate pole of power on par with the US and the PRC, but these three factors already point to insufficient capabilities and the presence of a range of constraining systemic conditions.

In sum, even a preliminary analysis of US and Chinese positions and their respective visions of world order and global governance suggests that **THE EMERGENCE OF A BIPOLAR INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM THROUGH A DIPLOMATIC REDISTRIBUTION OF SPHERES OF INFLUENCE IS UNLIKELY, OWING TO THE PARTIES’ CONFLICTING INTERESTS AND HIGH LEVEL OF AMBITION**. A rebalancing of power through military confrontation appears equally improbable, not least in light of the recent Beijing summit, at which both sides expressed a desire to avoid escalation. Nonetheless, one cannot rule out a scenario in which China continues to augment its power amid a further relative weakening of the United States; at present, however, it is too early to draw definitive conclusions. **As for Russia’s role and place in alternative models of world order, its power – at least for now – is insufficient, given its failure to meet several key benchmarks, to credibly claim the status of an independent pole of power comparable in influence to the PRC and the United States.**

⁷² УНІАН. (2026, January 15). Росія і Китай: торгівля, Москва стає все більш залежною від Пекіна. <https://www.unian.ua/economics/other/rosiya-i-kitay-torgivlya-moskva-staye-vse-bilsh-zaleznoyu-vid-pekina-13197087.html>

⁷³ Georgetown Journal of International Affairs. (2022). The Collective Security Treaty Organization: A lifeless shambling alliance. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/global-governance/the-collective-security-treaty-organization-a-lifeless-shambling-alliance/>

⁷⁴ НВ. (2025). Азербайджан і Вірменія підписали мирний договір у Білому домі — Трамп. <https://nv.ua/ukr/world/geopolitics/azerbaydzhan-i-vironeniya-pidpisali-mirniy-dogovir-u-bilomu-domi-tramp-50535840.html>

The course of the Russian-Ukrainian war



Photo: Army FM

■ *Victory Day Parade 2026: From a symbol of power and invincibility to a manifesto of weakness and vulnerability*

The latest Victory Day Parade held on Red Square on 9 May 2026 stands in sharp contrast to previous events, particularly those that took place between 2022 and 2025. Western media outlets argue that this state of affairs points to the further weakening of Russia's power, the destabilization of the hierarchy of elites and balance of forces constructed by Vladimir Putin, as well as to the decline of Russia's authority and weight on the international stage.

According to The Wall Street Journal⁷⁵, this year's parade was "a demonstration of vulnerability" rather than strength, as it had been in all previous years. This conclusion is based on several factors: 1) Russia's fear of Ukrainian drone strikes against military equipment and/or Red Square itself already testifies to vulnerabilities in the country's defence posture; 2) April 2026 (according to ISW) marked the beginning of a new trend in the Russian-Ukrainian war, with Ukraine regaining more territory than it lost – an indication that Russia's bet on a slow, inevitable advance is losing its relevance; 3) the scale of losses suffered by the Russian Armed Forces appears unjustifiably high given their slow rate of progress along the front lines; 4) the rising frequency of Ukrainian drone and missile strikes against key industrial sites (including oil-refining facilities) demonstrates a "new normality" in which Ukraine has acquired the ability to act more freely (without the need for constant consultation with Western leaders and the US in particular) and to implement a strategy of deterring Russia in practice. In this context, **the "downsized" format of the parade combined with the "fragile" situation at the front is framed as the beginning of a "prospect of defeat" for Russia.**

⁷⁵ Is Ukraine turning the Russian tide? The Wall Street Journal.
<https://www.wsj.com/opinion/is-ukraine-turning-the-russian-tide-420e044e>

The New York Times⁷⁶ underscores the role and significance of the Victory Day Parade for the ideological dimension of Putin's Russia, namely the 9 May parade as a central ritual of Russian identity and the victory cult. Accordingly, the display of military hardware (which was absent this year for security reasons) is a key instrument in this regard. The fact that the parade took place without combat equipment is presented as a sign of a change of era: a show that was meant to entrench the image of a superpower now exposes its limitations. Furthermore, the intensification of Ukraine's long-range strikes on Russian territory has led not only to the downsizing of the parade but also to an expansion of security measures on Red Square (and around Putin personally). Thus, The New York Times identifies a new trend in Russian politics: there are no guarantees that strikes will not be carried out against the Russian capital, nor that the Kremlin has the capacity to ensure its own defence.

In its article, Politico⁷⁷ stresses that the deteriorating security environment and ambiguous battlefield results are transforming Putin from a symbol of the "guarantor" and of "victory" into Russia's "greatest liability" – or burden. This trend is reinforced by a certain cognitive dissonance surrounding the Victory Day Parade: one of the key ideological constructs of "victory" and "strength" of the Russian people was presented from a position of weakness – the absence of military hardware, minimal foreign presence at the parade (especially compared to last year), and visibly tighter-than-usual security measures. These and a number of other factors, such as restrictions on internet access, mass security checks, and an ever-growing focus on Vladimir Putin's personal security, indicate that the thesis/myth of inevitable victory is losing any practical content. As a result, the 9 May Victory Day Parade no longer serves as a symbol of Russia's greatness and invincibility but rather resembles a ritual intended to conceal the lack of real successes at the front.

The article in The Telegraph⁷⁸, for its part, describes this year's Victory Day Parade as a "parade of exhaustion". The absence of military hardware, the shortened duration of the event, and the raised security level all attest to the profound fatigue of Russia's governing system. The inability to field military equipment in the parade – whether for security reasons or due to its shortage and deployment at the front – is interpreted as evidence of the Russian ruling elites' (and Putin's in particular) inability to control the situation and the course of events, even in Russia's capital, the decision-making centre. In addition, the fact that diplomatic representation was markedly lower this year than last year demonstrates Russia's inability to act as one of the anti-Western mobilizing centres. Overall, the conclusion is drawn that Russia has now entered a phase of "strategic exhaustion".

In an article for The Economist⁷⁹, written by a former Russian official on condition of anonymity, the focus is on Putin's gradual loss of control over the Russian power system he himself created. The author identifies four key reasons for this situation: 1) the cost of the so-called "special military operation" against Ukraine exceeds any potential gains, leaving the state grappling with inflation, higher taxes, mobilization, and infrastructure damage – all without a clear objective; 2) the elites are in a constant state of uncertainty amid personnel purges and redistribution of assets; 3) Russia has lost its identity as an actor championing a just global order and has instead become a disruptor of that order, which carries negative consequences for the political and business elites; 4) the "social contract", under which the state did not interfere in private life while citizens stayed out of politics, has been broken by intensified repression and censorship. One direct consequence of these trends is that Russian elites are increasingly distancing themselves from decisions taken in the Kremlin. All this indicates that Russia's

⁷⁶ A Less Muscular Victory Day Parade Shows Putin's Growing Vulnerability. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/09/world/europe/russia-victory-day-parade.html>

⁷⁷ Russia's Victory Day is Putin's biggest liability. Politico Europe. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-victory-day-vladimir-putin-biggest-liability-ukraine/>

⁷⁸ Putin's Moscow parade is a stage-managed display of strategic exhaustion. The Telegraph. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2026/05/09/putin-moscow-parade-stage-managed-strategic-exhaustion/>

⁷⁹ Vladimir Putin is losing his grip on Russia. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2026/05/06/vladimir-putin-is-losing-his-grip-on-russia>

previously pursued foreign-policy strategy and overall development trajectory are losing relevance and support among the ruling elites. Accordingly, Russia's current situation can be described as a "zugzwang", where any move only makes things worse.

The BBC⁸⁰, citing CNN and Forbes, notes Putin's clear defeat in his confrontation with Ukraine and with President Zelensky personally. Zelensky's open style, and his willingness to appear in public and in crowded places, stands in stark contrast to the Russian leader's paranoid attitude toward his own security – which was again on display during the preparation and conduct of this year's Victory Day Parade. Given the quasi-religious status of the event in Russian political thought, the pared-down format of the parade directly undermines its potential as a symbol of Russia's victory and greatness. This in turn confirms the decline of Russia's status as a major global power, including in terms of the strength of its armed forces. Against this backdrop, the decision to bar foreign media from attending the parade appears to be an attempt to create an artificial, tightly controlled information environment around Victory Day, despite obvious uncertainty about the security situation in the Russian capital. Taken together, all these factors indicate that Russia is suffering defeat at the strategic and diplomatic levels and is unable to reverse this trend.

Thus, according to articles in the most authoritative Western media outlets, **this year's 9 May Victory Day Parade – and the broader chain of events surrounding its preparation and conduct – provides evidence of a profound strategic and doctrinal turning point in Russian politics.** The absence of convincing battlefield victories, the intensification of Ukrainian missile and drone strikes deep inside Russia, growing dissatisfaction among Russian elites with the status quo, Moscow's inability to guarantee an adequate level of security for civilians and military hardware in its own capital, as well as Russia's diplomatic isolation, all reflect the loss of relevance and popularity among Russia's ruling elite of the country's current development strategy.

⁸⁰ Парад Перемоги в Москві: в чому причини урізаної версії улюбленого дійства Путіна. BBC News Україна. <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cgrpglk1825o>

■ *Russia: External and internal challenges*

Trend: *For aspirants to global dominance, the central task becomes depriving Ukraine of the key to victory in the Russian-Ukrainian war by coercing it into capitulation.*



Photo: Bloomberg

As of April–May 2026, the negotiation track launched by the Donald Trump administration in 2025 entered its most pronounced phase of stagnation. This was driven by a reduction of United States pressure on the Russian Federation and by the declining salience of the Russian-Ukrainian war within the U.S. foreign-policy agenda. The trilateral meeting in Geneva (17–18 February 2026)⁸¹ has so far become the last full-fledged negotiating round, as subsequent meetings were cancelled and postponed indefinitely due to the escalation in the Middle East. Beyond the obvious risk of further escalation resulting from the “freezing” of diplomatic efforts, a key challenge for the Ukrainian side is that, ***as of May 2026, Washington has failed to unify the various negotiation tracks and to develop an agenda acceptable to both parties as satisfactory and not contradicting their stated war aims***. Subsequently, as evidenced by the meetings in March⁸² and April⁸³ 2026 between Kirill Dmitriev, the Russian President’s special representative for investment and economic cooperation with foreign countries, and senior U.S. officials, the U.S.–Russian dialogue has increasingly centred on economic cooperation and sanctions pressure on Russia in the context of the new energy crisis generated by the Middle Eastern escalation (this was true until the U.S. government decided not to renew

⁸¹ TSN. (2026, April 2). Зеленський зробив заяву про скасування переговорів Україна–США–РФ. <https://tsn.ua/politika/zelenskyv-zrobiv-zaiavu-pro-skasuvannia-perehovoriv-ukrayina-ssha-rf-3034979.html>

⁸² Russia’s Dmitriev says he discussed global energy crisis with US counterparts. (2026, March 12). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-dmitriev-says-he-discussed-global-energy-crisis-with-us-counterparts-2026-03-12/>

⁸³ Українська правда. (2026, April 10). У Кремлі заявили, що посланець Путіна вирушив до США обговорювати не Україну. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2026/04/10/8029617/>

the licence for imports of Russian petroleum products⁸⁴). This shift of focus in U.S.–Russian relations, together with the temporary windfall that Russia derived from rising oil prices and the aforementioned permission to export certain categories of Russian oil products, was accompanied by a marked intensification of Russian military activity from the second half of March 2026⁸⁵. This occurred against the background of Ukraine’s shortage of air and missile defences and potential macro- and micro-financial risks linked to Hungary’s and Slovakia’s blocking of an EU credit package worth 90 billion euros. Yet, despite this multidimensional pressure on Ukraine, the Kremlin, as indicated in ISW analytical assessments, failed to exploit the waning U.S. interest in the war to reverse the course of events in its favour. The large-scale offensive at the end of March⁸⁶ did not produce the expected results. On the contrary, ISW’s April and May reports stress that the Ukrainian Armed Forces have achieved their greatest successes since the operation in Russia’s Kursk region in August 2024: the defence forces managed to halt the Russian offensive and carry out effective counterattacks⁸⁷. At the same time, ISW identifies the campaign of deep strikes on Russian territory (in particular against oil refineries and the military-industrial complex⁸⁸) as the decisive factor that altered the balance of power. Tellingly, in an attempt to divert attention from its clear tactical setback, Russia intensified mass, combined air attacks on Ukrainian cities⁸⁹; nevertheless, the situation on the battlefield remains unfavourable to Moscow. Taken together, the conditions that emerged in April–May 2026 in the international arena in general, and in the Middle East in particular, are not conducive to Ukraine’s achieving an end to the war on just terms. In this context, it is appropriate to examine the positions of such actors as the United States, Russia and China, all of which openly claim leadership ambitions and for whom the Russian-Ukrainian war represents one of the levers of influence in their mutual relations.

As already noted, *Russia’s stance has been shaped by the escalation in the Middle East, which drew the United States into operations against Iran and, consequently, relegated Ukraine to the background*. On the eve of the next negotiation round in Florida (20–21 March 2026), Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced that the Russian delegation would not participate, while at the same time expressing hope that the pause in the talks would be temporary. Subsequently, however, despite its formal “readiness” for a diplomatic solution, the Kremlin not only refrained from taking any initiative to resume negotiations but also opposed such initiatives as the Easter ceasefire⁹⁰ (which, although agreed, was marred by Russian violations⁹¹), even as it intensified shelling of Ukrainian cities. On 6 April 2026 Peskov confirmed that the trilateral negotiation process was “on hold”, although information exchanges

⁸⁴ Суспільне Новини. (2026, April 9). США вирішили не продовжувати дію тимчасового винятку, який послаблював санкції проти російської нафти – Bloomberg. <https://suspilne.media/1312021-ssa-virisila-ne-prodovzuvati-diu-timcasovogo-vinatku-akij-poslabluyav-sankcii-proti-rosijskoi-nafti-bloomberg/>

⁸⁵ Institute for the Study of War, & AEI’s Critical Threats Project. (2026, March 20). *Russian offensive campaign assessment, March 20, 2026*. UnderstandingWar.org. <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-20-2026/>

⁸⁶ TSN. (2026, March 30). Росія почала масштабний наступ по всьому фронту: кинули десятки тисяч солдат – ISW. <https://tsn.ua/ato/rosiia-pochala-masshtabnyy-nastup-po-vsyomu-frontu-kyuly-desiatky-tysyach-soldat-isw-3047420.html>

⁸⁷ TSN. (2026, May 7). Вперше за три роки ЗСУ перехопили ініціативу: як вдалося зупинити масштабний наступ РФ. <https://tsn.ua/ato/vpershe-za-try-roky-zsu-perekhopyly-initsiatyvu-ia-k-vdalosia-zupynyly-masshtabnyy-nastup-rf-3059294.html>

⁸⁸ Novyny.Live. (2026). Україна посилює удари по НПЗ у РФ: в ISW назвали переломний момент. <https://shtab.novyny.live/ukrayina-posiliuie-udari-po-npzu-rf-v-isw-nazvali-perelomnii-moment-324274.html>

⁸⁹ Радіо Свобода. (2026, May 7). ISW прокоментував випробування «Сармата» в Росії. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-isw-pro-vyprobuvannia-sarmata-v-rosii/33755762.html>

⁹⁰ Політична аналітика. (2026, March 31). Росія і «перемир’я», скандал в Угорщині: головне за 31 березня 2026 року. <https://politanaliz.com.ua/54680-rosiia-i-peremyr-ia-skandal-v-uhorshchyni-holovne-za-31-bereznia-2026-roku/>

⁹¹ TSN. (2026, May 4). «Криваве великоднє перемир’я»: РФ розстріляла полонених, атакувала «швидку» і запустила дрони. <https://tsn.ua/ukrayina/kryvave-velykodnye-peremyria-rf-rozstriliala-polonenykh-atakuvala-shvydku-i-zapustyla-drony-3060485.html>

between Moscow and Washington through available channels were continuing⁹². Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that Russia saw little prospect for resuming dialogue because U.S. mediators were “occupied with other matters”⁹³.

At the same time, **Moscow continues to adhere to the understandings reached between the Russian and U.S. sides at the summit in Anchorage**⁹⁴—that is, to an agenda that pre-dated the reduction of the peace plan from 28 points⁹⁵ to 20⁹⁶ (whose initial version was clearly skewed in Russia’s favour). According to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia hopes that, once a ceasefire with Iran is in place, the United States will have more time and capacity to return to trilateral talks⁹⁷. Given the Kremlin’s habitual rhetorical shifts, however, the Trump administration’s reorientation from Ukraine to Iran appears more as a pretext and justification for derailing the negotiation process in order to exert further pressure on Kyiv to capitulate. A key signal from Moscow was Lavrov’s statement of 17 April during his visit to Türkiye⁹⁸, in which he stressed that the resumption of talks was not Russia’s top priority. Simultaneously, he reiterated that Russia was prepared to negotiate if the other side demonstrated the will to do so—a formulation that in effect attempts to shift responsibility for the pause in talks onto Ukraine and the United States. The next salient statement on the course of the war and prospects for a settlement came from President Vladimir Putin during his Victory Day parade speech⁹⁹, where he argued that the conflict was already approaching its final phase. At the same time, he set a hard condition: direct talks with President Zelenskyy would be possible only after “final arrangements” on a peace agreement had been reached—in other words, he proposed to meet solely to sign a document negotiated in advance. Finally, among the most recent pronouncements, Peskov’s comments of 17–18 May stand out: he reiterated that the peace process remained “on pause”, but that Moscow expected its resumption with U.S. participation¹⁰⁰. In parallel, however, the Kremlin continues to escalate terror by striking Ukrainian territory, in most cases through deliberate missile and drone attacks on civilian objects. Russia thus pursues a familiar foreign-policy pattern: (a) shifting blame onto third parties and (b) “linking” the resolution of one issue to progress on another. This approach is designed to sabotage the negotiation process and, given declining U.S. interest in the war, to improve Russia’s bargaining position by intensifying pressure on Ukraine—primarily through military means.

With regard to the United States, between late March and May 2026 Washington did not formally close off the prospect of negotiations, yet no new dates for trilateral meetings were announced. As noted above, contacts continued through back-channel formats, such as meetings with Putin’s special envoy Kirill Dmitriev in March and April 2026. By contrast, the activities of the U.S. negotiating team on the Ukrainian track (the “Witkoff–Kushner” group) saw no

⁹² Українська Правда. (2026, April 6). «Мир до червня під загрозою»: Кремль висунув нові територіальні вимоги Україні – ЗМІ. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2026/04/6/8029001/>

⁹³ УНІАН. (2026, April 9). Переговори про мир в Україні: Лавров заявив про контакти Росії зі США.

<https://www.unian.ua/world/peregovori-pro-mir-v-ukrajini-lavrov-zayaviv-pro-kontakti-rosiji-zi-ssha-13343694.html>

⁹⁴ TASS. (2026). Lavrov says Russia maintains contacts with US on Ukraine settlement. <https://tass.com/politics/2117125>

⁹⁵ TSN. (2026, February 15). Усе про «мирний план» Трампа: який кінець війни нав’язують Україні і чи погодиться вона на це. <https://tsn.ua/politika/use-pro-myrnyy-plan-trampa-iyakyv-kinets-viyny-navyazuiut-ukravini-i-chy-pohodytsia-vona-na-tse-2960891.html>

⁹⁶ Укрінформ. (2026, February 20). Проект мирної угоди: Зеленський назвав 20 пунктів і розкрив деталі.

<https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/4072918-proekt-mirnoi-ugodi-zelenskij-nazvav-20-punktiv-i-rozkriv-detali.html>

⁹⁷ Russia says it welcomes Iran ceasefire, hopes U.S. will now resume Ukraine talks. (2026, April 8). *U.S. News & World Report*.

<https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2026-04-08/russia-says-it-welcomes-iran-ceasefire-hopes-us-will-now-resume-ukraine-talks>

⁹⁸ Talks are not Russia's number one priority, Lavrov says. (2026, April 18). *Ukrainska Pravda*.

<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2026/04/18/8030736/>

⁹⁹ Putin says he thinks Ukraine conflict 'coming to an end'. (2026, April 19). *BBC News*.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn8p4j2jzwwg>

¹⁰⁰ Kremlin expects resumption of "peace process" and US assistance. (2026, May 18). *Ukrainska Pravda*.

<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2026/05/18/8035185/>

meaningful progress in April–May. At the end of April 2026 it became public that the planned visit of Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner to Kyiv had been postponed: the U.S. side considered it unproductive in the absence of substantive movement. A senior Kyiv official familiar with the matter observed: “They have promised many times, but have not come once.”¹⁰¹ Witkoff and Kushner, however, have travelled to Moscow on multiple occasions. The last meeting in this format as of late May 2026 was the visit of Ukraine’s National Security and Defence Council Secretary Rustem Umerov to the United States on 8 May 2026¹⁰². Following meetings with representatives of the Trump administration, he stated that the sides had agreed to revitalise the peace process and “coordinate further steps towards a dignified peace”. Reportedly, they discussed three key humanitarian-track issues (prisoner exchanges, the return of deportees, demining) and concurred on the need to re-energise the diplomatic track once the situation at the front and in the region permits. In parallel, the United States concentrated its attention on the Middle East¹⁰³, in particular on advancing work towards a “grand bargain” with Iran. The Russian-Ukrainian war was pushed into the background, with a view to returning to it once political bandwidth and resources were again available. This framing is corroborated by Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s statements in the same period. On 7–8 May 2026 he publicly acknowledged that U.S. peace efforts had stalled, explicitly linking this to Washington’s shift of focus towards Iran¹⁰⁴. On 22 May, speaking at the NATO foreign ministers’ meeting in Sweden, Rubio noted that talks were not currently taking place but expressed hope that this would change, since the war could end only through an agreed settlement. He rejected accusations that Washington was pressuring Kyiv and drew a clear line: the United States had no interest in an endless cycle of meetings that produce no results¹⁰⁵. In practical terms, the only notable steps taken by the Trump administration in April–May 2026 were the establishment of a three-day ceasefire from 9 to 11 May and a major prisoner exchange. Both Ukraine and Russia had an interest in portraying themselves as initiators and therefore contributed actively to this outcome, yet President Trump claimed full credit for it on Truth Social¹⁰⁶, characterising the ceasefire as “the beginning of the end” of the four-year war—even though it was marked by widespread and systematic violations. Overall, the U.S. position has amounted to rhetorical maintenance of the negotiating status quo, references to the lack of substantive convergence between the parties, and condemnations of Russian strikes against Ukraine, without commensurate practical measures. Even the fact that the war was raised during Trump’s meeting with Xi Jinping on 14 May 2026 had no discernible impact on the prevailing agenda¹⁰⁷. One of Kyiv’s principal challenges is the acute shortage of air-defence missiles¹⁰⁸—a deficit driven, inter alia, by the prioritisation of supplies to Gulf states in the Middle East¹⁰⁹. More broadly, the restriction or suspension of assistance to Ukraine has become one of the cornerstones of the Trump administration’s approach to ending the war. On 30 April 2026 it emerged that the administration had excluded funding for military aid to Ukraine under the USAI programme from the draft U.S. defence budget for fiscal year 2027. This concerns new resources: the 2026 budget still contains 400

¹⁰¹ Trump’s envoys delay Ukraine visit over doubts about talks, Witkoff put off by train travel. (2026, May 1). *Ukrainska Pravda*. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2026/05/01/8032773/>

¹⁰² Umerov in the U.S. meets with Austin and Blinken to discuss long-term security support for Ukraine. (2026, May 8). *LB.ua*. https://lb.ua/world/2026/05/08/737084_umierov_ssha_zustrivsvya_z.html

¹⁰³ Ukrinform. (n.d.). *Переговори*. Ukrinform. Retrieved May 30, 2026, from <https://www.ukrinform.ua/tag-peregovori>

¹⁰⁴ Caliber.az. (n.d.). *Rubio says US-led Ukraine peace efforts have stagnated*. Caliber.az. Retrieved May 30, 2026, from <https://caliber.az/en/post/rubio-says-us-led-ukraine-peace-efforts-have-stagnated>

¹⁰⁵ Pravda. (2026, May 22). *Trump’s three-day ceasefire proposal in Ukraine raises concerns in Kyiv and Brussels*. Retrieved May 30, 2026, from <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2026/05/22/8035997/>

¹⁰⁶ Al Jazeera. (2026, May 8). *Trump announces three-day ceasefire in Russia-Ukraine war*. Retrieved May 30, 2026, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/8/trump-announces-three-day-ceasefire-in-russia-ukraine-war>

¹⁰⁷ RBC-Ukraine. (2026, May 14). *Trump makes statement on war in Ukraine after new escalation*. Retrieved May 30, 2026, from <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/trump-makes-statement-on-war-in-ukraine-after-1778854276.html>

¹⁰⁸ NV. (2026, May 21). *Дефіцит ракет для ППО: Ігнат пояснив відкриту комунікацію України*. Retrieved May 30, 2026, from <https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/deficit-raket-dlya-ppo-ignat-povasniv-vidkritu-komunikaciju-ukrajini-50611086.html>

¹⁰⁹ 24 Канал. (2026, May 26). *ППО для України: чи отримає Україна більше засобів протиповітряної оборони*. Retrieved May 30, 2026, from https://24tv.ua/ppo-dlya-ukrayini-otrimaye-ukrayina-bilshe-zasobiv-protipovitryanoyi_n3073835

million dollars for Ukraine, but the 2027 draft allocates no additional funds under USAI¹¹⁰. In this way, Trump's team signals the absence of political will to sustain large-scale arming of Ukraine in the medium term and to enhance its defence capabilities, leaving only minimal previously approved programmes in place. Such an approach is clearly intended to compel Ukraine to accept Russia's preferred terms for ending the war: given the administration's inability or unwillingness to exert pressure on Moscow, pressing Kyiv is the easiest way to claim at least some political "victories" and sell them to the domestic electorate ahead of the 2026 mid-term congressional elections.

The final actor warranting attention is the People's Republic of China. Beijing's position remains restrained and ambiguous, formally emphasising the desirability of an early cessation of hostilities. Compared with previous years, however, the tone of Chinese rhetoric has shifted. In 2025 the Chinese leadership adhered to the principle of preventing Russia's defeat or serious weakening. This outlook stems from the overarching strategic rivalry between the United States and China: it is in Beijing's interest that Washington expend resources and political capital as far away from East Asia as possible. Additionally, China benefits from the gradual erosion of U.S. authority and hegemonic status caused by its inability to swiftly and effectively suppress challenges to the status quo. During Xi's visit to Moscow on 9 May 2025, the two leaders harmonised a joint position that the conflict could be resolved only by addressing its "root causes"—language that essentially mirrors Kremlin propaganda¹¹¹. In turn, the meeting between Sergey Lavrov and Wang Yi in Beijing on 14 April 2026¹¹² once again confirmed the resilience of Sino-Russian coordination. Nevertheless, as noted in the previous article in this issue, the "strategic partnership" between Russia and China is highly situational in nature. Despite sustained military-technical cooperation, China's recent diplomatic engagement with Russia has been marked by notable restraint. The first public sign of cooling was the absence of a Chinese government delegation at the Victory Day parade in Moscow (in contrast to the previous year). A second, more informal indicator was a reported remark by Xi Jinping suggesting that Vladimir Putin might ultimately come to regret the war against Ukraine (*even though this claim rests on anonymous accounts from those allegedly present at the meeting and has been officially denied by Beijing*¹¹³). Judging by Chinese statements following meetings with the U.S.¹¹⁴ and Russian¹¹⁵ presidents, however, Beijing continues to maintain rhetorically neutral positions, advocating a resumption of negotiations and the search for "constructive tools" to bring the conflict to an end as soon as possible.

In sum, neither the constructive settlement of the Russian-Ukrainian war nor Ukraine's survival as a state and subject of international relations currently constitutes a top priority for any of the aspiring great-power leaders. Russia's stance is straightforward: it seeks Ukraine's defeat and its political absorption into Moscow's sphere of influence. The U.S. position, by contrast, has undergone qualitative change. Under Trump, populist slogans and unrealistic goals have become the primary yardsticks of foreign-policy "effectiveness". Ukraine has thus been

¹¹⁰ 24 Канал. (2026, April 30). *Військова допомога: чому Україна не отримає грошей з бюджету США*. Retrieved May 30, 2026, from https://24tv.ua/geopolitics/viyskova-dopomoga-ukrayina-ne-otrimaye-groshey-byudzhetu-ssha_n3060230

¹¹¹ Ukrainska Pravda. (2025, May 9). *Xi Jinping supports Putin's position on war against Ukraine*. Retrieved May 29, 2026, from <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/05/09/7511368/>

¹¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2026, April 14). *On April 14, 2026, FM Wang Yi held talks with Russian FM Sergei Lavrov in Beijing* [Post]. Facebook. Retrieved May 29, 2026, from <https://www.facebook.com/61572961049373/posts/on-april-14-2026-fm-wang-yi-held-talks-with-russian-fm-sergei-lavrov-in-beijingw/122180004872765368/>

¹¹³ LB.ua. (2026, May 19). *Китай заперечив слова Сі про те, що Путін пошкодує через вторгнення в Україну (оновлено)*. Retrieved May 29, 2026, from https://lb.ua/world/2026/05/19/739250_kitay_zaperechiv_slova_si.html

¹¹⁴ RBC-Ukraine. (2026, May 15). *China ready to take 'constructive role' in ending war in Ukraine*. Retrieved May 29, 2026, from <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/china-ready-to-take-constructive-role-in-1778942565.html>

¹¹⁵ Fakty ICTV. (2026, May 20). *Путін і Сі висловилися про завершення війни в Україні: про що йдеться у спільній заяві*. Retrieved May 29, 2026, from <https://fakty.com.ua/ua/ukraine/20260520-putin-i-si-vyslovylysya-pro-zavershennya-vijny-v-ukrayini-pro-shho-jdetsya-u-spilnij-zayavi/>

transformed into one of several conflicts that Trump aims to “solve” as quickly as possible in order to market these outcomes to the American public and boost his ratings. Effective conflict management has not been a priority. Before the Middle Eastern escalation—and even more so afterwards—Washington failed to craft a shared agenda for the trilateral negotiations, leaving Ukraine and Russia entrenched in mutually exclusive positions. The reorientation towards the Middle East and the absence of new financial and military assistance packages objectively favour the Kremlin: the stronger Russia’s bargaining position, the easier it becomes to force Ukraine into capitulation. Given the lack of capacity or willingness to pressure Moscow, pressuring Kyiv is virtually the only remaining option for the United States to present itself as a peacemaking mediator and to claim—even if illusory—peace achievements. Some tangible “result”, against the backdrop of meagre progress in the war with Iran, is urgently needed by Donald Trump ahead of the 2026 congressional elections. *China, for its part, maintains a consistently rhetorically neutral stance while engaging in active military-technical cooperation with Russia.* Although a certain “cooling” in the diplomatic relationship can be observed, *China’s involvement and contribution to achieving a just and lasting peace in Ukraine remain minimal and are primarily aimed at signalling its preference for a swift resolution of the conflict, without corresponding concrete steps.* Under these conditions, **the Ukrainian government has little choice but to continue resisting in the hope of altering the balance of power in its favour.**