



The new global chessboard: Europe, America, Russia and China in the Ukraine war

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Abstract

The Ukraine war has reshaped the global geopolitical landscape, positioning Europe, America, Russia and China as key players on a new global chessboard. Europe is grappling with the dual challenge of ensuring regional security and managing the economic fallout from the conflict. America's evolving global relationships are marked by a burden-shift with Europe, diplomatic efforts to further deter Russian aggression and a strategic rivalry with China. For Russia, the invasion of Ukraine is a bid to reassert its influence, but it faces severe international sanctions and military setbacks, constraining its strategic ambitions. And China is navigating a complex balancing act between supporting Russia and maintaining its economic ties with the West. This complex interplay of alliances and rivalries underscores the shifting dynamics of global power and the urgent need for diplomatic solutions to ensure stability and peace.

Keywords

Europe, United States, Russia, China, Ukraine, Geopolitics

Introduction

On 27 March 2025 a Summit on Peace and Security for Ukraine was organised by President Emmanuel Macron in cooperation with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer. It was held in Paris. This summit was part of an ongoing series of political and operational meetings that the UK and France have been organising alternately over several weeks, aimed at contributing to a sustainable and just peace in Ukraine. This particular summit

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saw the participation of 31 countries, including non-EU nations such as the UK, Norway, Canada and Iceland, as well as high-profile figures such as the NATO secretary general, the president of the European Commission and the president of the European Council. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also attended.

The increased frequency of meetings among this wide-ranging ‘coalition of the willing’ is recognition, in Europe’s eyes, of the immediate need to establish and permanently guarantee security and peace in the long term for Ukraine. It is evident that the unconditional ceasefire that Ukraine had declared its readiness to enter into on 11 March in Saudi Arabia has since evolved into a proposal for a limited ceasefire with additional conditions and demands from Russia. Moscow is employing delaying tactics, and there is a growing realisation, even within the US, that Russia is not genuinely interested in ending the war.

Europe’s novel security approach: ‘Peace through strength’

This fear of a prolonged conflict in Ukraine, and the perceived risk of war between Europe and Russia, has pushed the European Commission to propose a way forward in its *Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030* (European Commission 2025), which can be encapsulated by the motto ‘peace through strength’.

This approach entails rapidly increasing military support for Ukraine, including the provision of more ammunition, artillery, air defence systems, drones and training. Additionally, it involves enhancing the capabilities of European countries by them investing more in their own defence, simplifying administrative processes and fostering better industrial cooperation, including with the Ukrainian defence industry. The European Commission has also outlined the financial instruments that have been established in record time to address these specific challenges.

The primary objective of these financial instruments is to bolster European defence spending, with the EU targeting a total of €800 billion. This includes €150 billion in loans available to member states through a new Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument and up to €650 billion from national defence budgets, corresponding to an expenditure of 1.5% of GDP that can be excluded from national budgets by activating the ‘national escape clause’ of the EU’s Stability and Growth Pact. Additionally, private financing and funds from the European Investment Bank will be mobilised for investments in priority capabilities.

Furthermore, the EU has identified several priority capabilities for investment. In the short term, joint EU purchases should focus on missiles and artillery systems. In the medium term, the goal is to develop large-scale EU systems in integrated air and missile defence, military mobility and strategic enablers. NATO standards will continue to serve as the foundation, and it is crucial that these standards are shared with the EU.

Finally, ‘peace through strength’ also includes the further European integration of Ukraine, with Brussels clearly considering Ukraine the EU’s first line of defence. The

Commission's Joint White Paper and a parallel initiative launched by High Representative Kaja Kallas both aim to bolster military support for Kyiv and stress the importance of defence procurement both with and within Ukraine.

Despite the commendable pace and scope of the numerous recent initiatives undertaken by the EU, it is imperative to recognise that these commitments must still be translated into tangible actions. The European Commission remains hopeful that the proposals delineated in the Joint White Paper can be actualised during the Polish Presidency, with the aim of reaching concrete decisions by the European Council meeting scheduled for 26–7 June. However, considering the ongoing deterioration of the European security landscape, it could be argued that this deadline lacks the requisite sense of urgency needed to address the pressing challenges ahead.

European peace through strength—but not without the US

While Europe is building its rise as a security, defence and military actor, there is a consensus among most EU member states that these efforts should not happen to the detriment of NATO and that there is a need to maintain solid US involvement in European security. Strength is not merely a matter of political initiatives but also of demonstrating a clear readiness to engage militarily. There must be a deterrent effect from military power, particularly in anticipation of potential new Russian offensives once Moscow rebuilds its troops and supplies during a future ceasefire or peace deal. And military power is exactly where Europe—willing or not—will still need to rely on the transatlantic partnership for a foreseeable while, due to its current overreliance on strategic US military and intelligence assets.

Moreover, the new administration in Washington has manoeuvred fast to have a clear say on the future of European security. It is the US—not Europe—that is leading the diplomacy on a ceasefire or peace deal in Ukraine. And while Europe, in reaction, is focusing on shaping future security guarantees for Ukraine—or even pushing for boots on the ground through a ‘coalition of the willing’—both of these European endeavours hinge, first, on the success of US diplomacy to reach a deal with Russia; and second, on US logistical and intelligence support for the proposed troops on the ground. Without these, most of the ‘willing nations’ may withdraw their commitments. The situation is further complicated by the shortage of operational European troops: for instance, the UK has an expeditionary force, but relies heavily on its air and naval power; France has some units, but in insufficient numbers; and Germany's contribution remains uncertain.

In this context, a European plan to help Ukraine win and maintain peace should not compromise NATO's resilience and should therefore be developed in close coordination with the alliance, particularly in terms of planning and interoperability. And as Europe is now spending on defence, it should do so while ensuring that its expenditures align with NATO capability objectives.

Moreover, military strength is not the only domain in which Europe should continue to keep an eye on the US. Europe notably believes that it is imperative to increase pressure on Russia through sanctions. The EU is unequivocally clear that there can be no consideration of easing sanctions; on the contrary, some member states even advocate for intensifying them. The challenge for Europe, however, remains to emphatically convey this message to the Americans, as any decision by the US to ease sanctions—as requested by Russia—would undermine the most critical form of pressure against Russia. Some EU member states have already raised concerns about the future of European sanctions policy, highlighting the need for new methods to enforce sanctions, particularly if certain EU member states more friendly to Russia decide to obstruct them in the future.

Putin's patient game of chess

Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin has clearly asserted a degree of dominance in the ongoing diplomatic negotiations. He has set preliminary conditions for a ceasefire, made a limited commitment regarding energy infrastructure and subsequently undermined the credibility of his own commitment with new attacks on Ukraine. Despite this, Putin's demands concerning Western military supplies and intelligence-sharing reveal that Ukrainian attacks on Russian critical infrastructure are causing significant damage and irking the Russian president.

Putin's demands, including the reduction of Ukraine's military capabilities, the transfer of entire Ukrainian regions to Russian control and the replacement of President Zelensky, are, naturally, unacceptable to Ukraine. These demands also pose the most significant risk to the West: if Russia were to succeed in installing a pro-Russian leader in Kyiv and controlling the Ukrainian military, it would alter the entire power and military balance in Eastern Europe. Should President Trump agree to this, it would likely cause a further deterioration in US–EU relations too. Achieving a middle-ground in any US–Russia agreement for Ukraine currently still poses a formidable challenge.

Moscow therefore perceives that it has the momentum in its favour, despite Russia's inability to achieve any strategic breakthroughs in Ukraine. The financial and human costs of this conflict for Moscow are substantial, while it is making minimal territorial gains. However, while Ukraine has successfully liberated 50% of the territory that was previously occupied by Russia, the Kremlin nevertheless still occupies approximately 20% of Ukrainian territory. Moscow has also likely observed in the US a desire to shift towards finding a consensus and a willingness to negotiate in a transactional manner. Moreover, the recent suspension of US intelligence and military support has already had immediate repercussions on Ukraine's strength. It has weakened Ukraine's ability to bring this war to a conclusion and could potentially lead to a temporary ceasefire that would de facto result in the creation of a 'frozen conflict'—an outcome which Russia would not necessarily view unfavourably.

A friendly US visit to Europe . . .

On 3 and 4 April 2025, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio participated for the first time in a NATO foreign ministerial meeting. Rubio's visit to NATO headquarters was notably smoother and more amicable than the visit of his colleague at the Department of Defense, Pete Hegseth, for the defence ministerial meeting in February 2025.

Rubio, a seasoned diplomat, adroitly conveyed the message that European allies must significantly increase their defence spending, advocating for allocations of up to 5% of their GDP. He acknowledged the difficulty of this demand but emphasised that it could be achieved incrementally, provided the allies concerned showed a clear and consistent direction of progress.

In a similar vein, Rubio addressed the situation in Ukraine, commending the resilience and fighting spirit of the Ukrainian people. He articulated President Trump's recognition that a military solution in Ukraine is unattainable for both Ukraine and Russia, necessitating a negotiated settlement. Rubio underscored that peace negotiations inherently require compromises from all parties involved. He acknowledged that Ukraine has already made significant concessions, whereas Russia has yet to reciprocate. According to Rubio, Russia is testing President Trump's resolve, but he also acknowledged that Putin faces severe consequences if he does not promptly agree to a ceasefire, indicating that the timeline for such an agreement is measured in weeks, not months. Rubio concluded by asserting that a peace agreement would be unattainable without European involvement.

Rubio also expressed broad support for the EU's defence initiatives, including the EU Joint White Paper and the ReArm programme. He praised the EU's efforts to encourage its member states to meet their NATO commitments and to strengthen the industrial base, provided that the non-EU defence industry, particularly American firms, is not unduly excluded.

Despite the positive reception of Rubio's visit to Europe and NATO, there remains an underlying uncertainty about whether other influential figures within President Trump's Make America Great Again movement share Rubio's views. The path to achieving a cohesive and effective alliance strategy is fraught with challenges, and it remains uncertain whether NATO will navigate these obstacles successfully and emerge intact.

. . . but Washington's priority is the Asia-Pacific region

Above all, the NATO foreign ministerial meeting of early April showed again that the US felt fundamentally displeased with the Western approach to China over the past several decades. The prevailing assumption—that a capitalist and economically prosperous China would inevitably evolve to resemble Western democratic nations—was a misguided and overly optimistic expectation. This erroneous belief has permitted Beijing to engage in deceptive trade and military practices for the past 30 years without facing significant repercussions.

Today the US is clearly concerned about the way China has strategically weaponised its industrial capabilities by seamlessly integrating its civilian and military sectors through a dual-use strategy that is particularly evident in critical economic and high-tech domains, such as artificial intelligence. By blurring the lines between civilian and military applications, China has been able to enhance its technological and industrial base, thereby posing a multifaceted challenge to global security.

Moreover, for the US, the presence of North Korean soldiers in Ukraine serves as a stark indicator of the interconnected nature of the threats emanating from the Indo-Pacific and European regions. For Washington, the collaborative efforts of adversarial states such as China, Russia, Iran and North Korea in Ukraine and other geopolitical theatres necessitate a similarly unified and strategic approach from democratic like-minded nations to strengthening their alliances and enhancing their collective security measures in response to the evolving geopolitical landscape.

Interconnected theatres of confrontation

China's alleged support for the Russian war effort in Ukraine and the military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, and Russia and Iran, clearly illustrate the interconnectedness of security dynamics between Europe, the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine represents a pivotal moment for the stability of the international system, impacting not only Europe but also other parts of the world. Contrary to the characterisation of the conflict in Ukraine as merely a 'European war' a few years ago, the war there is now considered by the West to be a globalised conflict with profound international implications. This perspective is widely accepted among the NATO allies, which recognise the growing interconnection between the three theatres of conflict.

This attitude is also increasingly reflected in the enhanced dialogue between NATO and the Indo-Pacific Four partners—Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the Republic of Korea. This cooperation is today seen by allies as mutually beneficial and necessary. Beyond exchanges of intelligence, particularly on the challenges posed by China, support for Ukraine dominates the partnership, alongside the joint battle against hybrid threats, progress on cybersecurity and the strengthening of maritime security. It is widely expected that NATO allies will seek to further strengthen this cooperation at the 2025 NATO summit in The Hague.

Among NATO members there is, furthermore, a growing consensus on the need to be firm with China. Allies agree on the necessity of sending a stronger message and taking determined and united actions in terms of deterrence, including at the hybrid and cyber levels, as well as on imposing sanctions against Chinese economic operators involved in China-Russia cooperation in Ukraine. While Russia remains the primary long-term threat to the NATO realm, there is recognition that China poses a significant problem that must be addressed in its full magnitude, particularly in the context of China-Russia cooperation. It is essential to act firmly and in a united way to increase the costs of

cooperation with Moscow for Beijing while keeping open the necessary avenues of engagement. Any dissonance between Europe and the US on this issue might otherwise become the root cause of the next big crisis of trust in the transatlantic relationship.

China versus a Russian–American rapprochement

Russia is not fighting its Ukraine war alone. It is receiving help from allies including China, Iran and North Korea. Moreover, the war in Ukraine is not just about Ukraine's future. It is also part of a larger global struggle, with Russia seeking position alongside China in a reconfigured world order that is more multipolar and less centred on the US. In this respect, China may be inclined to silently assist Russia in opposing a proposed ceasefire or peace plan for Ukraine put forward by President Trump. Beijing likely recognises that by resolving the conflict in Ukraine and fostering better relations with Russia, Trump's ultimate objective is to reallocate US diplomatic, military and economic resources to address the growing global influence of China and its impact on US national interests.

In this respect Putin appears keen to keep President Xi Jinping informed about American attempts at rapprochement and ongoing negotiations concerning Ukraine. Historically, the 'good relations' between China and Russia are relatively recent; the stability of this relationship is attributed to the resolution of their border disputes, their complementary economies and their non-interference in each other's ideological systems. But Moscow treads carefully as it knows it is the junior partner in the relationship.

Moreover, the prospect of an American–Russian rapprochement is not viewed by either Moscow or Beijing with any real sense of threat. Ultimately Russia's offerings to the US are limited; it has also been asserted that any rapprochement would not have an effect on Moscow–Beijing relations, as Sino-Russian ties are not dependent on any third party.

Furthermore, regarding the Ukraine war, China maintains that it is 'not a party' to the conflict (DPA 2024). China upholds the principles of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine while acknowledging Russia's legitimate security concerns. In the eyes of Beijing, these principles must be reconciled to end the war. Additionally, China opposes unilateral sanctions on Russia but, due to its significant trade ties with the EU and the US, it accepts the Russian sanctions and their secondary effects on the Chinese economy.

The ongoing negotiations on Ukraine are perceived by China as creating crucial momentum for achieving peace through dialogue, which should not be an opportunity missed. The American initiative is seen as a continuation of previous efforts, including the Chinese Peace Plan for Ukraine of 2023, the Ukraine Peace Summit 2024 in Switzerland and the Sino-Brazilian Six-Point Plan, also in 2024 (Gov.br 2024). China calls for non-escalation and direct negotiations, noting the signs of the exhaustion of manpower and resources on both the Russian and the Ukrainian sides.

Despite China's apparently laconic stance vis-à-vis the relationship, an American–Russian rapprochement could cause some concerns for Beijing. Economically, Moscow is less relevant to Beijing than Washington or Brussels. However, Russia holds fundamental strategic value due to its extensive land border with China. In the event of an American–Chinese rivalry escalating into direct conflict, Russia could become a lifeline for Beijing, especially if accompanied by a successful American blockade. These potential risks and scenarios, which seem increasingly likely over time, may serve as a significant incentive for China to obstruct the warming of relations between Moscow and Washington.

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