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TABLE OF CONTENTS

**UKRAINE AND A NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE:
A REVISIT OF THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY 3**
Dmytro Byliev

**AMERICAN DECOUPLING FROM EUROPE: THE NEW APPROACHES
TO WASHINGTON'S (QUASI) LEADERSHIP 11**
Oleksandr Kraiev

**THE UKRAINE EFFECT: SECURITY GUARANTEES AND THE RISE
OF MINILATERALISM IN EUROPE'S NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE 18**
Elnur Ismayil

**"THE DONROE DOCTRINE": TRANSFORMATION OF THE US SECURITY POLICY
TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA DURING DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND TERM..... 31**
Ivan Fechko

STRATEGIC STABILITY IN AN ERA OF MULTIPOLAR NUCLEAR COMPETITION..... 43
Alina Hrytsenko

**BELARUS'S SUCCESSION PROBLEM AS THE MISSING LINK IN EUROPE'S
POST-WAR SECURITY ARCHITECTURE 56**
Pavlo Rad

UKRAINE AND A NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: A REVISIT OF THE REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY

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This article applies Buzan and Wæver's Regional Security Complex (RSC) Theory to the post-2022 transformation of European security. It argues that Russia's aggression and full-scale invasion sought to eliminate Ukraine's role as an "insulator state", fusing the formerly distinct EU-centred and post-Soviet RSCs into a single interdependent super-complex. Its future remains an open securitisation contest: so that averting Russian hegemony depends on sustained Ukraine-EU balancing, expedited Ukrainian EU integration and active transatlantic engagement.

Introduction

The post-Cold War European security architecture, once predicated on the assumption of normative institutionalism and cautious economic interdependence with Moscow, was shattered by the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moscow's revisionist grand strategy aims at the violent dismantling of the Euro-Atlantic security order, so as to establish a sphere of unquestioned hegemonic dominance in Europe.

However, rather than fracturing the continent, Russian aggression has in fact catalysed an unprecedented structural realignment. Within that shift, Ukraine has transitioned from a role of 'insulator state' into that of a systemic anchor of continental defence. Analysing this transformation

requires looking beyond traditional power-balance metrics in European security. Recent structural shifts with the active integration of Ukraine into the European defence technological and industrial base demonstrate that European and Ukrainian security are now structurally and economically interconnected to a high degree.

The scale of this military and institutional integration represents a fundamental redrawing of geopolitical boundaries, and requires a rigorous conceptual lens to understand how these distinct spheres are merging. Buzan and Wæver's regional security complex (RSC) theory¹ provides a framework that supports situational and strategic analysis, while offering the necessary theoretical depth for forecasting the future trajectory of regional developments.

1 B. Buzan, *Regional Security Complex Theory in the Post-Cold War World*, [in:] F. Söderbaum, T.M. Shaw (eds.), *Theories of New Regionalism*, Palgrave Macmillan: London 2003, p. 140.

Examining power dynamics on the wider European continent through the prism of the RSC theory reveals that the European regional security complex is currently undergoing a generational shift. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represents a catalyst that is accelerating the transformation of the European RSC. This article argues that there is an ongoing process leading to the formation of one integrated "super-complex RSC", with a strong interregional level of security dynamics. If an effective balancing act is not upheld by the EU-centred RSC, with Ukraine as an integral and indispensable part, the system will transform into a Russia-centred superpower RSC based on Moscow's military-political hegemony. This makes Ukraine's accession to the EU on an expedited timeline a matter of strategic importance to the Union's enduring agency.



***Examining power dynamics
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To fully grasp the magnitude of this systemic shift, one must first establish the theoretical and historical baseline of the order that is presently unravelling. Conceptualising this disruption requires understanding the foundational structures of continental interdependence. Assessing the ongoing military-political consolidation of this new

European architecture requires a clear conceptual baseline of how continental security dynamics were previously compartmentalised. According to Buzan and Weaver, regional security complexes are defined as "a set of units whose major processes of complex securitisation and desecuritisation are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another"². The rupture of historical moments or transformative periods leads to the reassembling and restructuring of regional security complexes. For the European RSC, the major moment of this sort came in 1989 with the downfall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the bipolar security structure. For the most part of the ensuing post-Cold War era in European history, the security structure of Europe has shown the continuity of a model established in 1991, with the European landmass divided into two separate centred regional security complexes: the EU-Europe RSC based around the EU and the post-Soviet RSC centred around Russia, as the key actor capable of projecting power in the immediate regional neighbourhood³.

The Pre-Invasion Architecture: Two RSCs and a Contested Middle

The next transformative moments of arguably similar political and historical magnitude came in 2014 and later in 2022, with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine⁴. Moscow set out to challenge the post-Cold War security structure, move beyond the post-Soviet RSC and penetrate the sphere of the EU-Europe RSC. Applying Buzan and Weaver's definition to this context, Russia's securitisation of a threat from

2 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p. 492.

3 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p. 343.

4 O. Ditych, M. Laryš, *What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia's War on Ukraine?*, «European Security», May 2024, p. 2.

NATO and Ukraine was so “interlinked with the European and Euro Atlantic security that concerns of both parties could no longer be analysed or resolved apart from one another”⁵. Since the attempted illegal annexation of Crimea, through armed aggression against Ukraine in 2014, and now including the full-scale invasion of February 2022, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has become a signature feature of the European security landscape. This has created an effect of security interdependence amid intractable security dynamics between the EU-centred and Russia-centred regional security complexes.

For roughly two decades, the geopolitical architecture of the continent was characterised by recurrent phases of friction and engagement between the EU-centred RSC and post-Soviet RSC. During this period, the boundary between these two distinct security environments was maintained by a contested functional buffer zone, with Ukraine serving as the critical “insulator state”. Russia’s invasion in February 2022 attempted to merge these RSC structures, by means of obliterating the insulator model.

Moscow’s maximalist attempt to forcefully absorb Ukraine into a hegemonic, Russia-centred complex triggered an unprecedented, reciprocal securitisation response from the EU-Europe RSC, amplified by active engagement from the United States. By erasing the buffer, this zero-sum contest initiated the structural fusion of the two formerly distinct RSC architectures. Hence,

the current European security environment has turned into a unified super-complex defined by Buzan and Wæver as “a set of RSCs within which the presence of one or more great powers generates relatively high and consistent levels of interregional security dynamics”⁶.



Moscow’s maximalist attempt to forcefully absorb Ukraine into a hegemonic, Russia-centred complex triggered an unprecedented, reciprocal securitisation response from the EU-Europe RSC

For three decades following 1991, Ukraine occupied a contested strategic position as a buffer zone between the EU-Europe and post-Soviet RSCs. In RSCT (RSC Theory) terms, it functioned as an “insulator state,” occupying a geopolitical fault line without formal absorption into either security architecture⁷. Yet such an insulator status is rarely permanent. As Buzan and Wæver argue, such states are “likely candidates for external transformation”⁸, particularly when the integrationist pull of one neighbouring RSC intensifies at the expense of another⁹. Hence, an insulator’s survival depends entirely on the viability of the balancing act between these competing regional forces.

In Ukraine’s case, the gradual consolidation of its political and economic orientation towards the European RSC unsettled an

5 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p. 491.

6 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.492.

7 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.484.

8 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.487.

9 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.487.

equilibrium that Moscow had come to regard as strategically indispensable. Russia interpreted this shift as an unacceptable loss to its self-declared sphere of influence, and sought to reverse it through coercion and, ultimately, military force. The 2022 invasion was, therefore, a maximalist attempt to physically absorb the insulator state into the post-Soviet RSC, before it could fully integrate into the EU RSC.

Before 2022, Ukraine was assigned a role of a buffer state “standing at the centre of a strong pattern of securitisation, and its role was to separate rival powers”¹⁰. Russia considered this to be a temporary artificial structure that was to be eliminated when the circumstances were right. The EU-centred RSC considered this model, based on an insulator state as a grey security zone delineating the two RSCs, to be stable and permanent. However, this structure was ruptured by Russia in 2014, and ultimately eliminated in 2022.

Russia's Revisionist Designs

The strategic design honed by the Russian leadership after the rupture of the post-Cold War European security architecture aims to forcefully impose the structural fusion of the post-Soviet and EU RSCs. By trying to violently eliminate the Ukrainian “insulator state”, Russia aspires to weaponise its forward military presence, in order to project unmitigated military-political influence directly into Central and Eastern Europe. In effect, Moscow is attempting a fundamental alteration of the European security

constellation, by reengineering regional power dynamics to secure a highly favourable position at the global systemic level.

To execute this geopolitical brinksmanship, Russia initially weaponised the deep desecuritisation trend that had lulled the Euro-Atlantic community into a false sense of security prior to 2022¹¹. Their objective has been to dismantle the US-centric security architecture, and to replace it with an order subordinated to Russian military-political hegemony. Decoupling the transatlantic alliance has historically served as a core element of Moscow's grand strategy. However, initiating the 2022 invasion, Russia profoundly miscalculated the US, European and Ukrainian reaction, and triggered a historic re-securitisation rather than capitulation. As evidenced by the sweeping 2025–2026 EU defence mandates, including the 150 billion euros Security Action for Europe (SAFE) framework and the broader Re-Arm Europe plan, the EU-centred RSC is rapidly consolidating its own strategic autonomy and defence-industrial base. Despite facing a newly fortified continent, Moscow's ultimate objective remains unchanged: to use Ukraine as a springboard to elevate Russian status from that of a regional great power to that of a superpower, defined as an “actor with broad-spectrum capabilities exercised across the whole of the international system”¹².

A defining feature of Russia's long-term strategic design is its simultaneous penetration of the “four levels of the EU RSC security constellation”¹³. Rather than relying

10 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.489.

11 J. Sperling, M. Webber, NATO and the Ukraine Crisis: Collective Securitisation, «*European Journal of International Security*», vol. 2, no. 1, 2017, p. 32.

12 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.34.

13 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.51.

solely on conventional military force, Moscow employs a comprehensive spectrum of coercion to systematically dismantle the existing order from within. At the foundational domestic level, the Kremlin utilises hybrid warfare, subterfuge, and strategic corruption, to paralyse the internal cohesion of European states. This seamlessly feeds into the state-to-state and interregional levels, where Russia actively weaponises political friction to upset internal RSC dynamics and, for example, to aggressively block the institutional integration of Ukraine and Moldova into the Euro-Atlantic architecture. Concurrently, at the global level, Russia targets the overarching systemic structure by actively attempting to diminish the role of external global powers. By aggressively amplifying anti-US narratives and exploiting transatlantic divisions, the strategic objective remains the eventual eviction of US military forces from the EU RSC. By maintaining continuous pressure across these four interconnected levels, Moscow aims to induce the systemic collapse of the US-amplified EU-centred RSC architecture, thereby facilitating a cycle of “disassembly and reassembly”, so as to ultimately establish a Russia-centric super-complex hegemonic order.

The Counter-Balancing Coalition

The ultimate objective of Russia’s multilevel interference in the European security constellation is to structurally invert its polarity by transforming it from an EU-centred RSC into a unipolar superpower RSC, dominated by a Russian military-political hegemon. However, this contest for hegemony has instead had the unintended effect of accelerating the structural fusion of the continent through intense enmity towards Russia. As Buzan and Wæver argue, an RSC is “not defined by membership of

organisations or by agreement on belonging together. On the contrary, the most common way of being tied together is by negative dynamics, i.e., by being each other’s security problem”¹⁴. The full-scale invasion of 2022 cemented the European security complex into a single interdependent super-complex bound by permanent, reciprocal securitisation. As NATO operationalises its stringent regional defence plans and forward deployments, and as Russia transitions into a permanent war economy to sustain its attrition strategy, the two spheres have become inextricably linked by mutual containment. Within this new paradigm, Moscow and the Euro-Atlantic community are permanently locked together by the undeniable reality of being each other’s primary security problem.



At the foundational domestic level, the Kremlin utilises hybrid warfare, subterfuge, and strategic corruption, to paralyse the internal cohesion of European states

However, several critical factors currently hamper Russia’s ability to implement this ambitious revisionist strategy. First, Russia is increasingly exhibiting signs of strategic overstretch, driven by a volatile interplay between domestic economic constraints and global geopolitical dependencies. As the Russian state transitions into a permanent war economy, it faces severe macroeconomic trade-offs that have stifled broader economic stability throughout 2025 and 2026. Furthermore, its supply chain resilience and military manpower regeneration across multiple theatres are demonstrably faltering.

¹⁴ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2003, p.430.

The second factor impeding Moscow's grand design is the systemic militarisation and socio-political consolidation of Ukraine, which has successfully transformed into a genuine counter-balancer. Defying initial Kremlin calculations, Ukraine has utilised the period of war to forge a highly resilient state apparatus, emerging as one of the most capable and technologically adaptive land powers on the continent. This resilience is structurally underpinned by a vibrant national defence industry.

***altering the boundaries
of the EU-centred RSC
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Furthermore, the Ukrainian transformation is actively redrawing the external boundaries of the EU RSC. The formal integration of Ukraine into the Euro-Atlantic defence-industrial complex demonstrates a profound shift in interregional dynamics. This structural fusion is no longer merely aspirational. The rapid adoption of the 150-billion-euro SAFE framework in May 2025, which explicitly incorporates Ukraine into joint European defence procurement, followed by the European Council's authorisation of a €90 billion defence and macro-financial loan for 2026-2027, has structurally embedded Kyiv in the EU security ecosystem. The deeper this integration proceeds, the more profoundly the Ukrainian transformation manifests itself¹⁵.

Consequently, altering the boundaries of the EU-centred RSC through Ukraine's accession irreversibly changes the balance of power between the European and Russia-centred complexes. Preventing Russia from executing its grand design and confining its status to that of a regional power rather than a superpower relies entirely on the consolidation of this structural counterweight. In RSCT terms, the EU and Ukraine are actively institutionalising a balancing counter-coalition. Therefore, Russia's primary strategic imperative remains that of violently disrupting this integration and neutralising Ukraine, before this Euro-Atlantic counter-coalition renders Moscow's hegemonic ambitions permanently unattainable.

Future Trajectories of the Super-complex

Further examination of the European regional security complex demands analysis of possible future trajectories of regional developments. Ondřej Ditrych and Martin Laryš¹⁶ proposed a host of scenario models. Two of their scenarios capture the structural tension at the heart of the super-complex: the "unstable balance model" and the "stable negative model".

Under the unstable balance model, "the regional conflict does not escalate into a regional war. Rather, it evolves into a stalemate, while the regime in Russia remains mostly the same as well as operational codes of the Russian elites..... The function of deterrence and the balance of power in the security management architecture remains precarious"¹⁷. In this scenario, Russia continues to build its

15 D. Panchuk, The Impact of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Public Support for EU Enlargement, *«Journal of European Public Policy»*, vol. 31, no. 10, 2024, p.3129.

16 O. Ditrych, M. Laryš, What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia's War on Ukraine?, *«European Security»*, May 2024, p.10.

17 O. Ditrych, M. Laryš, What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia's War on Ukraine?, *«European Security»*, May 2024, p.11.

victory strategy on its ability to critically impact Ukraine's morale and exploit war fatigue in the West. This scenario supports the possibility of Russia transforming into a superpower within the European RSC, but leaves the chance for the EU powers and Ukraine to form a counterbalance to keep Russian grand ambitions at bay. In this scenario, the key variable is the engagement of the external superpower, the US, in upholding the stability of the EU-centred RSC.



In an environment where the balance of power remains precarious and highly contingent on volatile US engagement, expedited Ukrainian accession to the European Union emerges as the paramount geopolitical imperative for the EU-centred RSC

Under the stable negative scenario¹⁸, however, “regional security order would be stabilised according to Russia’s geopolitical visions. In particular, this would entail Moscow’s significant increase of influence in the ‘in-between’ space. The catalyst of such a scenario would be Ukraine’s defeat as an alternative outcome of the war. [...] The peace (however) will be only a fleeting illusion. After a time, when Russia, with empowered ultra-nationalist hardliners in Putin’s close circle, would recover from its losses it would likely continue in its advance against the Ukraine ‘rump’ and possibly other post-Soviet targets”. Such a shift in the balance of power in Russia’s favour would translate into a rewriting of the European

security architecture, which would be characterised by greater Russian influence, and eventually lay the foundation for the demilitarisation of NATO’s Eastern flank, in line with Moscow’s proposals of December 2021¹⁹. A strategic victory for Moscow against Ukraine would bolster the Kremlin’s revisionist geopolitical conduct and produce more long-term instability in the regional security system, or lead to a model in which the centre of this system would be ordered on Moscow’s terms as a military-political superpower.

The Fast Track Integration Imperative

Mitigating the severe risks outlined in both the unstable balance model and stable negative model requires the EU to exercise decisive strategic agency, moving beyond reactive containment to structural consolidation. In an environment where the balance of power remains precarious and highly contingent on volatile US engagement, expedited Ukrainian accession to the European Union emerges as the paramount geopolitical imperative for the EU-centred RSC. Delaying integration perpetuates a dangerous and unfavourable status quo, leaving the shattered insulator state vulnerable to Moscow’s long-term strategy of attrition and continuous cross-domain coercion. Conversely, accelerated accession decisively limits the Kremlin’s core revisionist objectives. By formally extending the institutional, legal, and political boundaries of the EU project, including the mutual solidarity clauses inherent in the EU framework, Brussels can permanently anchor Ukraine within its security architecture. This would structurally neutralise the stable negative

18 O. Dityrych, M. Laryś, What Can European Security Architecture Look Like in the Wake of Russia’s War on Ukraine?, «European Security», May 2024, p.14.

19 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en, access: 11 May 2026].

scenario by rendering the demilitarisation of the Eastern flank and the expansion of the Russian sphere of influence institutionally unattainable.

Furthermore, neutralising Russia's strategy of exploiting Western war fatigue demands a shift from ad hoc military assistance to permanent structural integration. Accepting Ukraine on an expedited timeline is imperative for the EU's own security coherence. The unstable balance model assumes a protracted stalemate, a condition that has historically favoured the actor with a greater capacity for resource mobilisation. To sustain a credible counterbalancing coalition against a militarised Russian economy, the EU must fully integrate Ukraine's vast, battle-tested defence-industrial base, food-security weight, and critical raw-materials resources. An expedited integration would transform Ukraine from an external beneficiary of European financial instruments into an internal systemic engine of European strategic autonomy. By permanently fusing this potential, the EU and Ukraine can establish a resilient, self-sustaining economic bloc, capable of enduring prolonged systemic friction of the new regional security super-complex, thus eroding the economic viability of Moscow's revisionist grand strategy.

Conclusion

To conclude, the current power dynamics across the wider European continent demonstrate a rapid systemic rupture of the post-Cold War order. The architecture

of two distinct, compartmentalised RSCs has definitively collapsed, fusing the EU-centred and post-Soviet RSCs into a single, highly volatile RSC super-complex. This new structure is characterised by intense intractable interregional security dynamics and reciprocal securitisation. Maintaining the current balancing act cannot rely on tactical and reactive crisis management. It requires permanent strategic solutions and institutionalisation. Should the members of the EU-centred RSC fail to uphold this equilibrium, the system risks devolving into a unipolar superpower RSC dominated by Russian military-political hegemony. From the RSCT perspective, the defining variable in this securitisation contest is whether the European Union can exercise decisive strategic agency. Integrating Ukraine's battle-tested defence-industrial capacity and structural resilience is a foundational prerequisite for securing European strategic autonomy and permanently checking Russian revisionism.

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AMERICAN DECOUPLING FROM EUROPE: THE NEW APPROACHES TO WASHINGTON'S (QUASI) LEADERSHIP

Oleksandr Kraiev

Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"

The structural transformation of the transatlantic alliance is fundamentally driven by the United States' shift from an unconditional security guarantor to a transactional "quasi-leader" that prioritises the Indo-Pacific over Europe. Fostered by President Trump's own agenda and his "America First" doctrine, Washington's strategic recalibration effectively forces European nations to rapidly internalise the financial and conventional burdens of their own continental defence. In response to this eroding security umbrella and the slowness of NATO mechanisms, agile minilateral coalitions are emerging as critical deterrence tools, highlighting Ukraine's new role as a battle-tested security provider rather than merely as a recipient.

America First

The erosion of the post-Cold War transatlantic consensus has been driven by the "America First" doctrine, which effectively replaces values-based alliance commitments with a more transactional approach to geopolitics. The personalisation of US foreign policy under Trump's second administration is defined by scepticism towards multilateral institutions such as NATO and the European Union, heavily favouring bilateral deal-making, whereby American leverage can be maximised without classic bureaucratic constraints.

The traditional security umbrella is no longer viewed as an unconditional common good for both Americans and Europeans, but is rather evaluated through

a rigid economic lens. The European allies are increasingly perceived not merely as strategic partners but as economic competitors who have historically "free-ridden" on American military investments while simultaneously maintaining favourable trade imbalances. This paradigm is evident in the administration's strong emphasis on economic metrics as a primary measure of allied utility, reflected in President Trump's assertion at the World Economic Forum that his administration has "slashed our gaping trade deficit by a staggering 77%."¹ Consequently, the American security guarantee is implicitly conditional, tethered to European concessions in trade and defence spending, thus fundamentally altering the psychological and strategic foundation of the Euro-Atlantic bond.

¹ Donald Trump speaks at the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos. Read the transcript here, REV, 22.01.2026, <https://www.rev.com/transcripts/trump-at-wef>

This transactional restructuring of the alliance is deeply intertwined with Washington's aggressive pivot towards the Indo-Pacific, wherein China has been elevated from a peer competitor to become a strategic challenge to American global hegemony. This reassessment dictates a major reallocation of military, diplomatic, and intelligence resources away from the Euro-Atlantic theatre. Within this new calculus, European security crises, even high-intensity conflicts such as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, are increasingly viewed by Washington as regional distractions that threaten to drain the resources required for Pacific containment strategies. As Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth unequivocally stated to allies, "stark strategic realities prevent the United States of America from being primarily focused on the security of Europe."² By openly acknowledging that the US can no longer act as the primary security guarantor for the continent, Washington is actively forcing a paradigm shift, signalling that European defence must be managed locally, while American strategic bandwidth is preserved for the Asian theatre.

Furthermore, the external recalibration of US commitments is simultaneously driven by a deep crisis in foreign policy consensus at home, exacerbated by deep domestic polarisation. Trump's political approach is both a product and an amplifier of profound fatigue with foreign commitments among the US electorate, capitalising on a widespread exhaustion with "endless wars" and disproportionate overseas financial obligations. The administration's rhetoric has reinforced neo-isolationist and anti-

globalist sentiments, fracturing the long-standing bipartisan establishment that historically underwrote European security. This inward turn transforms international obligations into domestic political liabilities, shifting the political imperative towards immediate, tangible benefits for the American taxpayer and strict border enforcement.



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The institutionalisation of this fatigue dictates that maintaining the traditional architecture of European security is increasingly viewed as politically toxic. Therefore, the administration's demands are framed not merely as strategic adjustments but as domestic political imperatives. As the Department of Defence has articulated, the explicit expectation is that the Europeans step up, while America focuses on areas of the world that are in great danger, amid strong domestic pressure to prioritise consequential threats to their homeland and the security of their own borders.³ This domestic political dynamic ensures that the push for a European decoupling is not merely a temporary diplomatic posture, but a permanent structural reality dictated by the wishes of the American electorate.

2 Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered), US Department of War, 12.02.2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>

3 Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered), US Department of War, 12.02.2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/>

The Concept of “Quasi-Leadership” and the “Backbencher” Strategy

The transition of the United States from a hegemon to a “quasi-leader” represents a recalibration of transatlantic dynamics, whereby Washington seeks to retain its political influence while reducing its asymmetric financial and military exposure. This “quasi-leadership” rests on the premise that the US acts as a managing partner rather than the sole provider of European stability. The administration has effectively rejected the traditional “Pax Americana” model, calculating that a more fragmented and unpredictable regional security environment is an acceptable strategic trade-off if it significantly reduces costs for the average US taxpayer. In this transactional framework, geographic realities are invoked to justify the reduction in unconditional support, reframing continental defence as primarily a local responsibility. This sentiment was starkly articulated by Donald Trump before returning to office: “If Europe is not going to pay, why should we pay? They are much more greatly affected. We have an ocean in between us. They don’t.”⁴ Consequently, this doctrine asserts that American engagement is no longer guaranteed by shared historical ties, but is instead strictly contingent upon the direct, measurable financial relief it provides to the United States.

Central to this new strategy is the weaponisation of burden-sharing, which has transformed NATO’s baseline defence-spending targets from diplomatic aspirations into geopolitical ultimatums. Under the paradigm of quasi-leadership, the traditional understanding of the need for collective defence is replaced by a transactional “protection pact” mentality.

Security guarantees and the Article 5 commitments are no longer viewed as the inherent rights of allied democracies, but rather as conditional services rendered only to those who fulfil specific financial quotas. This conditionality introduces unprecedented volatility into the Alliance’s security posture. The administration has made it clear that failure to meet these financial thresholds – 2%, 3%, and most recently 5% – effectively nullifies the American security umbrella. In a stark departure from decades of deterrence strategy aimed at adversaries, the threat of abandonment is now openly directed at allies. Recounting a conversation with a European leader, Trump illustrated this during his speech in South Carolina: “You didn’t pay, you’re delinquent? No, I would not protect you. In fact, I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You got to pay. You got to pay your bills.”⁵ This rhetoric weakens the unconditional solidarity that has historically anchored European stability, replacing it with a pay-to-play model of collective defence.



The transition of the United States from a hegemon to a “quasi-leader” represents a recalibration of transatlantic dynamics

To operationalise this reduced presence, Washington is effectively implementing a strategy of “back-bench leadership.” Operationally, this repositioning dictates that the United States intends to transition into the role of a high-end arms supplier, intelligence coordinator, and diplomatic

4 Read the Full Transcripts of Donald Trump’s Interviews With TIME, TIME Magazine, 30.04.2024, <https://time.com/6972022/donald-trump-transcript-2024-election/>

5 Edward Helmore, Trump says he would encourage Russia to attack Nato allies who pay too little, The Guardian, 11.02.2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/11/donald-trump-says-he-would-encourage-russia-to-attack-nato-countries-who-dont-pay-bills>

moderator, rather than serving as the primary provider of boots on the ground in Europe. By deliberately withdrawing the certainty of American intervention, the administration aims to force a rapid strategic maturation among its European partners. This calculated reduction of the US military presence acts as a coercive mechanism, compelling local actors to assume immediate, localised responsibility for deterring regional threats.



Washington is effectively implementing a strategy of “back-bench leadership”

The underlying rationale claims that decades of absolute American guarantees have stifled European defence capabilities, a perspective clearly voiced by J.D. Vance: “The problem with Europe is that it doesn’t provide enough of a deterrence on its own because it hasn’t taken the initiative in its own security. I think that the American security blanket has allowed European security to atrophy.”⁶ Therefore, the strategy of quasi-leadership is not merely a retreat, but an intentional shock doctrine designed to dismantle perceived European complacency, thereby forcing the continent to physically and financially internalise the burden of its own survival.

Contours of a New European Security Architecture

The practical application of American quasi-leadership creates an unprecedented institutional stress test for NATO, fracturing the established architecture of Euro-Atlantic

deterrence. The transactional rhetoric coming from Washington deliberately undermines the psychological core of Article 5, shifting the perception of collective defence from an ironclad certainty to a calculated, conditional gamble. This dynamic is fostering the creation of a “two-tier” Alliance, creating a sharp internal division between states that comfortably meet or exceed strict financial benchmarks and those deemed financially incapable or unwilling, and vulnerable to American abandonment. The resulting strategic ambiguity constitutes a critical vulnerability. By replacing unconditional American leadership with conditional audits, a deterrence vacuum emerges. This grey zone is highly susceptible to exploitation by adversaries, primarily Russia, which is encouraged to test the Alliance’s cohesion through hybrid aggression and sub-threshold provocations (namely, drone flyovers and shows of force in border regions), acutely aware that transatlantic unity for mutual defence is no longer automatic.



By replacing unconditional American leadership with conditional audits, a deterrence vacuum emerges

In direct response to this eroding transatlantic certainty, the concept of European Strategic Autonomy has undergone a radical conceptual evolution, transitioning from a solely French ambition into a pan-European survival imperative. The realisation that the continent can no longer permanently outsource its security

⁶ Senator and Member of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, of the United States of America (later Vice President of the United States of America). JD Vance used his remarks at the Munich Security Conference 2024 to call for Europe to “finally take a bigger role in assuring its own security”, Munich Security Conference, February 2024, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/books/selected-key-speeches-volume-i/2020-2024/speech-jd-vance-2024/>

has mainstreamed the doctrine of self-reliance. French President Emmanuel Macron encapsulated this existential awakening, warning starkly: “There is a risk our Europe could die. We are not equipped to face the risks. Europe must show that it is never a vassal of the United States and that it also knows how to talk to all the other regions of the world.”⁷ Operationalising this concept requires a massive paradigm shift in defence procurement and the urgent establishment of a robust European Defence Technological and Industrial Base. The European Union is attempting to pivot away from a long-standing reliance on American off-the-shelf military hardware towards sovereign production capabilities. As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen articulated, the new geopolitical reality dictates that “Europe must spend more, spend better and spend European”⁸, reflecting an emerging consensus that military sovereignty is impossible without industrial autonomy.

A pragmatic reality check reveals that European armed forces currently lack the critical, high-end enablers historically provided almost exclusively by the United States — including advanced communications, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance networks, strategic airlift, deep-strike precision capabilities, and the ultimate deterrent of a unified nuclear umbrella. Bridging this vast capability deficit requires a significant financial and organisational effort, but the most critical constraint is time. There is a discrepancy between the rapid, politically driven pace of American decoupling and the slow, deeply bureaucratic timeline required for European states to rebuild their military-industrial complexes. Acknowledging this



A pragmatic reality check reveals that European armed forces currently lack the critical, high-end enablers historically provided almost exclusively by the United States

critical time lag, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius issued a sobering assessment of the continent’s readiness against an emboldened Russia, noting already in 2023 that “I don’t like to look into a crystal ball... I can’t predict if and when an attack on NATO territory might occur. But it could happen in five to eight years.”⁹ This temporal chasm between the withdrawal of the American shield and the forging of a capable European sword represents the most precarious phase in the restructuring of the continent’s security architecture.

Minilateralism as an Anti-Crisis Tool and the Regionalisation of Security

As the traditional transatlantic consensus fractures, ‘minilateralism’ is rapidly emerging as the most viable crisis management tool in the European security toolkit, fundamentally reorganising deterrence around regional agility rather than universal consensus. This shift is driven by the stark realisation that a 32-member NATO, while retaining its ultimate Article 5 mandate, operates with a slow-paced, consensus-based bureaucracy that is often too sluggish to pre-empt rapidly escalating crises. In contrast, minilateral coalitions — smaller, purpose-driven groups of nations united by shared geography and acute threat perceptions — prioritise speed

7 Maia Snow, Alessandra Scotto di Santolo, Emmanuel Macron makes worrying plea as he warns ‘Europe could die’, Express, 25.04.2024, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1892325/emmanuel-macron-brexit-france>

8 Keynote speech by President von der Leyen at the European Defence and Security Summit, European Commission, 17.04.2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/speech_24_2101

9 Russia could attack in 5-8 years. Pistorius calls on Europe and NATO to prepare for ‘worst case scenario’, RBC Ukraine, 18.02.2024, <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/russia-could-attack-in-5-8-years-pistorius-1708287809.html>

as a strategic leverage. They offer the critical advantage of immediate, flexible decision-making without the paralysing requirement of securing universal political agreement from capitals thousands of miles away from the crisis zone. This decentralised approach directly addresses the vacuum left by the US transition towards quasi-leadership. By establishing rapid-response mechanisms that can act decisively below the level of a full NATO mobilisation, these regional alliances provide a functional, immediate patch, covering up for the reduced forward presence of U.S. combat forces, ensuring that deterrence is not solely dependent on the geopolitical mood in Washington.



The strategic centre of gravity is shifting towards regional frameworks, exemplified by the expanding operational role of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force

This dynamic is actively reshaping the deterrence architecture along Europe's Northern and Eastern flanks, where proximity to Russia dictates a different security approach. The strategic centre of gravity is shifting towards regional frameworks, exemplified by the expanding operational role of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, which serves as a highly flexible military instrument capable of rapid deployment across the High North — or Arctic, North Atlantic, and Baltic Sea regions. For countries bordering Russia, theoretical debates over strategic autonomy are replaced by an acute perception of threat. This shared vulnerability has fostered a distinct “pre-war” mentality, driving these nations to integrate their military capabilities, intelligence sharing, and defence procurement far beyond standard NATO requirements. Consequently, new strategic axes, such as the emerging Nordic defence integration and the deepening

political-military cooperation between some NATO capitals and Kyiv, are rapidly consolidating as the functional backbone of European deterrence, capable of operating effectively even during periods of American strategic hesitation.

At the very vanguard of this minilateral security network stands Ukraine, forcing a profound paradigm shift in how European security is conceptualised. Rather than being viewed merely as a security recipient awaiting integration into Western structures, Ukraine has evolved into Europe's most essential security provider, and it possesses the most battle-tested military force on the continent. This transformation is being institutionalised not through traditional multilateral formats but through a dense web of bilateral security agreements negotiated between Kyiv and key European capitals during the last three years. This web of agreements ensures deep operational interoperability between Ukraine and its Eastern and Northern European partners. The signing of the Hundred-Year Cooperation Agreement between Ukraine and the United Kingdom is still perceived as a pinnacle of this type of cooperation, transforming tactical cooperation into a prolonged strategic course.

Minilateral integration ensures that Ukraine acts as an immediate, highly capable shield for the continent, anchoring the European security architecture precisely when the American umbrella is being recalibrated. Although the immediate benefits for Ukraine remain highly politicised, especially regarding future NATO membership, Europe gains a great deal from this type of cooperation.

Understanding — and Living — the New Reality

Ultimately, the phenomenon of American decoupling from Europe must not be misdiagnosed as a retreat into 1930s-style isolationism. Rather, it constitutes a calculated and enduring restructuring of the

transatlantic alliance. While this transition bears the distinct transactional and often disruptive signature of Donald Trump, the underlying geopolitical mechanisms are driven by structural inevitabilities — most notably, the imperative to confront the rising threat of China in the Indo-Pacific. This dictates a permanent reallocation of American strategic bandwidth. As Elbridge Colby, one of the key architects of this strategic realignment, argues, “The core strategic reality laid out by the NSS and NDS is this: Europe must assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defence.”¹⁰ Consequently, the old paradigm of unconditional American hegemony is increasingly obsolete, replaced by a rigid expectation that European allies must physically and financially shoulder the burden of their own survival.



Although the immediate benefits for Ukraine remain highly politicised, especially regarding future NATO membership, Europe gains a great deal from this type of cooperation

This transition solidifies the concept of American “quasi-leadership.” Washington is actively redefining its geopolitical posture from being a paternalistic, unconditional guarantor of European stability to becoming an offshore balancing power. In this new division of labour, the United States seeks to

retain its overarching political influence and its role as a supplier of high-end strategic assets, while simultaneously sharing out the burden of providing conventional deterrence on the continent among the Europeans. The era of the American security umbrella as a guaranteed public good has been replaced by a pay-to-play model. This is a profound psychological and operational shift for a continent accustomed to outsourcing its defence. Under such quasi-leadership, the US acts as the alliance’s managing partner and high-end tech provider, while demanding greater returns on investment and delegating the heavy lifting of regional deterrence to local actors.

The success or failure of the new European security architecture now depends entirely on the continent’s ability to race against the clock. The US transition from absolute hegemony to quasi-leadership has opened a dangerous window of vulnerability, one that revisionist states such as Russia are eager to exploit.

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10 Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial (As Prepared), US Department of War, 12.02.2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4404801/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-nato-defense/>

THE UKRAINE EFFECT: SECURITY GUARANTEES AND THE RISE OF MINILATERALISM IN EUROPE'S NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has turned out to be a defining moment for European security, exposing both the strengths and limitations of existing security arrangements. Beyond its immediate military and geopolitical consequences, the war has reignited debates over the credibility of security guarantees and has accelerated the search for alternative forms of security cooperation. This article examines how the "Ukraine effect" is reshaping Europe's emerging security architecture through the growing prominence of minilateral alliances and flexible coalition-building. The author argues that the failure of previous security assurances to deter aggression against Ukraine has generated renewed interest in security mechanisms that extend beyond traditional multilateral frameworks.

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has fundamentally altered Europe's strategic landscape. More than any other regional conflict, the war has exposed structural weaknesses in the post-Cold War security order, and challenged long-standing assumptions: that major interstate war had become unlikely in Europe, that economic interdependence would constrain revisionist behaviour, that existing multilateral institutions and the rules-based international order were sufficient to preserve regional stability, and

that political security assurances short of binding defence commitments could provide credible deterrence. These developments have prompted a fundamental reassessment of European security, including a growing reliance on more flexible and purpose-driven minilateral security arrangements. While NATO has demonstrated unprecedented political cohesion in supporting Ukraine and reinforcing its eastern flank¹, the conflict has simultaneously revealed the limitations of existing institutional arrangements in responding to rapidly evolving security threats. The result has not been simply a reassessment of European defence policy

1 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29.06.2022, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>, pp.1-13; NATO, Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 11.07.2023; NATO, Washington Summit Declaration, 10.07.2024.

but a broader transformation in the way European states conceptualise security cooperation.²

The “Ukraine effect” extends well beyond the battlefield. It has reshaped national security strategies, accelerated defence modernisation, revived military planning across Europe, and prompted governments to reconsider how security commitments are organised and implemented. Perhaps most importantly, it has renewed attention to a central question that had gradually faded after the Cold War: what makes security guarantees credible? Ukraine’s experience has demonstrated that political assurances, diplomatic declarations, and even extensive international partnerships may prove insufficient when they are not supported by clearly defined military commitments, operational planning, and political willingness to employ force. The gap between political solidarity and legally binding defence obligations became one of the defining lessons of the war.

This lesson has had profound implications across Europe. States situated along NATO’s eastern flank, as well as countries with growing concerns regarding Russian revisionism, increasingly recognise that relying exclusively on broad multilateral institutions may not always provide the level of responsiveness required by an increasingly volatile security environment. Although NATO remains the indispensable bedrock of Euro-Atlantic defence, contemporary security challenges demand additional mechanisms capable of responding more rapidly to emerging crises, coordinating military capabilities among like-minded partners, and addressing region-specific threats.

Consequently, Europe is witnessing the rapid expansion of what has become known as *minilateralism*³ – security cooperation involving a limited number of states united by common strategic interests, geographical proximity, or shared threat perceptions. Unlike traditional multilateral organisations, minilateral arrangements emphasise flexibility, operational effectiveness, and political cohesion, rather than universal membership or comprehensive institutionalisation. Their growing importance reflects not dissatisfaction with NATO itself but recognition that collective defence increasingly requires complementary layers of cooperation capable of filling strategic and operational gaps.



The “Ukraine effect” extends well beyond the battlefield.

It has reshaped national security strategies, accelerated defence modernisation, revived military planning across Europe, and prompted governments to reconsider how security commitments are organised and implemented

The proliferation of these initiatives is already reshaping Europe’s security landscape. The Joint Expeditionary Force has evolved into an increasingly important framework for Northern European security. The United Kingdom has strengthened bilateral and trilateral defence cooperation across Northern and Eastern Europe. The Nordic states have accelerated military integration following Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO. Poland has expanded regional security cooperation,

2 *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, Council of the European Union, March 2022, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/strategic-compass/.

3 Moises Naim, “Minilateralism,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 173 (2009), pp. 135–136, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/21/minilateralism/>; William Tow, “Minilateral Security’s Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific”, in Kai He (ed.) *Contested Multilateralism 2.0 and Asian security dynamics*, Routledge, 2020.

while simultaneously investing heavily in national military capabilities. The Weimar Triangle alliance between France, Germany, and Poland has gained renewed strategic significance, while various regional defence initiatives around the Baltic and Black Seas have become increasingly relevant for deterrence and military planning. These developments collectively indicate that European security is becoming more layered, networked, and adaptive, than at any time since the end of the Cold War.



***the growing prominence of
minilateralism also raises
important policy questions. Can
flexible coalitions provide meaningful
security guarantees without
weakening broader alliance cohesion?***

Several interconnected factors explain this transformation. First, the strategic environment has become significantly more unpredictable. Russia's willingness to employ large-scale military force against neighbouring states has fundamentally altered European threat assessments. Second, uncertainty regarding the future trajectory of transatlantic relations — particularly debates surrounding long-term American engagement in European security — has encouraged European governments to diversify security partnerships, without seeking to replace NATO. Third, contemporary security challenges increasingly require coalitions capable of acting quickly, integrating specialised military capabilities, and coordinating responses across multiple domains, including cyber defence, intelligence, critical infrastructure protection, maritime security, and emerging technologies.

These developments challenge conventional understandings of European security architecture. Traditionally, European defence has been viewed primarily through the

institutional framework of NATO and, to a lesser extent, the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Yet the emerging security landscape suggests that this binary perspective is becoming insufficient. Rather than evolving towards either greater institutional centralisation or fragmentation, Europe appears to be developing a multi-layered security system, in which formal alliances coexist with overlapping networks of flexible partnerships. Such arrangements do not necessarily undermine collective defence; instead, they often enhance it by strengthening regional deterrence, improving military interoperability, and enabling faster political decision-making among states sharing similar strategic priorities.

Nevertheless, the growing prominence of minilateralism also raises important policy questions. Can flexible coalitions provide meaningful security guarantees without weakening broader alliance cohesion? Do overlapping defence initiatives improve resilience, or do they create duplication of effort and strategic fragmentation? How should NATO and the EU incorporate increasingly autonomous regional security arrangements into a coherent deterrence strategy? Most importantly, what lessons does Ukraine's experience offer regarding the relationship between formal security guarantees and practical defence cooperation?

This article argues that the rise of European minilateralism represents one of the most significant strategic consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Rather than constituting an alternative to NATO, minilateral cooperation has emerged as an adaptive response to heightened geopolitical uncertainty and the evolving requirements of deterrence in the twenty-first century. The failure of previous security assurances to prevent Russian aggression has reinforced the importance of smaller, politically cohesive security groupings capable of translating shared threat perceptions into practical military

cooperation. Their growing role reflects not institutional competition but functional complementarity within an increasingly complex European security environment.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. The first section examines how Ukraine's experience has transformed perceptions of security guarantees and deterrence across Europe. The second explores the strategic logic behind the rapid expansion of minilateral security cooperation and identifies the principal drivers behind its growing importance. The third assesses the relationship between minilateral arrangements and NATO, evaluating whether these initiatives reinforce or complicate the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Finally, the article outlines the policy implications of Europe's increasingly multi-layered security order and considers how flexible security coalitions can contribute to long-term strategic stability while preserving alliance cohesion.

The central argument is straightforward. Europe's future security architecture will not be defined by a choice between NATO and minilateralism. Instead, it will increasingly depend on their interaction. The Ukraine effect has demonstrated that credible deterrence requires both strong collective defence institutions and agile regional coalitions capable of adapting to rapidly changing security conditions. Understanding this evolving relationship is essential for shaping a more resilient European security order in the years ahead.

The Ukraine Effect: Why Existing Security Guarantees Failed

The most enduring strategic lesson of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is not simply that interstate war has returned to Europe. Rather, it is that the credibility of security guarantees depends less on political declarations than on the

demonstrated willingness and capability of states to act collectively under conditions of extreme risk. Ukraine's experience has fundamentally altered European thinking about deterrence, exposing the limitations of security assurances that lack enforceable military commitments and reinforcing the importance of practical defence cooperation. This reassessment has become one of the principal drivers behind the emergence of a more flexible and multi-layered European security architecture.

For more than three decades after the end of the Cold War, European security rested on several interconnected assumptions. The first was that economic interdependence would reduce the likelihood of major interstate conflict. The second assumed that international institutions and international law would significantly constrain revisionist behaviour. The third held that broad multilateral organisations, particularly NATO and the EU, would gradually expand the zone of stability across the continent. Although these assumptions were repeatedly challenged – by the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Russia's intervention in Georgia (2008), and the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 – they nevertheless continued to shape strategic thinking throughout much of Europe.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022) effectively invalidated these assumptions. The scale of the military operation demonstrated that revisionist powers remained prepared to use overwhelming conventional force to alter borders, despite the imposition of severe diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions. Equally significant, the conflict revealed that international norms and political commitments, while important for mobilising diplomatic and economic responses, are insufficient to prevent aggression in the absence of credible military deterrence.

This distinction lies at the heart of what may be termed the “Ukraine effect.” The war has shifted attention away from declaratory security towards operational security. European policymakers increasingly recognise that deterrence depends not merely on formal commitments but on the existence of integrated military planning, deployable forces, prepositioned equipment, intelligence sharing, logistical infrastructure, and established political mechanisms capable of making rapid decisions during crises. In other words, security guarantees have become credible only when they are backed by visible military capability and institutional preparedness.



***The war has shifted attention
away from declaratory security
towards operational security***

Ukraine’s own security experience illustrates this reality with particular clarity. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited one of the world’s largest nuclear arsenals. In return for joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a non-nuclear state, Kyiv received political assurances regarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity through the 1994 Budapest Memorandum signed by Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and the UK.⁴ Although the memorandum represented an important diplomatic achievement in the context of nuclear non-proliferation, it did not establish legally binding collective defence obligations comparable to Article 5 of the North Atlantic

Treaty. The distinction between security assurances and security guarantees would later become strategically decisive.⁵

The 2014 occupation of Crimea exposed the practical limitations of such assurances.⁶ While Ukraine received significant diplomatic support and economic assistance, although the West introduced sanctions against Russia, no external military intervention occurred to restore Ukraine’s territorial integrity. The full-scale invasion in 2022 reinforced this lesson even more dramatically. Despite unprecedented military assistance from NATO members, Ukraine continued to defend itself without the direct protection afforded to alliance members. This outcome demonstrated that extensive political support, however substantial, does not automatically translate into collective military defence.

The implications extend well beyond Ukraine. Across Europe, governments began reassessing the practical meaning of deterrence. States located on NATO’s eastern flank interpreted the war not only as evidence of Russia’s revisionist ambitions but also as a reminder that national security cannot rely exclusively on political expectations regarding future allied responses. Instead, deterrence increasingly requires forward military presence, regional operational planning, resilient supply chains, integrated command structures, and the ability to fortify vulnerable regions rapidly. These are precisely the areas where smaller and more flexible security arrangements can often generate added value alongside larger alliance structures.

4 Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Budapest Memorandum), signed 5 December 1994, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280401fbb>.

5 Steven Pifer, *The Trilateral Process: The United States, Ukraine, Russia and Nuclear Weapons*, Brookings Institution, Arms Control Series No. 6, 2011, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/05_trilateral_process_pifer.pdf.

6 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262, *Territorial Integrity of Ukraine*, 27.03.2014.

Another important consequence of the war has been the renewed emphasis on preparedness rather than reaction. For many years, European security planning focused primarily on crisis management, stabilisation missions, and expeditionary operations outside NATO territory. Russia's invasion redirected attention towards territorial defence, high-intensity conventional warfare, military mobilisation, and industrial capacity for sustained conflict. The war demonstrated that deterrence begins long before the outbreak of hostilities. It depends on continuous military readiness, robust defence industries, secure energy infrastructure, cyber resilience, and effective civil preparedness.



Another important consequence of the war has been the renewed emphasis on preparedness rather than reaction

This broader understanding of security has encouraged governments to seek cooperation formats capable of addressing highly specific operational requirements. Unlike universal institutions that must accommodate diverse strategic priorities, smaller coalitions can concentrate resources on common regional challenges. Countries sharing similar threat perceptions often find it easier to coordinate procurement, conduct joint exercises, harmonise military doctrines, and establish standing operational frameworks. Such cooperation strengthens deterrence not by replacing larger alliances but by enhancing practical readiness where it matters most.

The war has also transformed perceptions of strategic uncertainty. During the immediate post-Cold War period, many European governments assumed that the overall

trajectory of transatlantic security would remain relatively stable. Although political disagreements occasionally emerged within NATO, the long-term commitment of the United States to European defence was generally taken for granted. Today, this assumption is considerably questionable. Successive debates within the United States regarding burden sharing, strategic competition with China, domestic political polarisation, and future military priorities have generated uncertainty among European allies about the future distribution of security responsibilities.

Importantly, this uncertainty should not be interpreted as a loss of confidence in NATO itself. Rather, it reflects the recognition that European security can no longer depend exclusively on a single institutional framework or a single external guarantor. The objective is therefore not strategic autonomy in the sense of replacing NATO, but strategic resilience — the ability of European states to strengthen their own capacity for collective defence, while remaining firmly anchored within the transatlantic alliance.



this uncertainty should not be interpreted as a loss of confidence in NATO itself

The Ukraine effect has accelerated this shift from dependence to resilience. Governments are investing unprecedented resources in defence modernisation⁷, expanding ammunition production, rebuilding military stockpiles, increasing defence budgets, and strengthening domestic defence industries. These investments are increasingly accompanied by new forms of regional cooperation designed to maximise

⁷ *Trends in World Military Expenditure 2024*, SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), April 2025, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2024>.

interoperability and reduce duplication. Joint procurement initiatives, multinational capability development, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and coordinated force planning all reflect a broader effort to translate political solidarity into operational effectiveness.



The credibility of deterrence is therefore becoming cumulative rather than singular. It emerges from the interaction of multiple security mechanisms operating simultaneously at different levels

The changing understanding of the meaning of deterrence is equally evident in military planning. Traditional concepts of deterrence focused primarily on preventing large-scale invasion through the threat of collective retaliation.⁸ Contemporary deterrence has become considerably more multidimensional. It encompasses cyber defence, protection of critical infrastructure, maritime security, counter-disinformation efforts, space capabilities, energy resilience, and technological innovation. Many of these challenges require cooperation among relatively small groups of states possessing similar capabilities or facing comparable vulnerabilities. Flexible partnerships often prove better suited than larger organisations to developing specialised responses in these areas.

Furthermore, Russia's war has demonstrated that security today is increasingly regional in its operational requirements, while remaining global in its strategic consequences. The defence of the Baltic region, the security of the High North, the

stability of the Black Sea, and the protection of critical undersea infrastructure each involve distinct geographical realities, military balances, and political dynamics. A uniform approach is therefore neither feasible nor desirable. Instead, Europe requires differentiated security mechanisms capable of addressing regional contingencies without undermining the coherence of collective defence.

This evolution represents a significant departure from earlier debates concerning European security institutions. Previous discussions often framed policy choices as alternatives between NATO and the European Union, between transatlanticism and European strategic autonomy, or between bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The experience of Ukraine suggests that such binary thinking has become increasingly obsolete. Contemporary security is being organised through overlapping layers of cooperation rather than mutually exclusive institutional models.

The credibility of deterrence is therefore becoming cumulative rather than singular. It emerges from the interaction of multiple security mechanisms operating simultaneously at different levels. NATO continues to provide the indispensable framework for collective defence and nuclear deterrence. The EU contributes to economic resilience, defence-industrial cooperation, sanctions policy, and regulatory instruments. Minilateral coalitions strengthen regional preparedness, operational flexibility, and military interoperability. Bilateral defence agreements reinforce political commitments among key partners. Together, these mechanisms generate a more resilient deterrence architecture than any individual institution could achieve independently.

8 Snyder, Glenn H. (1961). *Deterrence and Defense*. Princeton University Press; Schelling, Thomas C. (1966). *Arms and Influence*. Yale University Press.

From a policy perspective, this transformation carries two important implications. First, future security guarantees will increasingly be evaluated by their operational credibility rather than by their legal formulation alone. Political declarations remain necessary, but they must be accompanied by concrete military capabilities, established planning mechanisms, and demonstrated readiness to act. Second, European governments are likely to continue diversifying their security partnerships, not because existing institutions have failed, but because the strategic environment has become too complex to rely upon a single institutional framework.



Unlike what happens within universal or highly institutionalised organisations, minilateral arrangements prioritise practical outcomes over formal procedures

The Ukraine effect has therefore redefined the relationship between deterrence and cooperation. The central lesson is not that traditional alliances are obsolete. Rather, it is that alliances require complementary mechanisms capable of adapting rapidly to evolving threats, strengthening regional defence, and enhancing practical military cooperation. This realisation has created favourable conditions for the rapid expansion of minilateralism across Europe, a development that represents one of the most significant structural changes in the continent's security architecture since the end of the Cold War.

The Rise of European Minilateralism: Drivers, Forms, and Strategic Logic

The growing prominence of minilateral security cooperation represents the most significant institutional development in European security⁹ since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although cooperation among small groups of states is not a new phenomenon, the strategic context has fundamentally changed. What were previously viewed as supplementary initiatives have increasingly become integral components of Europe's broader deterrence architecture. Their expansion reflects less a rejection of existing institutions than an effort to address challenges that large multilateral organisations cannot always manage with sufficient speed or flexibility.

Minilateralism can be understood as structured cooperation among a limited number of states that share common strategic interests, geographic proximity, or similar threat perceptions.¹⁰ Unlike what happens within universal or highly institutionalised organisations, minilateral arrangements prioritise practical outcomes over formal procedures. Their value lies in political cohesion, rapid decision-making, and operational effectiveness rather than broad representation. For European governments confronting an increasingly volatile security environment, these characteristics have become particularly attractive. Three interrelated factors explain the growing appeal of minilateral security arrangements.

The first is the convergence of threat perceptions. Russia's war against Ukraine has reduced many of the strategic differences that previously existed among

9 Besch Sophia and Tara Varma, "Alliance of Revisionists: A New Era for the Transatlantic Relationship", *Survival* 67 (2), 2025, pp.7-38.

10 William Tow, "Minilateral Security's Relevance to US Strategy in the Indo-Pacific", in Kai He (ed.) *Contested Multilateralism 2.0 and Asian Security Dynamics*, Routledge, 2020.

states located along NATO's northern and eastern flanks. Countries that once differed in their assessment of Russian intentions now largely agree that Moscow represents a long-term security challenge, requiring sustained military preparedness.¹¹ This shared strategic outlook has facilitated closer cooperation among governments with similar geographic exposure and comparable defence priorities.



Modern deterrence extends beyond conventional military capabilities to include cyber defence, intelligence sharing, protection of critical infrastructure, maritime domain awareness, space assets, and defence innovation

Second, multilateral formats enable faster political coordination. NATO's consensus-based decision-making remains one of the Alliance's greatest strengths, ensuring political legitimacy and collective ownership. However, consensus among thirty-two allies inevitably requires time. Smaller coalitions are often better positioned to coordinate immediate responses, organise military assistance, conduct joint exercises, or develop common procurement initiatives, without extensive institutional procedures. In an era where crises tend to unfold rapidly across multiple domains, political agility has become an increasingly valuable strategic asset.

Third, technological and operational changes in warfare favour more specialised forms of cooperation. Modern deterrence extends beyond conventional military

capabilities to include cyber defence, intelligence sharing, protection of critical infrastructure, maritime domain awareness, space assets, and defence innovation. These areas frequently involve states possessing comparable capabilities or facing similar operational challenges. Smaller partnerships can therefore generate greater efficiency by concentrating resources on clearly defined objectives.

Recent developments illustrate these dynamics. The Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)¹², led by the UK and comprising ten Northern European countries, has evolved into one of the most operationally flexible security frameworks in Europe. Although it is not a collective defence organisation, the JEF strengthens regional deterrence through joint planning, high-readiness forces, maritime security cooperation, and regular multinational exercises. Its geographic focus on the Baltic Sea, North Atlantic, and High North (Arctic region) complements NATO's broader strategic posture, while enabling participating states to coordinate responses below the threshold of formal alliance activation.

The transformation of Nordic security cooperation provides another important example. Finland's¹³ and Sweden's¹⁴ accession to NATO has fundamentally altered the strategic geography of Northern Europe. Rather than reducing the relevance of regional cooperation, NATO enlargement has strengthened incentives for deeper military integration among Nordic states. Shared operational planning, coordinated air defence, intelligence cooperation, and integrated logistics increasingly reinforce both regional resilience and Alliance

11 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29.06.2022, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>, pp.1-13;

12 The Joint Expeditionary Force, "About the JEF," <https://www.jefnations.org>.

13 "Finland joins NATO as 31st ally," NATO, 4.04.2023.

14 "Sweden joins NATO as war in Ukraine prompts security rethink," *Reuters*, 7.03.2024.

capabilities. In this context, minilateral cooperation functions as a force multiplier rather than as an institutional alternative.

Similar developments are evident elsewhere in Europe. Poland has pursued increasingly active regional defence partnerships, while simultaneously undertaking one of the continent's most ambitious military modernisation programmes. The Baltic states continue to deepen defence cooperation, based on common security interests and shared assessments of regional risks. Meanwhile, the renewed political relevance of formats such as the Weimar Triangle reflects growing recognition that Europe's security challenges require closer coordination among key regional actors capable of translating political consensus into practical initiatives.



The proliferation of minilateral initiatives also reflects changing approaches to burden sharing

Importantly, these arrangements differ significantly in their institutional design, membership, and objectives. Some emphasise operational readiness, while others focus on defence-industrial cooperation, capability development, or political consultation. Their diversity should not be viewed as evidence of fragmentation. Rather, it reflects the increasingly multidimensional nature of contemporary security. Different challenges require different coalitions, and flexibility has become an essential characteristic of effective security governance.

The proliferation of minilateral initiatives also reflects changing approaches to burden sharing. For decades, debates concerning European defence concentrated primarily on the distribution of responsibilities between Europe and the United States. Today, burden

sharing increasingly occurs within Europe itself. States possessing similar capabilities and strategic priorities are assuming greater responsibility for regional security while remaining firmly embedded within NATO's collective defence framework. This trend enhances the resilience of the Alliance by strengthening regional preparedness and reducing dependence on centralised responses.



Security is increasingly understood as a network rather than a hierarchy

Nevertheless, the continued expansion of minilateralism also presents policy challenges. The multiplication of security formats risks creating institutional overlap, duplication of capabilities, and competition for limited defence resources. Divergent regional priorities could complicate broader Alliance planning if coordination mechanisms remain weak. Maintaining coherence, therefore, requires careful integration between regional initiatives and NATO's command structures, capability planning, and deterrence strategy. The objective should not be to maximise the number of security arrangements, but to ensure that each contributes distinct operational value within the wider Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

Ultimately, the rise of European minilateralism reflects a broader transformation in strategic thinking. Security is increasingly understood as a network rather than a hierarchy. Flexible coalitions do not replace formal alliances; they reinforce them by providing additional layers of deterrence, improving military interoperability, and enabling faster responses to emerging crises. The Ukraine effect has accelerated this transition by demonstrating that resilience depends

on the interaction of multiple security mechanisms operating simultaneously at the national, regional, and transatlantic levels.

The challenge for European policymakers is therefore not whether minilateralism should continue to expand, but how its growing role can be integrated into a coherent strategic framework that strengthens, rather than complicates, collective defence. That question lies at the centre of Europe's evolving security architecture.

Minilateralism and NATO: Reinforcing the Euro-Atlantic Security Order

The expansion of minilateral security cooperation inevitably raises questions about this arrangement's relationship with NATO. At first glance, the growing number of regional initiatives, bilateral defence agreements, and flexible coalitions could be interpreted as evidence of institutional fragmentation. Such an interpretation, however, overlooks the strategic logic driving these developments. The rise of minilateralism is best understood not as an alternative to NATO but as an adaptation to a more demanding security environment in which deterrence requires multiple, mutually reinforcing layers of cooperation.

NATO remains the only organisation capable of providing comprehensive collective defence in Europe.¹⁵ Its integrated military command, established planning mechanisms, interoperability standards, experience of nuclear deterrence, and legally binding mutual defence commitment remain without equivalent. The Alliance has demonstrated remarkable unity since

2022¹⁶ through the reinforcement of its eastern flank, the accession of Finland and Sweden, and sustained military support for Ukraine. None of the emerging minilateral arrangements possess either the political legitimacy or the military capacity to replace these core functions.

Yet NATO's comparative advantage also defines its limitations. As a large alliance composed of thirty-two members with diverse strategic priorities, decision-making inevitably requires extensive consultation and political consensus. This institutional design ensures legitimacy, but may reduce flexibility in responding to rapidly evolving regional contingencies. Minilateral arrangements help bridge this gap by allowing groups of like-minded states to develop capabilities, coordinate policy, and prepare joint responses without waiting for the go-ahead for Alliance-wide initiatives. Their effectiveness, therefore, derives from complementarity rather than competition.

The relationship between NATO and minilateralism can be understood as a division of strategic labour. NATO provides the overarching framework for deterrence and collective defence, while minilateral coalitions strengthen regional preparedness, accelerate capability development, and improve operational readiness. In practice, these functions are increasingly interconnected. Joint exercises conducted within regional formats enhance NATO interoperability; common procurement initiatives strengthen Alliance capabilities; and intelligence sharing among smaller groups contributes to the broader situational awareness of the Euro-Atlantic community.

15 The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington, D.C., 4 April 1949, Article 5; "Collective Defense and Article 5", *NATO*, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/collective-defence-and-article-5>.

16 *NATO Washington Summit Declaration*, 10 July 2024, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2024/07/10/washington-summit-declaration>.

From a policy perspective, the challenge is not to limit the growth of minilateralism but to ensure that it remains embedded within NATO's overall strategic planning. This requires closer coordination between regional initiatives and Alliance defence planning, greater transparency regarding capability development, and regular mechanisms for political consultation. Properly integrated, minilateral arrangements can reduce, rather than increase, the burden on NATO, by strengthening deterrence at the regional level and enabling faster responses in the initial stages of a crisis.

The "Ukraine effect" therefore points towards a European security architecture that is neither centralised nor fragmented, but networked. Its resilience will depend on the ability of institutions operating at different levels — national, regional, European, and transatlantic — to complement one another. In this emerging model, NATO remains the indispensable cornerstone of European security, while minilateral coalitions provide the flexibility and operational adaptability required by an increasingly uncertain strategic environment. The success of this architecture will ultimately depend not on the number of new initiatives that emerge, but on how effectively they are connected into a coherent system of collective deterrence.

Conclusion

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has become a watershed in the evolution of European security. Beyond transforming the military balance on the continent, the war has fundamentally reshaped how European governments understand deterrence, alliance commitments, and the credibility of security guarantees. The central lesson of the "Ukraine effect" is that political assurances alone are insufficient to prevent aggression. Credible security increasingly depends on military readiness, operational

integration, resilient institutions, and the demonstrated willingness of partners to act collectively under conditions of crisis.

This changing strategic environment has accelerated the emergence of minilateralism as a defining feature of Europe's evolving security architecture. Smaller, flexible coalitions have proven capable of responding more rapidly to regional challenges, strengthening military interoperability, coordinating capability development, and complementing broader Alliance efforts. Their growing role reflects neither dissatisfaction with NATO nor a broader shift away from transatlantic security. Instead, it illustrates an adaptive response to a security environment characterised by greater uncertainty, regional differentiation, and the need for faster political and military coordination.



***From a policy perspective,
the challenge is not to limit
the growth of minilateralism
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embedded within NATO's
overall strategic planning***

At the same time, the expansion of minilateral cooperation should not be viewed as an end in itself. A proliferation of overlapping initiatives without strategic coordination could weaken coherence, duplicate capabilities, and complicate defence planning. The effectiveness of Europe's emerging security architecture will therefore depend on ensuring that regional frameworks remain closely aligned with NATO's strategic objectives, force planning, and command structures. The challenge for policymakers is to institutionalise complementarity rather than allow fragmentation to emerge through uncoordinated initiatives.

For Ukraine, these developments carry particular significance. Although NATO membership remains the most credible long-term security guarantee, the experience of the current war demonstrates that security can also be strengthened through deeper participation in regional defence networks, bilateral security agreements, joint capability development, and long-term defence-industrial cooperation with European partners. As Europe continues to build a more resilient security order, Ukraine should be regarded not merely as a recipient of security assistance but as an increasingly important contributor to regional deterrence. The experience acquired by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the country's rapidly expanding defence industry, and its crucial position on Europe's eastern flank make Ukraine a strategic asset whose integration into future security arrangements will enhance, rather than burden, Euro-Atlantic security.

Looking ahead, European security is unlikely to return to the institutional model that characterised the post-Cold War era. Instead, it is evolving into a multilayered system in which collective defence institutions coexist with flexible regional coalitions, bilateral partnerships, and issue-specific security networks. This transformation does not signal the decline of NATO but rather its adaptation to a more complex strategic environment. In this context, the future of European security will be determined not by choosing between multilateralism and unilateralism, but by combining both in ways that reinforce

deterrence, enhance resilience, and preserve the political cohesion of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Ultimately, the "Ukraine effect" is not simply a consequence of war, but it is a catalyst for strategic innovation. By exposing the limitations of traditional security assumptions, Russia's aggression has accelerated the development of a more flexible and resilient European security architecture. Whether this architecture succeeds will depend on the ability of European and transatlantic partners to translate the lessons of Ukraine into enduring institutional reforms that strengthen both collective defence and regional security cooperation. Such a system is likely to define the next phase of Europe's security order and shape the continent's response to future geopolitical challenges.

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“THE DONROE DOCTRINE”: TRANSFORMATION OF THE US SECURITY POLICY TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA DURING DONALD TRUMP’S SECOND TERM

Ivan Fechko

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This article examines the transformation of the US security policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean during Donald Trump’s second presidency, through the concept of the “Donroe Doctrine.” It argues that the administration has combined the traditional logic of the Monroe Doctrine with the principles of America First, strategic competition, and the securitisation of transnational threats. The article analyses the use of economic coercion, military and intelligence instruments, and selective security partnerships. It concludes that this approach reflects a broader return of the Western Hemisphere to US strategic priorities and regional security.

Donald Trump’s return to the White House in January 2025 marked a notable transformation in US policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean. Issues that had previously been largely treated as separate areas of regional policy (drug trafficking, transnational organised crime, illegal migration, and political instability) became increasingly integrated into a broader understanding of US national security and strategic competition in the Western Hemisphere. At the same time, the Trump administration increased its attention on the presence of extra-regional powers, primarily China, Russia, and Iran, combining the need to counter their influence with the aim of restoring American primacy in the

region. This shift was accompanied by a more active use of economic coercion, and military and intelligence instruments, as well as an expansion of security cooperation with politically aligned states in the region.

In this article, this set of interrelated approaches is examined through the concept of the “Donroe Doctrine,”¹ which serves as an analytical designation for the contemporary reinterpretation of the traditional logic of the Monroe Doctrine during Donald Trump’s second presidency, and in light of the America First foreign policy principle. The central argument is that this represents not simply a return to the historical Monroe Doctrine, but its adaptation to a new security

¹ The term “Donroe Doctrine,” formed by combining the name Donald and the surname Monroe, gained public currency in early January 2025, particularly after the headline “The Donroe Doctrine: Trump’s Vision for the Hemisphere” appeared on the front page of the New York Post on January 8. The term subsequently became widely used in journalistic and analytical discourse to characterise the approach of Donald Trump’s second administration towards the Western Hemisphere.

environment in which the traditional aim of limiting the influence of extra-regional powers is combined with the securitisation of transnational threats, and a willingness to employ a broader range of instruments of American power. The aim of the article is to identify the key characteristics of the transformation of the US security policy towards Latin America, and to analyse its practical implementation within the framework of the "Donroe Doctrine."

From the Monroe Doctrine to the "Donroe Doctrine"

The US foreign policy principle known as the Monroe Doctrine was formulated in 1823 by President James Monroe, against the background of the independence gained by the former Spanish colonies in Latin America and concerns about the possible restoration of European control over them. It was based on the broader logic of strategic denial – the aim of preventing the military, political, or strategic presence of external powers in the Western Hemisphere. At the time of its proclamation, the doctrine was largely declaratory due to the limited capabilities of the United States, but as American power grew, it gradually developed into one of the key principles of Washington's policy in the region.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the meaning of the Monroe Doctrine gradually expanded along with the growing capabilities and ambitions of the United States. From its initial focus on preventing European intervention, it increasingly evolved into a US claim to a

special role in maintaining regional order². The culmination of this transformation was the Roosevelt Corollary of 1904, which justified the right of the United States to intervene in the affairs of Latin American states in cases of chronic instability or the threat of external intervention. Thus, the Western Hemisphere was increasingly viewed as a space of special US security interests and privileged influence.

During the Cold War, this logic was adapted to deal with the confrontation with the Soviet Union (the so-called "Kennan Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine).³ The main challenge became preventing the spread of communist influence and Soviet military presence, which was particularly evident in US policy towards Cuba, and during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and later in support for anti-communist forces within the framework of the so-called "Reagan Corollary."⁴ Despite changes in the historical context, a common element of the different interpretations of the Monroe Doctrine remained Washington's aim of preventing the emergence in the Western Hemisphere of an external power capable of limiting US strategic freedom of action.

After the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet threat, the importance of the Monroe Doctrine declined, while US strategic attention, especially after 11 September 2001, shifted towards other regions of the world. Against this background, China's presence in Latin America gradually increased, making it one of the key economic partners of many states in the region, while Russia maintained

2 G.B. Young, *Intervention Under the Monroe Doctrine: The Olney Corollary*, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 2, June 1942, pp. 247–280, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2143553>

3 L. Bethell, *The Monroe Doctrine in US-Latin American Relations: And the 2025 Trump Corollary*, *CEBRI-Journal*, Year 4, No. 16, October–December 2025, <https://cebri.org/revista/en/artigo/241/the-monroe-doctrine-in-us-latin-american-relations>

4 L. Bethell, *The Monroe Doctrine in US-Latin American Relations: And the 2025 Trump Corollary*, *CEBRI-Journal*, Year 4, No. 16, October–December 2025, <https://cebri.org/revista/en/artigo/241/the-monroe-doctrine-in-us-latin-american-relations>

certain political and security positions and Iran expanded its contacts with several governments. This gradually brought Latin America back into the context of global strategic competition.

During the 2020s, the presence of extra-regional powers became increasingly closely linked in US security discourse with transnational crime, drug trafficking, and illegal migration. Under Donald Trump's second administration, these two dimensions were effectively integrated into a single vision of security in the Western Hemisphere. It is precisely the combination of the traditional logic of preventing the dominance of external powers with new transnational threats and strategic competition that provides the conceptual foundation for the contemporary reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine in the form of the so-called "Donroe Doctrine."

Although Trump and his first administration had made reference to the Monroe Doctrine before, it was after his return to the White House in 2025 that this approach began to acquire a more coherent political and strategic form. The institutional consolidation came in November 2025, with the adoption of the new US National Security Strategy, which explicitly declared the intention to "assert and enforce a 'Trump Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine." Among the key US interests in the Western Hemisphere, the document identified regional stability, limiting illegal migration, combating cartels and transnational crime, preventing extra-regional competitors from controlling strategic assets, and preserving US access to key geographic locations. The Strategy also envisaged strengthening the American military presence in the region and the possibility of using lethal force against cartels⁵. Thus, it provided a coherent conceptual framework for an approach that,

during the first months of Trump's second presidency, had manifested itself primarily through individual policy decisions.

The name "Donroe Doctrine" can therefore be used to describe Donald Trump's second administration's approach to the Western Hemisphere, combining the traditional logic of the Monroe Doctrine with the principles of America First and the contemporary understanding of threats to US national security. It is not a separately and officially proclaimed doctrine, but rather a set of interrelated strategic approaches: returning the Western Hemisphere to US security priorities; seeking to preserve American primacy and limit the presence of China, Russia, and Iran; the securitisation of drug trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration; and a more active use of military, economic, and political instruments.



It is precisely the combination of the traditional logic of preventing the dominance of external powers with new transnational threats and strategic competition that provides the conceptual foundation for the contemporary reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine in the form of the so-called "Donroe Doctrine"

A manifestation of this logic has been pressure on states in the region to limit the Chinese presence in strategic infrastructure. This was evident, in particular, in Washington's position regarding the activities of Chinese companies around the Panama Canal, and the submarine cable project between Chile and Hong Kong, demonstrating the Trump administration's intention to constrain China's entrenchment in critical transport and digital infrastructure.

5 The White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, November 2025.

The “Donroe Doctrine” in Practice

Venezuela: From Pressure to Direct Coercion. One of the clearest examples of the practical application of the “Donroe Doctrine” was provided by Venezuela, which became the principal testing ground for the Trump administration’s shift from political and economic pressure towards the use of intelligence and the military. The Chavista regime had remained a traditional opponent of Washington for more than a quarter of a century, but after Trump’s return to the White House, relations entered a new stage of a sharp escalation in hostility.

An important precondition for this escalation was the Trump administration’s broader interpretation of the term terrorism. In February 2025, the State Department designated eight drug cartels and transnational criminal groups as foreign terrorist organisations, including Venezuela’s Tren de Aragua. In November, the Cartel de los Soles, which Washington linked to senior officials, military figures, and President Maduro himself, was also added to the list. These designations reinforced the shift from treating the Venezuelan regime solely as an authoritarian government to presenting it as part of a broader narco-terrorist threat⁶.

At the same time, the United States increased its military presence in the Caribbean Sea and began strikes against vessels linked to drug trafficking. The first publicly confirmed strike took place on 2 September 2025; by

the end of the year, the administration had authorised more than 30 strikes against at least 36 vessels, resulting in the deaths of at least 115 people⁷. These operations prompted significant criticism from human rights organisations and international law experts, who questioned the legal basis for the use of lethal military force. Human Rights Watch characterised them as extrajudicial killings⁸.

Meanwhile, Washington intensified economic pressure on Caracas. In March 2025, Donald Trump issued an executive order imposing a 25 per cent tariff on imports of goods from countries purchasing Venezuelan oil and gas⁹. This instrument represented a form of secondary economic pressure: the administration sought to impact not only Venezuela but also its main trading partners. In December of the same year, a maritime interdiction campaign against tankers carrying sanctioned Venezuelan oil began, during which at least ten vessels were intercepted.

Economic and military pressure was complemented by intelligence and political instruments. In October 2025, Trump confirmed authorisation for the CIA to conduct covert operations in Venezuela, while the reward for information that could lead to Maduro’s arrest was increased to USD 50 million. At the same time, Washington maintained a negotiating channel through Special Envoy Richard Grenell, although by the autumn of 2025, this had lost priority amid further military escalation.

6 B. Klein, N. Bertrand, K. Liptak, Trump Administration Formally Designates Venezuela’s Maduro as Member of a Foreign Terrorist Organization, CNN, 24.11.2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/11/24/politics/venezuela-terrorist-designation-maduro>

7 International Enforcement Law Reporter, Vol. 42, Issue 2, February 2026, <https://www.grossmanyong.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/IELR-Vol.-42-Issue-2.pdf>

8 Human Rights Watch, US: Maritime Strikes Amount to Extrajudicial Killings, 18.09.2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/18/us-maritime-strikes-amount-to-extrajudicial-killings>

9 The White House, Imposing Tariffs on Countries Importing Venezuelan Oil, Executive Order, 24.03.2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/imposing-tariffs-on-countries-importing-venezuelan-oil/>

By the end of 2025, the United States had deployed its largest military force in the Caribbean in decades, including the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford, other warships, aircraft, and approximately 15,000 military personnel and civilian staff. The scale of the deployment significantly exceeded the requirements of a traditional maritime drug-interdiction operation, and provided the capability for a broader military campaign.

The culmination came on 3 January 2026, when US forces conducted an operation in Caracas that resulted in the detention of Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, who were subsequently transferred to the United States for prosecution. The operation was carried out without prior separate congressional authorisation for the use of military force, prompting debate over its compliance with US law and international law.

Despite Maduro's removal, the United States did not completely dismantle the Chavista system or transfer power to the opposition led by María Corina Machado. Instead, Washington began engaging with former Vice President Delcy Rodríguez, who became acting president. This decision allowed the main state institutions to remain in place, prevented an immediate administrative collapse, and ensured the country's governability, but at the same time postponed the question of a democratic transfer of power indefinitely.

Trump stated that the United States would effectively oversee the transition process in Venezuela until a "safe, proper, and judicious transfer of power could be ensured"¹⁰. He also emphasised the intention to involve American oil companies in rebuilding the country's energy sector. Thus, the Venezuelan campaign combined the declared goals of

stabilisation and political transition with clear US economic and resource interests. The prioritisation of stability, oil production, and cooperation with part of the former ruling elite over immediate democratisation indicates that resource and geopolitical control occupied a place no less important in Washington's policy than its officially declared support for democracy.



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Following Maduro's removal, the country entered a transitional period that increasingly displayed signs of authoritarian stabilisation under significant external influence. The Venezuelan authorities moved towards liberalising energy policy, expanding access for foreign companies, primarily American and other Western firms, to the oil sector, releasing some political prisoners, and limiting cooperation with certain US adversaries. At the same time, key representatives of the Chavista apparatus, including parts of the security structures, retained significant influence, raising questions about the speed and irreversibility of the democratic transition.

Thus, during the Venezuelan campaign, the Trump administration consistently employed instruments of coercion, a maximum-pressure strategy combining economic, diplomatic, informational,

¹⁰ BBC News, Trump Says US Will 'Run' Venezuela and 'Fix Oil Infrastructure', 04.01.2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd9enjee3go>

intelligence, and military leverage. It included both the threat of force and its limited and subsequently direct use, in order to compel the Venezuelan leadership to make concessions and alter the state's political behaviour¹¹. Following Maduro's detention, the policy of coercion gradually transformed into a transactional model for managing the transition process. It was based on control over the sale of Venezuelan oil, directing export revenues towards the need for stabilisation, involving Western companies in rebuilding the energy sector, and cooperating with part of the former ruling elite.

***The Venezuelan case,
therefore, demonstrates the
most radical manifestation
of the “Donroe Doctrine”***

One of the principal architects of US policy towards Venezuela was Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who conceptualised the subsequent American approach as a three-stage process of stabilisation, economic recovery, and political transition.

The Venezuelan case, therefore, demonstrates the most radical manifestation of the “Donroe Doctrine.” It combined the securitisation of drug trafficking, the designation of an authoritarian regime as constituting a terrorist threat, secondary economic sanctions, a naval blockade, covert intelligence operations, the direct use of force, and the subsequent management of the political transition. Whereas US policy towards Venezuela had previously been based primarily on sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and support for the opposition, in 2025-2026, Washington moved towards

directly shaping the country's domestic political and economic order. It is precisely this transition from external pressure to direct coercion and controlled stabilisation that constitutes the main significance of the Venezuelan case for understanding the practical dimension of the “Donroe Doctrine.”

Operation Southern Spear: Militarising Regional Security. The Venezuelan campaign was part of a broader operational framework for combating narco-terrorist organisations in the Western Hemisphere — Operation Southern Spear, whose launch was announced by US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth on November 13, 2025. The operation was placed under the command of US Southern Command, while the forces involved were capable of conducting maritime, air, and limited ground operations, going beyond traditional maritime drug interdiction efforts.

The launch of Southern Spear consolidated the blurring of the line between law enforcement and military approaches to combating transnational crime: after cartels were designated as terrorist organisations, actions against them were increasingly treated as part of a military campaign involving the use of lethal force. In this sense, the operation became one of the key military instruments of the “Donroe Doctrine,” creating a basis for broader US power projection in the region. While in Venezuela this took the form of direct coercion, in Ecuador it was implemented through a stronger military partnership and joint operations.

On 3 March 2026, the armed forces of Ecuador and the United States launched joint military operations against organisations that Washington classifies as terrorist

11 M. Elieson, Venezuela: A Study in Coercion, Small Wars Journal, 08.07.2026, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2026/07/08/venezuela-a-study-in-coercion/>

organisations. The campaign launch was announced simultaneously by the Ecuadorian government and the US Southern Command. The deepening of cooperation took place against the background of a sharp increase in criminal violence in Ecuador, which, located between two leading cocaine-producing countries (Colombia and Peru), had become one of the key transit hubs for drug trafficking to the United States and Europe. An additional political and legal basis for expanding US involvement was the designation of the influential Ecuadorian groups Los Choneros and Los Lobos as foreign terrorist organisations.

The US military presence in Ecuador was implemented primarily through a partnership model: intelligence sharing, technological support, training of forces, and coordination of joint operations. At the same time, US participation in planning and supporting strike operations indicated a gradual blurring of the line between traditional counternarcotics cooperation and the use of military instruments. In this sense, Ecuador became a representative example of the logic of Operation Southern Spear, in which US military capabilities were used not only for direct coercion but also to build a network of regional security partnerships.

Shield of the Americas: A Coalition of Partners. The next step was an attempt to institutionalise the new security model at the regional level. On 5 March 2026, the first Americas Counter Cartel Conference was held at SOUTHCOM headquarters in Doral, Florida, bringing together representatives of defence and security agencies from 17 states of the Western Hemisphere. The conference resulted in the signing of a joint declaration on strengthening regional cooperation in

combating cartels and designated terrorist organisations. Two days later, on 7 March, Donald Trump held the Shield of the Americas summit in Miami with the participation of leaders from 12 Latin American and Caribbean states, during which the Doral Charter of Liberty was signed. The Trump administration presented this format as a coalition of states prepared for closer coordination in combating transnational crime, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and other threats to regional security. Overall, the participation of the country's leaders was to some extent a demonstration of loyalty, although the summit resulted in few concrete practical agreements¹².



Ecuador became a representative example of the logic of Operation Southern Spear, in which US military capabilities were used not only for direct coercion but also to build a network of regional security partnerships

In the context of the "Donroe Doctrine," Shield of the Americas can be viewed as an attempt to transform the practice of selective bilateral partnerships and military cooperation into a broader political and security format. An important element of the summit was the emphasis on the militarisation of the fight against drug trafficking. Notably, the region's largest states (Brazil and Mexico), as well as Colombia, did not participate in the summit, while the participants were predominantly governments more politically aligned with Washington, including Argentina, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Paraguay. Thus, the new architecture is taking shape not as a universal inter-American mechanism similar

12 C. Osborn, Trump's Summit Offers More Deference Than Details, Foreign Policy, 13.03.2026, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/03/13/trump-shield-americas-drug-cartel-military-far-right/>

to the OAS or the Summit of the Americas, but rather as a coalition of “willing” partners that share the US understanding of regional threats. This is both its main strength and its structural limitation: the narrower format allows Washington to coordinate actions with its allies more quickly, but the absence of Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia significantly limits the ability of the Shield of the Americas to claim a role as a hemisphere-wide security system.



In the context of the “Donroe Doctrine,” Shield of the Americas can be viewed as an attempt to transform the practice of selective bilateral partnerships and military cooperation into a broader political and security format

An important feature of the regional policy of Donald Trump’s second administration was the development of a more differentiated approach towards Latin American states, depending on the political orientation of their governments and their willingness to support Washington’s security priorities. Particularly illustrative in this context were relations with the governments of Gustavo Petro in Colombia and Claudia Sheinbaum in Mexico, towards which Washington combined practical security cooperation with harsh political rhetoric and periodic threats of unilateral action. The administration developed its closest relations primarily with right-wing and conservative governments that shared its approaches to combating organised crime, drug trafficking, and illegal migration, while relations with a number of left-wing governments were characterised by greater tensions and political disagreements.

The Shield of the Americas summit, attended predominantly by leaders ideologically close to Trump, became one of the clearest manifestations of this tendency. At the same time, the political divide was not absolute: cooperation with Mexico in combating cartels continued despite ideological disagreements, including the elimination of one of their leaders, Nemesio Ruben Oseguera Cervantes, known as “El Mencho”, in February 2026.

At the same time, the region was experiencing a growing electoral shift in favour of right-wing and conservative forces, partly driven by public demand for greater security and a tougher response to organised crime. Trump also increasingly openly demonstrated political preferences during election campaigns in the region, publicly supporting ideologically aligned candidates, while contacts between members of his administration and certain candidates were able to strengthen their political legitimacy and international visibility ahead of elections. In the context of the “Donroe Doctrine,” this indicates Washington’s intention of building a network of politically aligned partners, capable of supporting the US vision of regional order and security.

Cuba: Economic Coercion and Maximum Pressure. Another example of the practical implementation of the “Donroe Doctrine” was the Cuban case, in which Washington’s main instrument, unlike in Venezuela, was a strategy of “maximum pressure”, based primarily on economic and energy coercion. As early as June 2025, the Trump administration reinstated strict restrictions on tourist travel to Cuba, strengthened the enforcement of the long-standing embargo, and tightened restrictions on transactions with enterprises linked to the Cuban military¹³. However, a new step-up in pressure began after the January 2026

13 The White House, Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Strengthens the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba, 30.06.2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/06/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-strengthens-the-policy-of-the-united-states-toward-cuba/>

operation to detain Nicolás Maduro. The removal of the Venezuelan leader and Caracas's reorientation towards cooperation with Washington effectively deprived Havana of its main political ally and one of its key economic partners in the region. Particularly significant was the termination of Venezuelan oil supplies to Havana, on which Cuba had long been heavily dependent.

On 29 January 2026, Donald Trump signed Executive Order 14380, which declared the situation surrounding Cuba an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to US national security and foreign policy. The document established a mechanism for imposing additional tariffs on imports of goods from countries that directly or indirectly supply oil to Cuba. Thus, Washington moved from traditional bilateral sanctions to secondary pressure on third-party suppliers, using access to the US market as leverage to restrict Havana's energy resources. Under this pressure, Mexico, one of Cuba's main oil suppliers, suspended some shipments, although the Mexican authorities publicly emphasised the sovereign nature of such decisions.

At the same time, the executive order demonstrated a significant expansion of the US interpretation of the Cuban threat. The Trump administration linked Havana not only to its own domestic repression and its communist political system, but also to cooperation with regimes and actors hostile to the United States: Russia, China, Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah¹⁴. In this sense, Washington increasingly viewed Cuba less as a kind of "relic of the Cold War" and more as a potential foothold for the political, intelligence, and strategic presence of extra-regional

US adversaries in the Caribbean. It is precisely this logic that directly places the Cuban case within the broader concept of the "Donroe Doctrine": the internal nature of the regime, its foreign policy ties, and its geographical proximity to the United States are combined into a single category constituting a national security threat.

Energy pressure sharply deepened the already systemic crisis in the Cuban economy. The island's energy infrastructure had remained outdated and insufficiently modernised for decades, but the reduction in external fuel supplies triggered a new wave of large-scale power outages. In July 2026, Cuba's national power grid completely collapsed three times within nine days. The fuel crisis was accompanied by shortages of goods, transportation problems, declining economic activity, and a further deterioration of the tourism sector. In terms of the scale of its economic difficulties, Cuba's situation has increasingly been compared to the "Special Period" of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Thus, restricting Cuba's access to external energy resources became one of the main instruments of US coercion. Washington seeks to maximise the economic costs of the island maintaining its existing political model, and to compel the Cuban leadership to make concessions, while leaving open different scenarios for the country's further transformation – from a negotiated process to increasing domestic political instability. At the same time, such a strategy carries significant humanitarian and political risks, as the consequences of the energy crisis directly affect the everyday lives of the Cuban population and may provoke a migration crisis in the region.

14 D.J. Trump, Executive Order 14380 – Addressing Threats to the United States by the Government of Cuba, The American Presidency Project, 29.01.2026, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-14380-addressing-threats-the-united-states-the-government-cuba>

Political pressure was simultaneously reinforced by the administration's rhetoric. While after the fall of the Maduro regime, Trump initially argued that the Cuban system could "fall on its own," Washington's subsequent signals regarding the need for fundamental change in Havana became considerably tougher. The July 2026 State Department report reinforced this framing by presenting Cuba as an ideological and security adversary engaged in long-term influence operations¹⁵.



in the case of Cuba, the main pressure is exerted through restrictions on energy flows, secondary economic measures against third countries, and the constant raising of the political cost of maintaining the existing regime

Rubio, one of the main advocates of a hard-line approach, directly linked Cuba's economic crisis to the need for a fundamental transformation of its political system¹⁶. At the same time, despite the unprecedented pressure, contacts between the two sides did not cease entirely: the Cuban leadership demonstrated a willingness to negotiate, while also stating that it was unwilling to abandon the basic principles of its political system.

The Cuban case, therefore, demonstrates a different model of the practical application of the "Donroe Doctrine." While in Venezuela, US coercion ultimately took the form of direct military intervention, in the case of

Cuba, the main pressure is exerted through restrictions on energy flows, secondary economic measures against third countries, and the constant raising of the political cost of maintaining the existing regime. The scenario of direct use of force remains rather an option of last resort, while Washington's priority appears to be achieving Cuba's internal transformation through economic and political coercion. At the same time, the Venezuelan experience suggests that the Trump administration may also be prepared to cooperate with sections of the existing ruling elites, provided that they change their foreign policy orientation and comply with key US security demands.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that during Donald Trump's second presidency, US policy in Latin America and the Caribbean has undergone a notable transformation towards a more security-oriented, coercive, and interventionist model. Its defining feature has become the integration of previously relatively separate challenges — drug trafficking, transnational organised crime, illegal migration, political instability, energy security, and the looming presence of China, Russia, and Iran — into a single vision of hemispheric security. In this context, the Western Hemisphere is increasingly viewed by Washington as a space of direct US national security interests, in which the preservation of American strategic primacy is linked both to countering internal transnational threats and to limiting the ability of extra-regional powers to establish themselves in terms of critical infrastructure, strategic sectors, and geographically important locations.

15 US Department of State, Cuba: The Capital of 21st Century Communism, Report, 20.07.2026, <https://www.state.gov/cuba-the-capital-of-21st-century-communism/>

16 D. Roy, Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign on Cuba, Explained, Council on Foreign Relations, 31.03.2026, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/trumps-maximum-pressure-campaign-on-cuba-explained>

It is in this sense that the “Donroe Doctrine” can be viewed as a contemporary reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, but not as its literal reproduction. In terms of its interventionist logic, it is, in some respects, even closer to the Roosevelt Corollary of 1904 than to James Monroe’s original declaration of 1823: the emphasis shifts from primarily preventive efforts to exclude external intervention to justifying an active US role in shaping regional order. Whereas in the nineteenth century the main external threat was seen as the return of European powers to political and military control over the Americas, today the principal systemic competitor is China, alongside Russia and Iran. At the same time, cartels, transnational criminal networks, migration flows, and governments that Washington identifies as threatening, are becoming internal objects of securitisation.

The practical implementation of this logic has varied from direct military coercion in Venezuela and economic coercion against Cuba to the partnership model in Ecuador, and attempts at its broader institutionalisation through the Shield of the Americas.



Whereas in the nineteenth century the main external threat was seen as the return of European powers to political and military control over the Americas, today the principal systemic competitor is China, alongside Russia and Iran

At the same time, the effectiveness and long-term consequences of such a strategy remain uncertain. The strikes on vessels linked by the United States to drug trafficking, as well as the operation to detain Nicolás Maduro, became the



For inter-American relations, this may mean a shift from universal multilateral mechanisms towards a more selective system of partnerships built around states willing to support the US definition of regional threat

subject of intense debate regarding their compliance with international law and the permissible limits of unilateral use of force. This creates a paradox within the “Donroe Doctrine”: while seeking to restore American regional primacy and ensure a more effective response to transnational threats, Washington is simultaneously using instruments that may deepen distrust of the United States, strengthen anti-American sentiment, and encourage some Latin American states to pursue greater strategic autonomy. The limitations of the new approach are also evident in the fact that even governments politically close to the Trump administration are not prepared to fully abandon their economic ties with China. Therefore, Washington’s strategic objective appears to be less the complete displacement of extra-regional competitors’ trade and economic presence from the region than preventing their entrenchment in critical sectors and strategic locations.

For inter-American relations, this may mean a shift from universal multilateral mechanisms towards a more selective system of partnerships built around states willing to support the US definition of regional threat. Such a model may provide greater operational flexibility, but its legitimacy and sustainability are limited by the absence of the compliance of key regional states, primarily Brazil and Mexico. In the broader transatlantic context, weakening the positions of Russia and other US adversaries in the Western Hemisphere could potentially

reduce their ability to use the region as a space for strategic pressure on Washington and its allies. At the same time, the practice of unilateral military intervention creates complex legal and political precedents for an international order based on the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

For now, the question remains open as to whether the “Donroe Doctrine” is a specific manifestation of Donald Trump’s foreign policy style — a form of temporary Trumpism — or the beginning of a more lasting transformation of US strategy in the Western Hemisphere. Its current form is undoubtedly linked to Trump’s personality, his preference for transactional approaches, demonstrative use of force, and hard-line rhetoric. At the same time, the structural drivers of this course — the growing influence of China, the activities of Russia and Iran, transnational

crime, drug trafficking, and migration pressure — are likely to extend far beyond a single presidency. Therefore, even if the specific instruments change, the broader trend towards the renewed securitisation of the Western Hemisphere and its return to the ranks of priority areas of US strategic policy may prove considerably more durable than the Donald Trump administration itself.

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STRATEGIC STABILITY IN AN ERA OF MULTIPOLAR NUCLEAR COMPETITION

Dr Alina Hrytsenko

The article examines the transformation of strategic stability in an increasingly multipolar nuclear order. It analyses how the transition from bipolarity has altered traditional concepts of deterrence and strategic stability, and assesses the limitations of Cold War-era theoretical frameworks in explaining contemporary nuclear competition. Particular attention is devoted to the roles of Russia, China, and North Korea in reshaping the global nuclear landscape, as well as the strategic risks arising from growing complexity, technological change, and the erosion of arms control institutions. The article also explores potential mechanisms for preserving strategic stability through nuclear risk reduction, crisis management, strategic dialogue, and more flexible approaches to nuclear governance.

Introduction

The international nuclear order is undergoing its most profound transformation since the end of the Cold War. For more than five decades, strategic stability was largely understood through the prism of bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The underlying assumptions of this framework rested on relatively stable nuclear parity, mutual vulnerability, predictable patterns of deterrence, and institutionalised arms control mechanisms that sought to reduce the risks of nuclear escalation. Although crises and periods of heightened confrontation repeatedly challenged the system, the bipolar structure provided a degree of strategic predictability that shaped both nuclear doctrine and international security policy.

The contemporary security environment differs fundamentally from that of the Cold War. The gradual collapse of the

bilateral arms control architecture, the modernisation and expansion of nuclear arsenals, the emergence of new technologies that affect strategic deterrence, and the growing role of regional nuclear powers have all contributed to a significantly more complex strategic landscape. Rather than a predominantly bilateral relationship, nuclear competition increasingly involves multiple actors with divergent capabilities, doctrines, threat perceptions, and political objectives. As a result, the traditional concept of strategic stability faces mounting theoretical and practical challenges.

Among the developments driving this transformation are China's rapid nuclear expansion, Russia's increasing reliance on nuclear coercion as an instrument of statecraft, and North Korea's continued advancement of its nuclear and missile capabilities. These trends unfold against a broader backdrop of deteriorating relations among the major powers, growing geopolitical fragmentation, and declining

confidence in existing arms control and confidence-building mechanisms. At the same time, technological developments — including advances in missile defence, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons, and space-based systems — are further complicating deterrence dynamics, by increasing uncertainty, compressing decision time, and blurring the distinction between conventional and nuclear conflicts.



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These changes raise fundamental questions regarding the continued relevance of classical theories of strategic stability. Concepts developed to explain deterrence in a bipolar system may no longer adequately account for interactions among multiple nuclear-armed states, whose strategic relationships are neither symmetric nor equally interdependent. The growing number of nuclear dyads, overlapping regional deterrence relationships, and the absence of comprehensive multilateral arms control arrangements create new pathways for miscalculation, inadvertent escalation, and crisis instability.

These developments call for a reassessment of strategic stability as both an analytical concept and a practical objective of international security policy. Frameworks developed for bipolar nuclear competition are becoming increasingly insufficient for

explaining deterrence dynamics, in a system characterised by multiple nuclear actors, asymmetrical strategic relationships, and overlapping regional security complexes. At the same time, the weakening of arms control institutions and the growing role of emerging technologies further increase the risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation.

Understanding strategic stability under these conditions requires moving beyond the assumptions that shaped Cold War deterrence theory. Greater attention must be paid to the interaction of multiple nuclear powers with divergent strategic cultures, capabilities, and security interests, as well as to the institutional mechanisms capable of reducing nuclear risks in the absence of comprehensive arms control agreements. The evolving roles of Russia, China, and North Korea illustrate many of these challenges and highlight the need to reconsider the foundations of deterrence, crisis stability, and nuclear diplomacy in an increasingly multipolar international system.

From Bipolar to Multipolar Strategic Stability

The concept of strategic stability was developed within the context of the Cold War, when international security was dominated by strategic interaction between the two superpowers. Although no universally accepted definition exists, strategic stability has generally been understood as a condition in which neither side has an incentive to initiate either a conventional or a nuclear first strike during a crisis. Mutual vulnerability, approximate strategic parity, and credible second-strike capabilities formed the foundations of this equilibrium¹. Over time, bilateral arms control agreements, transparency

1 R. Jervis, *The meaning of the nuclear revolution: Statecraft and the prospect of Armageddon*. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1989

measures, and crisis communication mechanisms reinforced this stability by reducing uncertainty and limiting the risks of miscalculation.

The gradual transition towards a multipolar nuclear order fundamentally alters these assumptions. Rather than two principal actors managing a relatively stable strategic relationship, contemporary deterrence increasingly involves several nuclear powers with different military capabilities, strategic objectives, regional interests, and perceptions of acceptable risk². The emergence of additional states with nuclear capabilities transforms deterrence from a largely bilateral interaction into a network of interconnected strategic relationships, in which decisions taken by one actor inevitably influence the security calculations of several others.

This transformation significantly complicates the maintenance of strategic stability. Under bipolarity, deterrence depended primarily on maintaining a predictable balance between two adversaries. In a multipolar system, stability can no longer be assessed solely through the bilateral balance between any two nuclear powers. Strategic calculations increasingly involve triangular and multilateral interactions, in which shifts in one strategic relationship affect the stability of others. Efforts by one state to strengthen deterrence against a particular adversary may simultaneously undermine deterrence elsewhere, creating security dilemmas across multiple theatres.

The increasing asymmetry among nuclear powers further distinguishes the contemporary environment from the Cold War model. Nuclear-armed states possess

significantly different arsenal sizes, force structures, technological capabilities, and nuclear doctrines. While some maintain diversified strategic triads and sophisticated early-warning systems, others rely on comparatively limited arsenals designed primarily for minimum deterrence or regional defence³. These asymmetries make it considerably more difficult to establish common understandings of strategic stability, or to negotiate arms control arrangements based on reciprocal limitations.



The emergence of additional states with nuclear capabilities transforms deterrence from a largely bilateral interaction into a network of interconnected strategic relationships

Multipolarity also increases the probability of strategic miscalculation. The growing number of nuclear actors creates multiple overlapping deterrence relationships, each influenced by distinct historical experiences, political objectives, alliance commitments, and regional security dynamics. During periods of crisis, decision-makers must assess not only the likely behaviour of a single adversary but also the potential reactions of several nuclear powers, whose interests may only partially coincide. As a result, uncertainty becomes an increasingly significant factor shaping strategic decision-making.

Consequently, strategic stability can no longer be understood simply as the preservation of mutual vulnerability

2 P.J. Bolt, Strategic stability in a new era. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, Article 1504361, 2025 [<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1504361/full>]

3 V. Narang, Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2014

between two superpowers⁴. In a multipolar nuclear environment, stability depends more and more on managing a broader set of strategic interactions, limiting escalation across interconnected regional and global theatres, and reducing the risks arising from uncertainty, technological change, and the absence of comprehensive multilateral arms control mechanisms.

Nuclear Risk Reduction beyond Traditional Arms Control

The deterioration of the global arms control architecture does not eliminate the need for nuclear risk reduction. Instead, it changes both its purpose and the instruments through which it can be achieved. During the Cold War, strategic stability was supported by legally binding bilateral agreements that limited strategic capabilities, enhanced transparency, and established procedures for crisis management⁵. In the contemporary security environment, however, the political conditions necessary for negotiating similarly comprehensive agreements are largely absent. Nuclear risk reduction must therefore increasingly rely on alternative mechanisms that seek to manage rather than eliminate strategic competition.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in the understanding of arms control itself. Whereas traditional arms control focused primarily on limiting the number and characteristics of nuclear weapons, contemporary approaches place greater emphasis on reducing the probability of miscalculation, accidental escalation, and unintended conflict⁶. Risk reduction is therefore becoming a complementary

objective rather than a direct substitute for formal arms limitation. The central challenge is no longer maintaining numerical parity between two superpowers, but preserving sufficient predictability and communication in an increasingly fragmented strategic environment.



Nuclear risk reduction must therefore increasingly rely on alternative mechanisms that seek to manage rather than eliminate strategic competition

Several mechanisms remain capable of contributing to nuclear risk reduction, even in the absence of comprehensive treaties. These include strategic dialogue, military-to-military communication channels, crisis hotlines, advance notification of missile launches and large-scale military exercises, transparency measures regarding nuclear doctrine, and confidence-building arrangements designed to reduce ambiguity during periods of heightened tension⁷. While none of these measures directly limits nuclear arsenals, each can reduce the likelihood that misunderstandings or misperceptions escalate into military confrontation.

At the same time, the effectiveness of such mechanisms depends on broader political conditions. Risk reduction cannot be entirely separated from the level of trust among nuclear-armed states, nor can technical arrangements fully compensate for deteriorating strategic relations. Nevertheless, even adversarial

4 J. M. Acton, *Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, D.C., 2021

5 R. Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1989

6 J.M. Acton, *Reimagining Nuclear Arms Control*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, D.C., 2021

7 B. Tertrais, *The war that must never be fought: Dilemmas of nuclear deterrence*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2024

relationships may generate a shared interest in preventing uncontrolled escalation, thus creating opportunities for limited forms of cooperation despite persistent geopolitical competition.

Future efforts to preserve strategic stability are therefore likely to rely on a layered approach combining bilateral, regional, and multilateral initiatives, rather than a single comprehensive arms control regime. Instead of seeking immediate replacements for Cold War-era treaties, international efforts are increasingly expected to focus on pragmatic measures that enhance transparency, improve crisis communication, and strengthen mechanisms for managing escalation⁸. Such arrangements are unlikely to eliminate strategic rivalry, but they can reduce its most dangerous possible consequences and contribute to a more predictable nuclear environment.

The Limits of Cold War Deterrence Models

Classical theories of nuclear deterrence and strategic stability were developed under conditions that differ fundamentally from today's international security environment. Although many of their core principles — including second-strike capability, mutual vulnerability, and the credibility of deterrence — remain relevant⁹, the assumptions on which they were originally based have become increasingly difficult to sustain. The transition towards a more complex and technologically dynamic security environment has exposed important limitations in Cold War models of strategic stability.

One of the central assumptions of Cold War deterrence was the existence of a relatively stable bipolar balance. Strategic calculations were primarily shaped by the interaction of two superpowers¹⁰ with broadly comparable capabilities and a shared understanding of the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war. Contemporary deterrence, by contrast, operates within a system characterised by multiple nuclear actors, diverse strategic objectives, and varying perceptions of acceptable risk. Stability can no longer be understood solely as a bilateral relationship between two adversaries.



Future efforts to preserve strategic stability are therefore likely to rely on a layered approach combining bilateral, regional, and multilateral initiatives

A second assumption concerned the predictability of strategic behaviour. During much of the Cold War era, deterrence theory assumed that nuclear powers would behave as rational actors, seeking to avoid escalation towards nuclear conflict. While rational decision-making remains an important analytical concept¹¹, contemporary crises are increasingly influenced by domestic political considerations, regional conflicts, asymmetric capabilities, information uncertainty, and divergent strategic cultures. These factors complicate traditional models of escalation management, and make adversaries' behaviour more difficult to anticipate.

8 P.J. Bolt, Strategic stability in a new era. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, Article 1504361, 2025 [https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1504361/full]

9 L. Freedman, The evolution of nuclear strategy (4th ed.), Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2019

10 E.A. Colby, M.S. Gerson, (Eds.), Strategic stability: Contending interpretations. U.S. Army War College Press: Carlisle, 2013

11 D. Adamsky, The Russian way of deterrence: Strategic culture, coercion, and war. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2023

Technological developments have further weakened several assumptions underpinning Cold War deterrence. Advances in precision-guided conventional weapons, missile defence systems, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons, and space-based military assets increasingly blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear operations¹². At the same time, they reduce decision-making time, increase uncertainty regarding the survivability of strategic forces, and complicate assessments of escalation risks. As a result, strategic stability can no longer be analysed exclusively through the prism of the balance of nuclear arsenals.



***Technological developments
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assumptions underpinning
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Cold War deterrence also relied heavily on institutional mechanisms that promoted transparency, communication, and predictability. Arms control agreements, verification regimes, and regular strategic dialogue helped reduce uncertainty¹³ and establish shared expectations regarding strategic behaviour. The gradual erosion of these institutions has increased the likelihood that crises will unfold without many of the safeguards that previously contributed to strategic stability.

These developments do not render classical deterrence theory obsolete. Many of its fundamental insights remain central to an understanding of nuclear strategy.

However, the analytical framework requires significant adaptation, to account for multipolar strategic interaction, emerging technologies, regional deterrence dynamics, and the declining role of formal arms control mechanisms. Strategic stability in the twenty-first century can no longer be explained solely through concepts developed for bipolar nuclear competition, but must instead reflect the greater complexity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness of the contemporary international security environment.

**Russia, China and North Korea as
Drivers of the Emerging Nuclear
Order**

The transformation of the contemporary nuclear order cannot be explained solely by the diffusion of nuclear capabilities or the emergence of additional nuclear-armed states. More fundamentally, it reflects changes in how nuclear weapons are perceived, integrated into national security strategies, and employed as instruments of international politics. In this process, Russia, China and North Korea occupy distinct but complementary positions. Each challenges different assumptions that underpinned the post-Cold War strategic environment¹⁴, while collectively accelerating the transition towards a more fragmented and competitive nuclear order.

Russia remains the principal military successor to the Soviet Union, and continues to possess one of the world's two largest nuclear arsenals. Unlike in the later stages of the Cold War, however, Russian nuclear strategy has increasingly blurred the distinction between deterrence

12 J. M. Acton, *Escalation through entanglement: How the vulnerability of command-and-control systems raises the risks of an inadvertent nuclear war*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, D.C., 2018

13 T. D. Grant, *Nuclear Arms Control in Peril: Why the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Matters and How to Save it*, Policy Press: Bristol, 2024.

14 P.J. Bolt, Strategic stability in a new era. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, Article 1504361, 2025
[<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1504361/full>]

and coercion¹⁵. Nuclear weapons have become integrated into conventional military campaigns, diplomatic signalling, and broader efforts to shape adversaries' political calculations. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022¹⁶, repeated nuclear threats, changes in nuclear doctrine, deployments of tactical nuclear weapons beyond Russian territory, and public nuclear messaging have demonstrated an increasing willingness to use nuclear threats not only to prevent attacks on Russia itself but also to constrain Western military and political support for Ukraine.



China's modernisation has consequences extending well beyond numerical growth.

It fundamentally alters the architecture of global deterrence

This evolution carries broader implications for the international nuclear order. Classical deterrence theory largely assumed that nuclear weapons existed primarily to prevent war through mutual vulnerability. Russia's behaviour illustrates a different model, in which nuclear capabilities are used to create political space for conventional military operations¹⁷, while seeking to deter external intervention. Such an approach lowers the threshold for nuclear signalling, increases ambiguity regarding escalation, and weakens long-standing informal norms governing

responsible nuclear behaviour. The result is not merely greater instability in Europe, but a broader erosion of the normative foundations upon which strategic stability has traditionally rested.

China represents a different source of systemic transformation. For decades, Beijing maintained a comparatively restrained nuclear posture, based on a relatively small arsenal, minimum deterrence, and an officially declared no-first-use policy. This posture is now undergoing significant revision. The rapid expansion of China's nuclear forces, large-scale construction of missile silo fields, improvements in ballistic missile submarine capabilities, development of hypersonic delivery systems, and modernisation of strategic command-and-control infrastructure, indicate that China is preparing to develop a substantially larger and more sophisticated deterrent¹⁸.

China's modernisation has consequences extending well beyond numerical growth. It fundamentally alters the architecture of global deterrence, by replacing the relatively stable bilateral balance between Washington and Moscow with a triangular strategic relationship. Unlike bipolar deterrence, triangular deterrence lacks established rules, mature communication mechanisms, and institutionalised arms control arrangements. Strategic calculations increasingly involve interactions among three major nuclear powers whose security interests only partially overlap. Decisions taken within one bilateral relationship inevitably affect

15 D. Adamsky, *The Russian way of deterrence: Strategic culture, coercion, and war*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2023

16 A.L. Fink, *Russia's Nuclear and Coercive Signaling During the War in Ukraine* (CRS Insight No. IN12464). Congressional Research Service: Washington, D.C., 2024 [<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12464>]

17 B. Tertrais, *The War that Must Never be Fought: Dilemmas of Nuclear Deterrence*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2024

18 F.S. Cunningham, *Under the Nuclear Shadow: China's Information-Age Weapons in International Security*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2025

the others, creating strategic externalities that did not exist under the Cold War model. This significantly complicates crisis management, and increases the difficulty of maintaining strategic stability across multiple theatres simultaneously.



The significance of North Korea lies less in the absolute size of its arsenal than in its impact on regional deterrence. Its nuclear programme influences the defence planning of the United States, South Korea, Japan, and increasingly China and Russia

North Korea constitutes a third and qualitatively different challenge. Although its nuclear arsenal remains significantly smaller than those of the major nuclear powers, Pyongyang has demonstrated that even a relatively limited nuclear capability can reshape regional security dynamics. Through sustained investment in ballistic missiles of varying ranges, solid-fuel technologies, manoeuvrable re-entry vehicles, submarine-launched systems, and tactical nuclear capabilities, North Korea has steadily improved the survivability and credibility of its deterrent¹⁹.

The significance of North Korea lies less in the absolute size of its arsenal than in its impact on regional deterrence. Its nuclear programme influences the defence planning of the United States, South Korea, Japan, and increasingly China and Russia. As alliance commitments, missile defence systems, conventional strike capabilities, and extended deterrence guarantees evolve in response, developments on the Korean Peninsula generate wider strategic

consequences that extend beyond Northeast Asia. North Korea, therefore, illustrates how regional nuclear competition can become embedded within the broader global strategic balance.

Taken together, Russia, China and North Korea represent three distinct pathways through which the contemporary nuclear order is being transformed. Russia challenges the political norms governing nuclear deterrence by expanding the role of nuclear coercion. China reshapes the structural distribution of strategic power, through the emergence of a third major nuclear centre. North Korea demonstrates that relatively small nuclear powers can exercise disproportionate influence over regional and global deterrence dynamics. Their combined impact extends beyond changes in force structure or arsenal size. It reflects a broader transformation in the logic of deterrence itself, in which strategic stability increasingly depends on managing interconnected relationships among multiple nuclear actors operating across different regional and global theatres, rather than preserving a single balance between two superpowers.

Strategic Risks in a Multipolar Nuclear Environment

The transition towards a multipolar nuclear order introduces a broader and more complex spectrum of strategic risks than those associated with the bipolar competition of the Cold War. Although the probability of deliberate large-scale nuclear war among the major powers remains relatively low, the likelihood of miscalculation, unintended escalation, and crisis instability has increased considerably. These risks stem not only from the growing number of nuclear-armed states but also from the interaction of diverse nuclear

19 E. Howell, *North Korea and the Global Nuclear Order: When Bad Behaviour Pays*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2023

doctrines, emerging technologies, regional conflicts, and the weakening of international arms control institutions²⁰.

One of the most significant challenges is the increasing complexity of deterrence relationships. During the Cold War, strategic calculations were primarily based on a bilateral balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. In contrast, the contemporary nuclear environment consists of multiple overlapping deterrence relationships²¹, each shaped by different strategic interests, alliance commitments, military capabilities, and regional security dynamics. Decisions taken by one nuclear power may simultaneously influence several strategic relationships, creating indirect consequences that are difficult to predict or manage.

Closely related is the growing risk of strategic miscalculation. Multipolarity increases uncertainty by expanding both the number of actors involved in crises and the range of possible responses. Decision-makers must assess not only the intentions of a single adversary but also the potential reactions of allies, partners, and third parties, whose interests may only partially coincide. The absence of established multilateral crisis-management mechanisms further increases the possibility that misperceptions or incorrect assumptions could contribute to rapid escalation²².

Technological change constitutes another major source of instability. Advances in cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons, precision conventional

strike systems, missile defence, counter-space capabilities, and autonomous military systems increasingly blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear operations²³. These technologies may threaten early-warning systems, command-and-control infrastructure, or the survivability of strategic forces, thereby creating incentives for rapid decision-making during crises. As warning times decrease, opportunities for political leaders to assess information and prevent unintended escalation become correspondingly more limited.



Multipolarity increases uncertainty by expanding both the number of actors involved in crises and the range of possible responses. Decision-makers must assess not only the intentions of a single adversary but also the potential reactions of allies, partners, and third parties

A further challenge arises from the growing interaction between regional and global deterrence. Nuclear crises are no longer confined to isolated bilateral relationships, but increasingly develop within interconnected regional security complexes. Developments on the Korean Peninsula, in the Taiwan Strait, Eastern Europe, or South Asia have the potential to affect the strategic calculations of other nuclear powers, through alliance commitments, military

20 P.J. Bolt, Strategic stability in a new era. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6, Article 1504361, 2025
[<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1504361/full>]

21 B. Tertrais, The war that must never be fought: Dilemmas of nuclear deterrence. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2024

22 L. Freedman, The evolution of nuclear strategy (4th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2019

23 J. M. Acton, Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, D.C., 2018

deployments, or broader geopolitical competition. Consequently, regional conflicts may generate escalation dynamics with implications extending well beyond their immediate theatres.

The continued erosion of the international arms control architecture further amplifies these risks. The expiration or suspension of major bilateral agreements, limited prospects for new legally binding treaties, and the absence of comprehensive multilateral frameworks add up to reduced transparency and predictability among nuclear powers²⁴. Without effective verification mechanisms and institutionalised strategic dialogue, uncertainty regarding military capabilities, intentions, and escalation thresholds is likely to increase.



the multipolar nuclear environment complicates strategic decision-making itself. Political leaders must operate under conditions of greater informational uncertainty

Finally, the multipolar nuclear environment complicates strategic decision-making itself. Political leaders must operate under conditions of greater informational uncertainty, compressed decision timelines, and a wider range of possible escalation pathways. Traditional deterrence models, largely developed for relatively stable bilateral competition, provide only partial guidance for managing crises involving several nuclear-armed states with

divergent strategic cultures and asymmetric capabilities²⁵.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the principal danger of the emerging nuclear order lies not necessarily in the increased probability of intentional nuclear war, but in the growing complexity of strategic interaction. Multipolarity creates an environment in which uncertainty, interconnected crises, technological innovation, and institutional fragmentation collectively increase the risk of escalation despite the absence of any actor deliberately seeking nuclear conflict.

Preserving Strategic Stability in a Multipolar Nuclear Order

The transition to a multipolar nuclear environment requires a corresponding evolution in the mechanisms designed to preserve strategic stability. Institutions developed during the Cold War were largely intended to regulate strategic competition between the two superpowers through legally binding arms control agreements, verification procedures, and bilateral crisis-management arrangements. While these instruments contributed significantly to reducing nuclear risks, they are unlikely to provide a sufficient framework for managing the more complex strategic relationships that characterise the contemporary international system.

Future approaches to strategic stability are therefore likely to place greater emphasis on nuclear risk management rather than traditional arms limitation. Instead of seeking comprehensive agreements covering all categories of nuclear weapons,

24 T. D. Grant, *Nuclear Arms Control in Peril: Why the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Matters and How to Save It*, Policy Press: Bristol, 2024.

25 V. Narang, *Nuclear strategy in the modern era: Regional powers and international conflict*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2014

states may increasingly pursue narrower arrangements focused on reducing uncertainty, improving communication, and preventing unintended escalation. Such an approach reflects the recognition that strategic competition is likely to persist, even when political conditions do not permit ambitious arms control negotiations.

One important priority is the institutionalisation of strategic dialogue. Regular communication among nuclear-armed states remains essential for clarifying strategic intentions, discussing doctrinal developments, and reducing the risk of misperception during periods of heightened tension. Unlike Cold War bilateral dialogue, however, future strategic consultations will need to accommodate a more diverse group of actors with different capabilities, threat perceptions, and regional security interests. Although comprehensive multilateral negotiations remain politically difficult, issue-specific dialogue involving different combinations of nuclear powers may provide a more realistic basis for confidence-building.

Crisis management mechanisms will also require further adaptation. Existing military-to-military communication channels, political hotlines, advance notification arrangements, and procedures for managing incidents should be expanded and modernised to reflect the realities of contemporary strategic competition. Particular attention should be devoted to preventing escalation resulting from cyber operations, interference with early-warning systems, activities in outer space, and the increasing interaction between conventional and nuclear military capabilities. Crisis-management arrangements should therefore extend beyond traditional nuclear issues,

and address the broader technological environment in which future crises are likely to develop.

Transparency and confidence-building measures are likely to remain important even in the absence of legally binding arms control agreements. Voluntary exchanges of information regarding military doctrines, strategic modernisation programmes, missile launch notifications, and major military exercises can contribute to reducing uncertainty and limiting opportunities for strategic miscalculation²⁶. Although such measures cannot substitute for formal verification regimes, they may help preserve a degree of predictability during periods of geopolitical confrontation.



Unlike Cold War bilateral dialogue, however, future strategic consultations will need to accommodate a more diverse group of actors with different capabilities, threat perceptions, and regional security interests

The growing role of emerging technologies also suggests that future nuclear diplomacy should extend beyond discussions of warhead numbers and delivery systems. Artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, hypersonic weapons, autonomous systems, missile defence, and counter-space technologies increasingly influence strategic stability, by affecting decision-making, escalation dynamics, and the survivability of nuclear forces. Effective governance of these technologies is therefore becoming an integral component of broader efforts to reduce nuclear risks.

²⁶ T. D. Grant, *Nuclear Arms Control in Peril: Why the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Matters and How to Save it*, Policy Press: Bristol, 2024.

Preserving strategic stability in the twenty-first century will ultimately depend less on restoring the institutional architecture of the Cold War than on developing a more flexible and adaptive framework capable of managing strategic competition among multiple nuclear powers. Such a framework is unlikely to eliminate rivalry or prevent all crises²⁷. Its primary objective should instead be to preserve communication, enhance transparency where possible, reduce incentives for unintended escalation, and strengthen political mechanisms capable of preventing strategic competition from escalating into nuclear conflict.

Conclusions

The contemporary international nuclear order differs fundamentally from the strategic environment in which the concept of strategic stability originally emerged. The transition from bipolarity to an increasingly multipolar distribution of nuclear capabilities has altered the logic of deterrence, expanded the number of strategic interactions, and increased the complexity of managing escalation. At the same time, the gradual erosion of the traditional arms control architecture, and the rapid development of emerging military technologies have further weakened many of the institutional and conceptual foundations that contributed to strategic stability during the Cold War.

These developments do not imply that the principles of deterrence have become obsolete. Mutual vulnerability, credible second-strike capabilities, and strategic communication all remain central elements of nuclear stability. However, they no longer provide a sufficiently strong framework for understanding the dynamics of a nuclear

environment, characterised by multiple actors, asymmetric capabilities, regional deterrence relationships, and increasingly interconnected security challenges. Strategic stability can no longer be viewed solely through the lens of bilateral nuclear parity, but must instead be understood as a multidimensional process involving political, military, technological, and institutional factors.



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The evolving roles of Russia, China and North Korea illustrate different pathways through which the global nuclear landscape is being transformed. Their strategies demonstrate that contemporary nuclear competition is no longer defined exclusively by the size of nuclear arsenals, but increasingly by the interaction of military modernisation, political signalling, regional security dynamics, and technological innovation. As a result, future strategic competition is likely to become more fragmented, less predictable, and more difficult to regulate through existing institutional arrangements.

Under these conditions, preserving strategic stability will require moving beyond the assumptions that shaped Cold War arms control and deterrence policy. While comprehensive multilateral arms control

27 B. Tertrais, *The war that must never be fought: Dilemmas of nuclear deterrence*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2024

agreements remain a desirable long-term objective, current geopolitical realities suggest that more flexible and adaptive approaches to nuclear risk reduction will become increasingly important. Strategic dialogue, crisis-management mechanisms, transparency measures, and cooperation on the implications of emerging technologies are likely to play a growing role in reducing the risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation.

Ultimately, strategic stability in the twenty-first century should be understood not as the preservation of a static balance of power, but as the continuous management of strategic competition in an international system

characterised by uncertainty, technological change, and multiple centres of nuclear decision-making. The challenge facing policymakers is therefore not to recreate the institutions of the Cold War, but to develop new forms of nuclear governance, capable of reducing risks while accommodating the realities of an increasingly multipolar world.

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BELARUS'S SUCCESSION PROBLEM AS THE MISSING LINK IN EUROPE'S POST-WAR SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Pavlo Rad

Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"

This article examines Belarus's place in Europe's post-war security architecture, tracing Minsk's geopolitical manoeuvring since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although Lukashenka has been able to keep the regime afloat, it remains vulnerable, because the system is built around one person and lacks a functioning succession mechanism, which Russia could exploit in the coming transition period. Since regional stability is not possible without a stable and predictable Belarus, the article offers recommendations for how Ukraine and the EU can minimise this risk.

Introduction

When experts and policymakers discuss what European security should look like once the current war ends, the conversation tends to centre on ending the fighting in Ukraine, reinforcing NATO's eastern flank, and building security guarantees strong enough to deter another Russian attack. Belarus rarely gets the same attention, even though lasting stability in the region is hard to imagine without taking the Belarusian factor into account.

Since the 2020 political crisis and Belarus's role in Russia's full-scale invasion, the country has come to be seen largely as a Russian satellite, while the EU's response has mostly boiled down to sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Yet despite its dependence on Moscow, Belarus has held on to certain elements of political and institutional autonomy, and these are worth preserving and, where possible, expanding.

This question matters even more, given the future power transition in Belarus once Aliaksandr Lukashenka leaves office. The current system of governance has never operated without him, so it is genuinely difficult to predict how it would function in his absence. Such a period would leave Belarusian statehood more vulnerable, and could give Moscow room to tighten its military, political, and economic grip on the country. If that happens, Belarus risks becoming a permanent Russian military outpost, and a lasting source of pressure on the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine.

Comfortable Status Quo

It sounds paradoxical, but the continuation of the active phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war actually suits the Minsk regime better than a lasting peace. Thanks to Belarus's role in supporting Russia's war effort, Minsk is currently enjoying its best period of relations with Moscow in three decades. Russia presently views Belarus as a key stronghold

on the frontline of its confrontation with the West, and the Lukashenka regime uses that status as leverage to secure subsidies and economic support from the Kremlin.²⁸

That balance is fragile, though, and a decisive success by either side could undermine it. A Russian victory might embolden Moscow to pursue new military or political conquests in the region, this time at Belarus's expense. Ukraine's victory, on the other hand, could trigger internal destabilisation inside Russia and cast doubt on its ability to keep supporting the Lukashenka regime.



A rapid normalisation phase between Moscow and the West would create its own problems for Lukashenka

A rapid normalisation phase between Moscow and the West would create its own problems for Lukashenka. Belarus would stop being such a valuable stronghold, which would lower Minsk's geopolitical importance for the Kremlin. On top of that, if Western companies and capital start returning to Russia as relations thaw, the Belarusian economy would lose a meaningful share of the Russian market it currently benefits from. To keep access to Russian resources in both the near and distant future, the Lukashenka regime would have to keep finding new arguments for why Moscow still needs Belarus.

In such a situation, a Russia-Ukraine truce, essentially a frozen conflict along the current front line, looks like the best possible outcome for Lukashenka. Russia would maintain a large army near the border, and remain prepared for potential

future operations, so it would not abandon its militaristic course entirely. At the same time, a truce could widen the partial lifting of Western sanctions already underway, many of which were imposed together with those on Russia, helping the Belarusian economy offset at least some of the risks tied to Western companies returning to the Russian market.

Geopolitical Risk Management

At the same time, Minsk has taken a clear course towards minimising potential risks. The Lukashenka regime has stepped up its efforts to engage in dialogue with Western countries, particularly with the United States. It first tried to carve out a role for itself in the negotiations between the United States and Russia, and later to diversify its economic ties in the throes of a trade deficit and mounting difficulties in expanding its presence in the Russian market. Since July 2024, Lukashenka has initiated multiple rounds of amnesty, resulting in the release of dozens of political prisoners.



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Over the following months, the process gained real momentum. On 21 June 2025, a visit to Minsk by Keith Kellogg, the US president's special envoy for Ukraine, was followed by the release of fourteen political prisoners, among them Sergei Tikhonovsky, who had spent five years in detention as one of Lukashenka's most prominent domestic opponents. The most significant

28 Artyom Shraibman, Lukashenko Seeks to Piggyback on U.S.-Russia Rapprochement, *Carnegie Politika*, 17.04.2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/04/belarus-usa-russia-opportunity>

breakthrough came six months later.²⁹ On 13 December 2025, Lukashenka pardoned 123 people, describing the move as part of an understanding reached with President Trump.³⁰ Among those freed were Viktor Babaryka and Maria Kalesnikava, both prominent figures in the 2020 protest movement, along with Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski. The announcement came the same day Washington removed the state airline Belavia from the US sanctions list, and it was explicitly tied to the lifting of restrictions on Belaruskali, the country's dominant potash producer.

 ***Minsk has been deepening ties with Asian countries, especially in Central Asia, a shift visible in more intensive diplomatic outreach, and the appointment of ambassadors with an economic background to key trading partners such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan***

The releases continued in 2026 as well. Following a visit by US special envoy John Coale in March 2026, Minsk carried out its largest single round of pardons to date, freeing 250 people, most of whom remained in Belarus, while at least fifteen others were

deported to Lithuania.³¹ Each new wave has followed roughly the same pattern: a visit by an American official, a batch of releases timed to coincide with it, and a further easing of US sanctions, this time extending into the banking sector. Taken together, these steps show a regime willing to trade a steady stream of political prisoners for tangible economic relief, without changing its underlying character at home.

Minsk's risk management is not limited to its dealings with the West; the government is pursuing several other tracks simultaneously. One priority for the coming months is widening the geographic reach of Belarusian exports. Senior officials, including Lukashenka himself, have openly acknowledged the country's economic difficulties, in particular a decline in export volumes.³² To offset this, Minsk has been deepening ties with Asian countries, especially in Central Asia, a shift visible in more intensive diplomatic outreach, and the appointment of ambassadors with an economic background to key trading partners such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.³³

China will remain Belarus's main foothold in Asia and its second most-important partner after Russia. Chinese activity there has been rising since the summer of 2024, marked by a surge in diplomatic engagements³⁴

29 Белорусский оппозиционер Сергей Тихановский вышел на свободу (Belarusian opposition figure Sergei Tikhanovsky released), Meduza, 21.06.2025, <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/06/21/beloruskiy-oppozitsioner-sergey-tihanovskiy-vyshel-na-svobodu-v-vilnyuse-ego-vstretila-zhena-i-lider-oppozitsii-svetlana-tihanovskaya>

30 Лукашенко помиловал более 120 осужденных (Lukashenka pardons more than 120 convicts), Meduza, 13.12.2025, <https://meduza.io/feature/2025/12/13/lukashenko-pomiloval-bolee-120-osuzhdennykh-na-svobodu-vyshli-mariya-kolesnikova-viktor-babariko-i-laureat-nobelevskoy-premii-mira-ales-belyatskiy>

31 В Беларуси освободили 250 политзаключённых. Список (Belarus releases 250 political prisoners. List), Human Rights Center Viasna, 19.03.2026, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/119847>

32 Основной причиной падения экспорта Беларуси стало снижение поставок в страны вне СНГ — ЕАБР (Falling non-CIS deliveries are the main reason for Belarus's export decline, EDB says), Pozirk, 10.03.2026, <https://pozirk.online/ru/news/129248/>

33 Post on the appointment of new Belarusian ambassadors, Pul Pervogo Telegram channel, 2025, https://t.me/pul_1/15204

34 Belarus Officially Becomes BRICS Partner, Belarus.by, 2025, https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/news/belarus-officially-becomes-brics-partner_i_180332.html

and the first-ever joint military exercises on Belarusian soil.³⁵ Minsk moved fast on this front. Belarus obtained full Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) membership and BRICS partner status, followed in 2025 by further meetings between Lukashenka and Xi Jinping, participation in the SCO summit, defence ministry engagement, and Minsk courting individual Chinese provinces the same way it has long courted Russian regions. For Belarus, China is not just a trading partner but a hedge, a way to broaden its room for foreign policy manoeuvre, and a card to play as it tries to rebuild ties with the West.

China, for its part, has shown some interest in helping de-escalate the situation in the region, illustrated by Wang Yi's visit to Warsaw and Li Xi's visit to Minsk during Poland's border closure in autumn 2025, since a more predictable Belarus serves Beijing's own economic interests in Europe. Another vivid example followed in June 2026. After a closed-door meeting with Vladimir Putin at Valdai, Lukashenka travelled to Beijing for talks with Xi Jinping, who described the relationship between the two countries as being at a historic peak, and reaffirmed China's support for Belarus's independence and territorial integrity.³⁶ The reassurance came at a pointed moment: relations between Belarus and Ukraine were sliding towards confrontation, with Kyiv accusing Minsk of hosting equipment used to guide Russian drone strikes and threatening to destroy it by force, amid growing fears in Kyiv that Russia was trying to drag Belarus directly into the war.³⁷



China, for its part, has shown some interest in helping de-escalate the situation in the region, illustrated by Wang Yi's visit to Warsaw and Li Xi's visit to Minsk

Nevertheless, Minsk has to keep proving its strategic value to Russia if it wants to avoid serious setbacks, once the active phase of the war ends. Russia remains crucial to Belarusian foreign and economic policy, and the main guarantor of the regime's survival. To keep access to Russian resources open, the Lukashenka regime will likely look for new ways to show the Kremlin it is still useful. That could mean giving Belarusian defence firms a bigger role in supporting Russian rearmament, or pitching elements of Belarus's own economic model, such as its state planning system, as something Moscow could borrow from, all in the hope of winning preferential treatment in return.

Power Transit Dilemma

This whole balancing act in foreign policy does more than just keep the current regime afloat. It is also laying the groundwork for what comes after it. The Belarusian political system is already changing gradually, as shown by the fact that Lukashenka has pushed through a series of legal measures meant to protect the system he built, and keep it running once he is gone.

35 China, Belarus Hold First Joint Military Exercises near Poland's Border, CNN, 08.07.2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/08/europe/china-belarus-military-exercises-poland-intl/index.html>

36 Встреча Лукашенко и Си Цзиньпина в Пекине 29 июня: подробности, темы обсуждений (Lukashenka-Xi Jinping meeting in Beijing on 29 June: details and discussion topics), Lenta.ru, 29.06.2026, <https://lenta.ru/news/2026/06/29/lukashenko-posle-zakrytyh-peregovorov-s-putiny-m-otpravilsya-k-si-tszipin-pu-o-chem-oni-govorili-bolshe-treh-chasov/>

37 Зачем Украина идет на конфликт с Беларусью? (Why is Ukraine heading toward conflict with Belarus?), Meduza, 24.06.2026, <https://meduza.io/feature/2026/06/24/zachem-ukraina-idet-na-konflikt-s-belarusyu-i-ne-sblizit-li-eto-esche-bolshe-minsk-s-moskvoy>

He is doing this through several mechanisms at once. First, he wants to keep so-called “destructive forces” (in reality, the Belarusian opposition abroad) out of the country’s top political offices and away from the presidency altogether. In January 2024, he signed off on sweeping changes to the presidential law that raised the minimum age for candidates to 40 and doubled the residency requirement to twenty years.³⁸ For the first time, the law also prohibits anyone holding foreign citizenship, permanent residency abroad, or special privileges tied to foreign documents from running for president.

 ***Lukashenka still has an institutional tool he could use to manage a succession process if he needs to: the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly***

Second, he has secured legal protections for himself and his family. The updated law expands the amount of state benefits available to the former president and his relatives and, for the first time, introduces something close to domestic diplomatic immunity: protection from prosecution for actions taken in office, and legal inviolability for personal property, vehicles, real estate, and correspondence. It also guarantees lifelong medical care, a state pension, and tax exemptions for the former president and his family.

Third, Lukashenka still has an institutional tool he could use to manage a succession process if he needs to: the All-Belarusian

People’s Assembly. It was originally designed as a vehicle for controlled succession, modelled on the approach Nursultan Nazarbayev had taken in Kazakhstan, with Lukashenka intended to retain overarching influence as its head while a new president took on a more symbolic role.³⁹

 ***Lukashenka cannot count on a rapid thaw with the West, given Belarus’s support for Russia’s war against Ukraine***

That plan was postponed after the mass protests of 2020, when Lukashenka reasserted control with Kremlin backing and drew closer to Moscow. Since then, the Assembly has been mostly a ceremonial body with little genuine political power. It is still built into the regime’s institutional architecture, though, and could be revived. If the need arises, Lukashenka can expand its authority and use it both as a channel for influence over domestic politics and as an extra layer of personal security.

Key Challenges to be Faced

Despite all this preparation, it remains unclear whether all this will lead to a named successor or a voluntary handover of power. Lukashenka is unlikely to move forward with any transition unless he is confident it will not be derailed by regional instability or by shifts in Belarus’s relations with Russia and the West, especially during such a delicate period for the regime. Without firm guarantees about how the war ends and

38 В Беларуси подписан закон о пожизненных гарантиях президенту (Belarus signs law on lifetime guarantees for the president), *Radio Svoboda*, 04.01.2024, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/v-belarusi-podpisan-zakon-o-pozhiznennyh-garantiyah-prezidentu/32759843.html>

39 Війна жуїв і закінчення транзиту влади в Казахстані (The War of Clans and the End of the Power Transit in Kazakhstan), *ThePage.ua*, 06.01.2022, <https://thepage.ua/experts/vojna-zhuzov-i-okonchanie-tranzita-vlasti-v-kazahstane>

whether Belarusian sovereignty survives it, a voluntary handover remains unlikely. The memory of the 2020 protests still looms over Lukashenka, and narrows the paths available for any peaceful transition.

Beyond this domestic uncertainty over succession, external recognition also matters. Lukashenka cannot count on a rapid thaw with the West, given Belarus's support for Russia's war against Ukraine. The United States has recently shown far more interest in engaging with the Belarusian authorities than its European counterparts. Still, both Poland and Lithuania have tried, each in its own way, to test how much autonomy Belarus retains from Moscow and to reach de-escalation through a process of first escalation then easing off.



For all of Minsk's manoeuvring, the truth is that Lukashenka has boxed himself into a position where almost any outcome risks opening a Pandora's box over the fate of his regime and that of Belarus itself

Warsaw went first. Hoping to extract concessions from the Belarusian authorities and reassert its regional influence, Poland shut down all its land crossings with Belarus entirely. That move affected China's interests, as its overland cargo transit to Europe through Poland and Belarus was incurring losses as a result. Two months later, Poland reopened two checkpoints that had been closed for almost four years. Minsk responded by scaling back

migration pressure and opening the talks that eventually paid off. At the end of April 2026, Andrzej Poczobut, the Polish minority activist who had spent five years in a Belarusian prison, was freed as part of a wider exchange of detainees between Minsk and Warsaw, and Belarus has since almost completely stopped the flow of migrants across the border.⁴⁰

Lithuania followed a similar path but moved more slowly, first raising the stakes by temporarily shutting all its border crossings with Belarus, then lifting the restrictions. In April 2026, Vilnius finally laid out its own conditions for dialogue, an end to migrant pressure, a halt to use of smuggling balloons crossing into Lithuanian airspace, and the return of the remaining Belarusian-held prisoners, a shift that also followed recommendations from the US State Department that Lithuania consider allowing the resumption of the transit of Belarusian potash fertiliser through their territory.⁴¹

Pandora's Box

For all of Minsk's manoeuvring, the truth is that Lukashenka has boxed himself into a position where almost any outcome risks opening a Pandora's box over the fate of his regime and that of Belarus itself. The core of the domestic problem is that Lukashenka has built a centralised, personalist regime, designed to preserve the status quo rather than to develop the country. The system rests on the loyalty of officials and on his own dominant role as its leader. Because its functioning depends so heavily on him personally, Lukashenka has put himself in

40 Анджей Почобут на свободе после обмена между Беларусью и Польшей (Andrzej Poczobut freed after prisoner exchange between Belarus and Poland), Radio Svoboda, 28.04.2026, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/andzhey-pochobut-na-svobode-posle-obmena-mezhdu-belarusyju-i-polshey/33744322.html>

41 Президент Литвы дал Минску месяц на выполнение условий по возобновлению диалога (Lithuania's president gives Minsk a month to meet conditions for resuming dialogue), EADaily, 02.04.2026, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2026/04/02/prezident-litvy-dal-minsku-mesyac-na-vypolnenie-usloviy-po-vozobnovleniyu-dialoga>

a position where he can hardly afford to leave office at all. Given the volatile foreign policy environment, the fear of internal destabilisation, and his own desire to keep a grip on the country's main political processes, he is likely to keep deferring the question of succession. Doing so only postpones one of the worst scenarios: should serious health problems or death remove him from power, a system built entirely on personal subordination would be left paralysed, and Russia would be the first to exploit it.



With a negotiating track already forming between Washington and Minsk, the EU risks ending up as a bystander rather than an active player in this process

If Russia manages to get its way in Belarus, it will create permanent threats to Ukraine and some other European countries.

Over the last few years, Moscow and Minsk have been synchronising legislation, integrating their defence industries, and forging elements of military command into shared structures, steps that only make sense if the two states expect to function as one military space. None of this requires Russia to annex Belarus outright: financial and institutional control over Minsk already secures what annexation would, continued access to Belarusian territory for provocations, hybrid operations, intimidation, and, should the moment call for it, larger operations launched from Belarusian soil. That alone gives Moscow a permanent lever of pressure, not only on Ukraine's northern border but on NATO's eastern flank as a whole, given that Vilnius sits barely fifty kilometres from Belarusian territory, and that the Baltic states remain

connected to the rest of Europe only through the narrow Suwałki Corridor.

What Could Be Done

Despite the complexity of the situation, Belarus's autonomy and sovereignty are not yet fully lost, as the practice of geopolitical risk-management has shown. Because regional stability cannot be secured without a predictable situation in Belarus, Ukraine and the EU need to prepare for what comes after Lukashenka rather than wait for it.

The first priority is to preserve channels of communication with officialdom in Minsk. Keeping some exchange of signals going with the Lukashenka regime would let the EU and Ukraine track developments inside Belarus, and gauge the mood within the elite, while also giving Brussels and Kyiv a way to warn Minsk about the destabilising consequences of any further escalation with Ukraine or other European countries. It would also remind Lukashenka and those around him that there is an alternative path towards dialogue and de-escalation.

It is also important to see sanctions as a tool rather than as a goal in themselves. With a negotiating track already forming between Washington and Minsk, the EU risks ending up as a bystander rather than an active player in this process, which could potentially translate into greater US pressure on Belarus's European neighbours to allow Belarusian transit of potash fertiliser to resume. What is needed instead is a more flexible mechanism, one that makes adjustments to sanctions based on how genuinely the current regime engages in constructive dialogue with the EU, while making sure European interests are not sidelined. At the same time, lifting sanctions on military-industrial enterprises tied to Russia's war effort, however, should remain off the table entirely.

Beyond managing the present, Ukraine and the EU also need to prepare for changes in Belarus's ruling elite, since the Belarusian dictator will not be able to rule forever. The transition triggered by his eventual departure, and the reshaping of the personalised system he built, could turn out to be unpredictable and dangerous, particularly given the chance that Moscow will try to exploit the uncertainty for its own benefit. The EU needs to prepare for these scenarios in advance, while also looking for ways to influence some sections of the Belarusian political elite.

None of this will matter much, though, without also creating preconditions for democratic transformation in Belarus. Doing this means identifying and developing further mechanisms to strengthen Belarusian democratic forces, and to widen their reach within Belarusian society. Long-term training programmes for activists, along with sharing lessons learned from successful reform efforts elsewhere, would be a good place to start. At the same time, the EU and Ukraine should work together to build up for them a more positive image within Belarusian society, with particular attention to the neutral and apolitical majority of the population.

Conclusions

Belarus has ended up in a position where its domestic political stability depends entirely on one man. Lukashenka built a centralised, personalised system, and the country's future now rests on how and when that system will evolve. A change of power in Belarus has to happen sooner

or later, but the unstable foreign policy environment and the risks that come with it keep pushing Lukashenka to put off any voluntary, controlled transition, even though he has already partly prepared the country for the scenario, and has tried to reduce the risks attached to it by diversifying Belarus's foreign policy ties.

The longer this goes on, the greater the risk that the change of power ends up being forced by Lukashenka's death or through a serious health crisis, rather than by his own choice, and Russia would move quickly to exploit any moment of vulnerability. Should Moscow succeed in doing so, it would gain a stronger hand for turning Belarusian territory into a permanent source of threat against Ukraine's northern border and against the Baltic states and Poland. Even an end to the Russia-Ukraine war, in that scenario, would not bring lasting stability or security to the region, since the underlying conditions on the ground would still point towards renewed pressure rather than away from it.

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